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Respect and relationship: creating safe spaces to explore attachment, grief and loss

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This paper addresses first and second person inquiry where strong emotions may be evoked in participants and the facilitator(s); the themes which link the two inquiries are human attachment, reactions to grief and loss, and how we defend ourselves against trauma, pain and suffering. Some findings of a family placement assessment action research study are outlined. I then describe a first and second person inquiry into trans-generational grief and loss issues arising from my father's wartime experiences . Finally as a result of this inquiry, I reflect on how I have changed and am changing my practice as an action researcher.

Introduction and Background

This paper represents a personal and professional journey, which explores human attachment and reactions to grief and loss through both first and second person inquiry. Through an action research study which sought to improve how potential foster carers and adopters are assessed by family placement social workers, some of the key findings relating to workers' emotions in the assessment process and how they 'manage' them in relation to particularly challenging cases are addressed. One of the reasons that family placement work is so demanding is the nature of the losses experienced on all sides: loss of the possibility to have a child through normal conception; repeated episodes of unsuccessful fertility treatment or the loss of a child for prospective adopters; loss of family relationships (e.g. with parents, siblings etc.) and other relationships (e.g. with foster carers) for the child; and loss of the child/ren for birth parents, many of whom love their children but are unable to care for them. I also discuss participant support issues in the inquiry group, and self care.

Reflecting on some of the key issues raised by the family placement assessment study, I then draw on first person inquiry work into how grief and loss has impacted on my life. Through reflection on stories told to me as a child by my father and engagement with his two war diaries, I address the trans-generational impact of his experiences of intense combat at the Battle of Arnhem in the Netherlands and as a prisoner of war (PoW) in Germany during the closing stages of the Second World War from September 1944 to April 1945. I consider the impact of exploring family history in the context of war and its aftermath.

I take the inquiry out to other ex PoWs through participative research at their annual reunion and presentational form. Using extracts from the men's stories, I outline what I learnt during the days we spent together. This is supplemented by published and unpublished first hand accounts of combat, becoming and being a PoW. I then return full circle to reflect on the original family placement assessment study, and discuss my evolving practice as an action researcher.

The Family Placement Assessment Study

Methodology

The method chosen for the study was action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2001; Coghlan and Brannick, 2001). The world of social work practice is characterised by the unpredictable; the reflective space needs to address why and how people do things as much as what they do (Jones and Gallop, 2003). A group of twelve social workers, who assessed and supported foster carers and adopters, met on a monthly basis for eight cycles of action and reflection to make sense of their assessment of applicants. In effect they were co-researchers, who shaped their inquiry as they moved between action and reflection, exploring and evaluating ways of improving their practice (Heron & Reason, 2001). They explored different hypotheses, their evidence base and ways of making changes to improve their practice. In addition, part way through the study, a small sample of foster carers and adopters met in two focus groups (Morgan, 1997) to explore their experiences of the assessment process. The two focus groups were co-facilitated with a member of the Inquiry group who had not previously acted in a key worker role with any

of the group members. The main findings were fed into the Inquiry group following each focus group.

The Emotional Terrain of Family Placement Assessment

One of the key findings relating to how social workers 'manage' their emotions in this challenging field is the way they negotiate the object/ subject divide in relation to the children they are seeking to place. In order to distance themselves from the child as a person and their particular life history and pain, they seek to objectify him/her. The objectification of the children was summed up in a conversation between the adopters in their focus group:

It's just about the way the children . . . are discussed.

Yes. As if they're cars or they're objects. I mean social workers . . . can't get emotionally tied to children because it would destroy them . . .

It's like a second hand car really. You know "If this child isn't the one for you, you can say no and we won't hold it against you."

Yes it was very, it was a bit of a shock really . . . how the children were almost described really. I mean foster carers were absolutely brilliant, but it's as if they weren't personalities. But I suppose they're not, I suppose they're not to the social workers, they can't be.

When we think of children, we think of little children you know not objects. It's possibly like being a doctor or surgeon.

