IRREDUCIBLE CULTURAL CONTEXTS: GERMAN–JEWISH EXPERIENCE, IDENTITY, AND TRAUMA IN A BILINGUAL ANALYSIS

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This article addresses the themes of culture, identity, and trauma in a bilingual analysis between a German-speaking second-generation Holocaust survivor and an analyst of German descent. By paying attention to the shifts between German and English over the course of the therapy, it becomes possible to see how deeply language is intertwined with culture, history, and traumatic memory in the German–Jewish experience. Both patient and analyst are embedded in multiple cultural contexts and participate in language shifts that shape the process of negotiating and revealing identity. The article suggests that identity is neither fixed nor stable, but linked to the fluid and dynamic shifts of our experiences in the presence of the other person, and of language and culture in general. By focusing on the therapeutic interaction between the patient and analyst, the case demonstrates the degree to which the burden of history, struggle with trauma, and legacy of shame are all embedded in and determined by culture and history across contexts and generations.

Keywords: bilingual; culture; history; holocaust; identity; language; shame; trauma
The social and cultural contexts of human development inalterably shape self-understanding and how we experience the world around us. Similarly, the therapeutic process is an expression of the sociocultural contexts in which it takes place. Our ability to understand and be understood points to the fact that we are fundamentally social creatures who live in a world of shared understandings. We are not just the product of our individual psychologies, but also of language, culture, and history. Indeed, language and culture are inherently interdependent; to speak of one is to speak of the other. As Pierre Bourdieu (1990) suggests, languages are culturally embedded practices. Language is a living embodiment of culture; language situates us in family, community, tradition, and history. In speech, we give voice not only to our own experience, but to our cultural history. In fact, culture and history are often disclosed in language in ways that we are not even aware of.

In this article, I explore the intertwining of language, culture, history, and identity in the clinical situation. I suggest that we are fundamentally forged by culture and society and that our identities are revealed through our use of language. As a linguistic undertaking, psychoanalysis gives expression to the cultures, histories, and identities of its participants. In the psychoanalytic process, we come into being through the act of narration—the telling of our story. Our identities as individual persons and as cultural beings are articulated in narration.

Psychoanalysis is a unique undertaking because it attunes us to language and allows us to explore how our identities are experienced and expressed in language. However, the narrative process is hardly simple or straightforward. Indeed, psychoanalysis reveals that while we speak through language, language and culture also speak through us. Because speech and language position us in culture and history, they have the constitutive power to demarcate our identities. As a result, our identities are neither fixed nor stable, but linked to the fluid and dynamic shifts of our existence within culture and language.

To illustrate the conscious and unconscious interplay of language, culture, history, and identity, I draw on a bilingual analysis between a German-speaking Jewish Austrian man and a German-speaking analyst of German descent. By paying attention to the language shifts between German and English over the course of the therapy, it becomes possible to see how deeply language is intertwined with culture, history, identity, and traumatic memory. My objective is twofold: first and foremost, to use the clinical case to illustrate the complexity of working across languages and
cultures; and second, to examine the way in which the culture and history of both participants, the patient and the analyst, fundamentally influences what transpires in the analysis. Both patient and analyst are embedded in multiple cultural contexts and participate in language shifts, thus demonstrating the mutuality of the therapeutic process. Although I focus on the patient’s progress through the course of the analysis, I also discuss my own process of confronting questions of culture, history, and identity; and illustrate the way in which our therapeutic interaction was inherently embedded in, and determined by, cultural and historical contexts.

I use language as a focal point for examining the unfolding nature of the therapeutic process. However, it is important to stress that language is always much more than the words we speak. In contrast to the reductionism of the linguistic turn in some recent philosophy and psychoanalysis (Frie, 1999), I view language as an expression of our social, cultural, and biological embeddedness. Without an appreciation of the fundamental interdependence of these different levels of experience, language would be an empty shell; and psychoanalysis, so often dependent on the spoken word, would be devoid of meaning. Psychoanalysis illustrates the degree to which human experience is nonverbal and embodied, seemingly beyond the grasp of public articulation. Yet, neither is it possible to step outside of language; we are born into languages that are not of our choosing and which become fundamental to who we are and how we experience and see the world around us. As such, language is the social, cultural, and historical system through which we interact and define ourselves.

With this brief introduction to the themes of language, culture, and contexts, I turn to the clinical case illustration. The case is based on a common language and cultural background, yet these commonalities mask very different cultural histories, which get played out in a series of language shifts involving both patient and analyst.

Clinical Case Illustration

Daniel was referred to me because he was looking for a German-speaking analyst. From the referral, I knew that Daniel was from Austria, in his 40s, and was working for a nonprofit organization. He was in a committed relationship, which was the reason for his immigration to the United States. Daniel struggled with mild to moderate symptoms of depression and anxiety, and experienced strong feelings of anger—feelings he knew might
be connected with his past and which he wished to come to terms with. However, this was the first time he sought help.

Before turning to the clinical interaction between Daniel and myself, let me provide you with some brief, but salient, facts about Daniel’s history. Daniel grew up in a Jewish Austrian family. His father was a successful professional. He was also a Holocaust survivor, who was deeply suspicious of others and plagued by anxiety. Daniel’s mother was socially prominent and, in contrast to his father, was not outwardly religious. His mother tragically died of a sudden illness when Daniel was only 10 years old. Daniel was the eldest of two children, and has a brother who is several years younger.

