

## **Learning From Three Practices**

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The formal launch of the Association for Psychosocial Studies prompted me to reflect upon how I came to this perspective in the course of my life. I got to thinking that I've probably been wedded to this approach since I started work back in the 1970s but in those days we never thought of it in terms of 'the psychosocial'. Having recently moved out of the university sector to focus more on my psychotherapy and work around climate change I also found myself reflecting upon the different ways in which I have learnt from engagement in these three areas – research, psychotherapy and politics. So what follows is a set of biographically inspired ruminations on what Bion aptly termed 'Learning from Experience' (Bion 1962).

I was fortunate enough to get a university research job in the early 80s without anything other than a first degree. I had begun doctoral research at Sussex University in 1974 but quickly fell out with my supervisor (a social psychologist) as my interest in psychoanalysis grew. The research aimed to explore a facet of sensitivity training groups (here-and-now experiential methods of understanding group processes) but it quickly became clear to me that I would have to use controlled experimental methodologies to do so, which even then felt like the kiss of death to mystery and vitality in the research process. So I returned to London with Rosie my life long partner. I started work in Battersea at what was then the Peoples Aid and Action Centre (PAAC), led by a Maoist, Sue Holland, who had just completed the adult training at the Tavistock Clinic. With hindsight I can see that PAAC was an early attempt at a psycho-social project - we provided psychodynamic counselling to individuals and couples, ran a

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food coop, day nursery and welfare rights service. We were involved in local campaigns and helped run Pavement, a community newspaper. We believed that peoples' material and emotional needs were inseparable and we were convinced it was necessary in theory and practice to understand how class, race, poverty and other social phenomena contributed to the social suffering of people in the area (Holland & Holland 1984; Hoggett & Lousada 1985).

Along with a few others who, like me, had been in various Trotskyist sects during the 1970s we formed the *Intervention Collective*, a free wheeling Marxist discussion forum led by a very thoughtful, self-taught intellectual, Ken Tarbuck, who had rejected orthodox communism back in the 1930s. The Battersea project had its funding withdrawn in 1978 by the new Conservative administration in Wandsworth and I drifted into doing counselling in a small private practice and part time teaching at what was then Thames Polytechnic. We attempted to continue the Battersea 'social action psychotherapy' project by setting up the Lambeth and Southwark Community Mental Health Group which is where I met a clinical psychologist called Stephen Frosh. Eventually, completely by chance in 1981, I spotted a one year contract being offered at a place called the School for Advanced Urban Studies (SAUS) at Bristol University. They were looking for someone with 'group work' skills and experience of community work. I fitted the bill.

For me this whole period, the period before I became 'a researcher' if you like, was formative. It was through politics and community work that I learnt to write so that by the time I got into academia I could express myself, albeit slightly rhetorically at times, even though I hadn't managed a higher degree. Through Sue Holland I discovered the 'object relations' tradition in psychoanalysis - Fairbairn, Klein, Winnicott, Balint, Khan - and realised that psychoanalytic practice, in the UK at least, was very different to the classical

psychoanalysis of Freud's. Through the Intervention Collective I began to develop an intellectual critique of catastrophic Marxism as we immersed ourselves in Gramsci, the economic theory of 'long waves' and analyses of what was then known as 'the subjective factor' in history (i.e. class consciousness). Of course, to the analysis of the latter, I was able to bring my developing psychoanalytic insights. I would happily sit up at night reading and typing after our two young boys had gone to bed. It didn't seem like 'work' to me, and the thoughts that grew in this period eventually found expression a decade later in 1992 in my book *Partisans in an Uncertain World*. It contains the best stuff I have written and because Free Associations published it I was completely free from any of the constraints of academic publishing; I could be speculative, a bit daring and passionate, not really valued qualities within academe.

