



MY WAY

Writings by Peter Zelaskowski in the late 1990s for the British Association of
Group Psychotherapists' Newsletter



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1. The Suboptimal Seminar

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At a BAGP seminar some time ago I gave the paper I am proud to be presenting this week during Congress. This is how it went.

I imagined a large dimly lit room humming in anticipation of my presentation: 'The Suboptimal Group'. Row upon row of familiar, half familiar and unknown faces, all awaiting my paper. People standing at the back. Men smoking pipes and knowingly nodding. Formidable women all a flutter. I hear whispers, "By 'suboptimal' does he mean" and, "How brave. I couldn't talk about that, could you?" and, "This is the next big paper" . As I enter the room I see a bespectacled, white haired middle aged man in a lounge suit quietly stroking his beard. Oh, and isn't that Bion over there next to Melanie and SHF with Queen Elizabeth!! Earl and Malcolm.....

I launch into my paper. *"The suboptimal group exists in similar relation to the Foulkesian small group. It is the group which persistently exists on or below the Foulkesian breadline of five members, for which selection and composition represent distant ideals and, at its other extreme, it is psychotherapy on the cusp bordering individual and group. It can have as few as two active members and is precariously close to being something else, be it individual psychotherapy or inexistence and, as such, survival and annihilation are key themes - which I will come to later."*

Annihilation? As I speak reality begins to dawn. I see only six others in the room. The empty chairs outnumber the people. Where's the man in the lounge suit? And all the others? I stutter on, *"The suboptimal group is the group that many of us work with while attempting to set up and conduct analytic small groups. It is not the group we hoped we were setting up but is the one we all too often find ourselves working with."*

I scream inwardly. Six!! I wish they would all go away. This can't be happening to me!! I press on and finish. *"... treading a fine line between annihilation and survival. An unsteady equilibrium can establish itself, one I suggest can be worked with. It is very painful to conduct and there are pressures to avoid it, however my experience would suggest, contrary to Foulkesian idealism, that where certain conditions prevail and group psychotherapy is to be offered, we are faced with little alternative."* Of course the seven of us then go on to have an interesting discussion. Someone suggests there may well be another paper being read somewhere else in London that evening. I imagine that group...

Then I remember the week before presenting the same paper to a group of colleagues, fifteen women and one man, at the Westminster Pastoral Foundation. It went better than I imagined. They'd lapped it up - like Frank in Las Vegas. I begin to feel a little better. Suboptimal? That's my kind of town.

2. Note-taking, time and money

I want to be Frank. I'd like to be able to tell you that I routinely keep notes, detailed reports of each session charting the ebbs and flows of group life. 'They'll come in handy you know.' I'd like to be able to say that I write my notes immediately after each session, in the post group quiet, at that time when the experience is freshest and most available **or** that I have created a routine space in my life for scribbling down the therapeutic encounters of my week. After all, this is the very least of what any self-respecting psychotherapist should be doing.

However, I do not keep notes. There, I've said it. Certainly, up until quite recently I went about routinely **not** writing notes firmly believing that I should, routinely feeling guilty over my lack of professionalism, that is to say way, feeling short of the full Foulkes, insufficiently Jung.... Anyway, how the hell do you possibly do justice to the richness of these epic encounters?

Nowadays, I'm glad to say things have changed. I still do not keep notes. What has changed is that I no longer feel I should. I now see myself as a jobbing psychotherapist who struggles to combine earning a crust with parenthood, partnership and any other hat you care to mention. My workload is a constantly changing concoction of sessionally-paid contracts between which I am constantly moving, some of which pay well, the majority quite poorly - have you seen the rates for the NHS counsellor!! What galls me most while I breathlessly go about my business is that I could earn **more** as a state secondary school teacher - my former hat - and have six holiday breaks per year instead of the three I now have. I choose not to because I believe that working as a therapist is on the whole much more interesting and rewarding. I often find myself saying that it suits me being my own boss, however in truth I have more bosses than most. There are

times when this choice is by no means clear and I am tempted to go back into teaching and give up this more existentially insecure struggle that is my lot as a therapist.

