
PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

A process oriented psychology (POP) approach to processing collective trauma in an Irish context

Pádraig Cotter^{*1,2}  and Paul Callery³

¹Research Society of Process Oriented Psychology United Kingdom (RSPOPUK), 27 Old Gloucester Street, London, WC1N 3AX, United Kingdom

²Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, Dept of Clinical Health Psychology, Clarence Wing, St Mary's Hospital, London, W2 1NY, United Kingdom

³Instituto Trabajo de Procesos, Carrer La Palma 11, Principal 1a, 08011 Barcelona, Spain

ABSTRACT

The island of Ireland and Irish people have experienced a vast array of social, political, and military and paramilitary events and occurrences throughout history. Many have given rise to different forms of collective trauma. This has influenced the development of a national psychology and the many sub-psychologies of different groups of Irish people. Unprocessed, this trauma is transferred to subsequent generations at an individual, group, and collective level. This article considers an integrative approach to working with collective issues within groups of people who have a relationship with Irishness. This is heavily based on process oriented psychology (POP) or its larger scale application, worldwork. Mapping and following the different roles that may emerge within the process is key. We combine this approach with the spirit or essence of ancient Irish storytelling in hosting community-based dialogue interventions. These groups explore 'the experience of being Irish in 2022 or different relationships with, or to, Irishness in today's world'. The different themes and topics that emerged across the initial groups are discussed with further reflections from participants and more in-depth commentary from the perspectives of the group facilitators. The next stages of this group-based psychotherapeutic work are considered within an Irish framework; as well as the potential benefit of this kind of work at an international level, given the many collective psychosocial challenges we face across a very interconnected globe.

KEYWORDS: process oriented psychology (POP); The Seanchaí Project; collective trauma; worldwork; group psychotherapy; innerwork

INTRODUCTION

Like many other regions of the world, the island of Ireland, the Irish people, and the cultures of these peoples has been heavily influenced by a range of collective and societal events in the recent and not-so-recent past (Curtis, 1978). Colonisation, famine, partition of the island, civil war, the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland, and significant religious oppressions are to name but a few (Ferriter, 2019). The social, economic, and psychological impact of some of the more recent events has been shown to be very significant (e.g., Corcoran et al., 2015; Ferry et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2014; O'Neill & O'Connor, 2020).

Unprocessed, untold, and unconsidered trauma that such events may lead to can be transferred to subsequent generations and re-enacted in different ways at an individual, group, or collective level (Dowd, 2019; Inger, 2012; Zerach et al., 2016). This can occur in both conscious and unconscious ways (Audergon, 2004). For example, a 'victim-oppressor' interaction (Audergon, 2005) can play out in dynamics of internalised oppression 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. This interaction between people and what happens in their environs informs the development of a national psychology, different 'sub-psychologies' across many different groups of people, 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 (Mindell, 2014), giving rise to a notion of 'Irishness' or rather many different conceptions of what it means to be Irish. 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, benefits of joining the European Union (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 (Ralph, 2020; Tiernan, 2020).

Over the past half century, there have been a wide range of efforts, at various different levels of society, to address the impact of intergenerational trauma on Irish people and in particular, its impact in Northern Ireland. These have included innumerable reports, community development projects, local and national initiatives, and working directly with trauma within a psychotherapeutic setting (e.g., Bolton, 2017; Byrne et al., 2009; Day & Shloim, 2021; Eugen, 2022; Ferry et al., 2014; Goodbread, 2010; O'Neill & O'Connor, 2020).

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). This 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 the facilitation of 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.

The current paper

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'. From here, we follow the group's process and facilitate the exchanges and interactions that emerge. We do not have an aim within these groups of 'healing trauma' per se; however, we hold the perspective that this is often an artefact of groups following their own process and being supported in doing so. The remainder of the article gives an overview of our approach to group facilitation, the themes that emerged across the initial events, reflections from the perspective of participants, reflections from our own perspective as facilitators, and finally some thoughts for the future of the project. Participants have consented to their direct feedback being used and where our own reflections have concerned particular participants more directly, we have sought further consent to reproduce such reflections.

APPROACH TO FACILITATION

The underlying perspective from which we operate is integrative, interdisciplinary, and pluralistic (Boix Mansilla, 2010; Norcross & Goldfried, 2005; 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, cognitive behaviour 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 underling viewpoint that pulls all of this together is grounded in the Chinese philosophy, Taoism (Addiss & Lombardo, 1993). In terms of philosophical underpinning, it is also grounded in the theory of phenomenology (Husserl, 1970). The aim of this work is to follow nature, the 'Dao'; the 'way' or the 'process' as it arises in each moment (Mindell, 1989).

As a prelude to outlining some key aspects of the approach, a few issues are worth noting. Within POP, terms are considered important because they describe experience, which is changeable, not because they are absolute truths (Mindell, 1995). Mindell's terminology frequently borrows from other scientific (e.g., quantum physics) and spiritual (e.g., Zen Buddhism) arenas and often presents ideas from a more phenomenological (Husserl, 1970) or relativistic stance (Carr, 1987) than a positivistic (Comte, 1997) or realistic (Kanzian et al., 2019) one. The latter is more common in mainstream Western psychology and psychotherapy (Teo, 2010). The reader who views the world in terms of objective truths will likely experience Mindell's writing differently to the reader who experiences the world in terms of subjective 'truths' that are continuously shaped by the interaction between context and observer. The positivist may experience some of Mindell's descriptions as vague whereas the relativist may favour the space for interpretation they afford. The qualitative investigator may see rich opportunities for investigation whereas the quantitative viewpoint may see challenges in terms of definition, operationalising terms, and measurement.