Looking back it was during this period that I internalised something about the value of learning by doing. How better to learn about destructive group dynamics than to participate in a Trotskyist sect? How better to learn about ethical commitment than to work alongside social workers on the public housing estates of the then isolated and run down Isle of Dogs? How better than to learn about psychoanalytic practice than by sitting with Sue Holland as we listened to a distraught and angry black woman from a local housing estate? And not just doing but experimenting, trying something out to see what happened. Interestingly enough the activist groups (the same applies to the Labour Party that I immersed myself in during the 1980s) never did this. On reflection I think they were largely terrified of experimentation. But in the more anarchic world of group work practice, through community politics in Battersea and even the magic mushroom subgroup of the Intervention Collective we were always experimenting. A classic statement from long ago comes to mind:

The chief defect of all existing materialism...is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively. (Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach* )

Within academia I was fortunate enough to still find spaces for learning by doing. At SAUS I worked closely with a number of left wing local authorities in the 1980s (Sheffield, GLC, Camden) who were experimenting with what in those days we called ‘municipal socialism’. I was particularly interested in attempts to democratise public services through forms of neighbourhood democracy and worked alongside Labour councils such as Islington as a trainer and change agent. Later, an ESRC grant enabled me to assume the role of researcher to investigate the effectiveness of neighbourhood democracy in Islington and Tower Hamlets (Burns, Hambleton & Hoggett, 1994). By the early 1990s, the triumph of Thatcherism complete, the space for experimentation within local government had effectively disappeared and I don’t think it was a coincidence that it wasn’t long before SAUS itself was in crisis. In 1994 I joined UWE to work alongside Jeffrey Weeks with a task to develop the research culture within the social sciences at this new university. For me UWE presented the opportunity to do something that I’d never had the opportunity to do at SAUS, that was, to engage with theory. I knew that there was a mass of really interesting political and social theory out there but at SAUS our work was so closely related to policy and practice that I had no time to delve into theory beyond the psychoanalysis and Marxism that I already knew. I am indebted to colleagues such as Simon Thompson, Peter Jowers, Sean Watson and Jem Thomas for introducing me to classical social theory, feminist political theory (Iris Marion Young, Jessica Benjamin) and continental philosophy. I remember a Deleuze & Guattari reading group round about 1995. At one level I don’t think I understood a word of what was being said but at another level, at once both more visceral and more abstract, it got me into

thinking in terms of flow and affect. Yet at the same time as enjoying theory I remember feeling suspicious, particularly of the hegemony of post structuralism and social constructionism. I always remember Sivanandan's diatribe against Stuart Hall and the magazine *New Times*, there seemed to me to be some truths in his old Marxist rantings, particularly in his scornful accusation that the academic left had switched from 'changing the world to changing the word' (Sivanandan, 1990, 23) and that class struggle had now been replaced by 'struggle in discourse' (15). Indeed, deconstructionism seemed to take the struggle in discourse to such an extreme that there seemed to be no ethical ground, indeed no 'I', upon which one could clearly stand without being subject to withering (self) suspicion. Whilst outside the universities, neo-liberalism seemed to be triumphant everywhere, inside it seemed that everyone was being encouraged to say, 'I doubt, therefore I am'. Doubt and reflexivity seemed to have become so fetishised that the doubter was in danger of disappearing down his or her own arse in a vortex of suspicion.

But there was another problem I had with 'discourse', it wasn't just that the word was God but because the word was God it was as if we lived in a world of 'talking heads' without bodies or passions. Ian Craib parodied this beautifully:

I ask myself what I would feel if somebody walked into my office and said 'I am a social construct'. It would, I think, belong to the same class of reactions that I would have to someone who said 'I am a machine'. It would be a combination of fear and puzzlement at such depersonalisation.' (Craib 1997, 5).

At the time Ian wrote this I was just beginning a training in psychoanalytic psychotherapy and, for the first time since the late 1970s, I was 'enjoying' that unique experience of sitting

in a room with someone experiencing mental suffering, a suffering which was typically inscribed in the body (posture, face, eyes, tone of voice) as well in a feeling-full mind. The contrast between the headiness of discourse theory and post structuralism and my experience of the consulting room was stark.

