

Failure, guilt, confession, redemption? Revisiting unpublished research through a psychosocial lens

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Abstract

This article offers some critical reflections on a case of failure to bring a qualitative research project to completion and publication earlier in the author's career. Possible explanations are considered in light of insights derived from the 'psychosocial' turn in qualitative research associated particularly with Hollway and Jefferson's *Doing Qualitative Research Differently* (2001/2013). The project was an interview-based study of the life experiences of middle aged and older Irish emigrants in England, conducted in the late 1990s in Birmingham and Manchester. The article considers the failure as a possible psychic defence against the anxiety that completion and publication would be a betrayal of the interviewees, many of whom described experiences distressing to themselves and the interviewer. The psychoanalytic concepts of 'transference' and 'countertransference' are used to speculate as to the role of the unconscious at work in the interview encounters and how, despite class and generational differences, psychodynamic fantasies relating to both interviewees' and interviewer's migration histories and experiences may have impacted upon each other.

Introduction

Many researchers leave unfinished projects behind them and experience varying degrees of regret and uncertainty as to the reasons for reluctance or inability to bring the research to fruition. This article concerns a qualitative research project from earlier in my career that never reached completion and remains a source of guilt and shame for me. It revisits the research critically using a psychosocial lens in an attempt to identify and consider the possible underlying reasons for this failure. As an exploratory attempt at a 'working through' of painful and mixed feelings it is consequently a mixture of orthodox academic writing, analysis and experiment.

I begin with an outline of the origins and aims of the original research project and its sequel before settling on two cases in particular that in different ways I found impossible to find a way to represent in published form. In seeking to make sense of this, by turning to insights derived from Hollway and Jefferson's (2013) *Doing Qualitative Research Differently* and various psychoanalytic perspectives on migration I speculate as to how my autobiographical background and experiences may have impacted – unconsciously – on the sense of paralysis I felt at this time and in subsequent attempts to return to the project.

The original project was an ethnographic study of the construction of national identity among both Irish born and British born but self-identified 'second generation Irish' male Republic of Ireland national team football supporters in Birmingham. Conducted between 1994 and 1998 the project sought to identify how the symbolism of sport in constructions of national identity provided a vehicle for the articulation of specifically emigrant Irish and 'second generation identities' in a city in which a certain stigma was attached to Irish identity following two IRA pub bombings in 1974 at the height of the Northern Ireland 'Troubles'. The interpretative frame used in relation to the resulting data focused on the often contradictory 'postcolonial' aspects of Irish identity for a minority in Britain that had either directly or indirectly (via familial memory) experienced both a degree of stigmatisation and, paradoxically, a sense of invisibility as a 'white' ethnic minority in Britain.

This led to a subsequent interview based mixed gender project with older, predominantly working class Irish emigrants in Birmingham and Manchester, the purpose of which was to elicit narratives of migration to and settlement in England. Using an oral history method of minimal and open ended questioning, the interviews sought to examine the interplay between the economic, cultural and psychological aspects of migrant experience. By contrast with the original research project, here the focus was on respondents' sense of displacement and ambivalence towards both their countries of origin and destination. While some publications (Free, 1998, 2007) resulted from the original project, the latter research remains unpublished. In the next section I explore the narrative of how the two projects came about and mutated.

Research Motivation and Life Experience

The biographical context for this research (which I return to later) was the experience of migrating from Dublin to England in 1990 to begin my first full-time academic post. My

father died in the same year. I felt quite depressed for a few years afterwards and struggled to deal with the loss. The discovery of 'second generation Irish' identity was quite accidental and came following a period of withdrawal from social contact outside a work context. In 1993 I discovered a world I had hitherto avoided. These were the Irish pubs of Digbeth, an area of Birmingham adjacent to the main railway and coach stations that was the first point of arrival for large numbers of Irish migrants in the 1950s and 1960s, a period of postwar boom. Five per cent of the city's population was Irish born by the early 1960s, three times the national average (Delaney, 2007: 97). Stereotypically, reflecting a national pattern, large numbers of Irish migrant men worked in construction, while Irish women were overrepresented in varieties of care work (Owen, 1995). By the 1990s those emigrants' children were frequenting the pubs their parents had used many years before, and theme pubs were starting to appear, adorned with kitschy symbols of 'Irishness' (McGovern, 2002). Like many of the 1980s and 1990s Irish migrant participants in Breda Gray's (2004) research, on first arrival in England I had initially felt alienated by both earlier generations' expressions of migrant Irish identity and a contemporary commodified Irishness to which I could not – or would not – relate. As an emigrant I was determined to distance myself from all things 'Irish', having completed a PhD on British Victorian comics and popular culture.