Daniel described his childhood in broad terms, ranging from tolerable to miserable, punctuated by rare happy early memories, moments when his parents got along, or his father held his temper in check. After his mother's death, Daniel and his brother lived the next decade in near isolation with their father, finally leaving, if not fleeing, to attend university. Throughout his childhood, Daniel lived in fear of his father, who raged at the many threats he perceived from other people, even his children. Daniel rarely felt safe at home and, but for his younger brother, did not believe he could trust anyone.

Daniel’s father grew up in an orthodox household outside of Salzburg, and was sent with his family to a concentration camp for the duration of World War II. Exact details of what took place there are unclear and, while growing up, Daniel never asked questions. Indeed, questions were not invited or permitted. That said, his father was known to have been particularly fearsome. After being liberated by the Russians, he was offered the chance to take up arms and kill Nazis—something he was evidently very good at.

Much less is known of Daniel’s mother, who was the child of a well-to-do Austrian family. Daniel assumes his grandfather, who may or may not have been Jewish, was able to bribe the authorities to assure their safety during the war. His grandmother was Jewish, but not observant. Daniel knew his grandmother as a child, but she died shortly after the death of Daniel’s mother.

**Initial Impressions**

I was excited by the prospect of undertaking an analysis in German. However, learning of Daniel’s history and identity, I also entered the work
with a sense of trepidation. I wondered what tensions might emerge as our different cultures and histories became known. Whereas Daniel was a second-generation Jewish Holocaust survivor, I am a second-generation protestant German Canadian who grew up bilingually and biculturally. I was entering into our work with the weight of historical guilt and shame connected to my cultural background.

As the German social theorist, Juergen Habermas (1989) suggests, Germany’s extermination of Europe’s Jewish populations during World War II form a collective guilt, which is the responsibility of subsequent generations of Germans to bear. Habermas cautions against any “normalization” of German history and reminded Germans of their obligation to confront all aspects of their past. Describing the perspective of his own generation, he wrote: “The grandchildren of those who at the close of World War II were too young to be able to experience personal guilt are already growing up. Memory, however, has not become correspondingly distanti-ated,” for, regardless of one’s subjective perspective, its point of departure is still the same—“images of the unloading ramp at Auschwitz” (p. 229). Thus, Habermas points to the dangers of denial and suggested that, for subsequent generations of Germans,

[L]ife is linked to the life context in which Auschwitz was possible not by contingent circumstances, but intrinsically. Our form of life is connected to that of our parents and grandparents through a web of familial, local, political and intellectual traditions that is difficult to disentangle—that is, through a historical milieu that made us who we are. None of us can escape this milieu, because our identities, both as individuals and as Germans, are indissolubly interwoven with it. This holds true from mimicry and physical gestures to language and into the capillary ramifications of one’s intellectual stance [p. 233].

For Habermas (1989), therefore, the obligations that follow from the guilt and responsibility of the Shoah are not simply individual, but embedded in the very context of the contemporary life world. “There is the obligation incumbent upon us in Germany—even if no one else were to feel it any longer—to keep alive, without distortion and not only in an intellectual form, the memory of the sufferings of those who were murdered by German hands” (p. 233).

Talk of the war and Germany’s history was very much a part of the culture and family in which I grew up. My parents lived through the war
as children, and left the war-ravaged city of Hannover in the late 1950s. I largely grew up in Canada, in a community of German-speaking immigrants, and maintained close ties to family in Germany; German was my first language. When I was in high school, my parents moved back to Europe: first to Switzerland, where I also lived for some time, and then to Germany.

The narration of my life, as with so many other bilingual persons, is very much a story of two languages and two cultural identities. This duality is captured by Perez Foster (1998) when she states, “bilingual and bicultural (persons) possess two language codes with which they can think about themselves, express ideas, and interact with the people in their world. This duality is a unique characteristic of bilingual individuals. It is a fundamental factor that affects their lives and must surely impact on how they go about narrating their life story in the treatment process” (p. 62). As I was soon to find out, the theme of two languages also applied to Daniel.

Although Daniel grew up in Austria, he spoke English fluently. Daniel was schooled partly in English and then attended university in England. Ironically, we both attended the same university in England as undergraduates. Like me, Daniel studied philosophy, and we completed graduate work on a similar topic. I was struck by the parallels, and found myself identifying with him on several levels. Although we spent our childhoods on different continents, Daniel grew up speaking German and English. His native language was German, and we shared this common linguistic and cultural bond. However, these similarities masked a central difference between us, which would become an underlying theme throughout our work: Daniel was the son of Holocaust survivors, and I was the son of Germans.

Let Sleeping Dogs Lie?

The theme of culture and history was present from the very beginning of our work. In our initial session, Daniel asked where I was from and how it was that I came to speak German so well. I explored the nature of the question and answered him, although without going into details. I explained that I had grown up in Canada, that my family was German-speaking, and that I had lived in Switzerland. Having discussed my training background, Daniel also knew that I lived and worked in Germany as a student and spent considerable time in Berlin. Daniel appeared to take all of this at face value, not choosing to find out more.
Some months later, when Daniel talked about his Jewish upbringing, he inquired if I was Jewish. I wondered what meaning my answer might have for him. He said that if I were Jewish, I might understand him better. However, given the fact that his partner was not, he thought that if I were not Jewish, it was unlikely to stand in the way of developing a close relationship with me. I left this question unanswered for the moment, not wanting to forestall further exploration of what my identity might mean to him. I remember feeling at the time that Daniel framed his comments in such a way as to create a sense of safety for both of us. He knew that I was in some way German, and that I might not be Jewish; but for now, as the saying goes, we would let “sleeping dogs lie.”

