

# The 'seanchaí' project: Combining the spirit of ancient Irish storytelling with modern psychology in community and personal development

By Pádraig Cotter & Paul Gallery

## Background

The island of Ireland, the Irish people and the culture of these people have been heavily influenced by a wide range of very significant collective and societal events for hundreds of years. The impact of these is transferred to subsequent generations in both conscious and unconscious ways. This informs the development of a national psychology, different 'sub-psychologies' across the many groups of people on the island (and those who leave), as well as impacting the development of each person's psychology at an individual level. All are interconnected, the individual, their groups, sub-groups and the larger collective that gives rise to a notion of 'Irishness' or rather many different conceptions of what it means to be Irish.

In the last thousand years, there have been several major traumatic events on the island of Ireland. Many are connected to our relationship with our near neighbours in Britain. The first Anglo-Norman invasion occurred in 1169. Since then, the people of Ireland have lived through the Plantations (1500 – 1800), rebellions in 1641 and 1798, The Great Hunger or 'An t-Ocras Mór' between 1845 and 1852, the War of Independence between 1919 and 1922, the partition of the island that followed, the civil war this partition created, the civil rights movement in the 'North of Ireland' in 1964; and the 30 years of war or 'Troubles' that began in 'Northern Ireland' in the late 1960s. This is to name but a few. Religion and religious institutions have also had a far-reaching impact. This is true in terms of both Catholicism and Protestantism and in a whole myriad of very external and obvious contexts (e.g. Troubles in the North of Ireland) as well as many internal or unseen domains (e.g. internalised attitudes towards sex and sexuality).

Unprocessed, untold and unconsidered trauma that such experiences can lead to is often unconsciously transferred to subsequent generations to be re-enacted in different ways at an individual, group or collective level. For example, the 'victim-oppressor' dynamic plays out regularly within people's own psychology, within parent-child relationships, within romantic relationships, in the classroom, on the sports field, and at a broader level within political arenas. That said, we realise that there is much more than hardship to the many stories of Ireland and Irish people – both past and present – and we do not wish to overlook this. In recent times, the benefits of joining the EU have been many; many parts of the island now experience as much immigration as emigration; and there has been significant progress on social issues such as same-sex marriage and legislation pertaining to abortion.

Several years ago, along with other Irish people, we began processing some of the abovementioned issues at an International Group Process Seminar, hosted by CFOR (Force for Change) in conjunction with Research Society of Process Oriented Psychology United Kingdom (RSPOPUK). It was entitled 'The World Inside Out' and focused on the application of Process Oriented Psychology (POP) within

a group setting (Mindell, 1995, 2014). This was the beginning of a further project undertaken with another colleague at a subsequent CFOR/RSPOPUK programme, 'Facilitating Our Future'. This work, on the relationship between Ireland, Northern Ireland and England, was part of a series of workshops facilitated by people from around the world, working in the areas of conflict negotiation, post-conflict rebuilding, peacebuilding, and community development. This work led to the development of *The Seanchaí Project* (Cotter et al., 2022a), which is one of ten projects seeded by the 'Far in Far Out' (FIFO) Jean-Claude Audergon Memorial Project. The purpose of the FIFO project is to support facilitating personal and collective awareness within community-based projects at a range of different levels, including design and practical implementation, as well as within individual facilitators, facilitation teams and the interplay between these and the groups they work with.

## Approach to group facilitation

The underlying perspective from which we operate is integrative, interdisciplinary, and pluralistic (Norcross & Goldfried, 2005; Boix Mansilla, 2010; Teo, 2010). We are informed by a range of models and schools of thought, including Person-Centred Therapy (Rogers, 1957), Group Psychotherapy (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), Compassion Focused Therapy (Gilbert, 2005) and Existential Psychotherapy (Yalom, 1980). However, our biggest source of learning and training has been in Arnold Mindell's Process Oriented Psychology (POP) (Mindell, 1988, 2017).