However, this antipathy gave way to a personal and professional interest in first and second generation Irish migrant identity in Birmingham as a conscious way of reconnecting at a distance with this Irish background. Many journalistic and political commentators at that time were arguing that an international football team composed of Irish born and Irish descended players was a symbol of the Irish 'diaspora', a way of positively and inclusively reimagining geographically bounded definitions of Irishness for a nation-state with a long history of economically and culturally driven emigration, but in which national identity is frequently articulated in terms of homeland, locality, community and cultural continuity (Free, 2013). Ethnography, however, is an exploratory, unpredictable process. I encountered surprising contradictions and interpersonal connections that cut against the grain of the romantic, sometimes simplistic narrative of reimagined diaspora.

One of the people I encountered was James. Introduced to me initially as a football supporter, James shared with me an extraordinary background and life history. Originally from Belfast in Northern Ireland, James had migrated with his family to the west of Scotland, and from

there to Birmingham in the 1960s. In 1974 two Birmingham pubs were bombed by the IRA, killing 21 people. Six Irish men, later known as the ‘Birmingham Six’ were convicted but released when the convictions were quashed in 1991 following revelations of questionable forensic evidence and allegations of forced confessions (Mullin, 1990). A casual drinker in one of the bombed pubs, James survived but three of his fellow Irish born friends were killed. I interviewed James twice. I found his interviews extremely challenging and difficult, and was never able to use them. They took me in directions that I struggled to reconcile with the original research plan and could not incorporate into either eventual publication. The encounter with James inspired the subsequent project, which would attempt to explore Irish migration narratives in greater depth, particularly the relationships between the psychic and social experience of migration. However, here too I encountered difficulties and this research remains unpublished.

A key problem was how this term ‘identity’ kept disintegrating, unable to hold together the inevitable contradictions that were manifested with each interview, but how to make sense of this? Should I take a poststructuralist approach, highlighting the instability of discursive constructions of identity, the ways in which narratives of selfhood undergo multiple reimaginings and reconstructions, illustrating the vicissitudes and contingencies of identity formation (e.g. Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2010; Murray, 2012; Harte, 2007)? Or a socio-political and historical approach, stressing the stigma attached to Irish migrant identity in Britain, pre- and post-Irish Independence, that was heightened in Birmingham following the bombings (e.g. Hickman et al., 2012)? Or a labour history and labour process approach, focusing on how Irish migrants defined themselves in terms of their labour power as economic units servicing the British economy, and the ways in which this was gendered (extending Cowley’s (2001) work, for example)? Many male interviewees in the later project worked in the construction industry and had necessarily taken early retirement due to work related injury or illness; among the female interviewees were women who had worked in lower level care or factory work. Or should I take a cultural geographical approach (e.g. Walter, 2001)? Places like Digbeth signify the inbetweenness of Irish migrant identity in Britain, the sense of never having left or quite arrived in the ‘host’ community. There is a link between the residential status of this part of the city in the ‘50s and ‘60s for Irish migrants, with the bus station and main railway station at its core, and the symbolic space of the Irish pubs now – both Irish by association and Irish themed pubs – for the first and especially the

‘second generation’ Irish. It was a key site in which the lived experience of the ‘diaspora space’ of the Irish in Britain was played out. Brah’s (1996: 209) concept of diaspora space ‘includes the entanglement, the intertwining of genealogies of dispersion with those of “staying put”’. The diaspora space is the site where *the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native*’ (original emphasis). As Murray (2012: 12) highlights, for the Irish in Britain, the ‘staying put’ always includes both the host society and the ‘sending community’. Migrants ‘must negotiate the often contested cultural allegiances of diaspora space that this entails’.

‘I want *you* to tell my story’: a psychosocial perspective on writer’s block

At the heart of my failure to pursue publication projects adequately were the interviews with James. James told me that ‘I want *you* to tell my story’, but I didn’t. Partly the failure, here and later, was to do with returning to Ireland myself. A half-written article I worked on in 2001 that sought to examine the interplay between social class, gender and traumatic events in the lived experience of migration for James and those interviewees from the later project remained incomplete. Through subsequent, largely theoretical and textually based projects following my return that year the migration project was shelved but remained a source of guilt for me. I returned to it vicariously through other projects concerned with Irish migrants and representations of Irish migrant identity (e.g. Free, 2011, 2013 and 2015), but not directly.

I later discovered Hollway and Jefferson’s (2001/2013) *Doing Qualitative Research Differently*. As readers of this journal will know, Hollway and Jefferson’s approach sought to combine developments in discourse analysis with Kleinian and object relations psychoanalysis. I have long thought that this approach might be a way of returning to my migration research (albeit through a retrospective reading) in order to explore both the interviews themselves and my failure to publish.

Hollway and Jefferson focus on the ‘anxious, defended subject’ in qualitative research as ‘simultaneously psychic and social’: psychic as a ‘product of a unique biography of anxiety-provoking life-events and the manner in which they have been unconsciously defended against’; and social, among other ways, ‘because of the real events in the external, social world that are discursively and defensively appropriated’ (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013: 21).

