

Hester O Connor reflects on her experience of the Manchester Block training in Group Analysis.

For Cynthia: in three parts

Part one: once upon a time

Fado, fado*, in the olden days, in a village with 400 inhabitants, a church with lovely pine trees in the graveyard, a shop, school and four pubs, there lived a young girl. She was the sixteenth child, she still does not know what this really means. It being a time when paternalistic ways shaped identity through church, school and village life, she lived just like others in that small rural community. She never knew quite what the rules of games were and she seemed a little confused, a lot of the time. She managed to hide this well and who would ever have known but that she in fact invented the rules of the games. Life was funny in those times.

School was an extension of family and church life, so from an early age she dreamed of another life, like having Mars bars all to herself. Then university came and she began to meet folk from other villages and towns, she still had a fuzzy brain but you'd never have guessed. She was not hiding, more it was a case of when your brain is full of static you may not even notice. It's funny but, often it is the case that you notice you had things when they leave you. When she was twenty-four and three quarters she left her homeland to fly overseas to attend in big university where the folk had a soft spot for the way that lassies from her country used to sound when they spoke. After two more years of study, she still did not feel quite at ease deep inside herself. Then things began to change, by some means other than logic, maybe an angel of direction helped her to find a seat in a circle where folk spoke and listened in ways she never knew existed before.

At the Garnethill Centre in Rose Street in Glasgow, she met Jeff Roberts who said she was like a 'dog with a bone'; For sure she did not easily let up when she slowly began to emerge from the fog that had inhabited her mind from way back. One thing led to another and she joined Cynthia Rogers and the group in Manchester, in a place called the Red House. Up and down the motorway she used travel at weekends to join the others in talking and trying to make sense together. What she remembers is that Cynthia started to take a place in her heart not as the *group conductor*, but as '*My Cynthia*'. Try as she may to explain what happened: *belonging, playing, tears and words that joined people together*, all seem

to lack the vibrancy with which she now feels these words. They arise from a new place, not the fog and confusion that numbed their meaning once upon a time. They now have their own vibration, a resonance where you can hear, feel and taste their meaning.

Shame had finally lifted.

Part Two: *taming the censor*

Ten years later, Nov 2006

It is ten years since I graduated from Manchester with a Diploma in Group Analysis. I have worked for most of the past ten years as a trainer in Clinical Psychology. I have also run groups for People with Learning Disabilities, and I currently conduct two out-patient psychotherapy groups in the NHS. Recently, I ran a workshop training a group of eleven senior Family Liaison Officers in group supervision skills. This is an undergraduate module that we run at the University to give local staff opportunities to develop their skills.

A narrative of one clip of this training captures my commitment to groups as the approach of first choice, not as means of rationalising resources.

On the journey to the training venue my colleague Alex explained that the group I would be training would not have the luxury of running supervision groups for four or five junior staff. No, I needed to come into the real world, and, yes, there could be up to ten in a supervision group. Indeed, I learned that none of the staff previously had any experience of being supervised in a group themselves.

Once we arrived at the venue I quickly re-arranged the room moving chairs and tables and creating the group context with the standard circle of chairs. As the group filed into the room they seemed pleased to be invited to sit in a circle. They responded well to my explanation of how the day was loosely structured to allow flexibility for issues they may want to focus on. I facilitated an hour of a conversation between them about, well anything they wanted to talk about. The experience of sitting together in a facilitated group was new and some expressed dread at the silence at the beginning (the silence lasted about twenty seconds), others expressed relief at having space.

After coffee, I introduced the idea of paying attention to what you feel and notice as the best starting place to think about supervision. I played a ten minute clip from a Channel 4 video, called a Truant's Mum. The mum in the video was taking prescribed Methadone, while her eleven year old daughter raged and was absent from school so much that the mother was now facing her third custodial sentence. The older daughter of twenty one lived next door with her young son. The final clip we watched was of the mother visiting her own mother's grave.

I gave the group time to note down their own feelings. They then worked in pairs discussing what they felt and finally we discussed what this might mean for them as supervisors.

A clip from the conversation captures how the group began to take permission from one another to be freer to express feelings.

Ann, the cats on the work surfaces was disgusting. I would never say that in supervision, it is too judgemental.

Mary, I have seen it all before, I feel no hope for us working with such families, but I would not let supervisees know this.

I realised how important it was for me at that point to model giving permission to express feelings and let go of self censorship.

Hester, I felt incredibly sad for that young girl, it was heart breaking.

Pat, I felt so sorry for her too.

Joan, I wanted to work with the daughter next door, if you could get in with the next generation you might stop the cycle.

Tom, I felt sad seeing her at her mother's grave, she is still grieving.

Mary, the head teacher had such a negative attitude, I found that really difficult.

Hester, this is the lovely thing about groups because we have filled out the picture with our different responses to the video. By creating a space where feelings can be allowed it is then possible to begin to think together. In supervision the more you can allow feelings and the more you can encourage the group to work together it becomes richer and frees you from having to be the expert.

Throughout the remainder of the day I kept bringing them back to the importance of attending to feelings and we did exercises around containment and counter-transference.

Reflection on the narrative

I think this short piece sums up something important for me about the richness of the social. I would argue that the group context creates a potential space where shifts in identity may occur. It is evidenced here in how the members began to play with suspending self-censorship. They began to say what they felt without having to try to sound like some idealised expert. For me this moved the conversation into a more creative and less anxious space. Legitimising observing and noticing feelings makes way for amplifying hunches, this is for me a crucial aspect of learning to play with uncertainty. Having to 'know' is a blight on professional identity.

Part three: becoming curious

In the years that have passed since I qualified as a Group Analyst, I have found myself returning again and again in my mind, to that feeling of belonging that I experienced through the training. I have also been drawn back over the years to the memory of a place where I learned about the importance of ambivalence. Sadly, organisational life shuns uncertainty. It is therefore an ongoing challenge to keep relating in ways that acknowledge uncertainty and doubt. I am sure it is for this reason that I recall a time when difficult conversations were a legitimate aspect of relating. I now also re-visit the place of my childhood with new understanding and ways of making sense. Group analytic training has enabled old narratives to be replaced with narratives that are less rigid, fixed and blaming. I no longer hold the view that identity is fixed and solid, I believe instead that the potential is always there for identity to change. I continue to use telephone supervision through the Group Analytic Network. This has proved an invaluable means of maintaining connections and developing my identity as a group analyst. The Manchester training was a new beginning. The Doctorate of Management with Ralph Stacey and Farhad Dalal was another painful but very worthwhile process of learning to make new sense of old patterns. I believe that as my capacity to think has developed I feel encouraged to dive deeper into the depths of a life long spiritual longing, and curiosity for life. Overall, I have reached a place where confusion is bearable. I am deeply grateful for all that that has brought me to this place.

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*Fado in the Irish language means, once upon a time or long ago.