POP is a very integrative approach itself, incorporating learnings from Jung's analytical psychotherapy, psychodynamic therapy, CBT, client-centred psychotherapy, Gestalt therapy and Systemic and Family Therapy (Cotter, 2021a). Beyond the domain of psychology and psychotherapy, it also introduces concepts and ideas from physics, Shamanism, Buddhism, alchemy, and mythology (Mindell, 1989). An essential underlying viewpoint that pulls all of this together is grounded in the Chinese Philosophy, Daoism (Addiss & Lombardo, 1993). The aim of this work is to follow nature, the 'Dao', the 'way' or the 'process' as it arises in each moment (Mindell, 1989).

In recent years, there has been more and more recognition of the impact of collective traumas on individuals' mental health (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018; Sweeney et al., 2018). Early in the development of POP, Mindell (1989) came to see how there were many advantages to processing collective events and societal issues in larger forums beyond the traditional psychotherapy dyad. This larger scale group-processing has become known as Worldwork. We have had the benefit from learning quite closely from some of Mindell's early students in Ireland (Hollwey & Brierly, 2014), England (Audergon & Audergon, 2017) and Spain (Instituto Trabajo de Procesos). Two of our most influential mentors, Arlene and Jean-Claude Audergon, along with their colleagues, have used this approach in other parts of the world that have been heavily affected by war and conflict. These have included Rwanda and the Balkans (Audegon, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2008; Audergon & Ayre, 2005).

In an effort to incorporate aspects of human psychology and consciousness that have become less prominent in modern Western thinking, Mindell and colleagues have reached out to indigenous cultures and long-standing schools of meditation in the East (Mindell, 2000). These perspectives often inform the use of what are called 'Metaskills' (Mindell, 1994). These are the feeling attitudes, values and beliefs that inform the facilitator's overarching engagement and guide how they do what they do (e.g. following nature, beginner's mind, eldership (Diamond & Jones, 2004)). Over time the development of our own Metaskills has been informed by an ancient Irish tradition, the *Seanchaí*. This way of being has a range of resemblances and some more direct overlap to other indigenous cultures that Mindell has learned from and studied with in other parts of the world.

A *seanchaí* (pronounced shan-a-key) was a traditional Irish *storyteller* (O'Suilleabháin, 1969). In a literal sense, the word means 'bearer of old lore'. The *seanchaithe* (*plural*) were custodians of history and culture on the island of Ireland for many centuries (Mercier, 1964). Historically, they were highly valued by their local Chieftain and had a wide range of roles that involved dealing with legal issues, literature and genealogy. Following the English conquests of Ireland - from the 1500s onwards - the work of the *seanchaithe* became more and more centred on storytelling and passing on Irish folklore, myth and legend (Kiberd, 1979). This rich and ancient way of being, that has its roots in pre-anglicised Ireland, has become an important background spirit or metaskill and starting point for this work.

The work to date has involved facilitating group-based, community dialogue interventions. These have had a broad initial starting point of 'the experience of being Irish in 2022 or different relationships with, or to, Irishness in today's world' (Cotter et al., 2022a). From here, we follow the group's process and facilitate the exchanges and interactions that emerge. This involves using a range of POP-oriented facilitation skills and perspectives. (For a more complete overview see Audergon, 2004). An overarching metaperspective is Mindell's (1995) concept of 'Deep Democracy', whereby all views, voices and forms of emotion are welcomed, valued and listened to. Mapping and following the different roles that may emerge within the process is key. A role can be described as a particular cultural rank, position or viewpoint (e.g. boss, employee, helper, victim, perpetrator) that often operates 'in the background', shaping how content is discussed 'in the foreground'. Where we identify roles, they can be brought into awareness, taken on and filled out by different people over the course of a group process. We often conceptualise roles as emerging in pairs, even if sometimes only one of the roles is apparent. This helps to look for what might be the missing role or the 'ghostrole' (e.g. the activist role is very prominent and taking up a lot of airtime while those who are silenced is a ghostrole that is less obvious). Working with 'hotspots' is also central (Mindell, 2017). These are particular types of interactions within a dynamic where conflicts can cycle and escalate. Slowing down and bringing awareness to what is occurring at hotspots can lead to change. Similarly, bringing awareness to momentary resolutions or 'cool spots' is essential. Bringing awareness to issues of rank (contextual, social, psychological and spiritual), power and privilege is also important within this work (Mindell, 2014). Working on these issues within oneself – known as innerwork - is a further key part of facilitating groups in this way.