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My difficulties as a researcher were as much, if not more a matter of my being a heavily defended subject given that James and the other interviewees were very helpful to me in relating their life narratives. In this regard another of Hollway and Jefferson's concerns seems particularly significant, their use of the psychoanalytic concepts of transference and countertransference (ibid: 44). In the context of anthropological fieldwork Jennifer Hunt (1989: 58) highlights the difficulty of 'differentiat[ing] the transferences which arise from the researcher's unconscious, independent of the subject's, and those which emerge in relation to the subject's transferences'. Within the more limited time frame of interview based research this difficulty is even more acute. Nonetheless the analysis of qualitative interview data requires sensitivity to the possible transferences and countertransferences at work on the part of both interviewee and interviewer. What is projected into the researcher? How does the researcher experience this, especially when sensitive material is being divulged in the interview, perhaps for the first time? And how are the researcher's transferences and countertransferences influenced by their psychosocial history?

I will try to use this psychosocial perspective here both to speculate as to my failure as a researcher, as a defended' subject struggling with my own migration history, and as a means of reflexive contemplation on the practice of engaging in qualitative research and interpreting the resulting data. I will concentrate here on two cases – James from the original project and Mary from the later research project. My interviews did not use the free association narrative interview technique as they predated Hollway and Jefferson's work, but their psychoanalytic approach, combined with psychoanalytic perspectives on migration are, I argue, helpful in making sense of aspects of the interviews and my difficulties in trying to interpret and use them. Given the minimally interventionist approach taken in the interviews, the data that emerged from them is compatible with the psychosocial interpretative method, as they took courses that I attempted to avoid channelling. A key aspect of Hollway and Jefferson's approach is its collaborative nature as a means of raising awareness of and address individually defended subjectivity. Although not all directly comparable, in this case the return to, and interpretation of data gathered as an isolated researcher was retrospectively assisted by the eventual presentation and discussion of the material here at a research methods summer school at Mary Immaculate College in 2015 and with institutional colleagues since.

Migration lay at the heart of James', Mary's and my biographical narratives. Migration is commonly viewed in psychoanalytic thought as a third 'separation-individuation process' after infancy and adolescence, often repeating how love or hatred of one or both parents gives way to 'ambivalence' towards, and 'optimal distance' from them (Akhtar, 2004: 83). In a territorial parental divorce-like transference, one may be played off against the other (Grinberg and Grinberg, 1989: 87-88) – the good host country versus the bad home country or vice versa. Migration frequently entails 'melancholic' nostalgia for the lost homeland and 'hypercathexis of the lost objects' (Akhtar, 2004: 90), preventing 'mourning' for loss and embrace of the new. Inner emotional conflict may be displaced onto the body, manifested in digestive, respiratory or circulatory symptoms (Grinberg and Grinberg, 1989: 94). Or migrants may oscillate between 'pseudo-identification' with the new and nostalgia for the old (Garza-Guerrero, 1974: 421) before 'mourning' permits 'reaffirmation of [...] past identity through reactivation in fantasy of past good internalized object relations' (Garza-Guerrero, 1974: 423), in turn enabling 'the final consolidation of newly acquired cultural traits, new object relations [...] into the organization of ego identity' (Garza-Guerrero, 1974: 426).

However, as Grinberg and Grinberg (1989: 140) observe, 'good objects' within may be insufficiently stable for migrants to cope with external frustration, and migrants may become 'exposed to states of psychic decomposition' through the absence of 'an adequate intermediate zone [which] has not been created to ease the integration of his inner and outer worlds'. Echoing Winnicott (1971: 108) they call this 'a potential space' granting 'the possibility of experiencing migration as a game', failure of which is akin to a 'deprived child [...] effectively unable to play and exhibit[ing] an impoverished development of cultural awareness' (Grinberg and Grinberg, 1989: 14) .

James' migration history was complex. His parents moved from Belfast to the west of Scotland when he was three to escape Belfast's religious sectarianism and the scandal of his parents' Catholic-Protestant mixed marriage. However, having encountered further sectarianism in an area with strong Ulster Unionist links they moved to Birmingham. There is an absence of any sense of having been 'held' in James' early life, of being afforded the opportunity to inhabit a 'potential space' in which to imagine the relations between 'home' and the new environment. Hence the sense of always being unable to settle in a place he hated. Birmingham

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was a dump. The toilet was outside, I'd never seen an outside toilet 'til I came down here, and when you had a bath, I mean you had to go to the local baths and pay money with everybody else using it. I'd never done that before and I thought, England, here we go, heap of shite. I ran away. I was half way up the motorway when they found me. My Dad beat the shite out of me, told me I'd no choice.