For me, doing a training was about getting back into practice. Whilst there were many aspects of academia that I loved it never provided me with that raw experience of an existential encounter with otherness that I had experienced in politics and when working with groups. I had managed to deepen my engagement with group work since moving into academia, SAUS has supported me to attend two Leicester Conferences in the 1980s and we had begun to experiment with large group methods in the development programmes we ran for public service managers. In 2000 I became the founding editor of the journal *Organisational and Social Dynamics* after being invited by Eric Miller and Lionel Stapley from OPUS to help them establish a journal for the Tavistock Group Relations tradition. In 2007 I passed this editorial role onto my colleague Anne-Marie Cummins.

The costs (in time and money) of doing a psychotherapy training are enormous, as can be the psychological costs. I was advised by psychoanalytic colleagues in Bristol to do the Lincoln training in London. They indicated that it was the most rigorous, with hindsight I realise that they probably meant that it was the most Kleinian. There were many things I could have objected to during my training but I made the deliberate decision to keep my head down - I wanted to get that training and I wanted to inflict as little financial damage upon my family in the process of doing so. If I was to try and capture the problem with this training experience in a single idea I think 'cultish' is the closest I can get. Let me be clear, this wasn't just a problem of the Lincoln, indeed the psychoanalytic movement is now quite aware of the

pervasiveness of this phenomenon and the destructive effects it can have on the capacity of the community to regenerate itself (Eisold 1994; Levine 2003). For an academic going into this world the experience is particularly stark and it helped me understand better one of academic social science's great strengths, that is, the encouragement of critical thinking. Unfortunately many clinical trainings do not encourage you to think critically. For example, there can be a strong whiff of orthodoxy around the use of the transference and countertransference to which one is meant to adhere, an orthodoxy that transcends the different psychoanalytic traditions. And adherence is probably the right word here to describe a 'sticking to' what is deemed to be the correct approach. In the worst case scenario this leads to a kind of rigid mimicry in trainees. The interesting thing is that as you get to know this world you find that in practice experienced psychoanalytic therapists depart considerably from the script - addressing patients by their first names, exchanging pleasantries at the end of a session, on occasions offering advice, commiserations or congratulations, showing emotion, and so on. And surely this is as it should be, it indicates the way in which a therapist gets past the stage of identification with psychoanalysis and comes to internalise their learning, making it their own. But there is something privatised about this - in public, even among colleagues, many aspects of what we *actually do* remain difficult to speak about. It is possible that this fear of free thinking also reflects how power operates within the profession. My fantasy is that if you are at the top, a member of the Institute of Psychoanalysis, you have the freedom to think, but the further down the hierarchy you go, through the trainings in psychoanalytic psychotherapy to the trainings in psychodynamic counselling, the greater the adhesive identification with an imagined orthodoxy and the greater the anxiety about transgression.

That said, the actual experience of working with someone clinically over a long period of time is a rare privilege and the insights that it can generate about what it is to be human are extraordinary. But the approach to learning is rather different from either academic or political practices. It seems to me that clinical practice involves both learning by doing and learning by 'being with'. In contemporary psychoanalysis the latter is expressed through the concept of 'negative capability', a term Bion took from John Keats:

I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, and at once struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously - I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

(Letter to George and Thomas Keats, 21 December 1817)

Bion translates negative capability into the psychoanalytic idiom through his famous warning about memory and desire.

Discard your memory; discard the future tense of your desire; forget them both, both what you knew and what you want, to leave space for a new idea. (Bion 1980, 11).

My understanding of this is that Bion is saying 'just try and *be with* the patient, in the present moment, in the here-and-now and see what emerges'. It has taken me a long time for me to realise that I need to suspend my desire, particularly the desire to make my patients better or to improve their lives in some way. It was only when I began to realise how this desire could sometimes stop me from actually seeing and listening to them that I began to change. The



best way I have of describing the clinical stance I aspire to nowadays is ‘compassionate curiosity’. Curiosity seems central to clinical practice. I sometimes say to my patients about what they have said or done, ‘that’s interesting isn’t it, I wonder how we might understand that’. It’s an invitation to them to be curious with me so that we might think together. Of course this approach isn’t always possible and sometimes one has to interpret with conviction in an attempt to get through to the patient. The compassionate element in this stance is also important to me. In the past some forms of psychoanalysis could be coldly curious. In his last years the influential Kleinian analyst Herbert Rosenfeld (1987) regretted this approach.