Work is hard to come by. Each year the pool of more or less trained counsellors and therapists expands enormously, all competing for the very limited number of jobs, considerably fewer for the group therapist. In the place of professional structures we have threadbare organizations awash with stifling ethical approaches and bourgeois nineteenth century guilt, benevolence and the unrestricted giving of oneself. Why do lawyers not have these problems? I am bound by more codes of ethics and practice than I care to know and given the rewards available to therapists I think it is fair to say that we ask an awful lot of ourselves. Sometimes I think that good enough is not truly believed to be good enough in this profession. I do not take notes because I do not have the time and anyway, nobody is paying me to take them.

3. After the Congress is over

The Congress of the International Association of Group Psychotherapists has now been and gone. For a month afterwards I was in a state of mourning for this huge presence that the eight days had been, in particular that monstrous lover, the "large fucking group". I found myself urgently desiring more large groups - the small and the median would no longer do. Anything less than 500 participants was now suboptimal. Not only that, the group had to contain a plethora of languages, cultures and nationalities arranged in a multitude of concentric circles. Global conflicts had become my domestic concerns. My Russian blood had boiled. My Belfast Republican self had fired metaphorical bullets and had been fired at in return. I'd made new friends and new enemies. I'd taken risks that from this distance seem extraordinary but at the time were terrifyingly necessary. I'd danced, flirted and communed with colleagues as (un)equals - including my therapist - and basked in the thrill of association with the big cheeses. I'd consumed a mass of ideas, declined a whole lot more, there having been well over 300 papers, seminars, symposia and other brain foods. Ordinary life, just for a while, couldn't compete.

I have many stories to tell about my (rite of) passage through the Congress. Two will suffice for now. The first is about my voice - my somewhat neutral middle class accent to be precise. One of the most powerful and defining themes of the congress was concerned with the 'transgenerational transmission of trauma' in particular in conflict strewn parts of the world and how certain historical events can operate like 'chosen trauma' that repeat in various degrees of disguise over time, rather like emblems of a nation's or ethnic group's struggles. I have an uncle, my mother's elder brother, who came to Birmingham from Belfast in his

late teens in search of work and to escape his tyrannical father. There he fell in love with a lower middle class English girl from a family with aspirant social values. To gain her family's acceptance he anglicised his Irish name and did the same with his accent. I'd always resented that he'd done this and found his Birmingham accent grating. Now, when I was growing up I had a typical Brummy accent and arriving at University in Sheffield, aspiring to escape my immigrant working class routes and to join an elite social class, my accent felt like a bar to entry, so more or less consciously I set out to rid myself of it. For the uninitiated, there is a hierarchy of accents in this country at the bottom of which are the Brummy accent and the more inscrutable Black Country variants. At the congress my struggle to find my voice in the large group suddenly connected me transgenerationally to my uncle - I could now forgive the bastard!

In the central circle of the large group each day, along with Earl (the captain's name was Hopper, my god he had a ...) and others, was a vocal, formidable and expressive Palestinian woman called Lamis - the sole representative of her people at the Congress. For the first four days I sat well away from this central circle and sniped from the edges. Then on the penultimate evening I tumbled out of the conference centre with a crowd of people and found myself walking towards the west-end in conversation with none other than Lamis. We both shared a passion for a colleague of hers, Macario Giraldo, who had provided my Congress high, becoming my Congress father as a result, during a moving and illuminating symposium on his work in which he combines (believe it or not) Lacan and object relations around a core theme of intersubjectivity. I'd fallen into his session by chance, too tired of choosing between the vast arrays of possibilities. Lamis told me she needed to return to Washington the following day and that she would not be at the final session of the large group. She also told me that she'd found

my contributions to the large group very moving, that I reminded her of her brother and that as a consequence she wanted me to take her vacant seat the following day in the large group. My knees nearly buckled as she told me this. I felt myself touched yet at the same time overwhelmed by the responsibility of being her Congress brother, of taking her place and risking annihilation. I did once work in the Gaza Strip for a summer as an English teacher but never did I feel so involved, with this sense that their struggle was my struggle, as I did at that point. I think the large group experience taught me above all else that annihilation is in equal measure a potential consequence of the polarities of involvement and uninvolvedness.