In recent years, there has been more and more recognition of the impact of social, political, and 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 seemed to be many advantages to processing collective events and societal issues in larger forums beyond the traditional psychotherapy dyad. Working with people who experienced shared traumas (e.g., war, genocide, natural disaster) highlighted how collective trauma also benefitted from a collective approach to processing it (Mindell, 1995, 2014; Reiss, 2018). 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 (Audergon, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2008; Audergon & Ayre, 2005).

This approach 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'. From this perspective, all views and voices within a community are valued and welcomed, including those that may be considered extreme or unwanted. It also involves processing the polarisation between different sides (called roles) of a conflict and supporting all forms of emotion to be expressed. Through

facilitating these different parts of a process with awareness, it is theorised that a group or community can find their own way forward. From a POP perspective, the facilitator represents a 'role' belonging to the group as opposed to being some separate external entity that enters it (Mindell, 1989). Working with 'hotspots' is also central (Mindell, 2017). These are particular types of interactions within a dynamic where conflicts can cycle and escalate. Within the context of this approach, 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 important. Bringing awareness to issues of rank (contextual, social, psychological, and spiritual), power, and privilege is also considered 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.

A key aspect of worldwork methodology that deserves special mention here is working with roles. Mindell (1989) uses the term role to represent different parts of an individual's or group's process (Mindell, 2010). The term 'timespirit' was used laterally to highlight the temporal and transient nature of roles within a group (Mindell, 1995). Mindell describes roles or timespirits as:

a cultural rank, position or viewpoint that depends on time and place... that change rapidly because they are a function of the moment and locality... [and] are not fixed but fluid. They are filled by different parties and individuals over time, keeping the roles in a natural state of flux. (1995, p. 2)

Common roles may include insider and outsider or victim and perpetrator.

When someone identifies with a particular role within a group process, their consciousness can become altered, and they can experience the emotions of that role or the group of people that it is representing. Although each role seems located within a given individual or group, it is thought of as an evolving entity, a nonlocal transforming 'spirit of the times' that needs everyone to fill it (Mindell, 2010). Each role is much greater than any one individual or group and each person or group is much bigger than any one role.

As indicated earlier, one of the philosophical perspectives that underpins POP is the Chinese Philosophy or spiritual tradition, Taoism (Addis & Lombardo, 1993). Taoism, which developed in response to the more traditional Confucianism, purports that reality is ultimately a unified whole (Wong, 2011). This is represented in the Tajitu or Yin Yang symbol. This symbol denotes how opposite entities in the world are not separate but rather in coming together bring a sense of completeness into life. This is called monistic dualism and is contrary to the notion of Cartesian dualism (e.g., mind–body, right–wrong), which has had a big impact on much of Western society (Robinson, 2003).

This overarching perspective guides working with roles within worldwork fora. Viewing roles as opposites that are part of a greater whole helps group facilitators to notice how there is likely to be a parallel role for each role that emerges within the group. This aids facilitators

in bringing awareness to the missing or unspoken role, called the ghostrole (see below). Common pairings include victim and oppressor; communist and capitalist; and poor and rich—each group may have different names for these (Mindell, 2014). That said, there may not always be an obvious opposite to a role and group processes are rarely, if ever, as linear as this may suggest. Furthermore, there may often be interconnected roles that may appear in slightly different ways over time.

A ghostrole is a particular type of role that signifies aspects of a group's process that are not represented by anyone (Mindell, 2014). They may be people, events, or institutions that are referred to or spoken about, but nobody identifies with them in the moment, or they are not given a chance to speak (Mindell, 2010). Typical ghostroles include ancestors, the government, the prime minister, the environment, and the 'bad person' not present.

One of the chief ways that we identify and work with roles is through noticing and bringing awareness to verbal and non-verbal signals and feedback. This flow of information is differentiated in terms of 'primary' and 'secondary' processes, separated by an 'edge' (Mindell, 1988, 1993). A group's primary process refers to the experiences (e.g., thoughts, feelings, behaviours) that they are aware of and that they perceive as being closer to their known sense of identity. Secondary processes refer to experiences that are further from that known identity and that the group perceive as being unknown or 'not us'. The edge represents the limit of the known identity and the beginning of lesser known or disavowed experiences. This framework provides a way of organising perceptual information. The emerging process—including intended communication signals from the primary process and unintended communication signals from the secondary process—is explored and amplified across six modes of perceiving (Mindell & Mindell, 1992). These are called channels. There are four irreducible channels (auditory, visual, proprioceptive, movement) and two composite channels (relationship and world). Differentiated awareness is key to unfolding the process and following the group's feedback (in the form of communication signals) to interventions. Changes in the group's feedback guides the unfolding of the process (Mindell, 1989). Double signalling occurs where intended communication from a primary process (e.g., 'nice to meet you') conflicts with unintended communication from a secondary process (e.g., head and eyes look away) (Mindell, 1988). The effect of double signals is what Mindell (1988) calls 'dreaming up'. This occurs where one side of a conflict (receiver) responds to a disavowed part of another side's process (sender) that is carried by untended communication signals. POP group facilitation includes monitoring the group's process with awareness; 'weather reporting' on different communication signals and feedback; and identifying and representing the opposing roles. From here, we support the roles to interact with each other and facilitate the hotspots and issues of rank and power. The aim is do this from a position of deep democracy. Representing and communicating the perspectives of ghostroles is often key to facilitating a process to unfold (Mindell, 2017).