Donald Meltzer (1999) too argued for greater ‘kindness’ in analytical work. Although there are some sentimental views of compassion around these days, for myself I see compassion as a kind of solidarity with the other in which one allows oneself to be affected by the other’s suffering. This is not the same as empathy, where one projects oneself into the other in order to understand their viewpoint, nor is it anything like pity which is only extended to the other so long as they remain in the victim position, rather it seems to me like a kind of solidarity which is extended to the other in spite of him or herself (Hoggett 2006). The people I see as a therapist suffer just like the rest of us, they can be cruel and hurtful, stubborn and willfully self-destructive, but it is because we suffer that we all deserve compassion.

However the social scientist in me is wary of Bion’s demand, ‘discard your memory’. There is enough of a social constructionist in me to recognise the impossibility of being rid of the burden of my identity, my ‘ways of seeing’ or my values. I am my own unique personality and I bring to each clinical session my own beliefs, vulnerabilities and blindspots. I can be as aware as possible of these things, and all clinicians undertake their own intensive therapy or analysis to help them with this process, particularly with the vulnerabilities and blindspots, but such self-awareness does not eradicate the ‘problem’ of memory. For this reason, despite

my Kleinian training, I have been increasingly drawn to a relational position. The idea that the analyst can be a 'blank screen' upon which the patient inscribes his projections and the corollary that analysis is a 'one way' process simply doesn't stack up as far as I'm concerned. To cite Rosenfeld in support once again

I think it is essential that the analyst is aware that the analytic situation and transference situation are both affected not only by the patient's past experiences but also by the analysts's views, behaviour and counter-transference (Rosenfeld 1987, 270)

I want to stress again and again that the analysis is not a one-sided process but an interaction between two people (ibid. 272)

This has meant that I have come to question and have now discarded a central tenet of Kleinian practice captured in Betty Joseph's concept of the transference as 'the total situation' (Joseph 1988). According to Joseph, the transference 'must include everything that the patient brings to the relationship' (1988, 62) and in practice this has given licence to a form of psychoanalytic overdetermination in which everything the patient does and says is construed as a communication about their internal world (which of course also reinforces the tendency not to take the external world seriously). The analyst then uses her countertransference to intuit such communications which are 'frequently beyond (the patients') individual associations and beyond their words' (ibid. 72). I do believe that the ability to discern the language of the unconscious (the condensations, displacements, inversions, silences, metaphoric allusions, etc) is a unique and refined skill of the analyst, but under the banner of 'the total situation' it can turn into a kind of mental jujitsu in which

everything the patient says or does is translated into an inference about their internal world. The analyst then can easily become a parody of ‘the one who knows’ (the phrase used by Lacanians in the criticism of British, particularly, Kleinian analysis). It is interesting if you look at Betty Joseph’s paper how often, in reference to her own interpretations given to a patient, she uses the phrase ‘I showed him’, almost as if a process of instruction is taking place. I think there are signs, how strong I’m unsure, that all traditions within psychoanalysis are moving away from this approach to one which gives greater value to the contribution of the patient, recognising the co-produced nature of each analytic session and is more critical of the temptation of clinicians to ‘overvalue’ their own ideas (Britton & Steiner 1994).