Jones (2004, p. 16)

Family placement workers also spoke about the impact on their personal lives after undertaking an adult attachment interview (George, Kaplan and Main, 1985) in order to assess the applicants' attachment style and thus to generate a better fit between them and the child (Bifulco, 2002; Howe et al, 1999). As applicants' childhood memories of their relationships with their own parents were probed, workers struggled to maintain their own professional boundaries: the subject-object divide was crossed as the act of the asking the questions pierced the normal defences each worker had in place:

I said to my husband I just feel like I've been eaten alive, I need some space, so just gave myself space doing the chores and other things I needed to do. And just space out, like I sat in the car park here, I arrived early to at least dictate half of that visit . . . But that's not recognised in our work that we need space after a home visit and space to offload

Jones (2004, p. 26)

The consequences of mismatching a child with adopters, referred to as a disruption or placement breakdown, were agreed as potentially devastating and had the power to numb a worker's emotions:

Could I just say about disruptions generally that the impact on you as a worker if you have them or if you have more than one quickly because . . . it's a time when you need . . . an awful lot of support because you do look to yourself, you do blame yourself, you do feel a lot of guilt and it's a very difficult position to be in, to support people. And actually you might be quite angry with them and upset with them. And if they haven't been honest with you or truthful with you that hurts as well.

Jones (2004, p. 32)

Another person said they “crawled into a corner”. The group discussed the counselling service provided through ‘Relate’, a UK wide relationship guidance voluntary organisation; one person had used this with good effect to discuss a family issue. However group members felt that they would like a regular booked session every couple of months with an independent person to discuss the emotional impact of the work on them: testing carers’ motivation through the use of tools like the Adult Attachment Interview could potentially raise personal issues, which needed to be discussed. Supervision with the worker’s manager was not considered the right place to discuss the emotional impact of the work.

Preparation for facilitation and self care

With workers’ feelings very much brought to the surface in the inquiry, I had to consider how I prepared myself for the sessions. I stayed overnight near the venue and practised a short yoga session in the morning before breakfast, focusing particularly on slowing down my breathing (Agombar, 1999). I arrived about half an hour before participants arrived, greeting them individually before the session began; and stayed on afterwards if any member of the group needed some more time to talk through a particular issue. In this way I bridged participants in and out of the session.

I also worked with a mentor in London who was available to support me on this project. I saw her about once every two months. However it was not until four months after the project had ended that I began to address my own attachment issues as an adult. This was triggered by media coverage of the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Bergen Belsen Concentration Camp, which was situated close by Stalag XIB, Fallingbostal, north of Hannover, Germany, a large camp holding prisoners of many different nationalities. This had been one of the Prisoner of War camps in which my father had been imprisoned. He was wounded and captured in September 1944 at the Battle of Arnhem in The Netherlands. This was one of the fiercest battles of World War Two. The aim was to capture and secure the bridge over the River Rhine at Arnhem: ‘Allied forces suffered more casualties in Market-Garden than in the mammoth invasion of Normandy . . . In the nine days of Market-Garden combined losses - airborne and ground forces – in killed, wounded and missing amounted to more than 17,000 (Ryan, 1974, p.457).

My father travelled through Germany in closed cattle trucks to Fallingbostal, where he stayed for a month until joining an *Arbeitskommando* (a working party employed by a contract at a particular location) at the *Reichswerke Hermann Göring* in the Salzgitter region (referred to by my father as the Hermann Göring Steelworks). The prisoner of war camp was situated close to Drütte Concentration Camp, a slave labour camp right next to the former steelworks.

The journey begins

Methodology

The predominantly second person family placement assessment study triggered an extensive first person inquiry (Marshall, 1999) into trans-generational grief and loss arising from my father’s experience of intense combat and as a prisoner of war (Moody

and Arcangel, 2001). This has taken the form of journal writing during 2005 and 2006 and second person inquiry with ex Prisoners of War at their annual reunion on the South Coast of England (Frank, 1995; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000); and going on the journey of my father's prisoner of war diary across Germany in order to create a visual and healing inquiry to support my self care and to accompany the finished thesis (Schnetzer, 2005). The focus of this paper is on some of my early journal writing and the research with ex PoWs.

So let's begin at the beginning with some memories of my own childhood, just as adoption applicants were asked to recall by their family placement worker. The narrative account addresses the same question adoption applicants were asked to recall: 'Why do you think your parents behaved the way they did?'

Bellerophon

Once upon a time there was a little girl who lived in a house called 'Bellerophon'. Her Mum and Dad called her Joce and her big sister called her Jossie; everybody else called her Jocelyn.

Joce didn't think much to the name of her house: it was awful difficult to spell and whenever she had to tell someone where she lived, she had to spell it out letter by letter and then the next place where she lived 'North Warnborough' also needed the same boring treatment. So there were quite a few barriers to get over explaining where she lived. Sometimes Joce just wished she was called Ann and lived at Meadowview, The Street, Westborough. It would have made things much easier.

Bellerophon was painted maroon and light blue – a sky blue. It was a modern solidly built house for the 1950s anyway; and was built by Joce's Dad with the help of local builders and other tradesmen.

