

Dramatherapy with a bicultural client

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Introduction

Lily¹ was a client I felt at ease with from the very beginning. We spoke the same language, we spoke Grenglish. Grenglish is a language I use only with my very close family. Even with my children I have tried to avoid it so that it could become clear to them in which situations it was appropriate to speak in Greek and in which English.

As a person with a similar background to that of Lily's I found many similarities with my own life and felt I could understand her predicaments. We both had very domineering self-made Greek fathers and English speaking mothers who never learnt Greek very well and found it difficult to understand the Greek culture.

During therapy we spoke English, as Lily felt more familiar with this language, but she often used Greek words when she found them more suitable in conveying a certain nuance.

Lily's struggle had to do with the process of her individuation and her need to take a distance from her family, where she had played a caring role for several years. In Lily's family there had been a death, the eldest son, leaving Lily the oldest, with four younger brothers.

Lily is now 36 years old and would like a family of her own but she is aware that time is running out. According to her Greek father, she should have married years ago and made him a happy grandfather. According to her English mother, she should have become a professional and avoided having children.

¹ Lily is not her real name

Perhaps many of these issues are connected to the different personalities and life experiences of Lily's parents and not the different cultures alone, in the same way that Lily's life is unique in itself and has had varied influences. However, in this paper, using Lily's story, I would like to look at some of the differences between cultures and the effect these may have on our bicultural clients.

Bicultural people can be recognised wherever they live. There is always something that reveals them making it clear that they are different from the majority population, though, some times it is more obvious and others less so. With bicultural children these differences are visible especially when they go to school. They might be embarrassed that their mother speaks to them in a foreign language in front of their friends. It could be that they bring with them to school different food than their classmates or that they dress in a different style. In Greece, as in most countries, there is a strong feeling of patriotism, which is difficult for the bicultural child to feel to the same extent. Bicultural people have no strong feelings about belonging to one particular culture because they don't. The result of this can be that they have a problem with their identity and feel different from the rest of the inhabitants in either of the countries their parents come from.

Of course there are advantages as well, such as the intimate knowledge of two different cultures with the result that a bicultural person has a broad-minded attitude towards people generally. A bicultural person learns to be able to accept the grey divisions between black and white absolutes and thus he/she is more flexible.

In every nuclear family unit we have influences from the beliefs and customs of two families represented through the father and the mother. As the family grows, slowly it begins to form its own separate identity, which will be the one that these children will take into their own families. When the two parents come from different cultures their attitudes may be incompatible. How do the children

cope? Which parent do they identify with? A big influence can be the school the children go to and their close friends.

One of the problems a bicultural family faces is deciding which school to send their children to. When the family is living in Greece the arguments in favour of the Greek speaking schools are that the children will learn the language and culture of the country they are living in and will therefore fit in better with the society. However, it is often considered that English speaking schools are better academically and will enable their children to enter a good university abroad.

Coming back to Lily's story, she was sent to *seven* different schools. She started with a private English speaking kindergarten, then she went to the local state school for primary education. As she didn't seem to learn much in her first year she was next sent to a Greek private school near their home together with one of her brothers. However Lily's parents were not happy with the way the school treated her brother and took them both away. Lily was then sent to another private Greek school but at this one Lily had discipline problems so the following year she was sent to a very strict high school for girls run by Greek speaking nuns. This school turned out to be too strict. At the end of year Lily was changed again and sent to a liberal private Greek school in the centre of Athens. Finally, so that it would be easier for her to study abroad Lily was sent to an American school where she completed her last two years of secondary education.

The Drawing of ten figures.

In order to give you a picture of Lily's life I will focus on certain therapy sessions during which we worked on a drawing she made. Lily's drawing was done on a large sheet of paper where she made

a diagonal line on which she drew images of herself at ten different stages in her life.

According to Hammer, (1958), the drawing of person is used to convey a person's conscious view of themselves and other people. Lily's images began from when she was an infant of three months until the time she was making the drawing. Each image depicted Lily at roughly three or four year intervals and the last one was the figure of Lily sitting down taking a good look at her life. Lily made the sizes in correct correspondence to the age they represented and her images were very clear, thus symbolising specific stages in her life. Lily was portraying her self-image and self-esteem through her drawing. As Karen Machover (1949), who produced the 'Draw-A-Person' test, suggests, through the test a child is presumed to convey his/her self-image into his/her drawing of a human figure. Machover (1949) also claimed that the size of the figure reflects the child's self-esteem. Hammer (1958) and Koppitz (1968) agreed with Machover and added that tiny figures reflect the subject's insecurity and timidity. Thus, Lily's drawings grew larger according to the age she was depicting.

