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**BOOK CHAPTER**

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CHAPTER ONE

# The 'plurability of experience': Looking afresh at the large group

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The neologism in this title was first coined I believe by James Joyce. I came across it last summer, together with the phrase in which it appears, when, during an enforced absence from work, I happened to pick up the Penguin edition of *Ulysses* and started reading. It is cited in the Introduction to this edition by the Irish academic, Declan Kiberd (Kiberd, 2000).

One might take this phrase as referring to the capacity of the novelist (or dramatist) to enter into the multiple worlds of his or her characters; something akin to Keats's description of Shakespeare as a 'Man of Achievement' and his famous characterisation of 'negative capability' as the means of entry to such, imaginative, achievement (Forman, 1931, pp. 69–72). However, Kiberd makes clear that for Joyce this capacity refers equally to the ability and readiness of the author to enter into the multiple worlds, the multiple 'characters', one might say, of himself.

This is how Kiberd puts it, drawing on a distinction initially made by the American literary critic, Lionel Trilling, between sincerity and authenticity:

> "Sincerity, a congruence between avowal and feeling, is based
> on the Romantic idea of truth to the self and it presupposes a

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definite identity which it becomes the task of a lifetime to be true to. Authenticity ... a more exclusively modern demand ... makes the congruence between avowal and feeling difficult: it recognises that the issue is not truth to the self but the finding of the many selves that one might wish to be true to. It makes the liberating concession that a person, or a nation, has a plurality of identities, constantly remaking themselves as a result of perpetual renewals".

"The romantic writer says: there is an essential Ireland to be served and a definite Irish mind to be described. The modernist rejoins: there is no single Ireland, but a field of force subject to constant renegotiations; and no Irish mind, but Irish minds shaped by a predicament which produces some common characteristics in those caught up in it" (Kiberd, 2000, pp. xxvii–iii).

One might perhaps compare this, at the level of the individual, to the distinction between the psychoanalytic romanticism of, say, Winnicott's formulation of the 'true self' and Wilfred Bion's more layered picture, most strikingly on display in his psychoanalytic dialogue, "*A Memoir of the Future*", (Bion, 1991), of the many voices out of whose imagined conversation a personality evolves, develops, regresses, is conflicted, continually renegotiating its own boundaries: the group in the mind.

I want to suggest that this literary formulation, captured in Joyce's neologism, the 'plurability' of experience, has a particular aptness in relation to the phenomena of the Large Group, as we encounter this in conference settings, illuminating both its constructive potential and the more destructive shadow that potential elicits and evokes. I want, then, to use this perspective to raise a number of questions and reservations, both about how we may work as consultants in and to the Large Group and about certain limitations that a Group Relations perspective may set, implicitly if not explicitly, on the boundaries of exploration. I hope this may in turn open up broader questions of areas of possible innovation in design and technique.

## Images of configuration

While Joyce's neologism and its augmentation in Kiberd's comment helped to stake out the territory I am seeking to explore, the

immediate origin of this paper I owe to the impact of two images offered by members during successive conferences at Leicester, in which I was working as a consultant in the Large Study Group. Both of these images referred to the physical configuration of the LSG and each was presented in a session shortly after the mid conference break. Together they seemed to give birth to the "germ of an idea" which I am trying to articulate here and now. Whether it will turn out to add something new or fresh or simply be another way of saying what we already know, I remain unsure.

Both images shared something, in being brief, unexpected and apparently disregarded. Each however differed in their emotional tone: the first suffused with hope, the second with despair.

The first image was offered by a member, excitedly, at the start of I think the second LSG following the break. The group had been, both for members and for consultants, a pretty turbulent ride so far. In the middle of the first week one member had had to withdraw from the conference. The shock waves were still around. Staff, consultants and sponsoring institution were all under intense scrutiny; issues of safety and dependability at a premium. There was also, as normally in recent years, a sharp and noticeable differentiation between second and first timers, the 'knowing' and the 'innocents abroad'.