I have learnt an enormous amount from my own clinical practice and from colleagues with whom I have shared supervision. Through doing the work one thing I have come to realise is that ‘insight’ is not a sufficient condition for psychic change. I have found the work of John Steiner (1996) tremendously helpful here. Many of my patients come to ‘know’ about themselves and the way in which they contribute to their own suffering and yet cannot stop this because to change means to give something up which no matter how dysfunctional for them is nevertheless integral to who they are. Psychic change therefore requires the capacity to accept loss, to mourn for what has to be left behind and to trust oneself to a future which is bereft of familiar landmarks. The temptation to complain rather than mourn is a powerful one and Steiner has written in an illuminating fashion about the nature of grievance and, in particular, the process of nursing a grievance (1993). This learning has also influenced my academic work and in particular some of my recent writings on *ressentiment* (Windland & Hoggett, 2012; Hoggett, Wilkinson and Beedell, 2013), a ‘structure of feeling’ in which grievance plays a powerful role.

From the time I joined Bristol University in 1981 to the mid 1990s I had effectively led two lives. Most of my energies were devoted to the day job as a researcher working in the area of community studies and, later, public management. My psychoanalytic engagement, through *Free Associations*, through a Bristol charity called the Bridge Foundation for Psychotherapy and the Arts and through involvement in the Group Relations world, had to be fitted in around the job. When I began my training in 1996 I intended to leave academic life and become a full time therapist, it was either/or (either be a clinician or an academic). But an odd thing happened, in a way that I had never imagined my personal analysis enabled me to integrate my two lives. Within a few years at UWE we had set up the Masters in Group Relations and Society and then began to attract doctoral students, some from Bulgaria, who wanted to work psychoanalytically but within a social science framework. Simon Clarke had just completed his doctorate with us and had managed to get a full time post in sociology at UWE. Having been a self-employed builder Simon knew how to set things up and get them going. Simon had been working with what is now the Association for Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society in the USA and when they started looking for a new publisher for their journal it was Simon who clinched the contract with Routledge for their journal *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*. Simon and Lynn Layton became the first editors and it was around about this time that we got the go-ahead from UWE to set up the Centre for Psycho-Social Studies (CPSS). Two ESRC project grants and one grant for an ESRC Seminar Series quickly established CPSS within UWE. I also found ways in which my passion for psychoanalysis could directly inform my research. Building upon the formative work of Wendy Hollway, Tony Jefferson and Tom Wengraf we began to make our own contribution to psycho-social research methodologies (Clarke & Hoggett 2009) and in social policy I established a reputation for challenging rationalist accounts of human agency and for

using psychoanalytic insights to illuminate the reparative foundation of the commitment to welfare.

There are two ways that my clinical practice has informed my approach to psycho-social research. The first concerns the role of interpretation and the use of the counter-transference. Because of my encounters with psychoanalytic orthodoxy I have been wary of the use of the counter-transference in research but I have also been critical of the idea that the researcher should not engage in 'interpretation' during the interview. I wonder if there has been a slightly clichéd understanding at work here; in my experience analysts and therapists rarely indulge in classical forms of interpretation in clinical work, what they do, often in a very tentative way ('I wonder if...') is offer thoughts or hypotheses. I see no problem with the psycho-social researcher doing likewise for these are 'dialogue inducing' interventions. Secondly, I realise that I have problems with the concept of the 'defended subject'. It is not that the concept is wrong but I think it is too limited. What I think we encounter in the clinical world is a striking variety of ways in which our patients unconsciously structure their experience, this includes the use of defence mechanisms but also much more. Klein's 'positions' could be thought of as organised defences but they are much more accurately described as organised states of mind (Ogden 1986, 42). I think the same applies to perverse ways of thinking, psychic retreats and the various forms of narcissism. So whilst I accept the value of exploring the way in which both interviewee and interviewer at times unconsciously deploy defences against anxiety I think we need to go beyond this to understand how, both in the interview and possibly in the 'lived life' of the interviewee, particular unconscious modes of structuring experience were deployed.