At the time I had asked Lily to make these figures she was having another bout of anorexia and severe nail biting. I felt that this would be a way of finding out how she felt about her body at different stages of her development. Keleman 1975 wrote:

the body we have is the body we live. Our feelings and responsiveness shape our lives. We form our bodily selves as we shape our reality. Our bodily living shapes our existence. (p.13)

What Lily and I found out from her drawings was the story of her life. Each drawing we looked at separately and worked with in different ways. My aim in therapy was to help Lily distance herself from the symbols that made her feel defenseless.

Lily's story.

Lily used a purple felt-tip pen for the first six drawings, a green one for the next three and a red one for the last one. The three colours apparently indicated different periods in her life.

The first drawing was that of a baby in the embryonic position. Lily called that figure “INDI”. She could not say why she chose that name, but suggested it had to do with something deep inside her.

After a relaxing exercise I asked Lily to try and take the position she had drawn, with her eyes closed. Lily did this and remained still for some time, then she relaxed and sat up. Having let go of the image Lily started to talk about the feelings this position had brought back to her. Lily said that it was like the foetal position and she remembered that as a child she always took that position when going to bed. She liked to cuddle up and get warm and only before falling asleep she would slowly stretch. Thinking further Lily added that it was paradoxical how independent she had felt as a foetus. She felt omnipotent in that position. She then reflected, however, that once the foetus was born it would need protection and care. This state made her feel very uncomfortable. Lily then went on to say that as a very young baby she was content and well cared for but when she was two months old her mother developed mastitis and went to England to be treated, leaving Lily behind with her own mother.

Lily felt her grandmother as being her real mother, as she was the one who looked after her until she was 14 years. Then suddenly her grandmother had died. Her mother was always busy looking after her most recent baby. In fact shortly after Lily was born, she went to live with her grandmother and her older brother in one apartment, while her mother and father, along with the new born baby, lived in the apartment next door. When the baby brother became a toddler, he came to live next door with them as her mother had to look after the next baby. This kept on happening every time a new baby was born until Lily was twelve years old

and had five brothers. At that stage the whole family moved to a big house in the country, where they lived together.

Having the grandmother look after the children is still a common Greek custom. According to Pettifer (1993), in Greek families the grand parents have important roles especially the grandmothers, who have a series of responsibilities in child care and bringing up the next generation. In this case, it was the widowed English grandmother who came to Greece to help her daughter and to live with her. Her task was to look after the toddlers, while her daughter looked after the new baby and organised her husband's social life. Lily's mother, though English, had taken on the role of a traditional Greek wife, in spite of the fact that before her marriage she had been working as a professional.

The second drawing was that of a matchstick girl with long hair who was three years old. Lily named this one "LOOP". The name represented the loop of hair her grandmother always made her have.

For this drawing Lily selected a few toys and made a space where she could imagine the little girl playing. She stepped into this space and became the three-year-old "Loop". After playing with a doll for some time, she stopped and stood rigid, she said felt exposed. In this position she explained people could do things to her. She then remembered being tied to the toilet at night in order to defecate. She felt bared, as her brothers might be looking at her, with the result that she wouldn't go. She remembered falling asleep on the bathroom floor. Lily felt abandoned by her mother who had no idea of what was happening. Her grandmother had certain rules she believed the children should follow.

Her own story may explain her need for tying the children to one place. She had lived through a family tragedy. When her youngest son was four years old, their house caught fire while they were both inside together. She told her son to stay where he was, while she went through the blaze to get help. She then had run round to the back of the house in order to break down the window where

she had left her little boy but it was too late. The child had followed her into the flames. For this the reason, it may be assumed, she often tied the children to certain places in the house. It also may be the reason why she accepted to be mother to all her grandchildren, whom she loved dearly, in spite of her cruel rules.