Right from the start there was an important dynamic at work in the relationship between Daniel and myself: namely, my anxiety—or perhaps shame is the appropriate word—about my cultural identity. My work with Daniel began at a time when I was becoming a more integral member of the psychoanalytic community in New York, and the question of my cultural background, my native language, and my cultural identities weighed on me. Many of my colleagues and friends were Jewish. Those who knew me well were aware of my German background, but others were not; nor was my cultural background a fact I necessarily wished to articulate and make public. On the face of it, I do not appear German. I have no accent, carry a Canadian passport, and am second generation. Yet, language and identity do not simply melt away, even if at times we might want them to.

There is also an additional, more personal, layer to this story. Indeed, psychoanalysis helps us to appreciate that there are always multiple layers at work in every story. I met my wife, who is Jewish, in England while we were students. Our relationship is based on a shared reality that embraces different identities and multiple commonalities: be they religious, linguistic, or cultural. At the time we met, my family lived in Germany, and we worked through the meaning our identities held for us amidst varied geographical and cultural contexts.

The process of identification at work in the German–Jewish experience is grounded in multiple, often divergent, cultural and historical factors. I recall an experience when my wife and I were studying in Berlin as graduate students, and we met with a relative of mine. The issue of the past and the question of the “German identity” came up in the course of a conversation. My relative is a social worker and committed pacifist, progressive in his political outlook and personal beliefs. As a German, he felt shame about the horrors perpetrated under the Nazis. However, he
resented having to wear a badge of guilt, as he did not participate in the war and was born well after it. In any case, he did not understand how previous generations of Germans could possibly have supported the Nazi regime. However, as my wife pointed out, she did not choose her cultural identity either, nor did she wish to learn as a child that six million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust purely because of their identity. As this exchange makes clear, our lives are circumscribed by history and culture in ways that are beyond our choosing.

Cultural and historical realities both define us and burden us. They force us to acknowledge that the past is never simply behind us; that the past is always present. We are “thrown” (Heidegger, 1996) into contexts—be they culture, history, or family—and experience life and express who we are through these contexts. Psychoanalysis is a process of reflection that hopefully provides us with the opportunity to understand and articulate the meaning these contexts have for us. I use the term hopefully because sometimes our contexts are so implicit, so ingrained, that it can prove difficult to imagine new and different ways of experiencing the world.

In the early stages of our work, Daniel seemed pleased, and actually relieved, to be able to speak German. There were few people with whom he spoke German, and his emotional and dream life was very much rooted in his mother tongue. Indeed, Daniel missed not speaking German, although his English was also excellent. Throughout the treatment, much of our communication took place in German, and there was a free-flowing back and forth between the two languages, in a way that was similar to how I grew up. In fact, I was at first uneasy about how Daniel would respond to my German, as it is no longer as fluent as it was when I was young. While growing up in Canada, I lost my fluency for a time, and only regained it when I lived in Europe. As a result, I now speak with an accent and make mistakes. Yet, like Daniel, I shared a sense of enjoyment at being able to speak in German.

The experience of culture and identity is integral to language. In our sessions, Daniel most often used German when speaking about his family. Indeed, his use of German was most notable in the expression of memories, dreams, desires, and spontaneous emotions. In contrast, English often seemed to be the language of the intellect and everyday experience. As studies of bilingualism suggest (cf. Schrauf, 2000), emotion and memory in the first language tend to carry stronger affect than in the second language.
Language acquisition takes place in a dynamic interpersonal and cultural process between the child, its caregivers, and its social environment (Vygotsky, 1978). For many patients, the first language, or mother tongue, evokes complex developmental and interactive experiences with their caregivers. As Schrauf (2000, p. 388) points out, memories from childhood, when retrieved in the mother tongue, can be more numerous, detailed, and evocative than when they are retrieved in the second language. By contrast, speaking in a second language can function as a means to defend against emotional experience.

As such, language shifts between the first and second language can provide a means to understand and trace emotional states. An example had to do with Daniel’s expression of anger about not feeling respected by his father. When Daniel described his feelings and why he believed he was right to have them, he spoke in English. The moment he actually expressed the anger, however, he shifted into German. Daniel’s expression of affect in German actually carried the spontaneous emotion in a much more experience-near manner and was connected with his history of traumatic and ambivalent attachments. Similar examples occurred with the expression of other emotions, such as sadness or grief.

I found that my linguistic response to Daniel’s expression of affect could strengthen or intensify the emotional experience in the moment. If my response in German was attuned to his expression of emotion in German, it opened up an affective space for exploration and reflection. If I responded to Daniel in English, it would redirect away from the presence of the emotion. Indeed, in these moments, by language-shifting myself, whether consciously or unconsciously, I would join Daniel in constructing a kind of safety barrier against emotions or sensations that were rooted in the mother tongue, but that neither of us were fully prepared or able to articulate. This dynamic, as we see, would color our exploration of cultural difference and identity.