### Potential ways forward

We have many hopes for this project and the nature of the work it represents. We hope to host a range of further events across the islands of Ireland and Britain as well as online. The latter, as well as increasing accessibility, allows us to facilitate discussions on being Irish in a way that brings people together from different parts of these islands and from different corners of the world. Already we have seen the value of this and the interconnectedness it engenders.

We wish to host 'open' groups where anyone with a relationship to Irishness can join, as well as 'closed' sessions for groups of people who share a particular connection. This can be especially relevant to people who have been minoritised or marginalised within mainstream society. This may be due to gender, race, sexual orientation, disability, socioeconomic status or the many other ways that people are discriminated against. One group within Irish society that is deserving of special mention in this regard is the Travelling Community, which experiences the greatest degree of disadvantage "by far" among minority groups (McGinnity & Watson, 2021). Using a closed group model where appropriate may support integration in the longer term as it can support people from minoritised groups to later attend open groups. Closed groups may also be useful for groups of people with a common interest or shared goal. This might include writers, documentary makers, sportspeople, politicians, students,

and what may be of particular interest to the current readership, psychotherapists, psychologists and counsellors. We believe these types of group-based interventions can support such people in their own lives as well as with the work that they do.

Supporting people with different viewpoints and perspectives to come together is an important part of this work. One somewhat ubiquitous example of this is bridging 'the generational divide', in the context of differing experiences in a period of accelerated change. This may involve working with younger people and older people in closed groups initially and then bringing them together to share each other's stories and perspectives. Or potentially even more important, is when these dynamics arise organically within open groups. Other examples might include Catholics-Protestants, Northern Ireland-Republic of Ireland and Urban-Rural.

To realise the above propositions – and extend the project beyond the initial pilot phase - we will need to secure sufficient funding and associated resources. This is something we are currently exploring.

### Conclusion

There is a *seanfhocail* (old Irish saying) *Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine* or 'under each other's shadow is how people survive' (Magan, 2020, p. 126). We do not mean to overlook how many people have suffered and continue to suffer within individual and collective relationships. Rather, we also believe that growth and healing can emerge from within this so called 'shadow', especially when the 'right' conditions are cultivated and nourished. This *seanfhocail* can also be understood as 'it is in the shelter of each other that the people live' (O'Tuama, 2015, p. 5), recognising further how we are part of each other's stories.

Much of modern Western thinking is grounded in a particular way of viewing the world. This is reflected in perspectives such as positivism, capitalism, and the scientific method (Cotter et al., 2020, 2021b, 2022b, 2022c). While there have been many benefits to these ways of being, their dominance has created many problems in today's world. The individualistic, objectivist and reductionist stances they promote have contributed to eroding much of the interconnectedness between human beings – and between humans and other animals and the natural world more broadly. This is an underlying factor in many of today's major issues (e.g. climate change, rise of fascism, treatment of immigrants, lack of humanity in modern healthcare).

Within Europe, former colonial 'powers' may find it especially difficult to 'correct' this imbalance because they have taken it on, and benefitted from it, most wholly. Ireland's somewhat different history may mean that there is a little more space for a change in direction. We believe that combining the spirit of the *seanchaí* with learnings from the humanistic and integrative psychotherapies, in particular POP, can play an important role in supporting modern Ireland in becoming a more equitable place; in developing a different relationship between Irishness and Britishness, and in evolving the concept of Irishness on a more global level.



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