But he also describes the terrible conditions and impact of his father's work in an explosives plant in Scotland as a motivation and justification for the family move: 'he had a yellow face for seven years, yellow cake, his skin was yellow for seven years. It was all underground.' James' joining the merchant navy as a teenager was possibly indicative of what Davar (1996) calls the migrant's 'fugitive state of mind', the perpetual escape from working through problematic, even traumatic events from childhood. It allowed James to both return periodically and be mobile, to rationalise it as 'seeing the world and getting paid for it as well'. James' attachment to Glasgow Celtic football club is another indicator of attachment at a distance. Occasional return to Scotland for Celtic matches was his only connection there, but Celtic was the intermediate zone of contact with Belfast given its enduring connection with Irish migrants and descendants (Bradley, 1995). His Republic of Ireland fandom likewise connected him with a comparatively non-sectarian southern Ireland whose appeal transcended the border that separated it from the Belfast of his birth.

James was in the bombed pub on a return trip from merchant naval service. Two of his three friends who were killed were brothers. He described staying behind while the police and rescue services were en route, searching for bodies in a scene of utter carnage, 'like a butcher shop'. He subsequently 'ended up in hospital for two months' and 'couldn't eat for two weeks, I'd shakes and tremors'. He returned to the navy, but was recalled to testify at the trial of the 'Birmingham Six'. James was not actually called as a witness. He made clear that he had never seen the six, but was shown photographs of other men. Having said that he did not recognise them he was not called, but was instructed never to divulge what he had seen.

James kept his experiences secret until, following the six's release in 1991 he experienced panic attacks and short term memory loss. On one occasion he awoke in hospital with 'eleven stitches across' his head and 'another seven internal stitches and like that was because I [...] was asleep and I've actually injured myself when I've been asleep in the night'. On another,

while guiding a vehicle reversing from a building site he had a panic attack as he anxiously instructed some children to stay clear and accidentally injured a man with his saw. He could not attend a dentist ‘unless I’ve got a welfare guy with me in case I fucking hurt somebody’.

There seem to have been several factors in James’ trauma. First, there was the immediate and enduring trauma of near-death, not knowing if his friends were killed and, probably in a state of shock, the handling of mutilated bodies:

I went out one night, load of pills and I walked and I walked and I walked and the next day I woke up and they took me to one of the funny farms and I was there about two days and they said “will you talk about your problems?” How the fucking hell can I turn around as if I had “problems” with carrying legs, arms and pieces of fucking shit on them? You move a body and it falls apart. Think about it. That’s what happened, that’s a fact.

Second, there was the non-recognition of his unselfish service and the lack of any therapeutic help:

I mean they thanked the police, the fire brigade, everybody else that helped and everything for them. I mean we stayed behind for two hours there, after the bombings, two hours, carrying out the dead, we didn’t know there was any more bombs in the fucking place, we stayed there for two hours carrying people out, we never even got one “thank you”. [...] I never even got a thank you. That’s what killed me. I didn’t even have to do it. I didn’t have time to think. If I’d time to think it I’d have done it anyway. It’s as simple as that. If I’d time to think I wouldn’t have done what I fucking done. I was actually stayed behind and helping them. That’s what done for me.

The contradiction here is significant in highlighting James’ continually fraught state – saying that he both would and wouldn’t have helped if he’d had time to think.

Third, there was his treatment by the police who ‘came in with heavy boots [...] go[ing] over your statement again, opening your veins up. [...] The impression I got, they thought we’d fucking done it [laughs]. You can imagine me and the bomb in there just fucking up.’ There is a combination here of being questioned as a metaphorical killing – ‘opening your veins up’ – and the blackest possible humour. That he was a potential suspect is not inconceivable. The

Birmingham Six became suspects when five were arrested en route to Belfast for the funeral of a man who had accidentally killed himself with his own bomb. The subsequently introduced Prevention of Terrorism Act led to extensive arrests, detention and questioning of Irish people in Britain as a 'suspect community' (Hillyard, 1993, cited in Hickman et al., 2012: 92).

Fourth, there was the idea that the only victims were English. Apart from the deaths of 'my mates I mean I could have been killed. I wouldn't be talking to you here today, I wouldn't have been treated as I have for the last 21 fucking years. [...] I might as well have been killed. A living fucking nightmare.'

His otherness as an Irish migrant was such that he was not acknowledged (and could not experience himself) as a fellow victim. His was a particular instance of the 'curious middle space' (Trew, 2013: 156) experienced by Northern Ireland migrants who had lost friends and family members in the Troubles only to find themselves attracting suspicion in Britain due to their origins. James' Scottish accent made him inaudibly identifiable as an Irish migrant. But nor would the host environment to which he had migrated contain and help him to make sense of, to work through his contradictory experiences. He now felt he had been aligned, as an *Irish* survivor, with the bombers, forced to internalise the splitting, by the 'host society, of 'good' from 'bad', English victims from Irish perpetrators. His subjectivity had effectively been 'killed' off, while his fears (described above) of inadvertently hurting others are indicative of this alignment 'despite himself'. Lastly, there was the resultant guilt, that six men were wrongfully convicted, and a concomitant anger with no avenue of expression: 'they swept it under the carpet, they swept it under the carpet, they swept the whole fucking lot under the carpet'.