4. Clinical judgment and power in psychotherapy

When are clinical issues purely clinical? Never, of course! Obvious isn't it? Well no, not obvious actually. I have banged my head (and risked other parts of my anatomy) against the brick wall of clinical judgement on far too many occasions to be able to ever again allow anybody exercise their clinical judgement in my presence with impunity. What the hell is clinical judgement anyhow? It has often felt to me like one of those indulgences we allow each other as 'professionals' - the professional conceit is surely, the worst of all - in which we avoid doubt, unknowing, rivalry and much else and collude with each other around fantasies of ourselves as ubermensch - experts in our fields, purveyors of remedies, the modern seers, founts of ancient wisdom, the blessed. Paul Gordon, in his recent clear headed critique of some of psychotherapy's worst conceits (he lead our January Seminar this year) reminds us of the work of Ivan Illich some twenty or so years ago in which 'clients' are needed by 'professionals', indeed it is the client who services the professional. The client's 'needs' are made up of a mass of assumptions made on their behalf.

My particular gripe is fiercest in the warzone of assessment. I have worked in an organisation in which group therapy was very much the servant of individual therapy. Clients were fed to me under circumstances of severe rationing. Assessment was a conveyor belt into on-going one to one - only for group were positive indicators sought. Eventually, the Governors of the organisation listened to the clinical judgement of the Director, which was that group therapy wasn't working. This is an example of how power relations within institutions are played out within the client work, as much because there is a dismal tendency within psychotherapy to imagine we are above the mess of power and politics - we get to the real cause of things. Taken from this perspective the needs of the client

cease to play any part, the needs of the professionals, i.e., those earning a crust, understandably determined to defend their share of the loaf, are paramount. The question that my experience within a wide range of public and voluntary institutions has always begged is: just how come is it that counselling and psychotherapy clinics of one form or another always manage to provide just the right proportion of clients to sustain the different treatment forms they offer. Clinical judgement is surely way down the pecking order of explanations for this.

I currently work within an NHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service in which a so-called 'multi-disciplinary' team - largely psychotherapists - has been set up to help reduce burgeoning waiting lists. The Consultant Psychiatrist, who wields clinical judgements with no hesitation, is keen to profess her sympathy for psychotherapy but at the same time one is left in no doubt as to what our role is about - to protect her. We have had a number of bogus democratic discussions within the team on the nature of our assessments, however at the end of the day we are reminded that 'this', i.e., a basic psychiatric assessment, 'is minimally what we have to do' because this is all about weeding out potential suicide risk or care cases so that nobody can be accused of not having acted, i.e., the person with clinical responsibility cannot be so accused. By the way these are my inferences from our discussions. As a result our clinical meetings are laughable, well they would be if wasn't such a pain in the arse struggling through them, because our function as psychotherapists on the shop floor is to service the needs of the dominant profession - psychiatry.

In my experience this type of power struggle is not much talked about within psychotherapy. Too many assumptions are made about our relations as 'professionals' that disguise the underlying hostilities. Clinical judgement,

particularly at the level of assessment, is as much about power - the internal dynamics of the particular organisation added to the hierarchical tensions that exist between schools, models, theories, methods (etc.) of psychotherapy and counselling in competition with each other within the market scramble place.

I hope to see colleagues at the forthcoming BAGP Workshop "The Assessment Controversy" on Saturday May 8th in order to take these issues further.

Readers of this column should note that I am soon to move to Spain (hence the new title) but will continue to pen my views for the Newsletter from afar. By the way, I would be grateful to hear from any Spanish group psychotherapists, or anyone in the know, about opportunities for working in Spain within the field.