As our relationship developed, and Daniel became more trusting of me, he seemed more willing to know about me. I carefully followed Daniel in terms of what questions he was able to ask. He was learning to make more inquiries, and I expected that we would have the opportunity for exploration of our cultural differences and identities once he was ready. Of course, it is equally the case that this would happen only once I was ready. To use the oft-repeated phrase, “the patient can only go so far as the analyst is willing to go.”
When I look back at this early stage of our work together, it seems clear to me that my own concern of being rejected in some way, or being seen as the “bad German,” hardly made me want to take the plunge with Daniel. I felt that, as one colleague put it to me, “bringing the war into the room” might create impassable roadblocks for the treatment if it happened prematurely. On the other hand, it is equally the fact that the war was very much “in the room” from the very start of the treatment; it just was not being openly acknowledged by either of us. Instead, there was only an increasingly “loud silence.”

The fact is that our sociocultural and historical contexts are irreducible, much as we might wish to ignore them at times, or shunt them aside. As self-interpreting beings, our sociocultural and historical contexts form the lens through which we perceive ourselves and experience the world around us. These contexts defined the work between Daniel and myself from the very beginning. Although Daniel and I were aware of our linguistic and cultural similarities, what had yet to be explored was the importance our differences might hold.

**Will Curiosity Kill the Cat?**

Although German connected us, it is a language unalterably burdened by history. Throughout the early period of the analysis, Daniel would occasionally refer to me as Swiss or make allusions to my Swiss background. I experienced uneasiness whenever this happened—in these moments it was almost as though I took on the questionable mantle of Swiss neutrality; nor did Daniel comment on the fact that I did not speak with a Swiss-German accent, which is very distinct from high German. Daniel’s only remark was that I must be very good with languages—something that did not sit well with me either since languages have always been a challenge for me.

Clearly, there was uncertainty for both of us about what exploration of our cultural differences and identities would imply. How might his perceptions of me and the experience of the relationship change in the process? One of my concerns was that his experience of me would become a reflection of the childhood image he developed of his father in which there was no room for shades of grey. I feared being seen as the stereotypical “bad German,” let alone a Nazi. I wanted to avoid Daniel’s disappointment, anger, and rejection.

A series of events took place that demonstrated Daniel’s growing self-confidence and his increasing ability to express his needs and desires.
Daniel began professional school and his relationship, which was no longer satisfying to him emotionally, came to an end. As a part of this process he began to relate to his family in new ways. He seemed less willing to play the role of a caretaker with his brother. Daniel’s self-assertions often met with tension as others responded to his new ways of being-in-the-world.

What was particularly significant was that Daniel began to think about both his father and his mother differently. Early on in our work together, Daniel often struggled with seeing the human aspects of his father. He actively pushed away early memories of shared tenderness with him, perceiving him instead as a despot. It was difficult for Daniel to acknowledge that he had a mixture of feelings. Daniel was scared of what acknowledging his longing for connection with his father might mean. He also feared that by learning to know him, he might discover that his fears of him had a basis in fact. The parallels to his relationship with me seemed palpable.

In similar respects, Daniel began to struggle with his childhood experiences of his mother. Daniel wanted to hold on to and cherish an image of his mother as all good, as caring and tender, in contrast to his father’s threatening behaviors. Yet, Daniel could not help questioning how it was that his mother had come to marry his father in the first place, and why his mother had not created a safety net for him and his brother once his mother knew that she was going to die. Instead, Daniel and his brother were essentially left to live in lonely and fearful isolation with their father.

As Daniel relinquished his perception of himself and others in terms of the black and white features of his childhood, it became possible for him to form new and different ways of being with others. The fact that Daniel, as he put it, “couldn’t say anything” to his father, let alone ask him questions, had been an essential part of his dilemma. As Daniel began to alter his perceptions, he embraced a growing sense of agency. Being an agent meant that Daniel was not only willing to ask questions of others, he also expected answers.

The Cat’s Out of the Bag

I recall that it happened quite suddenly. I had assumed that questions about my “Germanness” would be forthcoming, but they took me by surprise. Daniel wanted to know how it was that I spoke German so well if I grew up
in Canada. Moreover, he had begun to acknowledge that I did not speak German with a Swiss accent.

Daniel’s questions and the issue of self-disclosure weighed on me. Self-disclosure is a thorny topic and strongly debated. A crucial aspect of this debate is what is meant by self-disclosure. I do not believe we can ever present a blank slate to our patients. Our patients always know much more about us than they ever let on. The analytic setting is more than a two-person endeavor. What takes place between my patient and I always includes our contexts of which we are both conscious and unconscious.

Self-disclosure is clearly an important aspect of any therapeutic relationship, and boundaries need to be respected. I generally answer patients’ questions that I find are appropriately related to our work together. At the same time, I seek to explore the possible meanings their questions and my answers might have in the context of the emotional experience of our work together. If I choose not to answer a personal question, it is usually due to a concern about how my answer may impact the therapeutic relationship or, alternatively, a response to my anxiety about revealing an aspect of myself. The motivations behind my responses to personal questions are, of course, an integral aspect of the interaction. Although there is clearly much that can be said on the topic of self-disclosure, I am noting it briefly here because it directly relates to Daniel’s newfound ability to ask me questions.