But what did James seek from me? On the one hand I feel that there was some transference at work. As an Irish migrant who had 'done well' and could both relate and validate his experiences, as he saw it, I was in the position of police and journalists who failed him. I could get it 'right'. I had actually been introduced to him by an Irish born Birmingham police officer and fellow football supporter, probably with that expectation. However, there may additionally have been some 'projective identification' in our relationship, and so the potential for 'countertransference' needs consideration. 'Projective identification' refers, in

its original clinical diagnosis (Klein, 1946), to how ‘dangerous’ or ‘bad’ parts of the self are projected *into* the mother, who experiences these as her own. The infant is thus ‘tak[ing] possession’ of the mother (Klein, 1946: 8). While the concept is widely used in therapeutic analysis to make sense of how the therapist’s countertransference registers that which has been projected into them by the analysand, and designates a form of unconscious, affective communication, I think it has relevance here.

James told me he wanted me to tell his story, but I felt a paralysis that may have connected with his experience of being told he could not divulge what he had been shown. I think that some of the guilt I have experienced was his guilt at being unable to help the six – I was being given information I could not use. Who was in the pictures he saw? Was this evidence? If so, of what? I felt paralysed for another reason also. James described an interview by a newspaper journalist as ‘just questions and answers, questions and answers’, and overdosed on pills and alcohol when reporters visited following the six’s 1991 release. In addition to fearing that I could not use the interviews I also feared that naming or not naming him and attempting to *write* his story would be a betrayal that would repeat his feeling of having been used and abused by the media. It would commit the unspeakable, that which it was possible to feel, to some degree at least as I listened, to an inadequate form of words that would repeat the failure of the police, authorities and media. To fragment his narrative into codified chunks in a more orthodox sociological approach to my ‘data set’ as a whole felt like an act of betrayal in diminishing the integrity of his narrative. But was he asking me to tell his story or bear witness to it? If I say ‘bear witness’ am I rationalising my failure? Am I ‘sweeping it under the carpet’?

I interviewed James in a pub. James lived alone, in fear of his panic attacks. Although he had a partner and was evidently a father figure to her adult son whom I met, he could not live with them. In Irish migrant culture in Britain pubs have ‘served as economic hubs’ and ‘social spaces, providing an escape from more general social isolation’ for Irish men in particular (Gilmartin, 2015: 104). The pub we used was a liminal space where the contradictions of Irish migrant life in Britain endured. It was a Victorian pub with Irish associations as a place that Irish people had frequented for decades. James showed me the shamrock wall tiles as evidence of its longstanding Irish connections.

As I listen to the tapes now, the background pub music is striking. Two songs stand out, The Cranberries' 'Ode to My Family', with the slightly mournful music and the refrain 'does anyone care?', and the Oasis song 'Roll with It'. The playing of these songs in an 'Irish' pub is indicative of the popularity of the Limerick band The Cranberries among the 'second generation Irish' in Britain in the mid-'90s, and Oasis' Manchester-born Gallagher brothers, Noel and Liam, who repeatedly and somewhat aggressively stressed their Irish family origins when they also made their breakthrough then (Campbell, 2011: 3). As musical cultural phenomena The Cranberries and Oasis coincided, but their popularity and open expression of their 'Irishness' took place in a changing cultural context facilitated by the IRA ceasefire in 1994, which led to the Belfast Peace Agreement in Northern Ireland in 1998. Yet James was trying to deal with the guilt of surviving the bombings, embodying the contradictions of an unresolved political and cultural conflict in his perpetually unsettled state. As a soundscape for the interview the repeated Cranberries refrain 'does anyone care?' and Oasis' 'roll with it' sound like a helpless plea and an imperative to 'move on' respectively.

The decision to withhold evidence from a Devon and Cornwall inquiry into the West Midlands Police investigation until 2069 inspired a campaign by the victims' families, together with various conspiracy theories, including the proposition that there was a cover-up due to government agent involvement as IRA infiltrators, 'spooks'. In June 2016 it was decided to reopen the inquest (Brown, 2016). Thus, although the Birmingham St. Patrick's Day parade was reinstated after a 22 year gap in 1996, the bombings remain, metaphorically, an open sore.