One of the dynamics we want to bring awareness to is ‘role switching’ (Mindell, 2010). Role switching occurs where someone has identified with a particular role (e.g., perpetrator/victim) but at a particular point in the process begins identifying with the other side (e.g., having agency rather than only feeling vulnerable). This supports people from different sides to see how everyone shares these different roles and supports people in becoming less entrenched in one position. This helps a process to unfold. When roles are processed, people within groups may become personal, which can support healing to occur.

A final point regarding the facilitation approach concerns how, in an effort to incorporate aspects of human psychology and consciousness that have become less prominent in modern Western thinking, Mindell and colleagues have incorporated concepts from more 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). While this has been questioned in terms of it being a form of cultural appropriation by some practitioners, it has been highly valued by others, including those from Indigenous cultures (Mindell, 1995). 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 & Spark Jones, 2004). Over time, the development of our own metaskills has been informed by our relationship to and conception of 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* (shan-a-key) was a traditional Irish *storyteller* (Ó Súilleabháin, 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 are said to have been 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). It is important to note here that while the foregoing gives some indication of the history of the Seanchaithe and their place in ancient Ireland, it is very difficult to be clear about who these people were and what they did because the accounts that survive often do so in the form of copies of copies (Heaney, 1983). Furthermore, it is also the case that we are using this term in a subjective way that reflects our relationship to storytelling within an Irish context, something that is recreated within each group we work with. Some readers might view this as appropriation or misuse of an ancient term and way of being (this would make for an interesting group process in and of itself); however, that is not our intention. We could have called the project ‘The Storytelling Project’ but believe we have gained a lot from using the term ‘as Gaeilge’ (‘in Irish’) and we keep seeing this in terms of how participants and prospective participants relate to it. This rich and ancient way of being—as we have

interpreted it to be—has become an important background spirit or metaskill and starting point for this work.

THEMES AND REFLECTIONS

A broad range of topics emerged across the initial three sessions, two of which were online and one of which was in person in London. Participants also regularly indicated that what was discussed was ‘only the tip of the iceberg’. An overview of these themes is presented in Table 1. This reflects our interpretation of the subjective experiences of participants within the groups and the groups as a collective. In keeping with the spirit of deep democracy, all were welcomed into the group, as were the differing perspectives on each.

Table 1. A selection of themes

The questioning
What does it actually mean to be Irish?
Do I ‘qualify’ or am I ‘legitimately’ Irish?
At what point can I call myself ‘Irish’?
Northern Ireland, the North of Ireland, and the Troubles
The history of pain and suffering that the Troubles have left behind in the ‘North of Ireland’.
Differences and similarities between Catholics and Protestants in ‘Northern Ireland’.
Having parents who came from each side of the Catholic–Protestant divide.
Progress made in Northern Ireland—and how this is neglected in the English narrative.
Ireland–England
Challenges of being Irish in London since Brexit.
Having an Irish identity when born in England and having an English accent.
Women who fled Ireland for England to give birth; and how they were treated by State and Church.
Being valued for being a joker and joke-maker, one of the stereotypes often bestowed upon Irish people in England.
Second families, who fled Ireland.
The ignorance of Irish–English history amongst people in England.
Pre-anglicised Ireland—Irish mythology, fairies, fairy forts, and leprechauns.

Ireland and the world
Being Irish and our relationship with racism.
How welcoming and open is Ireland to people from other countries and backgrounds?
The overlap between what has happened in Ireland and what has happened in other colonised countries.
The past made present
The 'Famine' and the lasting impact of this.
'Deconstructing' versus 'embracing' colonialism.
Loss of and reconnecting with the Irish language.
The role of alcohol and how it has been both tragic and needed.
Class within Irish society and particularly its impact on education.

Participant reflections

The people who participated in the initial sessions varied significantly in terms of age, gender, socioeconomic status, and geographical location (Ireland and UK). They provided feedback regarding their experiences in different ways, including a follow-up questionnaire. Table 2 provides an overview of the types of things that people said in response to questions such as: What was your experience of the session? What, within the session, was most important to you? Was there anything that emerged that you would want to share with someone else in your life?

Table 2. Reflections from participants

Making space for the past in the present
'It was a very profound experience for me. It reached into a deep sense of shame, the shame of poverty, displacement, and internalised oppression that I carry inside.'
'This enabled me to speak from a deeper place of my experience of Irishness both here in Derry where I have lived through the Troubles but also of times when I have lived in England, both in London (1973–1978) and Sheffield (1986–1991) also during the Troubles, when being Irish, sounding Irish, having an Irish name could draw negative, as well I may add, positive attention.'
'The complex pain people shared with regard to their relationship with the coloniser who both took and provided.'