Notes: 1. Gordon, P. (1999) *Face to Face: Therapy as Ethics* (Constable)

5. Reflections on attending a congress in Barcelona

I recently attended in Barcelona the Second European Conference on Group Psychotherapy of the European Federation for Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy in the Public Sector (EFPP). It was entitled: "From Fragmentation to Cohesion" - in my mind just the sort of twee psycho-idealism we are prone to as psychotherapists, so I came up with my own re-interpretation: "From Fragmentation to Ever So Slightly Less Fragmentation, Hopefully." I attended the Conference more out of a personal need to begin to have a picture of the local group therapy scene and to make contacts - I am moving to Barcelona this September - than of any particular involvement in the process of European Union.

The Congress was a frustrating mix of rich ideas, illuminating presentations, well-packaged intentions and strangely malfunctioning experiences. The remarkably efficient and clean metro that took me to the Congress each day, each train leaving exactly on time without exception, immediately contrasted with the chaotic time boundaries of the Congress. Each of the three days started with long inexplicable delays, such that the programme was constantly having to be restructured. The most striking element of this was that on each day the part of the programme that had to make way for the lost time was the small discussion group, surely the core element of any form of group psychotherapy no matter what country or of any conference or workshop. My anxiety and trepidation about this as an obviously Spanish thing - oh my god, how can I survive in this boundaryless Mediterranean culture that always keeps you waiting and wanting more - has since combined with thoughts that this may also equally have been a European thing, symptomatic of our resistance to so-called union. What was

most difficult to accept about this was that clearly much of our Catalan and Spanish host's time and energy had gone into this gathering, only for the key space in which cross cultural and trans-linguistic dialogue might occur to be treated with such apparent disdain. Of course there were compensations and this is far from the whole story.

Sadly I'd arrived in Barcelona the day after the extraordinary Champion's League Final - one hundred thousand in a circle in the Nou Camp - between Manchester United and Bayern Munich - with the streets (the Ramblas actually may as well be the only street in Barcelona) awash with loud boozy red and white celebration. There was also the Spanish Grand Prix that weekend, so there was very much a feeling of something extraordinary happening in this magnificent beGaudied city. This helped generate a mood of excitement over the possibilities of the Congress, as well as hugely inflating the cost of air travel. Three hundred psychotherapists coming together in a holiday setting in celebratory mood to get down to the really serious business of sitting, as opposed to driving round, in circles suddenly felt like just the thing to be doing.

A few familiar faces combined with the strange majority - one of whom it transpired works within the same NHS department. I wondered how far my Spanish could take me so I attended a group programmed to be in both Castilian (what we refer to as Spanish) and English. When I told the group of my expectation of this being a mixed language group the conductor seemed confused but nonetheless nodded and said in Castilian, "Well it can be if you want." It turned out not to be.

With the small group decimated it was left to the programme of seminars, workshops and key note addresses to provide some cohesion. Simultaneous translation between the four Congress languages and the occasional translation on paper provided some linkage, however the generally poor quality of the translations made for very difficult listening. This may all sound very negative, possibly an expression of how I feel about moving here. The fact is though that I found the contact invigorating in many respects and left feeling energised and optimistic. The abiding images came from an evening of Catalan culture. Firstly, a Sardana, a dance of four men and four women linked in a perfect circle, fully attuned to each other's steps. If only such harmony were possible. Secondly, and most memorably breath-taking, a troupe of Castellers. Around 50 or so people, ranging from four year old children to some in their forties, forming human towers. The tower emerges from what seems at first like a chaotic scrum. Suddenly, a platform takes shape made up of the strongest supported by the majority and before long the youngest children are climbing to the top of a tower of 5 or 6 levels. I could hardly watch, thrilled and terrified as I was - can the mass provide a secure enough base for the youngest and most vulnerable to climb upwards? Apparently, this year towers as high as 9 and 10 have been achieved!!

During the plenary session at the end of the Congress, I voiced some of my frustrations, in particular over the molten Dalian time boundaries. In response, an experienced Spanish delegate said that he had made the same complaint once at a Mexican congress and was never again invited back. Perhaps I need to watch my step in future - seems like quite a fall!