Joce didn't much like the colour scheme and couldn't understand why the house had to be in those colours. She would have preferred blue and white.

But as a child you learn that some things are non-negotiable.

So Joce found out that the weird name of her house belonged to the Greek warrior who rode Pegasus, the winged horse and symbol of the Airborne Forces; the colours were maroon and blue. Now this started to make a bit more sense to her. Joce's Dad talked about the war and his time in 'The Paras' quite a lot. Sometimes Joce got fed up hearing about it especially those awful stories about the Prisoner of War camp; and the starving Russian soldiers in the next camp; and the poor man who was brutally killed by a German guard when his friends were carrying him back from work between them.

Joce escaped to the patio and played hopscotch with a big stone that thudded on the concrete. This was to drown out the sound coming from behind the French windows, as her Dad continued the account over the tea table to his trapped audience. But she could still hear it as clearly as ever through the window panes.

Sometimes her Dad did weird stuff: one weekend he broke stones with a big sledgehammer on one side of the house, and then got Joce and her Mum and sister to carry two heavy metal buckets each full of small stones to make the foundations for the garage. Joce was maybe about six or seven at the time and she was tired like she'd never felt before and her soft hands were covered in blisters. Next day she ached so much and her Dad made them do it all over again, and her hands got more blisters.

She didn't understand why her Dad this to her. Weren't parents supposed to take care of their children and put plasters on blisters? Next day it was time to go to school, and Joce had plasters covering her blisters.

When Joce grew up she remembered her Dad talking about a middle aged woman he'd seen whilst a prisoner who was made to pick up huge pieces of stone and he looked into the woman's eyes and realised she could have been his mother and yet he was powerless to do anything about it.

Joce started to wonder what was really going on in her Dad's head.

Inside Bellerophon there were some souvenirs from a place called Oosterbeek, stone from a ruined church and some picture tiles, and tea towels in the kitchen with the ruined church on them. On one of the window sills in the dining room was a wooden carved and painted parachutist.

Joce didn't like him much because he looked a bit scary.

In the 1970s when the family had won a small concession to replace the sky blue paint by cream, Joce's Dad bought a picture with the battle for the bridge at Arnhem and this took pride of place in the front room.

The picture moved down with him to Joce's parents' retirement bungalow where it occupied the same central place in the sitting room. When Joce's Dad died, her Mum replaced it with a picture of a fast flowing river running through countryside.

(Extract from personal journal, May 2005)

This narrative has been the catalyst for my inquiry into living with a survivor of post traumatic stress disorder (Schiraldi, 2000). I think it is important to say here that I did not understand the extent of his and others prisoners' experiences until I engaged with his war diaries and other memorabilia that he carefully kept in various places around the house until the day he died. The inquiry into the war diaries led, as a close relative of an ex PoW, to associate membership of the National Ex Prisoner of War Association, and an invitation to join their annual weekend reunion in autumn 2005. Whilst acknowledging the awfulness of some of their experiences, the ex PoWs should not be seen just as frail victims, but rather as witnesses or survivors of trauma who have stories to tell and that need to be heard.

Inquiry with former Prisoners of War

Preparation and ethical issues: being with others and self care

I had to consider how I prioritised the men's well being as I researched with them and they told me their stories; stories which strike at the core of the human condition. At the time of the research I had been working on a semi structured interview schedule for a work assignment; this was the modern world of professionalism. Before I went to the reunion, I became nervous:

Had I prepared enough? Should I have my list of questions like the interview schedule for [another project]? No, I decided that I should just be: after all, I had grown up with an ex PoW and listened to his stories. So I relaxed and engaged with the first group of older men in blazers sitting in the corner of the cafeteria.

(Extract from personal journal, October 2005)

I committed myself to attending the whole of the reunion. Not to do so would have been disrespectful: I needed to focus 100% on the men and their stories that weekend. When I

introduced myself, I told them about my research and why I had joined the Association. I did not record or make notes at the time of any conversations, because this would have detracted from sitting and listening to the men individually and in small groups: I needed to build trust in the moment. During the afternoon break and late at night in my chalet, I wrote down as much of the men's stories as I could remember. The men were aware I was doing this. I also included some personal reflections on their stories.

I was very struck by their resilience, an enduring sense of humour to see them through darker moments and their compassion for the fragility of others. This revealed itself during the Sunday afternoon service when I started crying. I observed a man immediately in front of me, who I had talked to a couple of times previously, starting to cry during one of the hymns of remembrance. I watched as he brought out a tissue from his pocket, and his wife's arm gently stroked his broad back. I was overcome with a feeling of sadness so deep and wide. The ex PoW sitting next to me noticed my distress. During the end of the service he and his wife, were so kind; helping me not to fall apart and plying me with tea and biscuits. I gleaned a sense of the comradeship of PoWs through the inevitable bouts of despair, depression or doubt during captivity.