'I've spoken to my mum about it and had a new conversation with my dad about intergenerational impacts that for once was curious rather than confrontational.'

'I feel living in the South of Ireland, the experiences in the North were very separate to me. It was a real eye-opener hearing these personal accounts.'

'The personal sharing on colonisation in Ireland and the world.'

Welcoming Irishness

'The sessions reminded me of my love for the Irish language and further empowered my resolve to keep learning an teanga.. I have go leor Gaeilge ach nil me liofa...'

'The space to be Irish without reservation.'

'My insight into intergenerational trauma and the inability to express this when you don't speak your native language.'

Power of the group

'But I didn't feel alone in it, because the group created a safe container for my inner experience. I felt closer to the emotional level and the invisible trauma of what the Great Hunger has left behind in our psyche.'

'Really appreciated the sense of belonging to a community that emerged.'

'The opportunity to share whatever felt relevant, in a non-judgemental space.'

'Listening to different stories/individuals experiences and connecting it to my experiences as an African woman. I appreciated the openness, honesty, relaxed atmosphere and the respect by the organisers and the participants throughout the session.'

'Diversity of experience, connection, open-hearted, kind, and bold facilitation. Sense of inclusion.'

'One of the most moving sessions for me was my reaching out to my Northern friend... hands across that deep enough (cultural??) divide that exists here in NI [Northern Ireland]...'

'I was struck by the openness of those who participated.'

'Hearing from everyone. Learning about different people's experience. A safe space where people felt comfortable expressing themselves candidly.'

Facilitation role

'The facilitation guided the process beautifully... the human-ness of those present touched me and the humour...'

'The excellent facilitation made honest and open sharing very safe for me.'

'It was a very welcoming forum where a feeling of safety was cultivated by the facilitators and space was offered for those who wished to share their experiences.'

'These sensitive enriching conversations were very well facilitated...'

Facilitator reflections

What follows is an overview of some of the many reflections we have had about the initial stages of this work. Our perspective is influenced by our own relationships with being Irish and the lives we have lived more broadly. We were both born in the Republic of Ireland and have had traditional, rural Catholic upbringings. We are male and currently live in London. We have a strong interest in Irishness and being Irish as well as the world beyond that. Our reflections are an effort to make sense of the experiences we have, as opposed to representing 'fact' or 'absolute truths' in some way. Other people in our position may have very different experiences and perspectives. It is also of note that the following descriptions are made more concrete by virtue of putting them into words, but these experiences are much more transient and non-linear in 'reality'.

Innerwork

An essential part of this work is the preparatory work we engage in and how it assists us to facilitate, and model alternative ways of being for the group. We are always looking at how different roles emerge within ourselves; as well as our relationship with the different themes and topics that emerge within the group. One pair of roles that we have regularly found ourselves processing might be best represented as 'The Confident Role' and 'The Shy, Unable or Incapable Role'. At different times we have both experienced each of these in different ways. We have processed these within our own psychology, within our relationship with each other, and how they emerge within the groups and how they are connected to Irishness, both past and present. We have reflected on how such a dynamic can be very prominent at a collective level, given the power imbalance that Irishness has had relative to Englishness for many centuries. However, we also recognise this as one interpretation from our standpoint and that there are many more ways of considering the dynamic. This innerwork has supported our facilitation and work on the project more broadly. It has allowed us to step more fully into being confident about the work we are doing well; and 'not be against' moments when we feel shy or in need of support. The awareness we have generated through processing these roles has supported us in noticing them when they emerge within the group as well as having more space to respond to each from a more compassionate place rather than being psychologically 'knocked out' at one end of this polarity. We regularly conceptualise different aspects of our innerwork in terms of how they relate to different aspects of our Irish heritage and consequently our version of the ever-evolving Seanchaí metaskill that informs our facilitation.

Roles

Over the past number of years, we have identified and worked with a whole range of what we conceptualise as roles related to the Irish experience from our perspective. We have prepared a further article outlining these in more detail that will be submitted for publication soon. In this instance we focus on two related pairs of roles that have been influential on several occasions.

The first pairing is what we have called ‘The Jester/Jesting’–‘Being Serious/Taking it seriously’ and the second is ‘Going deep into the hurt/past’–‘Bypassing the hurt/past or Moving forward’. Separating these roles or even pairs of roles is an artificial distinction that is an artefact of putting names or attributing words to complex psychological phenomena. As we see below, these ‘individual’ roles are much more interlinked and not really distinct constructs at all.

While participants may have their own relationship with these roles at an individual level, from a group level perspective, it’s not difficult to relate many narratives from the past to these roles and why they still influence discussions on being Irish in the present. The reader will likely have many thoughts of their own—we offer some reflections from our own experiences and our experiences of being with others in relation to these roles. Use of humour and ‘the craic’ (the ‘fun’) appear to have been very important ways of being and coping for Irish people for hundreds of years, both in good times and in bad. There have been many times in the histories of the island where it was too difficult to ‘take things seriously’. In addition, the stereotype of the ‘Jester’ has been bestowed upon Irishness and caricatured by the ‘serious, civilised Englishman’ from very early in the shared relationship between the two nations. This is one example of how we experience Irishness as having developed relative to Englishness; and how it has been defined from this relative or othering perspective, which does not value humour. Many participants in the groups have considered how Irishness has been heavily influenced by how it has been consumed by the ‘serious, civilised Englishman’. People have spoken about how this is still often held up in many conscious and unconscious ways today—in Ireland, England, and on an international stage. ‘We’ continue to receive a lot of positive reinforcement for ‘being great craic’ and being the ‘life and soul of the party’ while other qualities may be overlooked.