The image was presented by a first timer, whose background and profession owed little or nothing to potential conference know how. He had been pretty active in the Large Group, sometimes welcomed for speaking his mind, sometimes consciously or unconsciously somewhat patronised. The physical configuration of the Large Group was the familiar (at least in Leicester Conferences) spiral. During the Large Group there had been a good deal of the sharing of dreams, often quite lengthy, offered mainly if not exclusively by second or third timers. What the new member now offered was not a dream he said, but an image that had come to him that morning and had excited him. It was simply this: that he had seen the lay out of the group as an **image of the brain**. Although I cannot exactly recall what he went on briefly to say, the import seem to be of a many faceted and differentiated vehicle for registering experience, which if it could be accessed would offer ...? It wasn't exactly clear what, but something additive: an enlargement.

In the session the conversation moved swiftly on, the image and its offerer, apparently discounted or ignored. But the image stayed with me, unusually vivid, intense and apparently suggestive, throughout the day and subsequently. Sometime, during a gap in the programme, I jotted down the following train of thought. I am leaving it more or less as it came out at the time.

> "One image that will stay with me (from this conference) is the image of the Large Group as a brain—with all its separate layers, cortices, left and right sides, cerebral and basal.
>
> It was offered as an image of enlargement, of collaboration and connection (but I wonder) if this image is at the same time terrifying (maybe this is why it is not picked up and built on). Does it arouse a fear that in trying to connect with all these parts, one's own sense of separateness and identity will dissolve?
>
> At the same time, it seems to me an image, (a potentially fearful image), of each one of us also, of the insides of our own heads. As if were we to conduct a conversation between all the parts of our own brains we too would dissolve into fragments and identity seem but a mirage.
>
> So better a contracting universe than an expanding one.
>
> Would this help to make sense of the boundaries we seem, as staff and members, to set up: me/not me;/us/not us; but also staff/member; male/female; my/our/your nationality/ethnicity etc, even on task/off task.
>
> They seem so reasonable, but are they also defensive: strategies of contraction, or boundaries of exclusion".

I will return to these somewhat unprocessed reflections in a moment, trying to locate them against what others have written and thought about Large Group dynamics. But first I need to share the second image that stuck in my mind, one year on. I referred to this earlier as an image of despair. It was offered, this time by a woman, who herself worked professionally with groups outside, towards the end of a session after the break, in which she had till then been silent.

To appreciate the image she offered I need to say something about the physical lay out of the Large Group on this occasion. One of the members attending the conference was disabled, as a result of an

accident some while ago, and confined to a wheel chair. The LSG consultants wondered beforehand how best to arrange the Large Group configuration in a way that would enable her to locate a place, if not completely of her own choosing, at least within a range of options nearer or further from the centre. We eventually decided to preserve something of the familiar spiral, but to open up a gap from the door and through to the start of the spiral in a way that would allow her to move between the different layers or rings. One of us was to describe the arrangement as a bit like a keyhole. Correspondingly we took out one chair. In the event this arrangement was never made use of, the member in question, with the assistance of one or other participant, finding her own place somewhere, usually in the outer ring, with consequent reshuffling of chairs. Nor was the arrangement of the spiral ever referred to in the group except towards the end of the second week. Disability and staff's management attempt to accommodate for it went unacknowledged, in the Large Group at least, session after session. It was eventually to emerge in dramatic form during the Institutional Event, after which it did become possible to name in the LSG, but subsequent to the session I am referring to.

During this session the member offering the image in question arrived a little late and took a seat just to the left of the opening into the spiral near the door, with just two occupied chairs at the end of the spiral next to her. I cannot now remember the drift of the discussion preceding her comment, though I do recall noting her silence and a certain air of distress. What she said was that arriving late, she had taken this seat and had gradually begun to feel that it was as if she was at the tail end of a snake that had been bitten off. She conveyed a sense of disconnection and an attendant anxiety, as if she had been in some sense depleted or rendered silent.