When Daniel asked about my background, I remember having two thoughts: “What took us so long!,” and “here we go.” I explored what it might be like for Daniel to know more about me. He replied that he had thought about asking me for some time, but that he also did not know if he could ask. Daniel seemed content to let his expression of curiosity sit without insisting on an immediate answer. We explored Daniel’s questions of me in the context of the new perspectives he had developed in his emotional relationships with others in his life—both past and present. Then, Daniel brought up the Internet. Daniel said that he realized he could look me up. I wondered what this realization was like for him. He said that somehow it did not seem appropriate; and, in any case, he had not been sure up until now whether he wanted to know more about me. At this point, Daniel moved onto something else. Following the session, I remembered thinking that my own delicate dance around the subject of our cultural differences might be making it harder for Daniel to tackle this issue more openly.
Some weeks later, Daniel announced that he researched me on the Internet. I asked him what that was like. Daniel said it felt embarrassing: He had learned that I had published on the theme of philosophy and psychoanalysis. Daniel said he felt silly, having spoken with me about philosophy all this time while I had a doctorate in the subject. From a cultural perspective, it is worth noting that in these moments I was the Herr Prof. Dr., who, in German-speaking cultures, wears a crown of intellectual authority.

I replied that in fact I enjoyed his discussions of philosophy, and we shared an interest in the topic. Indeed, Daniel’s insights on the topic were always noteworthy. Although Daniel was clearly nervous about what he might find out about me, this exchange connected us emotionally, and he felt encouraged to ask more. No doubt, my comment about sharing an interest was also a reaction to my anxiety around exploring our differences, by pointing to a connection that existed between us.

It took another few weeks before the issue of my background came up again. How was it, Daniel wondered, that I had attended university in England, yet grew up in Canada, and spoke fluent German? In fact, from information in my writing, Daniel sensed that my parents were from Germany. Now he wanted to know more. Here we were then. The question, “What did your parents do in the war?,” was not far away.

In fact, my parents were children during the war. However, my grandfathers were all conscripted into the German army. My paternal grandfather was killed in battle early on. My father and his mother spent the remainder of the war moving from place to place after being kicked out of their home by the local Gauleiter (Nazi party representative) for aiding refugees. My maternal grandfather worked on armaments and survived the war while my mother spent most of the war living in a bunker after her house was destroyed in one of the early allied bombing raids of Hannover. I vividly remember as a child hearing the memories of my parents so that even as a second-generation German, the war was always very present for me. When I entered into adulthood, I began to ask questions about my family’s past—a process that intensified as I got older—and I sought to come to terms with what the war and my German background meant for me.

I was now confronted with the issue of how to respond to Daniel’s questions. I had encouraged Daniel to be curious about his relationships and to challenge his accepted views of others in his life. It had been hard for Daniel to do this and harder still to demand responses: to learn how to express his needs and wishes with the knowledge that he also deserved a
response; and here I was, waffling on whether to answer Daniel’s questions of me. I had to weigh the effects of answering versus not answering. I feared that if I did not answer, it might work against the analysis, not only because I would maintain an emotional distance, but because I could appear to be hiding something. Daniel had difficulty trusting others. Could he trust me?

When Daniel asked about my family’s role during the war, I shared with Daniel that my parents had been children. Daniel wanted to know not only what happened to them, but where my grandparents had been and what they had done. I outlined for Daniel the basic facts. My ability to withstand Daniel’s scrutiny at this moment seemed very important to our work together. Daniel was willing, for the first time, to see me in shades of grey.

Yet, I wondered whether each answer I gave might not simply lead to new questions. Daniel took these facts at face value, initially not wanting, or perhaps not daring, to ask more. What was remarkable, looking back, was not just Daniel’s ability to be curious, but the language shifting that was at work. The exploration of my past and of my identity as a German took place entirely in English. This is noteworthy because so much of our early work took place in German, or a mixture of the two languages. It was almost as though we both found speaking English easier. In fact, when speaking about the war, and our separate histories, German suddenly seemed out of place.

I remember noting, with some relief, that the cat was out of the bag. I was not hiding any longer. However, I also wondered with trepidation how Daniel might feel about this new information, about the way in which my identity as a German, even a second-generation German, had become more real, although it had been present all along.

The following sessions ranged over a number of topics having to do with his relationships, with work and with his family, but did not return to what he had learned about me. What was most notable was that these sessions took place entirely in English. It felt like we were conducting a unilingual therapy in which the question of German, and Germanness, be it linguistic or cultural, personal or social, was entirely absent. It was as though we were, in these sessions, two English-speaking, English-educated, New York immigrants.

When I brought up the issue, observing that it seemed we spoke little German, Daniel responded simply, “I hadn’t noticed.” I explored with Daniel whether our shifting into English might have something to do with what he had learned about me? According to Daniel, who responded in
English, we were both second generation, and the German–Jewish issue had been well-explored; to dwell on it now was to revisit the past yet one more time. Knowing of Daniel’s historical and political awareness, I responded that this might well be. However, I also wondered about the potential threat my past held for his relationship with me and for his exploration of his own traumatic past. It remained curious to me that we no longer spoke in German. I questioned how this might relate to feelings about what he had learned about me.