My fear of betrayal, and the guilt of non-betrayal through failure to write as a betrayal anyway possibly relates to a deeper seated guilt on my part, dating back to my leaving Ireland in 1990. My father was terminally ill, though this wasn't something I could consciously acknowledge even though, on each return visit that year I observed his deterioration. He died 10 days after my final visit, for my PhD graduation. For much of the following two years I was often unable to make telephone calls, or did so with difficulty. On getting through I continually stammered on the 'h' of 'hello' before hanging up. This may be symptomatic of the guilt of betrayal – although irrational, I felt (and still do) that my leaving contributed to his deterioration which, following an illness of several years, accelerated then. I had succeeded in my higher education, but he had failed in his because, when his father fell ill in

the 1930s his relatives forced him to quit art school and find work. He left Ireland, joined the RAF and, having crash landed in a plane following the Japanese invasion of Singapore was rescued by an Allied vessel, spending two years of WWII at sea. When he later married in Ireland and converted from Protestantism to Catholicism his family ostracised him. The room containing his mainly unfinished, constantly reworked paintings and associated bric-a-brac remained locked in Dublin for nine years after his death. No-one entered, as though emptying it would be to empty our lives of his memory.

In retrospect, there may have been some transference for me between James and my father. There were physical similarities (especially the moustache), the parallel mixed marriage scandal, the near-death experience and subsequent silence, the time at sea, the sense of being permanently unsettled, though my father was an Anglophile who never felt quite at home in Dublin – the Protestant Dublin that had ostracised him, or the working class, mainly Catholic council estate in which, as a downwardly mobile struggling artist he found himself. I had achieved what he wanted for himself, and while he encouraged me I felt that I had killed him off, which is what I wanted to do when as an embarrassed student I referred to him as the ‘old fart’ to my friends. Perhaps Da’s untouched room was a way of keeping his memory alive, albeit melancholically. And maybe the unprocessed tapes and fieldnotes I still have and can’t relinquish have kept James alive as a work in progress. Unused they may be a symptom of the fear of another betrayal, and connect with my ambivalent attachment to a father who was always a mystery to me and also had difficulty finishing work himself.

Was my professional failure an avoidance of a bigger failure – a repeat betrayal, another murder? Or is this a retrospective narrative framing, a psychic defence against the demonstrable evidence of my professional and ethical failure?

‘And God that tea tasted lovely’: Maternal Fantasy, Liminality, Stasis

This failure haunted me through the subsequent research on older Irish migrants. Each interview I undertook seemed to lead back to my own unresolved problems as an Irish emigrant in Britain. The other case that caused most difficulty and remains most poignant for me was an elderly female interviewee in Manchester. If James took me back to my father, I still find it difficult to separate Mary from my mother.

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The theme of death pervaded Mary's interview: of her mother and father in County Mayo, the suicide of a young neighbour in Manchester whose body lay undetected for six weeks; and the premature death of her son a few years beforehand. Even when she mentioned the Irish set sitcom *Father Ted* (Channel 4, 1995-1998) she remarked: 'that was another one [actor Dermot Morgan, who died aged 45] that went off very quickly, dropped dead, he wasn't an old man. Our Michael was only 39'.

On the one hand, this interview might be read psychosocially as an illustration of migration as a premature separation-individuation. When her father died, the nuns who ran the school she attended took her from the classroom and placed her in the mill they owned. When she migrated to England she undertook a variety of textile mill jobs, defining herself, like so many Irish migrants, in terms of her labour power. Her life in Manchester was punctuated by a series of deaths, her professed inability to cope with which perpetuated the unmourned loss of her father to whom, like her mother, she was deeply attached and she actually replaced as her family's principal earner.

On the other, I think there was some transference between her son and myself. I was about his age when he died. Reciprocally, she reminded me of my mother, who had recently moved to Mayo to be close to my sister but, like my father and Mary always felt out of place – in this case after she left the inner city Dublin of her childhood. Mary yearned for the rural Mayo of the fire on the meadow and the brewed tea, 'and God that tea tasted lovely, and I mean lovely'. As Maye-Banbury and Casey (2016) have recently shown, this Proustian quality to remembered food from 'home' was a prominent feature of their interviewees' recollections of migration in a study originally focused on Irish emigrant experiences of housing. From a more psychosocial perspective these memories are probably inextricable from fantasies of maternal nourishment. My mother, displaced in Mayo, often yearned for the potatoes that 'you'd get up in the middle of the night to eat' in the Dublin fire station where she grew up. Still haunted by James's story, and having encountered in Mary and many of the other elderly Irish migrants I was interviewing now many stories of death and dislocation I sought some psychotherapeutic help at this time. I spent an hour in one session talking about potatoes after a visit to an English teashop in Worcester and a flaky croissant left me feeling hollow. They were the flowery potatoes of my childhood, but they were also my mother's potatoes. As the ironic saying goes, nostalgia ain't what it used to be. Or maybe it is. In Mary's interview, I

found my mother's yearning and my own. I could hardly have found a more straightforwardly stereotypically Irish 'metaphor for the desire to reconnect with the preoedipal mother' (Nikelly, 2004: 184).