After she had spoken I was aware of an association I was making to her offered image. This was to what I thought of as a kind of revisionist account of the story of the Garden of Eden, in which Eve instead of biting the proffered apple of knowledge, bites off the serpent's tail.

In his magisterial and to some degree still unsuperceded or outgrown account of Large Group dynamics, originally written in the early 70s, Pierre Turquet at one point comments on how, faced with the sense of bewilderment and bombardment attendant on

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membership of the Large Group (its 'disarroy' as he puts it), there may be the emergence of a:

> "paradise myth, the I M (individual member) seeing himself as being expelled from the Garden of Eden, with a loss of innocence and with knowledge as a feared, even unnecessary eruption into what should be a quiet and peaceful existence. At the same time there are present wishes to return to such a state of blissful ignorance, as if ignorance could be recreated" (Turquet, 1975/1994, p. 103).

Well, maybe. But on this occasion, it seemed and still seems to me, that this member's implicit reversal of the paradise story, with its accompanying aura of despair, expressed and drew attention rather to some sense of deadness in the rejection of knowing, whatever the burden of knowing might turn out to be. Something perhaps represented, though not named, in the silence around disability. Not so much then a regressive pull as a, partly vain, unconscious, developmental push.

The two images I have described I am taking to be work interventions, each of which potentially both posed and offered a developmental challenge, though neither at the time gained much of a purchase. I want to argue that between them they may serve not just to illustrate but to illuminate a paradox at the heart of the Large Group experience: that what may be most feared is simultaneously what may be most generative: to return to my starting point, the 'plurability of experience', in the individual as in the group, each of which may serve as a mirror to the other.

## The problematising of identity

There is nothing particularly new in the thought that the Large Group, with its multiple and not readily encompassable voices (or faces of experience, voiced or silent), challenges the individual's sense of identity. Pierre Turquet's pioneering account of the Large Group, which I cited a moment ago is after all itself, entitled 'Threats to Identity in the Large Group'.

In this paper Turquet refers to the "dislocation every conference member experiences as he takes himself into a world which

transcends the usual parameters of his own individuality" and the ways in which this may threaten him or her with "annihilation", of "becoming other than himself (or herself), of being in some way altered, pressurised, even diminished" (Turquet, op cit, p. 94).

Later on he comments how:

> "the apparent vastness of the Large Group seems to give sub-
> stance to a fantasy of the singleton/IM's internal world as also
> vast, unencompassable or boundless. The singleton requires of
> external life in groups a bounded experience to take in as an
> introject on which to build up his own psychic life-notions of
> internal boundaries or limitations. But the immediate external
> picture conjured up by the large group is one of vastness, if only
> because the boundaries do not seem to be directly or immedi-
> ately visible" (Turquet, op cit, p. 117).

What I want to suggest, though, is that the 'fantasy' of unencompassability or boundlessness may be serving rather as a cover for what is, here and now, experienced as unencompassable, in the self as in the group: the unacknowledged or unconscious states of mind that go against the grain of our entertained sense of identity; states of mind, like all unconscious experience," not directly or immediately visible". To put this another way I suggest that it is precisely our "psychic life-notions of internal boundaries or limitations" that the experience of the Large Group challenges. It threatens our experience of identity one might say precisely because it problematises it. On this view the threat of annihilation Turquet refers to, is not so much of becoming other than one's self, as of the risk of discovering the unwanted selves lurking around in the shadows.

I believe that it is the anticipatory fear, or at the extreme the terror, of this unknown territory of the self that drives the drama of projection and projective identification in the Large Group that Turquet maps out, alongside the panoply of defensive strategies, e.g. sub group formation, the obliteration or alternatively the over accentuation of differences, the attempts to establish implicit or explicit rules of conduct etc. I would also think that what Turquet refers to as "errancy", the potential for violence that may erupt in the Large Group, is both an externalisation and a defence against

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the felt violence or potential for violence within each individual's inner world.