Some time later, when I was researching the topic of language in the German–Jewish experience, I came upon the following account: It is the memory of a young German–Jewish girl when the German army invaded Belgium at the start of World War II. This girl had fled with her family before the war to escape Nazi persecution. She later said of her experience:

My biggest conflict with the German invasion [of Belgium] . . . occurred when I heard German spoken. It felt so much like home, and it was so tempting to speak to these soldiers and befriend them since we all were in a foreign country, except that they could speak to each other in their native tongues out in the open, whereas for us it was not prudent. They could bring a piece of home with them, whereas we had to give up our language if we wanted to be safe [italics added] [M. Oliner, as cited in Amati Mehler, 1995, p. 101].

The situation in which Daniel and I found ourselves was obviously different in time and place from the tragic memory of this little girl. Yet, to my mind, this quote conveys how the German language could be experienced as both emotionally freeing and imprisoning. Indeed, could Daniel speak German and still feel safe with me? For Daniel, the complexity of the German language cannot be underestimated. Both personally and culturally, German is identified with aggression and with tenderness. In our work together, German would at times be identified with memories of his father and paternal authority and aggression, just as it was also identified as the language of his mother, and the hoped-for expressions of maternal love and caring, and of the sense of comfort and closeness he associated with his brother’s presence. At the same time that German is the language of traumatic history, of the Shoah, it is also the language of learning, music, and philosophy. It seemed that Daniel’s relationship with me encompassed each of these outlooks over time.
By contrast, Daniel’s shift to his second language, to English, provided him with a safety barrier against affectively laden and potentially dangerous thoughts. Despite Daniel’s bilingual fluency, his choice of language was significant and, more often than not, completely unconscious. From the perspective of the analysis, Daniel’s shift to English provided an avenue of exploration, as well as a clear marker of changing emotional states. As you might imagine, the upsurge of cultural difference, identity, and history in the analysis took some time to work through. It was not until many months later that Daniel started to speak German again—a shift that seemed to be gradual and unconscious. It felt to me as though with time, and distance, it was once again normal, if not safe, for Daniel to speak German with me.

Following the initial exploration of our cultural difference, it appeared as though Daniel needed to relearn a sense of trust in me and in the therapeutic relationship. Indeed, the objection can fairly be raised that perhaps I should have remained silent and hidden in my Germanness. After all, to hear me speak is to assume I am broadly Canadian, with no trace or hint of any second language or culture, save perhaps for a few British pronunciations. This points to the complexity of the bilingual and multicultural identity.

Fluid Identities

The complexity of our identities cannot be underestimated. For example, when I speak only in English, an aspect of my experience and identity remains veiled. As I was writing up this case, I remembered a situation from my childhood. I had just moved from Toronto to Vancouver as a 6-year-old, and found myself in a new school. On one of my first days, my teacher wrote the word “rhyme” on the board and asked what the word meant. I sat glued to my chair in a kind of panic, lest I be personally asked for an answer. I did not have the foggiest idea what the word meant, let alone how to pronounce it. Of course, I imagined everyone else could.

Although I spoke English without an accent as a child, I struggled with language and was very sensitive to being culturally different. I had great difficulty with pronunciation and ironically, after years of education, my spelling has not improved much. I feared being made into an “Other” as a result of my poor grasp of English. I found myself in a school environment that emphasized cultural assimilation and discouraged bilingualism. I was not Canadian like the English-speaking children because I did not share their culture and did not speak English particularly well. At best, I
managed. However, nor was I—to use a Canadian metaphor—a “visible minority.” I was somewhere in between, in an undefined “grey area.”

Existing in a grey area is an apt description of what it was like for me in my work with Daniel. At times I was German and at other times Canadian; but on the whole, I felt I existed somewhere in between, waiting to be called out through the use of one language or the other. I existed in the hyphenated space between German-Canadian (Frie, 2008). It was only when my German past came to the fore that I suddenly found myself solidly on the one side of the hyphen. Paradoxically, perhaps, I became German in the therapeutic process at the very moment when communication with Daniel took place entirely in English.

My point is that cultural positions are frequently ambivalent and uncertain, if not entirely incompatible. Biculturalism is never simply an equal back and forth between cultural positions. Rather, I would suggest that being bicultural implies the continual navigation, both conscious or unconscious, of multiple and often contradictory identities. This navigation may be of our choosing but, more often than not, occurs as a result of the shifts of language and culture in dialogue with the other.

Identity is a challenging topic that defies easy definition. How I “identify myself” is personally constructed at the same time that it is created for me by my social and cultural contexts. I may exercise a sense of agency in creating a personal narrative (a story of who I am) that establishes and contributes to my ongoing identity. Yet, my sense of who I am is always dependent on my contexts, and is most intimately experienced in the response of the Other. In my work with Daniel, it was my initial fear of being “called out” or of being in some way “Othered” that led me to remain hidden. I sought to maintain an identity based on a measure of control and personal comfort. After all, being Swiss and “neutral” was so much easier than stepping with Daniel into the unknown.

Yet, it is precisely the Other’s “call” that can result in a spontaneous and, at times, unwilling shift of identity. Who I am depends in large measure on how the Other sees and responds to me. It was precisely when Daniel shifted only to English, and did not respond or speak in German for a time, that my identity as a German was suddenly fixed. In these moments, it was as though my identity was established by the Other and quite beyond my control.

The process of exploring and withstanding Daniel’s fears, fantasies, and potential recriminations of me allowed the situation between us to evolve into a more truly dialogic interaction. Our subsequent willingness
to interact more openly with each other and confront experiences of fear, mistrust, as well as longing and desire meant that we had taken a crucial step toward experiencing ourselves, and each other, as fluid identities. New spaces for the exploration of identity were opened up.