However, the mother who yearned for 'return' – her return to Dublin and mine to Ireland – would never be satisfied. When I eventually returned to Ireland shortly afterwards – and while I was in the midst of trying to write a piece that would finally use my interview material – she was anything but grateful. When she told me what an 'awkward kid' I had been as a child I was shocked. I was reminded of her often repeated story of needing a walking stick for the final months of her pregnancy, such was the discomfort I had caused her. I thought back too to how, before I had left for England (with my father's encouragement) she ordered application forms for desk jobs in the national airline Aer Lingus in the hope that I would stay. She had worked and met my father there in the 1940s. Not for the first or last time I had failed her by leaving anyway, and I had left while my father was terminally ill. Perhaps my return had upset a 'psychological "division of labour"' in managing the 'separation-individuation conflict' akin to that described by Mirsky and Peretz (2006: 60) in their account of a migrant married couple. The independent emigrant and the pining but resentful mother depended on splitting, projective identification and distance to performatively feed off each other.

On that first visit to her following my return I saw M. Knight Shyamalan's film *The Sixth Sense* (1999). I couldn't sleep that night. Bruce Willis' climactic realisation that he was a ghost whom no-one had actually seen or interacted with spooked me. Should I have returned? Was I any more at home here than in England? Would I ever get 'it' right? Ma was always yearning for something – often a film she hadn't seen for years. Her favourite actor was Ronald Colman, the debonair, English moustached Hollywood leading man of the '30s and '40s. Ronnie was slang for a moustache in Dublin, and my father's RAF ronnie was irresistible when he turned up in Aer Lingus. She frequently mentioned her favourite Colman film, *Random Harvest* (Mervyn Le Roy, 1942). I tracked down a rare VHS copy for her, but she didn't watch it. It appeared on broadcast television years later anyway and she watched it then. Colman plays an amnesiac WWI veteran, Smithy, who recovers his pre-war memory following an accident and forgets his postwar life with his wife Paula (Greer Garson). She becomes his secretary and suffers silently while awaiting the restoration of his memory,

despairing as he plans to marry his niece. I can't help thinking of Da as I watch the tape now. A model railway enthusiast, he built scale model British steam engines and 1940s English villages bounded by ovals of track in his garden shed as he persistently bemoaned his fate in the 'this bloody place' and among the 'these people' of a Dublin council estate. Another favourite of my mother's was the 1930s *Dandy* comic strip character Keyhole Kate. Kate regularly spurned open views of the objects of her domestic espionage in favour of the limited but controllable voyeuristic pleasures of the keyhole. These favourites always seemed to me to connect, for my mother, as vehicles of masochistic fantasy, though as Alison McKee (2014: 97) astutely observes, *Random Harvest* is more a play on Plato's 'androgynous' than masochistic melodrama as Colman's character, his memory restored but his second life as Smithy forgotten refers to himself as feeling 'half somebody else'. His 'missing half' is 'both himself (Smithy) and Paula'. For Ma (and Da) there was always something missing. And I could never be or supply that missing object by staying, going or returning.

I've let myself run with this chain of thought and connections in an effort to make sense of how the emigrant research 'got away' when I returned 'home' – 'home' in the sense of Ireland as an imagined integral place. I don't think Mary was a maternal substitute exactly, though at her insistence she fed me – and my mother had told all her children she would never cook for them again when she moved to Mayo, flowery potatoes or otherwise. We ate while her husband, who had suffered a severe stroke and was unable to speak, sat with us. Periodically during the interview and the meal he grunted and moved slightly. I don't know if he disapproved, and I am unsure as to the ethics of conducting the interview under these circumstances. I feel considerable shame and unease as I write. I do think, and sensed then, that it was like a tableau, a dramatic arrangement that somewhat crystallised, however fleetingly, a fantasy of familial rapprochement, with a warm and generous maternal figure ... and a silenced father.

My emotional and fantasy investment in this moment may have exceeded my commitment to publish my research. Within the frame of orthodox sociological research I could not confess that investment, and to dismantle the narrative integrity of Mary's account or the tableau I had created was a challenge I never faced. Perpetual deferral of return to the research combined with distraction, following my return to Ireland, in the form of alternative projects. Along with the other migrants in this research Mary remained frozen in time and in the

liminal, in-between, unsettled space of her and my migration to England, while my actual mother was a difficult, often critical presence in my life.