In one of the series of seminars Wilfred Bion conducted towards the end of his life, referring to his experience as an analyst, he comments:

> "the situation in analysis is misleading, because there is apparently only one person there with the analyst. I have found my experiences in groups useful—a group is almost like one person, character or personality spread out over a space" (Bion, 2005, p. 18).

The implicit quid pro quo is that the person is 'almost like' a group. One way of expressing what I am trying to draw attention to is just this: that what may seem to be spread out over the space of the Large Group is simultaneously experienced as evoking and gathering together the group within. The fear of and for the Large Group is then an echo of the fear of and for what might perhaps be termed the 'group of and in ourselves'.

I suggest that, whether it is a conscious intent or more likely an unconscious apprehension, it is our readiness to entertain the plurality of voices within the self that enables us as it were to negotiate and give value to the plurality of voices within the Large Group. It is this apprehension or readiness that I think is captured in Joyce's 'plurability'.

Earlier I referred to the situation in the Large Group as mirroring the situation in the individual and vice versa. But I am not suggesting that the plurality of voices in the Large Group and the plurality of voices in the individual member are one and the same. If that were so the Large Group would simply appear as a kind of vehicle for individual therapy. There are real differences in the Large Group, as many one might suggest as there are individual members. In a sense, the issue in the Large Group and its generative potential lies precisely in bringing these differences into view, to borrow a phrase from an Italian analyst as "the focal points of a multidimensional conversation" (Bion, 2005, p. 56). The point I am making is simply that the readiness to entertain these differences and explore their meaning-what they are saying about this gathering of people and the context in which they meet—turns on our capacity to tolerate, to entertain the differences, conscious and

unconscious, in ourselves. And this is risky, precisely to the extent that it is unknown.

It is this fear of what is unknown, in one's self no less than in the group that in my view drives the regressive pull of the Large Group experience, the descent into Turquet's 'disarroy'.

And there is a sense in which, whatever its consequences, this fear may be said to be completely realistic, since we cannot foresee the spectres in ourselves, the unconscious, unacknowledged spectral selves that we may meet on the way, like the ghosts that haunt Dante's hell.

But it is equally important, though not I think equally acknowledged, that alongside this regressive pull there may also be a countervailing developmental push. And this is what I took to be represented, however obliquely, in the second image, offered by a woman, from which I started, where the rejection of knowing was felt as a deadness, a contraction: a movement or dynamic that foreclosed the possibility of an expansion, in one's acquaintance with and understanding of oneself, the group within one's being and one's being within the group.

I think there are occasions in the Large Group when this developmental push takes hold and indeed were this not the case it is quite hard to understand why people should stay the course, other than perhaps to feel at the end, 'well at least we have come through'. But in my experience for much if not most of the time it seems present more as a sensed, feared and never fully realised potential: one might say as an absent object!

Why? I am not convinced that this developmental difficulty is necessarily intrinsic to any large group experience. And during the last few years I have had experiences of consulting to large groups in other settings, where in spite of an undercurrent of anxiety, (as a participant in one such event put it, "our tendency to behave as if a large group is like facing the medusa"), the mutative potential of the large group as a vehicle for unlocking and communicating differences of experience within a bounded and shared setting (the membership of a professional society for example), for facing shared challenges or unravelling felt conflicts, has seemed to have more space in which to play.