The psycho-social studies group at UWE differed from groupings in other universities in some ways. There were no psychologists in the group, the majority were sociologists and two (including myself) were from politics. Several of us had been in therapy or analysis and we were pretty immersed in the two primary traditions of British psychoanalysis - the Kleinians and the Independents. Because of our rather practical engagement with psychoanalysis and our reservations about the excesses of social constructionism and discourse theory I don't think any of us bought into the idea of the disappearance of the (totally decentered) subject. We don't have a problem with talking about inner and outer, psyche and society. The patients I see are often preoccupied with private thoughts, they have dreams, they are sometimes haunted by feelings that they cannot give a name to, they are inhabited by different parts of themselves which speak in different voices and are sometimes in violent conflict. This is their inner landscape. It is not reducible to discourse, class, gender or any other social force but it is certainly influenced by all of the above. So we Bristol folk have tended to stick with the hyphen in psycho-social studies to indicate that we believe that each side of the hyphen is formed by its own rules of structure formation, that neither side is reducible to the other, and that the hyphen signifies the space of overlap and interpenetration.

I've talked about my two lives, well from 1981 onwards a third life kept popping up intermittently. In the 1980s I chaired my local Labour Party branch and organised our Miners Support Group, I also organised a local anti-poll tax group in the early 1990s and went to Bosnia in 1995 as a result of solidarity work through another local support group. I have always believed in the truth of Marx's famous dictum, 'The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it', but believing it is one thing, acting on this belief is another. I have spent a lot of time feeling guilty about doing so little when so much was needed. About 8 years ago I got cancer and although it turned out not to

be life-threatening in the two months recovering from my op at home I got to thinking. I found myself reading about climate change. It began to occur to me that this was becoming the meta issue of our times and, if we failed to respond soon, by the middle of the twenty first century it's destabilising presence would be felt behind every conjunctural political phenomena including migration, ethnic tension, nationalism and the rise of the far right, escalating food prices, and so on. Just as at the time of heightened cold war tensions in the early 1980s some psychoanalysts had begun to organise around the threat of nuclear war so I realised that there were now similar stirrings in the psychoanalytic community around the threat of climate change. Largely thanks to Adrian Tait, a retired NHS psychotherapist and Transition activist on the Somerset Levels, we began to organise some events around climate change denial at UWE. This forged a connection with Sally Weintrobe at the Institute of Psychoanalysis whose edited volume *Engaging with Climate Change: Psychoanalytic and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* is an excellent advert for applying psychoanalysis to political issues. Before long, again largely with Adrian's prompting, we had started to set up an organised network of analysts, therapists, counsellors, group analysts, ecopsychologists and Transition activists which we call the Climate Psychology Alliance.

I am enjoying being Chair of the CPA and experiencing the complex group dynamics which attend giving birth to something new. Patience, and the anticipation of emergence, I believe are central to the psychoanalytic sensibility and can profitably be applied to the way in which we organise ourselves in our various projects in public life. It is a sensibility which is completely counter-cultural as the process of speed-up, pushed by neo-liberal globalisation, invades most spheres of life, including academic life.

I hope I've managed to describe how three different practices - research/scholarship, psychotherapy/group relations, and politics - constitute three different ways of knowing. Politics, defined very broadly to include a variety of ethical engagements with life, involves action. In a world of injustice and destruction it reminds us of 'the fierce urgency of now'. At its worst politics can lack all reflexivity and becomes full of 'passionate intensity'. But at its best this action is experimental and reflexive and reality is a process of becoming. We don't know whether our climate change project will have resonance, but there is only one way of finding out and that is to act and to see what happens. In contrast clinical practice with individuals and groups gives emphasis to feeling rather than doing or thinking and involves patience, negative capability, a capacity to stand back and avoid premature intervention whether in thought, word or action. In research and scholarship, in the social sciences and the humanities at least, we are involved in the life of the mind much more than in the other two practices. This is our strength, viz critical thinking, but it can also be our weakness - abstraction split off from any kind of practice. I think the potential for the future development of psycho-social studies lies in making these kinds of connections to other practices (I've focused on therapy and politics here but there are other possibilities, artistic and spiritual practices for example). Whether academia will remain a fertile environment for these kinds of connections to be made is another question.

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