

# V

## Vassiliou, George and Vasso



Mina Polemi-Todoulou  
Scientific Council Member, The Athenian  
Institute of Anthropos, Athens, Greece

### Name

Vassiliou, George (1927–2001) and Vasso  
(1927–2007)

### Introduction



**Drs. George and Vasso Vassiliou**, Psychiatrist and Psychologist, partners in life and profession since 1955, were the parents of Systemic Family and Group Therapy in Greece. In 1963, with a team of colleagues, they founded the **Athenian Institute of Anthropos (AIA)**, on a shared vision: to contribute to the humanization of postwar society, by supporting the **functioning of Anthropos** (the “whole human being” in Greek) – individuals, groups, families, large organizations, communities, and wider social networks.

The set goal was to equip professionals providing this service with the necessary skills and theoretical or methodological tools to combat antagonism in human relating at all levels and enhance cooperative practices within and among different social groups.

What was called for was the development of a holistic, dynamic, relational and process-oriented approach, and of a team of associates sharing a common vision and working closely together in the context of a wider interdisciplinary and intercultural network.

### Career

#### Early Years and Academic Experience

Born to an Athenian middle class family in 1927, Vasso Vassiliou – then Nomikou – came of age during a traumatic civil war in Greece, right after the Second World War. She got the Red Cross training and volunteered as a nurse in a hospital

created at the site of her old school in Athens. Strongly concerned with the societal developments she diverted from her initial university chemistry studies to involve herself in the creation of a center for children in Athens, assisting a Piaget-trained psychologist and to work in a magazine researching and reporting on prevailing social issues.

Born in a small village in the island of Lesbos, George Vassiliou got his degree from the Athens University Medical School (1953). Serving as a doctor in the military units in the mountain villages of Northern Greece he came to realize the widely spread destruction and pain the wars had brought to the people and published their stories in the magazine where Vasso was working. They met and shared the vision to respond to the needs of the society as they were experiencing them, by creating a center for the enhancement of people's mental health and by getting together a team of professionals, who would obtain the necessary training to meet up to this challenge.

In 1955, G.V. was accepted for an internship at the Mercy Hospital Loyola University Clinics in Chicago, USA, followed by a psychiatric residency at the Illinois State Psychiatric Institute (ISPI) and an internship at the Galesburg State Research Hospital. In 1956, Vasso joined him; they got married and started a family with the birth of their daughter Anni. Vasso obtained an MA and a PhD degree in clinical psychology at Loyola University (1962). They both worked as staff at these institutions and at the Catholic Charities Guidance Center (Vassiliou 1990).

During those years, they shared ideas influential for their development with important people they met, such as Virginia Satir, Nathan Ackerman, Percival Bailey, Jacob Moreno's associate Adelaide Starr, and Rudolf Dreikurs.

### Returning Home

Upon their return to Greece and having given birth to their second and third daughters – Lily and Alexandra – they founded the Athenian Institute of Anthropos.

Primary goals, on which substantial time was devoted at the initial stage, were: training young professionals who would become lifelong

associates, sharing the same vision; researching the Greek family, the changing roles and values, as well as the role definitions of all mental health professions; exploring ways to apply their training and adapt the new ideas they brought along from the other side of the ocean to the Greek context; setting up a clinical practice and training: one-way mirror, group therapy, family therapy, couples, sensitization of professional and caregiving roles.

The Athenian Institute became a meeting place: visitors from all over the world exchanged ideas on the newly developing field of systemic interventions, while the Vassiliou regularly traveled as invited trainers in many countries and institutions. They both taught as visiting professors in academic institutions in Greece and abroad. Vasso Vassiliou served as a full time Psychology Professor at Pierce University College in Athens (1963–1975).

During the last two decades of their life they held a summer school at G.V.'s parental home at Parakoila; it was very meaningful to them to be able to offer back to their respective roots (Athens and Lesbos) the goods they have gathered on the way, bridging these different worlds.

## Contributions to Profession

### Developing the AIA Systemic Therapy Approach

The Vassiliou were actively involved since the late 1950s in the movements of **Family Therapy**, **General Systems Theory**, **Group Therapy**, and **Subjective Culture** research.

During their Chicago years, they met with Virginia Satir, who was doing a weekly 2-h seminar at the Illinois State Psychiatric Institute on the powerful impact of family dynamics on individual psychopathology. With her supervision, they held their first family therapy sessions with patients at the Hospital. A long lasting friendship with Satir and the Palo Alto colleagues was established, leading to fruitful meetings in the following decades.