The second pair of roles, ‘going into the hurt versus bypassing it’, are not uncommon amongst groups of people where there is significant collective trauma. This has been observed and considered more fully by Audergon (2005). They can occur at an intrapersonal, interpersonal, and collective level. They can emerge within a group where some people wish to focus more on the hurt of the past whereas others do not. Even framing this, as a facilitator, and bringing awareness to it can help the group appreciate both rather than becoming entrenched on one side or the other. One of the ways that we have observed this emerging is where the more dominant jesting can lead to skipping over points where there is also much feeling. This can create confusing communication signals or what we often refer to as ‘mixed

feedback'. Continuously skipping over these feelings can lead to an escalation, eventually creating a hotspot. From a facilitation perspective, we have really worked with welcoming, embracing, and appreciating the jesting, humour, and 'the craic'. However, we are also looking for moments to slow down and welcome in the less apparent feeling-experiences and to ultimately 'take ourselves and our experiences seriously—take being Irish seriously' while not forgetting the value of humour. This is often a missing role or ghostrole. Through doing this, we create an environment in which something different can happen or new patterns and ways of being can emerge.

One final point regarding roles concerns the degree to which we step into a 'participant-facilitator role' within each group (Mindell, 2014). We view the facilitator role as part of each group we step into—as opposed to being some kind of external agents with external expertise. We are also always there as participants, on our own version of the same journey as all the other group members.

Hotspots and rank

Facilitating hotspots and issues of rank and power are important parts of this work. We take our experience of one such instance as an exemplar of this but again wish to stress that its depiction here is a gross oversimplification of the many complexities within it.

One of the groups was made up predominantly of people who had an Irish Catholic upbringing, whereas there was only one person who identified themselves as having grown up within a Protestant tradition in Northern Ireland. At one point in the group, a hotspot emerged around the use of violence within the Troubles and at other points during the past, such as the War of Independence.

There was a strong Irish Republican perspective presented early in the session by one member of the group (thus representing a role within the process as opposed to being solely the purview of that individual) and this was added to in different ways by other group members. This person had high 'contextual' rank in that their perspective could be conceptualised as likely representing a more dominant viewpoint within the group. This was furthered by the fact that it was known within the group that we as facilitators also had a Catholic upbringing. The contextual rank that facilitators hold within a group can be an influential factor in terms of what may get centralised versus marginalised (Mindell, 1995).

As facilitators, we were aware of how this may have been marginalising the viewpoint of the individual who grew up within a Protestant tradition. Eventually, we offered an intervention, highlighting how the foregoing perspective was one viewpoint and that there were also likely lots of other perspectives that we wished to hear. When this group member eventually spoke, they mentioned how they had been having lots of feelings within their body in response to many of the other viewpoints and that it had been difficult to hear. At this

point, we really appreciated them bringing their perspective and we outlined how grateful we were for them bringing it within the group; how we were learning from it; and how the group was much richer for having it. Other group members echoed this appreciation and a 'cool spot' of sorts followed. We reflected after on how bringing this framing and awareness sooner may have been preferable, however it was challenging to find a moment to 'interrupt'.

It is also worth noting that as facilitators, we had an awareness of how the person in question had a lot of 'psychological' rank and facilitation experience themselves and also had a number of allies in the group. This influenced some of our decisions in terms of how and when we intervened.

Deep democracy, following the process, and metaskills

As outlined above, two of the key pillars underlying worldwork facilitation involve following the wisdom of the group and welcoming in or making space for all of the different perspectives and emotions. We are continuously growing the 'how' by which we do this or the metaskills that inform our work. As outlined above, we relate this to being in keeping with our interpretation of the spirit of the Seanchaithe. What we mean by this is that our style of facilitating has an informal, storytelling-like approach to it where we are both 'doing' and 'not doing' or 'facilitating' and 'not facilitating'. It is also a somewhat different way of being to what has become the dominant way of 'leading' or 'hosting' groups in many aspects of modern life (e.g., business, healthcare, sport). This metaskill is something that continues to grow and evolve between us and each time that we engage in this work. It is an ongoing process itself as opposed to some fixed entity. While it is a part of our facilitation, it also represents a wider process within the project of finding or reclaiming an Irish voice(s) or Irish way(s) of doing things, something that is important to ourselves and is referenced in various different ways by group participants. As with much of the rest of the project, this is an ongoing process that evolves continuously.

POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS

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. With that said, we also feel that it is important to follow the feedback we receive in terms of hosting, planning, and locating groups (e.g., following invitations from people who have already participated) rather than solely following our own agenda.

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. From our perspective, there are a number of important factors to consider when working with any group or culture of people, who have been minoritised within society: being invited to undertake the initiative; continuously co-creating it with the group members; following the group’s process and their own wisdom; and recognising that we step into the facilitation role, which itself is part of each group. 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. 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.