The lived experience of identity in our work together was reflected in Daniel's own past, and the challenges of being both Jewish and Austrian. When we began our work together, it seemed important for Daniel to distance himself from being Austrian. During the early stage of the analysis, Daniel visited Salzburg numerous times to see old friends or meet his brother. However, he did not stay long, and usually described these trips in negative terms. Daniel's relationship with Salzburg and being Austrian was, to some degree, tied up with his relationship to his mother. In contrast to his father, Daniel's mother was at home in Austrian society and embodied its ideals. As Daniel learned to relate to the memories of his mother and experiences of his father in new ways, he also seemed less burdened by his trips to Austria. Daniel was not sure he actually wanted to live in Austria again, but it did not seem as threatening to him as it once had. On one level, his identification with his parents allowed for a greater identification with being Austrian. On another level, his increasing comfort with his many cultural identifications—be they Austrian, American, Jewish, and the son of Holocaust survivors—was an indication of the way in which Daniel was establishing a more fluid identity.

I am not suggesting that the tension between different cultural positions simply subsides. Daniel still struggled to define himself amidst his changing contexts. Indeed, this tension remains very much a part of a person's multicultural experience. However, what can change is the ability to find the means to navigate cultural demands and tensions, thus permitting the development of a more fluid identity.

Like the experience of identity, the analytic process can be characterized by fluid, dynamic movements of interaction and understanding, as well as by fixed and static emotional states that limit possibilities for dialogue and exploration. From the perspective of language, the analysis with Daniel had moved through a delicate dance of initial German–English interaction, to moments of unilingual English, and back to German again, eventually merging in an ever more easy-going, fluid German–English combination that reflected the mutuality of the therapeutic process. Similarly, the process of inquiry had progressed from nascent self-reflection, to tentative personal revelation, cultural questioning, and the exploration of new identities and shared realities. Daniel and I had moved beyond stereotypes, yet continued to work on the implications of these progressions.
Although my cultural background was now revealed, my personal experience of the German–Jewish question was still somewhat hidden. It was not until Daniel and I interacted more fluidly between German and English again that he was ready to inquire further. What of my own family, he wanted to know? Daniel knew that I was married, but wanted to know more about my wife. More precisely, he wanted to know whether my wife was Jewish. I replied that she was. Daniel's response, as I remember it, was, “Wirklich? [Really?] Wow!” This combination of German and English seemed somehow fitting, even playful. I awaited his reaction to this new information. Daniel said he felt as though I might better be able to understand him—that this knowledge was comforting in some way.

Looking back, I suppose it was also comforting for me to reveal this personal information. However, I remember being somewhat puzzled by the mixed emotions I felt. When I later shared my feeling of uneasiness with a German colleague, he responded that, for many Germans, the situation of being married to someone who was Jewish might actually help them allay feelings of guilt. In other words, the fact that my wife was Jewish might imply that I no longer had to carry an identity associated with shame or guilt about the past.

My colleague's response reminded me of the way in which some Germans might wish for a relative, a grandparent, uncle, or aunt, who stood up against the tyranny and terror of the Nazis. To have such a relative might mean that one could feel differently about the past. Was it a need to appear as a “good” German, rather than revert to the possibility of being a “bad” German, burdened by the weight of historical guilt? The difficulty, of course, is that our lived reality is never so neat; experience always breaks the bounds of any singular definition. Yet, our desire for singular definitions and identities is strong, precisely because it suggests the possibility of moving beyond (or escaping) complex and frequently incompatible feelings about who we might be or wish to become.

Over the years, I have worked with a number of second- and third-generation Holocaust survivors. If I am asked questions about my cultural background, I am more able to explore and answer these questions today than I was in the past. In such instances, I have found that sharing my personal familiarity with Judaism can help to create a sense of safety in the therapeutic setting. My work with Daniel has also helped me to speak more openly about my German background. Although, when faced with questions about being German in a Jewish context, I find I am no less anxious today. The burden of history does not lesson with time. Indeed, I felt
this burden most acutely when I recently spoke with my 8-year-old daughter about the Holocaust and sought to answer her many questions, and to wade through the confusion of our multiple identities. Perhaps what has changed is that I am more willing to confront and live with shame and anxiety in the presence of others, although it continues to be a challenge for me.

My work with Daniel revealed to me the extent to which the negotiating of cultures and identities defines who I am and how I experience and view life. I am now more willing and able to share this journey with my patients; and by attending to my responses and reactions about my identity in the presence of the other, I have learned to appreciate my patients' own struggles with the unending process of self-definition across cultural and emotional contexts.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have sought to elucidate the dynamics of identity and difference in the analytic process. The similarities and differences between Daniel and myself, in terms of language and culture, formed the backdrop against which our work unfolded. Our bilingualism connected us, yet our culture and history, and the language we spoke, also separated us.