At three years old, Lily said, she was still a happy child, as far as she could judge by the photographs she had of herself from that time. About a year later, Lily went to her first kindergarten, which was English.

In the third figure Lily was six to seven years old. She said that she used to wear torn off jeans, was skinny and had long blond hair. She also said that she played football a lot but added that her face in the photographs was no longer smiling. Lily dramatised this figure by playing football and talking loudly about the feelings she had then.

She remembered the time when she and her brothers were still living in the apartment with her grandmother. Lily had a flashback. She saw herself and her brothers fighting about who would climb up on the chair to look through the peephole in their front door at their father coming home to the other apartment for lunch. This picture would indicate that the children had to be kept away from their busy father when he returned home from work. It is not clear if the mother also remained distant.

At this age Lily was sent to the state school to attend first grade. She spoke Greek with an accent and was not fluent.

The fourth drawing was a scarecrow figure with hands sticking out at the sides. Lily's hair didn't show at all because it was tied back tightly and she is wearing a uniform. Only in this drawing and one other does the figure have eyes. Perhaps at this stage in her life, Lily 'witnessed' certain things that were taking place around her. In order for Lily to get the feel of this figure I asked her first to tie her hair back and make it into a bun. This took a bit of time while

she gathered her long hair up. Next I asked her to extend her hands out from her sides with her fingers outstretched and finally to place her feet in a Charlie Chaplin position. When she was ready, I asked her to walk up and down the room in order to remember how she felt in her body at that time. Many memories came flooding back.

At the age of eleven Lily went to High School. By this time she had become more fluent in Greek, but she still preferred speaking English. Her new school was a very strict religious school for girls, where the pupils had to wear long uniforms made of black material with white collars and their hair tied back in a bun. Lily remembered a nun tearing her earrings off her ears, because it was against the rules. When Lily's mother paid a visit to the school it was apparent that the Reverent Mother, did not approve of her Bermuda shorts, with the result that Lily's mother also felt very uncomfortable. When she complained about the school to her husband, he said that the child should stay until the end of the year, "it's not good for her to change schools all the time." However, after her visit, Lily's mother allowed Lily to stay home frequently, using the slightest illness as an excuse. It was her father's sister who had recommended the school, she was the sister who played a very active part in the life of the family. It was her belief that Lily needed a strict school because she behaved 'like a wild child'. Lily's mother was not asked to give her opinion about schools, as she wasn't Greek and didn't know. This would indicate that Lily's mother was not very self-confident and was intimidated by her Greek relations.

Lily was fed up with talks about how good the Greek family system was. She believed that in their case the only thing her aunts did was interfere. Her father had three sisters and two brothers. He had lost one brother during the civil war at the age of twenty-three, the same age as his son was when he died. The aunts had no children of their own, so they visited Lily's family on a regular basis with their husbands. One of these uncles was fond of touching Lily's breasts when she was beginning to mature. Lily was filled with hate and helplessness. She felt that she had no one

she could share these incidences with, even though she knew it was wrong. What she did eventually, was to make sure that she avoided him.

Between this drawing and the next one, at the age of 14, Lily lost her grandmother, whom she loved very dearly. This death, coinciding with the onset of adolescence, may have been the cause of the abuse she started to inflict upon her body through drugs and alcohol. It was as though she was going through a period of anger, which she directed on to herself.

In the fifth drawing Lily looked more like an adolescent with long hair. She was fifteen years old. Lily called herself in this drawing the 'Junky' because she smoked a lot of cannabis. She tried out other drugs as well, like cocaine, ecstasy and heroine. Also, she consumed a lot of alcohol.

I asked Lily to put herself in the body of this figure and to close her eyes. I asked her to remember what she was wearing and to try remembering a conversation she may have had at that age. Lily remembered wearing a school uniform with a tie. She also remembered a boy she was in love with. She used to sneak out of her home and use a phone booth so that she could telephone him. She would telephone his house many times a day but she didn't have the courage to speak to him. The conversation she remembered was one in which she couldn't speak. Lily felt at that time that she had no one to share her thoughts with.

Again Lily had changed schools, this time to a progressive private school in the middle of Athens. To get there, she had to take the train, which she did with two other friends, who were also bicultural and attending the same school. Lily was warned by her father not to speak to her friends in English, as she was forgetting her Greek, and told her that he didn't approve of these friends, anyway. Her father at this time was putting a lot of pressure on her to do better at school and stopped her from going to her ballet classes, so that she would improve her marks. Lily was very upset

about this because she loved her ballet. As a result, she put on some weight during that period.