G. Vassiliou, excited with the process of implementing Nathan Ackerman's ideas in couple and family sessions at the hospital, presented the

case of a couple therapy to a large colleagues' meeting. One of the stories G.V. liked to share is the harsh criticism he received by a well-established psychoanalyst for the "fatal mistake to see a husband and wife together in a session." They developed a long collaboration with Nathan Ackerman, regularly visiting his New York Institute, to share their understanding of families through research and clinical work in Greece.

During this period, the Vassilios came also in contact with the group therapy and general systems movement. Supported by Percival Bailey, a systemically thinking professor, George Vassiliou started group sessions with psychiatric patients. As he narrates *"during a visit in the psychiatric ward I observed something unusual: patients known to be non-communicative were bending over something on the floor and discussing. It turned out that this was a drawing by one of them."* This episode inspired G.V. to develop a method for group process facilitation: members are invited to use a common stimulus – a voted member drawing – in order to narrate and reflect on a life incident and express the related underlying feelings. Transaction among members is encouraged and developed for therapeutic purposes. Vasso Vassiliou contributed in the development of this method: inspired by her research at that time at Loyola Behavior Laboratory with Magda Arnold (a leader in research on emotion) utilizing TAT Story Sequence Analysis, and being sensitized on how different groups yield characteristic patterns of sequences, she applied the Sequence Analysis to the stories narrated by the therapy group members.

This is how the AIA innovative approach was born. It was first presented in a seminal paper on "Group Image Therapy" (Vassiliou 1968), which won for George Vassiliou an Illinois Psychiatric Society Award (1960), and opened up the way for further experimentation. The **Synallactic Collective Image Technique** (SCIT) was developed by the Vassilios and colleagues at the AIA as a method and a tool in research, diagnosis, therapy, and training. The Greek-derived term "synallactic" signifies the process of changing one another together through interaction.

During the early years, 1960s and 1970s, another trend – that of **comparative sociocultural research** – influenced their work. Having the war memories fresh still and alarmed by the massive and abrupt urbanization and the antagonistic values permeating many social institutions, they intensified their study of the impact of rapid cultural change on the functioning and malfunctioning of individuals and families. With colleagues in different countries, they carried out large-scale comparative research on role perceptions, values, and attitudes, initiated by Charles Osgood (Illinois University and Group Effectiveness Research Lab, Urbana) who coined the term "**subjective culture**" to signify "the way people perceive their social environment."

The Greek data, analyzed in collaboration with Harris Triandis (Illinois University), revealed the "**ingroup-outgroup**" division in the perception of the social world and the "**Philotimo**" (showing concern for the ingroup) as the guiding value in the Greek family. Cultivating awareness of the impact of the changing subjective culture on family life and on the work context became central in all work at the AIA.

Equipped with this research the Vassilios organized the **First Delphic International Colloquium on Family Therapy** in Greece (August 1970) on the influence of subjective culture on family therapy. Fifty invited participants from Australia, France, Great Britain, Greece, Israel, Japan, Turkey, USA, and Yugoslavia joined. G.V. proposed "**milieu specificity**" as a key factor in doing and discussing about family therapy: *"The way we perceive our social environment in general, misleads us in 'disagreeing' while in agreement and 'agreeing' while in disagreement... Quite unwittingly, individuals and groups, we throw each other in deadly double-binds, simply because we take for granted the assumptions we make on the basis of our Subjective Culture and we proceed to think that whatever works in our milieu must work the world over"* (The AIA Newsletter 1970).

The Vassilios proposed the "**Diogenes criterion**" – named after the Cynic Greek philosopher, who underlined the **importance of the human being above all other goods**: They

considered fundamental the distinction between practices that foster antagonism and exploitation versus those that are **committed to cooperative relations in the service of the common good**. Becoming a “whole human being” (Anthropos) is becoming a creative group member and becoming a creative cooperative group is utilizing the special potential of each member. “*Autonomy through and for interdependence*” has been a favorite motto in G.V.’s opening and closing speeches.

The influence of the **General Systems Theory** movement is seen in the Vassilios’ early writings in the prevalence of principles such as: “*Anthropos as a human system*”; “*Openness in organization and organization in openness*”; functioning as a “*spiraling process to higher levels of complexity*”; “*building a true dialogue on systeming rather than summing*”; “*cognitive-emotional integration*” and using analogic communication in therapy; “*doing away with artificial dichotomies and enlarging the picture to grasp the whole at another level*”; “*therapy aiming at the enhancement of self-leading processes.*”

They saw early on the need to work towards **prevention** though offering group process training for an array of roles related to family life: mothers, couples, adolescents, children, mental health, and education professionals.

They led an extensive training of therapists with the non-negotiable position that **the first and foremost therapeutic tool** is the **self of the therapist** and the **relationship** among the **coevolving** systems of the therapeutic team, the family or group, and the wider context. They themselves taught by example, through the way they led, on a daily basis, their personal, familial, social, and professional lives, guided by the Diogenes criterion.