Awareness is one of the most important things within POP. Awareness of our own blind spots, as facilitators, is key, as is an awareness of the approach itself. In doing the latter, however, it is important that it is not an artefact of the former (i.e., projecting our issues on to ‘the approach’ or Mindell or other such authority figures in the field). We are always asking ourselves questions such as ‘who in me is facilitating?’ and ‘how might I be projecting part of the process onto some other external figure?’ With that caveat in mind, we wish to recognise that POP is not without its shortcomings and just like any other school of thought there is always room for innovation, development, and improvement. For instance, as a paradigm POP is over 50 years old; however, there are still relatively few academic articles explicating the approach and comparing and contrasting it with other such approaches. We hope to contribute in our own small way to this with articles such as this.

Despite our deep interest and focus on POP within this article, we also wish to recognise the many other approaches to group facilitation and see there being great scope for

comparison and collaboration with these in the future. Within an Irish context, these have included a wide range of approaches including the Face Your Fear Club (FYFC) with young people (Stewart & Thompson, 2005); group analysis focusing on shame-rage cycles (Rice & Benson, 2005); community art therapy groups (O'Neill & Moss, 2015); and faith-inspired approaches to peacebuilding (Tyler, 2015).

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

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 believe that growth and healing can emerge from within this so called 'shadow', especially when appropriate conditions are cultivated and nourished. This *seanfhocail* can also be understood as 'it is in the shelter of each other that the people live' (Ó Tuama, 2015, p. 5), recognising further how we are part of each other 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, 2021b; Cotter et al., 2020, 2022b, 2022c). While there have been many benefits to these ways of being, their dominance has created many problems in today's world (Nekrasas, 2016). 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 (Farrell et al., 2012). 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 (Davis & Serres, 2018). Ireland's somewhat different history may mean that there's a little more space for a change in direction (Montano, 2013). We believe that combing the spirit of the *Seanchaí* with learnings from the humanistic and integrative psychotherapies 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.

REFERENCES

Addiss, S., & Lombardo, S. (1993). *Tao Te Ching: Lao-Tzu*. Hackett Publishing.

- Audergon, A. (2004). Collective trauma: The nightmare of history. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 2(1), 16–31. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ppi.67>
- Audergon, A. (2005). *The war hotel: Psychological dynamics in violent conflict*. Whurr Publishing.
- Audergon, A. (2006). Hot spots: Post-conflict trauma and transformation. *Critical Half*, 4(1), 41–44.
- Audergon, A. (2008). Daring to dream: Learning about community trauma, accountability and building the future in post-war forums in Croatia. In H. Barry (Ed.), *Peace-building in traumatised societies* (pp. 261–276). University Press of America.
- Audergon, A., & Audergon, J. C. (2017). Contribution of worldwork methodology for violence prevention and community recovery after mass violence: An example from Rwanda. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 15(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ppi.1405>
- Audergon, A., & Ayre, L. (2005). Transforming conflict into community: Post-war reconciliation in Croatia. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 3(2), 112–121. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ppi.24>
- Boix Mansilla, V. (2010). Learning to synthesize: The development of interdisciplinary understanding. In R. Frodeman, J. T. Klein, & C. Mitcham (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of interdisciplinarity* (pp. 288–306). Oxford University Press.
- Bolton, D. (2017). *Conflict, peace and mental health: Addressing the consequences of conflict and trauma in Northern Ireland*. Manchester University Press.
- Byrne, S., Thiessen, C., Fissuh, E., & Irvin, C. (2009). The IFI and EU Peace II Fund: Respondents' perceptions of funded project success in promoting peacebuilding and community development in Northern Ireland. *Peace and Conflict Studies*, 16(1), Article 4. <https://doi.org/10.46743/1082-7307/2009.1102>
- Carr, D. (1987). *Interpreting Husserl*. Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- Comte, A. (1997). *The essential writings: Auguste Comte and positivism*. Transaction Publishers.
- Corcoran, P., Griffin, E., O' Carroll, A., Cassidy, L., & Bonner, B. (2015). Hospital-treated deliberate self-harm in the western area of Northern Ireland. *Crisis*, 36(2), 83–90. <https://doi.org/10.1027/0227-5910/a000301>
- Cotter, P., Jhumat, N., Garcha, E., Papisileka, E., Parker, J., Mupfupi, I., & Currie, I. (2020). A systemic response to supporting frontline inpatient mental health staff in coping with the COVID-19 outbreak. *Mental Health Review Journal*, 26(1), 18–31. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MHRJ-05-2020-0026>
- Cotter, P. (2021a). A comparison of process oriented psychotherapy with person-centred psychotherapy, cognitive behaviour therapy, analytical psychotherapy, brief psychodynamic therapy, gestalt therapy and Milan systemic family therapy. *International Journal of Psychotherapy*, 25(3), 9–25.