An ordeal Lily went through every year, for as long as she could remember, was her birthday treat. For her birthday her auntie would take her to the centre of Athens to buy clothes of 'good taste' because again Lily's mother 'could not be trusted to know the good shops'. This exercise involved Lily trying on several articles of clothing that she knew she would never wear, until her aunt picked out something she liked. What she remembers particularly was the ease with which her aunt would go in and out of the dressing room, exposing her to other customers in the shop.

In the sixth drawing Lily was about 17 to 18 years old and had her right foot in a cast. She had changed schools once more and was now in an American school with fuzzy hair. At this school she felt more at ease, as many of the pupils were bicultural and spoke at least two or three languages.

Lily easily took on the stance of this figure and remembered very clearly how she walked with one leg in plaster. She even remembered what her friends had drawn on her cast.

At that time she was in the process of preparing to go to a dance school in England, where she was going to have an audition. A week before she was due to leave, she broke her foot. In retrospect, she said she had been weary of the prospect of going to England with her mother. The plan had been for her mother to go with her, so she could help Lily settle in and stay with her for two months. Lily felt at that time that she really didn't know her mother that well and had not been sure if she could have coped with so much undivided attention. It occurred to her that breaking her foot may not have been accidental.

The next three drawings were made in green felt tip, as though Lily wanted to separate them from the previous ones. Certainly one big difference was that by this stage she had left home.

In the seventh drawing Lily was in England, where she went finally to study human sciences. In this drawing she looked 'relaxed and messy', wearing a smiling face on her T-shirt. This was a time, according to Lily, during which she had to play a part because she could not be her real self. Was that why she wore that smiling face T-shirt? Was she not happy living in another country? Lily didn't know the reasons.

When Lily took on the role of this figure she did give the impression that all was well. She seemed self-confident and happy. Maybe Lily felt uneasy because in retrospect, she knew the events that would follow.

During the following year Lily was to live through very intense events, which have affected her until today. While she was in England, her older brother was in America, also studying. After two years of living in the U.S.A., Lily's brother contracted Aids and both her parents went to America to be with him. When they realised there was nothing to be done, they brought him back to Greece. Lily also flew back and stayed with him until the end. He had been her favourite brother. Nikos died two months later, the whole family was devastated with his loss.

Greek mourning rituals were followed in every detail. The women in the family wore black, whereas the father and brothers each wore a black band round their left arm. The shutters in the house were kept closed for forty days and the mirrors covered. No radio or television was turned on during that time. Visits from the family were a daily occurrence. It was then that Lily took on the role of caring for her siblings, as she felt they were neglected. Her parents could not believe what had happened to their elder and most promising son and were unable to comfort the younger ones who were aged from twelve to eighteen. Lily's father was angry with Lily for not telling him that her brother was bisexual 'had he known he would have helped his son get over it'. Even though Lily didn't believe this, she felt guilty.

Later, when Lily returned to her studies, she went through an anorexic phase and reached 46 kilos. With a height of 175cm she was very thin.

In the eighth image Lily's drawing drawn short hair with a fringe as well as eyes and a lopsided mouth. She was wearing a mini-shirt with leather boots and appeared not to have a right hand. She looked hard and determined.

When Lily took on this role she walked with heavy man like steps.

At this stage in her life Lily was in Israel. She was doing a degree in Middle Eastern studies and was living with her boyfriend. This was a relationship of almost seven years. However, things were not turning out well for them. Lily had an unwanted pregnancy that was followed by an abortion and the break-up of her relationship. Lily became, very depressed and continued to smoke a lot of cannabis, she also took different kinds of other drugs. Her weight was 52 kilos. Her abortion affected her deeply and reminded her of the loss of her brother. She felt she was alone with no one to turn to. She left Israel before completing her studies and returned to Greece.

Was the missing hand in the drawing a coincidence?