There is a sense I think in which our conceptualisation of and approach to the Large Group is over-determined, in a way which

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both feeds into and in turn mobilises the regressive pull. In conference brochures for example the Large Study Group or the Large Study Event is regularly introduced as follows:

> "By contrast (to the Small Study Group) the LSG has more of the qualities of a crowd in which sub-groups and anti-groups, alliances and anti-alliances, fantasies and myths emerge"
>
> (The Leicester Conference brochure, 2003)

Or

> "The Large Study Event (LSE) is of a size where individual relations are difficult to form and sustain, being swamped by group myths, both conscious and unconscious, reflecting various assumptions and their impact on behaviour"
>
> (The Grubb Institute Conference brochure, 2006)

The language (crowd, swamped, anti-groups, difficult to sustain) seems well designed to arouse an anticipatory anxiety, a sense of getting into something exciting, unfamiliar, and maybe dangerous. Why do we feel the need to say any of this beforehand?

Well one answer could be that the conference organisers are simply alerting members to what will indeed be the case. And in one sense this is true. But it is true I think, not because a large group is exclusively characterised in these terms, but because it is precisely this feature or dimension of the Large Group that the conference explicitly sets out to frame and explore.

Here we come up against a dilemma which I have argued before may indeed be intrinsic, not so much to the theory or indeed the reality of Group Relations but rather to their institutionalisation in Group Relations conferences and events. The argument goes as follows:

> "Group Relations conferences, whatever the titles they trade under, are temporary training institutions set up to explore or study the tensions inherent in group life, using a method of experiential learning. This is their manifest intention or 'primary task'. In order to study these tensions a frame must be created which mobilises such tensions from the outset. In part this frame is created by the very definition of the task, since

as Bob Gosling once put it with characteristic bluntness "setting up a group that studies its own tensions is a rather peculiar social experience". This peculiarity is in turn considerably compounded by the combination of under and over determination that, appropriately enough, characterizes the organisation and structure of the Conference and correspondingly the behaviour of staff in their work roles.

By 'underdetermination' I am referring to the stance taken by consultant staff within the here and now events: the refusal to answer questions, to structure the conversation, to address members as individuals etc, all of which are aspects of the rejection of basic assumption leadership. By 'overdetermination' I am referring to the firmness, often felt to be rigidity, with which boundaries are observed by staff, in particular boundaries of time, which may be taken as the accentuation almost to the point of characiature, of a work group culture.

Undue obtrusion of the basic group (or I might say here of the defensive strategies of the Large Group) are precisely what the design of such conferences seeks to sustain and hence make available for exploration. Inevitably then, attention tends to focus on this level of mental functioning. Correspondingly, the part played by work group mentality (the experiences, thoughts, associations, feelings of the group as an 'aggregate of individuals, or persons',) can slip out of view. It operates often I think as a silent factor, expressed in members' readiness to stay in the field of what can be an extraordinarily unsettling experience" (Armstrong, 2005, pp. 146–7).

Returning to this argument again, now in a different context, I would want to put it differently. I find myself wondering whether it is not so much that work group functioning slips out of view as that, paradoxically, it takes place below the surface, operating unconsciously as members get more in touch with the multiple voices in themselves and hence more able to acknowledge, to listen and give value to the multiple voices in the group. If so one might pick this up in the changing ways in which differences were being heard, built on, linked, associated to.

I am not always sure that as consultants in the Large Group we attend or find ourselves attending to this unconscious movement

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within what is happening. The focus on the relation to the consultant group gives what might be termed a certain steer to the distribution and flow of transference and counter transference phenomena. This steer and the accompanying emphasis on whole group interpretation may I think sometimes give rise to what a younger colleague, Simon Western, has referred to as a tendency towards 'totalisation', in which something of the variety or multi-dimensionality of the Large Group experience, as this is being refracted through the prism of its different members, is lost. If I am right about an unconscious movement in work group activity one might imagine that as this begins to take hold the working relation between consultants and the Large Group could shift. Towards something more collaborative and associative, less transferential or interpretative. Why, for example, was I not prepared to share my own associations to the two images I started from, at the time? What held me back?