At the most basic level, although Daniel and I were both bilingual, he spoke English with an accent and German without, whereas I spoke German with an accent and English without. English was the language of our everyday reality, of the present, and of our commonly adopted city and identity. It was the language of learning and education, spanning Canada, England, and the United States. By contrast, German was our common mother tongue; the language of family, country, and heritage. German was the language of primary attachment, both in the analysis and in our personal histories. German allowed us to think about being different from others in our adopted city and country, and of being “over there” in moments of common nostalgia for the culture that the German language can embody. Yet, German is equally the language laden with historical guilt and responsibility for the Shoah. In this sense, German is a language of contradiction: It links past with the present, victims with perpetrators, and traumatic history with everyday experience. Language, in this view, is the living embodiment of the culture we live and the ground of our shifting identities.
Lest we fall prey to the misconception that once you discuss and explore cultural differences they disappear, I conclude with a brief anecdote. In a session much later in our work together, Daniel complained to me that he had to travel to Germany on business. He did not want to go and, in any case, he was planning a brief vacation that would now have to be postponed. I knew that Daniel understandably had mixed feelings about visiting Germany, so I asked what it was like for him to have to travel there. He responded flatly, in German: “I am not a Jew who thinks there are only Nazis in Germany.” Although neither Daniel nor I actually resided in Germany, its language, history, and culture continued to impact on, and even define, our experiences. Perhaps Daniel and I had finally come full circle. German was a language that connected us once again, precisely, I believe, because we were able to acknowledge our culturally and historically grounded differences within it. Daniel and I had learned to live with and appreciate our cultural differences at the same time that we took for granted the commonality of our language.

Daniel’s path to a more fluid, yet stable, and dynamic set of identities was a testament to his emotional resiliency. His strength and determination led him to develop meaningful forms of self-expression and self-experience in the context of his world, thus enabling him to relate to others in new ways. Looking back, one might also conclude that Daniel’s regard for others led him to take care of me in my own struggle with identity over the course of our work. Indeed, together we sought to come to terms with the way in which identity and difference are inherently intertwined, whether personally, interpersonally, or socioculturally.

The fact that language and culture can be at once intimately familiar yet strangely dislocating was surely reflected in both of our experiences over the course of the analysis. The transmission of culture through language remains a vital part of our development and everyday experience. Indeed, I would argue that the pervasiveness of culture is irreducible. In the words of the anthropologist, Clifford Geertz (1973), “There is no such thing as human nature independent of culture” (p. 49).

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Translations of Abstract

Questo articolo affronta i temi della cultura, dell’identità e del trauma attraverso un’analisi
bilingue tra un paziente sopravvissuto all’Olocausto di seconda generazione – di lingua
tedesca – ed un analista di origine tedesca. Ponendo attenzione alla sostituzione tra il
tedesco e l’inglese durante il corso della terapia, si è potuto osservare come il linguaggio sia
profondamente intrecciato con la cultura, la storia e la memoria traumatica nell’esperienza
ebraico-tedesca. Sia il paziente che l’analista sono radicati in molteplici contesti cul-
turali ed entrambi partecipano a sostituzioni linguistiche che danno forma al processo di
negoziazione e di rivelamento identitario. L’articolo suggerisce che l’identità non è né fissa
né stabile ma connessa ai cambiamenti fluidi e dinamici della nostra esperienza promossi
sia dalla presenza dell’altro, sia dal linguaggio e dalla cultura in generale. Focalizzandosi
sull’interazione terapeutica tra il paziente e l’analista, il caso dimostra quanto il carico della
storia, la lotta con il trauma e il lascito della vergogna siano radicati nella e determinati
dalla cultura e dalla storia attraverso i contesti e le generazioni.

Cet article aborde les thèmes de la culture, de l’identité, et du traumatisme dans une analyse
bilingue entre un survivant de l’Holocauste de la deuxième génération de langue allemande
et un analyste de descendance allemande. En portant attention aux passages entre la langue
allemande et la langue anglaise en cours de thérapie, il est possible d’observer comment la
langue est profondément et inextricablement lié à la culture, à l’histoire et à la mémoire
traumatique dans l’expérience allemande-juive. Le patient et l’analyste sont tous deux
enchâssés dans des contextes culturels multiples et participent aux changements de langues qui façonnent le processus de négociation et de révélation de l’identité. Cet article suggère que l’identité n’est ni fixe, ni stable, mais qu’elle est liée aux modifications dynamiques et fluides de notre expérience en présence de l’autre personne, et de la langue et de la culture en général. En portant attention à l’interaction thérapeutique entre le patient et l’analyste, ce cas démontre à quel point le fardeau de l’histoire, du traumatisme et de son héritage de honte, est enchâssé dans et déterminé par la culture et l’histoire à travers les contextes et les générations.


Este artículo aborda temas como cultura, identidad y trauma en un análisis bilingüe entre un paciente de habla alemana que pertenece a la segunda generación de un superviviente del Holocausto y un analista de ascendencia alemana. Al centrar la atención en los cambios entre el inglés y el alemán a lo largo de la terapia, se puede observar como el lenguaje está entrelazado con la cultura, la historia y la memoria traumática en la experiencia germano-judía. Paciente y analista están incrustados en contextos culturales múltiples y participan en los cambios de idioma que conforman el proceso de negociar y desvelar la identidad. El artículo sugiere que la identidad no está fijada ni es estable, sino que está vinculada a los cambios dinámicos de nuestra experiencia en presencia de otra persona, y del lenguaje y la cultura en general. Al centrar la atención en la interacción terapéutica entre paciente y analista, el caso demuestra el grado en que el peso de la historia, la lucha contra el trauma y el legado de la vergüenza están entremezclados y determinados por la cultura y la historia a través de contextos y generaciones.
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