Self care at the Reunion was very important. I needed to balance compassion and taking a full part in the group with time for journal writing, rest, fresh air and exercise (Nelson, 2006). I ran alongside the beach very early every morning before breakfast; and on the last morning when I left, I had a meditative stroll along the beach before I drove up to do some documentary research at the National Archives in London. Nevertheless, research of this type is emotionally draining and I knew that I needed to practice more yoga and meditation in order to support the inquiry.

Sixty Years on: the Emotional Terrain of War and its Aftermath

Many of the men, now all in their 80s, experienced post traumatic stress disorder or flashbacks following the war; some still do. Their cumulative experience of trauma often began with intense combat, seeing comrades killed or seriously wounded and/or being wounded themselves (Sims, 1980). This was swiftly followed by the shock and humiliation of capture, and transit in cattle trucks and/or a forced march to an unknown destination, the PoW camp (Mackenzie, 2004). In the days, months and sometimes years that followed there were the constant feelings of powerlessness and intense cold and hunger; and survivor guilt as the men had to deal with what they had witnessed (Nichol and Rennell, 2002; Longden, 2005). There were also stories which show how the human spirit can endure and transcend such trauma through random acts of kindness on all sides (Mackenzie, 2004).

When I talked with the men, I was very struck by how the world of combat and being a prisoner of war is so very different to our world, the world of warm houses, hot food, and friendly faces, referred to by Primo Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz Concentration Camp in his poem, and book of the same name, 'If This is a Man' (Primo Levi 1987, p.17). One man, who still has flashbacks to his PoW days when he thinks he's in prison, told me that he had started talking about his experiences when his daughter was six or seven and she was learning about the war in school. Tears started to well up in his eyes, "you had to be careful about what you talked about" and then to stop the tears, "We had some good times." Just being alongside people like this man and some of the other PoWs, I was aware

that the inquiry into my father's wartime experiences was taking me to places where the human spirit is tested to its limits, where to survive at all cost becomes the daily pre-occupation and where unspeakable brutality is witnessed. Speaking of his experiences at the PoW reunion, Les Allan, the President of the Association, said, "You can never understand the depths of evil man can go to." This is one of the problems of researching PoWs' experiences: some things are best left unsaid by those who have suffered the trauma of combat and its aftermath; just like the social workers who objectify the neglected and abused children, they are trying to place with adopters, our natural defences kick in to distance ourselves from intense pain and suffering. And yet to engage we have to focus compassionately on the realness of the people we are with, on the lives they have lived, what they have witnessed or been forced to witness; we have to appreciate their humanity. We also have to accept that sometimes they would have liked to behave differently, but they could not, because they were pushed to the very edge of what it means to be human. It is easy to judge in these circumstances, but to do so belies the reality of what it takes to survive. We would act similarly.

Encountering 'the Enemy'

The beginning of the journey into combat often began with seeing a corpse. James Sims (Sims, 1980, p. 62) was just 19 years old when he went to Arnhem and describes his first encounter with a dead person, normally either a comrade or 'the enemy':

I approached the staff car filled with curiosity, for not only had I never seen a German officer before, I had never seen a corpse before. My parents had protected me from such sights by the face-saving phrase, 'No thanks I'd rather remember him as he was.'

Just hours later, after intense combat, James Sims (Sims, 1980, p. 69) makes an interesting observation: 'Some of the German casualties were SS men, distinguishable from the runes on their collars. I was curious to see what these supermen looked like but, apart from their uniform, they were just like us.' The transition from seeing 'the Enemy' as objects to relating to them as subjects occurred on both sides, often through random compassionate gestures, which the men vividly remember after more than sixty years. After capture Tom, an Arnhem veteran, talked to a German soldier with whom he shared an ambulance (Carpenter, c.1975, personal account of his experiences at Arnhem and after capture at Stalag XIB, Fallingbosten):

The young German was trying to communicate and was showing me photographs. I was able to understand when he made a point that he had been wounded on the Russian front then pointed to his present wound with the word "Kaput". The photographs were of his family and girlfriend. The way we were talking, although with difficulty, made it hard to believe that only hours ago we could have been looking at each other down the sights of our weapons and I could possibly be responsible for his present condition. Such were my thoughts, but there was no enmity in his tone.

