
PART III ETHICAL DELIBERATIONS

As we have seen in part II, cultural difference is an easily mobilized rationale to legitimize referrals to specialized mental health institutions like Centre Minkowska. This culturalization of psychological distress and social ills leads specialized mental health professionals to experience the contradictions and double binds that derive from their identification by referring state agents as cultural experts. While these contradictions and double binds are anxiety producing, they also offer fertile ground for resistance and ethical response.

A critical analysis of the social situations in which migrants find themselves unveils how their vulnerable positionality within an unequal social order exposes them to psychological distress and potentially leads to disorders requiring clinical attention. The stakes of interpreting forms of “social suffering” and their origins are high for professionals at Centre Minkowska. How do we make sense of the overlapping of social determinants and individual distress? How can we avoid medicalizing or pathologizing the social while also allowing recognition of social determinants in caregiving practices?

The approach practiced at Centre Minkowska incorporates this critical stance through regular staff deliberations about how to engage referring professionals in considerations of the social roots of suffering in a psychotherapy context. In this last section, I first consider how professionals at Centre Minkowska have adapted their clinical practice to accommodate situations in which social issues are predominant and hinder psychotherapeutic work. I refer here to situations of extreme precarity, when patients’ uncertainty about obtaining legal status or accessing basic needs (a place to sleep or food to eat) makes time chatting with a psychotherapist almost irrelevant. I then explore whether Centre Minkowska has been instrumentalized by the state as a stopgap for excluded migrant populations. In doing so, I investigate how ruptures between professionals’ ideals and system logics fuel feelings of frustration and provide an impetus for staff members to take responsibility and action but also differentially affect experts according to their professional status and experience. Throughout, I highlight MEDIACOR meetings as opportunities to evaluate how Centre Minkowska professionals use the cultural competence approach.