- Cotter, P. (2021b). Supporting the human being within healthcare workers: Facilitating staffSPACE, a process oriented psychology-informed approach. *InsideOut*, 93(2), 3–10. <https://iahip.org/page-1076729>
- Cotter, P., Callery, P., & Boyle, P. (2022a). *The 'Seanchai' project: The storytelling history of the island of Ireland continues*. CFOR Force for Change.
- Cotter, P., Papisileka, E., Eugster, M., Chauhan, V., Garcha, E., Kunkler, M., Brooks, M., Otvos, I., Srithar, A., Pujol, I., Sarafi, C., & Hughes, T. (2022b). Working with the chaos in an adult inpatient mental health setting: The role of an integrated therapies team. *Mental Health and Social Inclusion*, 26(3), 230–241. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MHSI-02-2022-0012>
- Cotter, P., Holden, A., Johnson, C., Noakes, S., Urch, C., & King, A. (2022c). Coping with the emotional impact of working in cancer care: The importance of team working and collective processing. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 877938. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.877938>
- Curtis, E. (1978). *A history of Ireland*. Methuen & Co.
- Davis, M. H., & Serres, T. (2018). *North Africa and the making of Europe: Governance, institutions and culture*. Bloomsbury.
- Day, N., & Shloim, N. (2021). Therapists' experiences of working with the intergenerational impact of troubles-related trauma. *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 19(2), e1585 <https://doi-org.ucd.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/ppi.1585>
- Diamond, J., & Spark Jones, L. (2004). *A path made by walking: Process work in Practice*. Lao Tse Press.
- Dowd, A. (2019). Uprooted minds: Displacement, trauma and dissociation. *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 64(2), 244–269. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5922.12481>
- Eugen, K. (2022). Cultural work in peacebuilding among traumatized communities of Northern Ireland 2: Talking about culture. *New England Journal of Public Policy*, 34(2), 10–17. <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol34/iss2/11/>
- Farrell, K., Luzzati, T., & Van Den Hove, S. (2012). *Beyond reductionism: A passion for interdisciplinarity*. Taylor & Francis Group.
- Ferriter, D. (2019). *The border: The legacy of a century of Anglo-Irish politics*. Profile Books.
- Ferry, F., Bunting, B., Murphy, S., O'Neill, S., Stein, D., & Koenen, K. (2014). Traumatic events and their relative PTSD burden in Northern Ireland: A consideration of the impact of the 'troubles'. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 49(3), 435–446. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-013-0757-0>
- Ferry, F. R., Brady, S. E., Bunting, B. P., Murphy, S. D., Bolton, D., & O'Neill, S. M. (2015). The economic burden of PTSD in Northern Ireland. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 28(3), 191–197. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22008>
- Gilbert, P. (2005). *Compassion: Conceptualisations, research and use in psychotherapy*. Routledge.

- Goodbread, J. (2010). *Befriending conflict: How to make conflict safer, more productive, and more fun*. Process Oriented Psychology.
- Griffin, E., Corcoran, P., Cassidy, L., O'Carroll, A., & Bonner, B. (2014). Characteristics of hospital-treated intentional drug overdose in Ireland and Northern Ireland. *BMJ Open*, 4(7), e005557. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2014-005557>
- Heaney, S. (1983). *Sweeney astray*. Faber and Faber.
- Hollwey, S., & Brierly, J. (2014). *The inner Camino: A path of awakening*. Findhorn Press.
- Husserl, E. (1970). *The crisis of the European sciences and transcendental phenomenology*. Northwestern University Press.
- Inger, S. (2012). *The political psychology of war rape: Studies from Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Routledge.
- Johnstone, L., & Boyle, M. with Cromby, J., Dillon, J., Harper, D., Kinderman, P., Longden, E., Pilgrim, D., & Read, J. (2018). *The power threat meaning framework: Towards the identification of patterns in emotional distress, unusual experiences and troubled or troubling behaviour, as an alternative to functional psychiatric diagnosis*. British Psychological Society.
- Kanzian, C., Kletzl, S., Mitterer, J., & Neges, K. (2019). *Realism – Relativism – Constructivism*. De Gruyter.
- Kiberd, D. (1979). Story-telling: The Gaelic tradition. In T. Brown & P. Raftery (Eds.), *The Irish short story* (pp. 13–26). Colin Smythe.
- Magan, M. (2020). *Thirty-two words for field*. Gill Books.
- McGinnity, F., & Watson, D. (2021, April 20). *Oral submission to the joint committee on key issues affecting the traveller community*. Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI).
- Mercier, V. (1964). The Irish short story and oral tradition. In R. B. Browne, W. J. Roscelli, & R. Loftus (Eds.), *The Celtic cross: Studies in Irish culture and literature* (pp. 98–116). Purdue University Studies.
- Mindell, A. (1988). *City shadows: Psychological interventions in psychiatry*. Routledge.
- Mindell, A. (1989). *The year I: Global process work*. Penguin-Arkana.
- Mindell, A. (1994). *Metaskills: The spiritual art of therapy*. New Falcon Press.
- Mindell, A. (1995). *Sitting in the fire: Large group transformation through diversity and conflict*. Lao Tsu Press.
- Mindell, A. (2000). *Dreaming while awake: Techniques for 24-hour lucid dreaming*. Hampton Roads Publishing Company.
- Mindell, A. (2010). *ProcessMind: A user's guide to connecting with the mind of God*. Quest Books.
- Mindell, A. (2014). *The leader as martial artist*. Deep Democracy Exchange.
- Mindell, A. (2017). *Conflict: Phases, forums and solutions: For our dreams and body, organizations, governments, and planet*. Createspace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Mindell, A., & Mindell, A. (1992). *Riding the horse backwards: Process work in theory and practice*. Penguin Arkana.