### **Fostering a Network Through the Delphic Spirit**

They contributed extensively to the **development of an international interprofessional network** of colleagues sharing similar visions and exploring systemic theory and applications. Dedicated **to actively sustain an ongoing dialogue** they used every opportunity to create forums that

brought together pioneers in the Balkan, Mediterranean, Eastern and Western European countries, the Middle East, and the USA. They tirelessly responded to all invitations to teach and present around the world – despite the kinetic impediment of G.V. since the early 1970s. The series of **Delphic Symposia** they organized (1964–1985) became the scene for vivid discussions on innovative concepts and practices.

The dialogue was further enriched through the **AIA Newsletter** (44 issues, 1964–1988), sent to over 700 colleagues, 300 institutions in 55 countries, in all continents and through regularly corresponding with visiting and hosting pioneers such as Nathan Ackerman, Yvonne Agazarian, Guy Ausloos, Claus Bahnson, Ariadne Beck, Don Bloc, Peter Bos, Philip Caillé, Rudolf Dreikurs, Helen and Jim Durkin, Sigmund H. Foulkes, Jay Haley, Vladimir Hudolin, Don Jackson, Salvador Minuchin, Jacob and Zerka Moreno, Malcolm Pines, Helm Stierlin, Maria Orwid, Virginia Satir, Paul Watzlawick, Lynn Wynne, and many others.

### **Affiliations**

The Vassilios were actively involved and served on the boards of numerous international associations: World Association of Social Psychiatry – WASP (G.V. president 1978–1983, V.V. Executive Council Member); Mediterranean Sociopsychiatric Association (MESPA), founded by G.V. and V. Hudolin, to interconnect neighbors in the Balkans, Mediterranean, and Middle East, witnessing similar sociocultural changes; American Group Psychotherapy Association – AGPA (Fellows); International Association of Group Psychotherapy – IAGP; task force of the General System Society; Committees of international conferences, clinical and research centers; Editorial boards in journals and book series.

They presented their ideas in numerous conferences, journals, chapters in books, and technical reports. The AIA Communication Series includes about 170 of their writings.

They were acknowledged for their contributions internationally and in Greece. They received distinctions and awards among which were by WASP (for George Vassiliou in 1983), and by

EFTA – European Family Therapy Association (for George and Vasso Vassiliou in 2001).

### Epilogue

George and Vasso Vassiliou's everyday life and practice reflected the basic values and principles that constitute the “**Systemic Dialectic Multilevel Multifocal Approach**,” which they codeveloped with colleagues and trainees over four decades as an emerging process rather than a closed system. In their daughter's words, they became a source of inspiration through “*their ongoing courage to face life's struggles, agonies and pain, and their unquenched thirst for learning, growing, developing personally and broadening their perception and sense of who they are, recognizing the teachings life brings them in many different forms, as they follow their path of heart, living life through their hearts*” (Vassiliou 2017).

They were happy to see one of their original goals materialize: through the AIA, many generations of family and group therapists and systemically thinking professionals were trained in Greece and elsewhere, out of which many new ideas were generated as well as numerous systemic, family therapy and group therapy centers and associations, with an influential presence in today's society.

It is worth noting that while still in full action themselves, they entrusted the AIA leadership to a small team of Associates trained by them in the 1970s, believing this would keep the AIA's

horizon open to new developments. Today the AIA, operated by this team, and with an enriched body of trainers and therapists, continues to offer in therapy, prevention, and training in and outside Greece, contributing further to the systemic field.

### Cross-References

- ▶ [Systemic-Dialectic Multilevel-Multifocal Approach](#)
- ▶ [The Athenian Institute of Anthropos](#)

### Key Citations

- Vassiliou, G. (1968). A transactional approach to mental health: An experiment in Greece. In B. Riess (Ed.), *New directions in mental health*. New York: Grune & Stratton.
- Vassiliou, G. (1969). Milieu-specificity in family therapy. In N. Ackerman, J. Lieb, & J. Pearce (Eds.), *Transactions in family psychotherapy*. New York: Little Brown.
- Vassiliou G. (1990). *A Long Story in a Few Words: The Athenian Institute of Anthropos*. The AIA Communication Series, No 260. Athens: The Athenian Institute of Anthropos.
- Vassiliou, L. (2017). *Vasso & George Vassiliou: A personal snapshot, The AIA communications series*. Athens: The Athenian Institute of Anthropos.
- Vassiliou, G., & Vassiliou, V. (1981). Outlining the synallactic collective image technique as used within a systemic-dialectic approach. In J. E. Durkin (Ed.), *Living groups*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.