In the latter case my overwhelming feeling now is of both guilt and shame. Guilt is usually seen in psychoanalysis as a manifestation of the superego, the internalised voice of parental, more specifically paternal authority (Lewis 1971: 23). It is typically related to specific deeds, misdeeds or failures. In the case of James I faced a particular difficulty that I failed to address. However, shame, as Lansky and Morrison (1997: 13) observe, results from a ‘self-conscious appraisal [...] discrepant with our aspirations, standards for lovability, and sense of competence, worthiness, and excellence’. It is thus ‘inextricably’ and dialectically ‘bound to narcissism’. Attempts to hide shame ‘may be accomplished either by a retreat to self-absorption and imagined self-sufficiency or by grandiose aspirations that try to mitigate that shame’ (Lansky and Morrison 1997: 15). My confession of shame here is an attempt at honesty regarding this failure and its subsequent hiding, a failure to meet both personal and professional standards. Admittedly, however, the act of writing now and the move from Mary into my own maternal relationship also feels uncomfortably narcissistic, a way of seeking approval and reassurance even as I try to retrace those errant footsteps.

Conclusions

This article is underpinned by two principal motivations. Firstly, it is an attempt at a Kleinian act of ‘reparation’, a ‘depressive’ recognition that my fantasies and movements within ‘diaspora space’ became enmeshed with my research, even if I do not fully understand the extent and implications of this enmeshment.

James, Mary and the other people in this research related narratives of migration and loss that were personal but also generationally and culturally specific. James’ traumatic narrative highlights the contingencies of national identity and an isolated psychosocial negotiation of the politically fraught legacy of the Northern Ireland ‘Troubles’. Mary’s economically driven migration narrative was preceded by a paternal loss that she was not allowed to grieve. Their stories in particular stopped me in my tracks for fear of betraying the trust invested in me by failing to find a way to convey their affective intensity; and in James’ case specifically, to relate a story eclipsed by the political narratives of the Troubles and a notorious miscarriage of justice. However, in so far as I can I have sought to acknowledge and convey how their

narratives of migration and loss and my fears of betrayal became intertwined both with my migration narrative a generation later, and also with my parents' distinct narratives and fantasies of migration and loss as remembered and imbricated with mine.

The work was shelved because the geographical space of my migration became an episode that – on return 'home' – could be compartmentalised, put in place, just as the journeys into the lives of working class Irish people in Birmingham and Manchester could be split from my academic life in England. As to why I have returned to this material now, an anonymous reviewer of an earlier version of the paper suggested that the passage of time, my mother's death in 2015 and other events may have 'allowed the psychic material circulating at the time of the original research to sediment and hence become more knowable even whilst working alone with the data'. The reviewer may be right. The return to this work began following my mother's passing. The process of mourning her, and – belatedly – my father's loss, was the context in which I felt the need to return to the research data. This act of reparation is thus simultaneously towards James and Mary and my parents.

There is a danger, of course, of earlier work being 'read' through the prism of later experiences. What becomes 'knowable' is never a simple case of recovery, and it may be a 'discovery' framed by a later context. Working with old data using theoretical concepts employed retrospectively inevitably entails a dialogical process in which the interpretative frame must be made explicit. In this case, though, the interpretative frame extends beyond a theoretical apparatus to include some sense of my affective investment in the research and its reinterpretation. For this reason, I have tried to convey something of this through the way in which the article is written.

One other contextual factor seems significant, and once again this exceeds the concern with theoretical framing. At the time of my mother's passing I was conducting research on the discourses of shame and guilt that proliferated in Irish media following the collapse of the 'Celtic Tiger' economy in 2008. The resultant article (Free and Scully, 2016) focused on the displacement of blame from successive Irish governments' embrace of neoliberalism and a poorly regulated banking sector onto a confessional narrative of how 'we' Irish had collectively 'lost the run of ourselves' in the boom through excessive public and consumer spending, with neoliberal 'austerity' solutions in the form of public sector cutbacks as the

disciplinary remedy. Although highly critical of the questionable rhetoric of public sector ‘waste’ and the proliferation of neoliberal moral narratives of individual responsibility and transformation in contemporary ‘reality TV’ shows, both resonated powerfully with my sense of having failed in my research through relative complacency, security and the sense of having ‘moved on’ in the boom years – both metaphorically and geographically – by ‘moving back’ to Ireland. The current article is not an exercise in neoliberal ‘transparency’ and ‘accountability’ to the individualised ‘taxpayers’ as shareholders who indirectly fund academic research, but I find it hard to separate that internalised disciplinary voice from the psychoanalytically driven motive to confess my guilt and shame. They are imbricated in ways that are perhaps impossible to undo.

Beyond the specificity here, I hope also to contribute to debates concerning the ways in which psychosocial theory and methods enable reflexive engagement with underlying biographical research motives that may be inaccessible to consciousness at the time of the research undertaking. In the case of procrastination or non-completion, I suggest that psychosocial reflexive contemplation might help to make sense of these difficulties. Beyond personal concerns the article will hopefully contribute to psychosocial understanding of how the social formation of researchers and research subjects as contradictorily gendered, national and class subjects impacts upon their conscious and unconscious perceptions and expectations of each other.

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