- Montano, J. P. (2013). *The roots of English colonialism in Ireland*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nekrasas, E. (2016). *The positive mind: Its development and impact on modernity and postmodernity*. Central European University Press.
- Norcross, J. C., & Goldfried, M. R. (2005). *Handbook of psychotherapy integration*. Oxford University Press.
- O'Neill, A., & Moss, H. (2015). A community art therapy group for adults with chronic pain. *Art Therapy, 32*(4), 158–167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2015.1091642>
- O'Neill, S., & O'Connor, R. (2020). Suicide in Northern Ireland: Epidemiology, risk factors, and prevention. *The Lancet Psychiatry, 7*(6), 538–546. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(19\)30525-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(19)30525-5)
- Ó Súilleabháin, S. (1969). Irish oral tradition. In B. Ó Cuív (Ed.), *A view of the Irish language* (pp. 47–56). Stationery Office.
- Ó Tuama, P. (2015). *In the shelter: Finding a home in the world*. Hodder & Stoughton.
- Ralph, D. (2020). *Abortion and Ireland: How the 8th was overthrown*. Palgrave Macmillian.
- Reiss, G. (2018). *Healing history: Breaking the cycle of personal and historical trauma*. Createspace.
- Rice, C. A., & Benson, J. F. (2005). Hungering for revenge: The Irish famine, the troubles and shame-rage cycles, and their role in group therapy in Northern Ireland. *Group Analysis, 38*(2), 219–235. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0533316405052380>
- Robinson, H. (2003). Dualism. In S. Stich & T. Warfield (Eds.), *The Blackwell guide to philosophy of mind* (pp. 85–101). Blackwell.
- Rogers, C. R. (1957). *On becoming a person*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Stewart, D., & Thomson, K. (2005). The FACE YOUR FEAR Club: Therapeutic group work with young children as a response to community trauma in Northern Ireland. *The British Journal of Social Work, 35*(1), 105–124. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bch165>
- Sweeny, A., Filson, B., Kennedy, A., Collison, L., & Gillard, S. (2018). A paradigm shift: Relationships in trauma-informed mental health services. *BJPsych Advances, 24*(5), 319 – 333. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bja.2018.29>
- Teo, T. (2010). Ontology and scientific explanation: Pluralism as an a priori condition of psychology. *New Ideas in Psychology, 28*(2), 235–243. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2009.09.017>
- Tiernan, S. (2020). *The history of marriage equality in Ireland: A social revolution begins*. Manchester University Press.
- Tyler, A. (2015). Reconstituting community in divided society: Faith-inspired civil organizations and the case of Corrymeela. *Political Theology, 16*(4), 346–366. <https://doi.org/10.1179/1462317X14Z.000000000109>
- Wong, E. (2011). *The essential guide to Taosim*. Shambhala Publications.
- Yalom, I. J. (1980). *Existential psychotherapy*. Basic Books.

Yalom, I. D., & Leszcz, M. (2005). *The theory and practice of group psychotherapy* (5th ed.). Basic Books.

Zerach, G., Kanat-Maymon, Y., Aloni, R., & Solomon, Z. (2016). The role of fathers' psychopathology in the intergenerational transmission of captivity trauma: A twenty three-year longitudinal study. *Journal of Affective Disorders, 190*, 84–92.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2015.09.072>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Seanchaí Project has received initial funding from the Jean-Claude Audergon Memorial, 'The Far in, Far Out' (FIFO) Project, and huge support from CFOR Force for Change and the Research Society for Process Oriented Psychology United Kingdom (RSPOPUK). We wish to express our appreciation to all involved, and in particular to Arlene and Jean-Claude Audergon.

For more information: theseanchaiproject@gmail.com

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES



Dr Pádraig Cotter, D Psych Sc., works as a clinical psychologist in the National Health Service (NHS) in London. He works within the field of clinical health psychology, and more specifically, psycho-oncology. Pádraig is also a member of the Research Society of Process Oriented Psychology United Kingdom (RSPOPUK). He has a strong interest in process oriented psychology (POP), and this informs a huge amount of his thinking and practice. This involves the application of POP at multiple levels of psychological and facilitation practise, including individual psychotherapy, couples therapy, group facilitation, working with systems and organisations, and working with larger scale collective and societal issues. He is particularly interested in how the same psychological processes emerge across these different levels and how they are all interconnected. Pádraig's research focuses on three inter-related factors and how these can support the human condition in different aspects of life. These are awareness, integration, and facilitation. There are three broad areas that his research is centred around: combining clinical psychology and POP and its application within a public health service

setting; supporting men in becoming aware of, and growing into their masculinity; and use of POP in processing collective experiences and historical trauma within an Irish context.



Paul Callery grew up in the northwest of Ireland but has spent most of his adult life in the Basque Country and in London, where he now lives. His background is in education where he focussed on developing generative and integral models using critical and reflective practices. He currently mentors and supports unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors. Paul is continuously engaged in learning and development within the field of process orientated psychology, working in private practice with individuals, couples, and organisations. He has a deep interest in the Irish experience, how we live it and how it lives in us.