In the ninth picture Lily looked like a hippie, she had a page boy haircut and a fancy cowboy jacket. Her hands were behind her back and she was smoking. Lily came back to Greece and stayed with her parents to recover. After a couple of months she couldn't take the pressure of living at home any more and so she went to an island, where she worked as a bar woman. During this period she was into heavy drinking and drugs, while at the same time she held down a job and took on more responsibilities than those of a mere waitress. She ended up drinking two bottles of whisky a day for two years and only returned home, when her father put pressure on her by threatening to go and pick her up himself.

In retrospect, Lily felt that during that period she was rebelling against her family. She hadn't been given much attention until then, not even when she had been severely anorexic.

In the final drawing, Lily was sitting on the floor reading and looking down the line of images through her life. The book she was reading was a feminist book about the oppression of women.

When I asked her to take on the position of this last image, Lily said that it felt very familiar. In this image she was feeling more at ease with her body and felt confident about taking a good look at her life.

In this final position it was as though Lily could see the other images of herself clearly like symbols from the past. According to Store (1972), the symbol arises as a consequence of distancing or detaching the self from the object. (p.184) Those images had become symbols of different stages in her life. By leaving them behind Lily would be able to find a meaning in her present life. She started to sort things out. Her life hadn't been easy. She had suffered certain traumas, which had left their mark on her.

Through looking at these images the aim was not to relive all the traumatic incidents in her life but to sort out the different stages and the feelings these brought to the surface. According to Laing (1969 p. 106), self-consciousness, as the term is ordinarily used, implies two things: an awareness of oneself by oneself, and *an awareness of oneself as an object of someone else's observation*. This was what Lily had achieved through therapy. She had become conscious of herself.

In the last image Lily no longer took heavy drugs nor did she drink. It was as though she had overcome the need to punish her body. What she would like to further achieve would be to give up cannabis, earn her own living and live alone. Finding a partner and possibly having a family were also on her mind, but they took secondary place.

Conclusion

Different value systems, as well as important events had influenced Lily's life. One important aspect was the fact that she was bicultural. This meant that Lily was often getting conflicting messages. On the one hand, there was a feeling from the Greek family that her mother didn't know certain things or could not be trusted by them. On the other, when Lily's mother had a very minor health problem, she went to England to have it seen to as she did not have faith in the Greek medical system. Lily's father believed that ballet was of much lesser importance than academic achievement, whereas her mother was prepared to support Lily in pursuing a dancing career. Lily's mother did not approve of the very religious school Lily was sent to by her father and aunt, and collaborated in helping her miss school. These are a few of the conflicting messages Lily experienced, and there must have been others, perhaps of greater importance, which Lily could only sense. It would be natural to assume that Lily's mother was not used to the mourning rituals the family carried out after the death of her son being so different from the customs she was used to. Did she pass this on to her daughter? When Lily talked about the mourning period, she said that it was the first time she came close to her mother and was able to 'open up to her'. Maybe this was a time when Lily's mother needed an ally, a female who could understand her.

Perhaps the seven schools Lily was sent to were connected to the different nationalities of her parents. It could be that each time they were hoping to find the most suitable one and were unaware of the great strain they were putting on their daughter. Lily was not allowed to put down roots. Each time she changed schools she had to leave her old friends and make new ones. This alone must have given her a great feeling of insecurity.

Another important aspect in Lily's life was her mother leaving her in the care of her grandmother. It was certainly the custom in

Greece and still is, but Lily felt she was unwanted. She yearned for more attention from her mother.

Finally, an event, which caused Lily a lot of pain was losing her older brother. His death must have brought her face to face with her own mortality. Also, her brother was one of the first young people in Greece to die of Aids, placing a stigma on the family that was not easy to bear. This became a source of resentment between Lily and her father, as he believed they should conceal the cause of death, whereas Lily felt her brother's death could be a warning to other young people.

I suggest that the strain of being bicultural, along with her life circumstances, led Lily to alcohol, drugs and anorexia. She reacted violently to her experiences, with the result that she started to abuse her own body. Fortunately, she was a very strong person, who had the will to live and wanted to become independent.

After a year of individual therapy and three years of group dramatherapy, Lily is now living in her own home with six dogs. She still goes and visits her parents regularly, but she has become more independent. She has practically given up the cannabis and has stopped biting her nails. Her weight is more or less steady. She has her own garden, where she cultivates many plants and has round about 400 pots of cacti. Could there be significance in her choice of plants?

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