One of the drivers gave the German wounded a slice of black bread and a piece of something greyish which was supposed to be cheese. There followed a heated argument initiated by the soldier who had been talking to us and the drivers. Two of the other wounded Germans joined in. We hadn't a clue what it was all about but it led to us receiving the same ration . . . At this time little did we know that, in the following eight months we might beg for what we had just received.

Later the wounded German soldiers were dropped off, 'leaving us with friendly gestures' (Carpenter, c. 1975 personal account).

To the camp and in the camp

The next stage of the journey was away from the front line in closed cattle trucks where Tom crossed back into being treated as an object. He writes in his journal, 'It was most disquieting that up to now no-one had asked for name, rank and number. To the Germans we were nonentities and could be lost on our journey of unknown destination and duration.'

Speaking of the 10 days between leaving the relative normality of army life in England, fighting, being wounded, and his transit through Germany in the cattle trucks, Tom attempted to summarise the mindset necessary for survival in such circumstances, 'It was very much a case of survival of the fittest and fend for yourself as we were all in the same predicament with no help from our captors whatsoever, such was our existence at the time, we were nothing.'

James Sims, also wounded and captured at Arnhem, describes his arrival on a stretcher at Stalag XIB. At the railway station he had got onto a stretcher, meant for amputation cases, and covered his wounded leg with a blanket:

On the way to the Stalag we passed the walking wounded who, despite their terrible condition, gave us a cheer. I felt a bit ashamed as many of the men in that marching column were in a worse state than I was, but already I was acquiring the attitude necessary for survival.

(Sims, 1980, p.136)

But at the same time and afterwards there was also survivor guilt to deal with. Stan, who was captured in France in May 1940, went to Stalag VIII B in southern Poland: "I will never forget the sight of the lorry going round the camp with the Russian PoWs in it, their legs and arms sticking out the side and they just tipped them into a ditch and covered the bodies with quicklime." Tom drew me a map and highlighted the route through the woods to the Cemetery of Nameless at Fallingbommel/ Oerbke, where 30,000 Russian PoWs, 30,000 people, 30,000 sons, brothers, lovers are buried. His friend J.J. Everitt, and the other British soldiers who died of their wounds, were buried around the Russians. Later their bodies were moved to Becklingen War Cemetery. The British PoWs were given a 'proper' funeral as far as that was possible in such circumstances, with an honour party and coffin bearers, ' . . . it was a very moving experience for me, as we passed other compounds, which held Russians, French, Poles etc., to witness them lining the wire, heads bowed in respect.'

In the months leading up to end of the war, many PoWs had to endure severe hardship on forced marches in freezing temperatures to escape the Russian advance. This pushed the will to survive to its limits. Many of them were suffering from ill health and malnutrition, especially the Russians, who were treated very harshly. As Stan said to me,

On the March you just trudged on, that's all you could do . . . the Russians were put to the front and as they fell back some were shot by the Guards and others were left to freeze in the snow. It was terrible to see the look in a man's eyes as he fell out.

In the moments of desperation the object-subject divide was bridged again. The eyes of those who survived met the eyes of the damned, vivid images in colour, perhaps a glance at the colour of the condemned man's eyes. This was a far cry from the black, grey and

white lens through which we view the Second World War in photos or on TV in the comfort of our homes.

Conclusion: Respect, relationship and reciprocity

What did I learn during those few days together? Perhaps the most significant learning point, or perhaps even a gift, was an overwhelming feeling of reciprocity and being bathed in love. Whether this was closing a circle in my relationship with my father I'm not sure. There was an ease of being and talking, coupled with little pranks and lots of laughing. Some lovely things were said to me, which gave me a newfound confidence in my work. I learned that how you are in the moment and following up what you have agreed to do is what matters. This was reciprocated by acts of generosity and kindness, including searching for and finding ex PoWs who had been at Arnhem and the same PoW camp as my father on my behalf. If I were to do the Family Placement Assessment Study again, I would invest more in the process of inquiry by supporting participants' emotional engagement, for example, by offering simple yoga stretches, breathing, relaxation and meditation (Schiffmann, 1996). This would deepen conversations around how the object-subject divide is negotiated in professional practice. As regards, my current practice as a participative researcher, I have incorporated meditation into my preparation as an act of self care. This helps me stay in the moment when I am interviewing or facilitating. I am less rushed: people take time to open up. Finally, I have a new found respect and appreciation of nature. I balance emotionally demanding inquiry with being amongst the elements. Nature has a profound capacity to heal as I learned from undertaking the accompanying visual inquiry which has supported the writing of this paper.

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