The difficulty is perhaps not so much to do with our focus or preoccupation with group dynamics as such, but rather with our tendency to read group dynamics or group mentality too exclusively in defensive terms, rather than in terms of the tension between the developmental challenges of the work group, the resistances set up against these challenges and what it is that drives those resistances, Pierre Turquet's 'because clause'. In my view the 'because clause' will always have to do with the unconscious undertow of the work group, its sensed internal meaning. Just as in Isabel Menzies Lyth's path breaking study of nursing, the defensive mechanisms she identified in the structuring and dynamics of the hospital were seen to have arisen and be functioning as a resistance or defence against unconscious anxieties inherent in the task of nursing (Menzies Lyth, 1960/1988, pp. 43–85).

I do not think we have ever fully or adequately conceptualised the specific nature of the work group in conference settings and in the particular events which frame those settings. Hence perhaps the tendency as it were to leave the dynamics of the work group to one side (Armstrong, D. 2005, pp. 139–150).

In this regard one might read or hear this paper as one provisional attempt to locate the unconscious meaning or import of the work group within the Large Group event. To return to my starting point, that it challenges the singularity of our identity. To enter the large group as a member, that is to take up the role of member,

necessarily and unconsciously involves encountering and engaging with that challenge. This is its unique particularity.

It is, in my view, this unconsciously sensed particularity that both limits but simultaneously evokes the transformational potential of the Large Group: to return to the quotation from which I began, the acknowledgement that a person or collectivity of persons, (family, tribe, organisation, nation) *"has a plurality of identities, constantly remaking themselves as a result of perpetual renewals"*, ... *"shaped"*, as the writer goes on to say *"by a predicament which produces some common characteristics in those caught up in it"* (Kiberd, op cit, p1xvii).

One might, then, think of the Large Group as a vehicle for the exploration of this predicament. And this leads to the last thing I want to say, concerning application. I am not quite sure how to put this. The idea of the Large Group as a vehicle for the exploration of plurability opens up new ways both of thinking about and probing the nature of our wider organisational and societal attachments. It expands or broadens the idea of the 'organisation (or society) in the mind', suggesting to paraphrase Kiberd's gloss on Joyce's enterprise in his novel, that we think rather in terms of a *"field of force, subject to constant renegotiations"*.

The Large Study Group **in** itself does not provide a vehicle for such an exploration, since the focus is simply **on** itself. There is, as it were, no third shared object in the wings. The conference as an organisation is not such an object. (The LSG is not about exploring the 'organisation in the mind' and the attempt to make it so, which may often surface at the beginning of a group, only serves as a defence against the anxiety membership of the Large Group elicits).

Moreover the focus on the 'here and now' and the interpretative stance taken by the consultants, however valuable in probing the nature of the anxiety membership of the Large Group elicits, tends, as I have already suggested, to get in the way of a more free floating, associative mode of working.

I am not suggesting that the experience of the Large Group is irrelevant to the kind of exploration I have in mind. On the contrary, to the extent that the Large Group opens up the territory of plurability and the resistances to which it may give rise, it may rather prepare the ground for such an exploration. But it does not itself constitute it.

Suppose, though, that one revisits the ways in which at present we think of plenary sessions, in particular those plenaries that take

place towards the end of a conference, after the 'here and now' sessions have run their course. At the moment the focus of such sessions tends to be on sharing experiences of individual learning, or non-learning and working at endings.

Another way of construing and perhaps extending such sessions would be to frame them as an exploration of the conference itself as an organisation, as this has been and is being refracted through the minds of its participants, members and staff, meeting now, collaboratively, as co-workers or peers. Within such a meeting, the interpretative stance would be suspended, or carried as it were implicitly in the to and from of associative work, similar perhaps to what may happen in a Social Dreaming Matrix. (Lawrence, 2005).

Such an exploration could serve not only to continue but to test the learning, put it to work, introduce us afresh to the organisation or organisations in the mind we have been and are part off, the multiplicity of their identity, the developmental and counter developmental forces at work, the predicament at their heart. The analytic stance.

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