

# CAIN AND ABEL: A STUDY OF THE SOCIETAL DYNAMICS OF ETHNIC CONFLICT

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*ABSTRACT The Irish Institute for Psycho-Social Studies (IIPSS), founded in late 1994, has involved psychoanalysts, sociologists, groups analysts and politicians in the search for new ways to address protracted ethnic conflict. A new hybrid sociological/psychoanalytic methodology, involving a 'resonant study group' practising 'resonant focus groups' seems appropriate to address a broad spectrum of societal ills. Preliminary results suggest the presence of unconscious structures in ethnic entities not unlike those in individuals, and unconscious ethnic dynamics similar to those between individuals.*

**Key words:** ethnic conflict, resonant study group, resonant focus group

## PSYCHOANALYSIS: PRACTICE LEADS THEORY

Psychoanalysis began in the consulting room. It was only after the failure of the orthodox treatment methods of his time that Freud, with Breuer, developed the 'talking cure', which became psychoanalysis. Freud himself expressed surprise at the turn his work had taken (1893):

I have not always been a psychotherapist. Like other neuro-pathologists, I was trained to employ local diagnoses and electro-prognosis, and it still strikes me myself as strange that *the case histories I write should read like short stories*, and that, as one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science. I must console myself with the reflection that *the nature of the subject is evidently responsible for this*, rather than any preference of my own. [my italics]

It was, then, 'the nature of the subject' that influenced Freud in the direction that the development of his methodology took, and

in the gradual, often faltering elaboration of psychoanalytic theory generally, based on the *primacy of the story*. We must not forget, either, that in the case Freud had just summarized, Elisabeth von R. had regained the full use of her legs, following disclosure and analysis of her story. A key phrase was 'Ich kann nicht weiter gehen' meaning both 'I can't go on' and 'I can walk no further'.

In addressing societal problems, from Freud's time to the present, the psychoanalytic movement has relied on two approaches:

- *Individual analyses add up*. There has been a notion that changes over years in many individuals will produce societal change. On the face of it, this would seem to be true.
- *Publishing books on societal questions*, stressing the unconscious dimension. Inevitably much of this work sees societal

entities as grand versions of the structures discovered in the consulting room in individuals – a thesis questioned by sociologists. In what areas is this reasonable? And are there societal structures without the parallels in the individual?

In late 1994 in Dublin the Irish Institute for Psycho-Social Studies (IIPSS) was founded with the aim of collaboration between at least psychoanalysts and sociologists. A principal initial notion was the development of a valid sociological methodology that would also validly act as a societal consulting room in the psychoanalytic sense. For psychoanalysis proper was preceded by a great deal of psychological armchair theorizing – much of it valid and important – but psychoanalysis only came into its own dealing face-to-face with living patients and their difficulties. In like manner it was supposed that a psychoanalytic sociology, preceded by a century and more of armchair theorizing might come into its own with the development of a ‘psycho-social consulting room’, in face-to-face contact with representative sub-groups of a given society, and wrestling directly with that society’s problems. And it was anticipated that *stories* would be essential. The place of phantasy, conscious and unconscious, in the individual, would be paralleled by mythology, conscious and unconscious, in the societal entity – with similar functions. These functions would include such tactics as self-deception, denial, counter-reaction formation, and the like: all defensive functions in Anna Freud’s (1936) sense.

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE METHODOLOGY

### Early contributions

Apart from personal observations to do

with the Cold War and racism in America, perhaps the earliest contribution to these developments came from Jonathan Hanaghan, who pioneered psychoanalysis in Ireland, and from his organization, the Irish Psycho-Analytical Association. One feature of this co-operative of analysts working over decades in Ireland was the Saturday night group – which included analysts, patients, and often social workers, journalists, doctors, clergy, and so forth, and which has met regularly from before 1938 until the present day. Aside from this group’s therapeutic workings, complementary to the individual analysis of many of its participants, the group seemed to have two further important functions:

- it acted as an inter-cultural bridge between the analysts, who were predominantly British or American for a long time, and the local cultures Catholic and Protestant; and
- it worked as a generator and as a repository of a growing set of original contributions to psychoanalytic notions of the unconscious in the individual and in society.

As Hanaghan himself put it (1957), a lot of the body of ideas was ‘the product of group thought’.

A second set of inputs came to IIPSS from the world of group analysis, mediated notably by Bob Hinshelwood and, of course, SH Foulkes and his followers. An important contribution came from John Alderdice (now Lord Alderdice) in his 1993 lecture, ‘Ulster on the couch’ (hosted by the Irish Psycho-analytical Association). Alderdice posited *a process of societal transformation, resembling the psycho-analysis of an individual, through the world of political interactions*. The pivotal contribution to the Peace Process by Alderdice

and his trans-ethnic Alliance Party in Northern Ireland, is well known. When the IRA declared a cease-fire, and the Irish Forum for Peace and Reconciliation began to meet, Alderdice wrote to me that 'the patient seems to be taking a turn for the better.' The Peace Process has made solid, although not yet conclusive progress.

Another important contribution to IIPSS thinking from the analytical world came from Andrew Samuels, also mainly in 1993. Both in his book, *The Political Psyche* and in his paper, 'The mirror and the hammer', Samuels put forward the idea of a citizen or a group of citizens acting as *processors of countertransference material* – again, putting them in the analyst's chair, and society onto the couch.

Parallel to these developments in the psychoanalytic world came a slow rapprochement from the domain of sociology. Norbert Elias, who had worked closely with Foulkes, made sociological contributions (especially in *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (1939), which drew heavily on Freudian psychoanalysis).

More recently in the emergent sociology of the emotions, Thomas Scheff in particular has highlighted emotional processes in protracted ethnic conflict. Such conflict, he argues (Scheff, 1994), has three effects:

- the 'zero-sum' dynamic – any gain by one side is seen as a loss by the other;
- the 'shame-rage cycle' – each side, after being shamed and humiliated by the other, angrily retaliates in kind; and
- 'damaged bonds' – protracted conflict shifts societal bonds either towards lock-step compliance ('engulfment') or towards excessive, anarchic individualism.

A contribution from Vamik Volkan drew from both worlds. After psycho-social fieldwork in dynamic ethnic reconciliation

in Cyprus during the 1970s, Volkan founded a Centre for the Study of Mind and Human Interaction at the University of Virginia, which has made further concrete contributions, notably in the Baltic States.

### **The Resonant Study Group (RSG): a collective facilitator**

The methodology of IIPSS began to come together in the margins of the Dublin lecture series, 'The unconscious and society', hosted by the Irish Psycho-Analytical Association in 1993. In Karl Figlio's lecture in this series, 'Democracy and the professional unconscious', he put forward the notion that the psychoanalytic profession could (and undoubtedly does) act as a kind of ego-ideal in relation to its host society. In a related paper from the same year, Figlio had noted that as a social entity, the psychoanalytic profession mirrors many of the issues troubling the host society. Meanwhile, Michael Rustin's later lecture in the same series, 'Psychoanalysis in different national cultures', presented a kind of sociology of psychoanalysis: how did the content of psychoanalytic thought evolve, as the movement went from country to country?

It was in a conversation with Michael and Margaret Rustin that a first major hypothesis emerged: *in each host society the psychoanalytic movement will develop splits over issues which will be translated versions of hidden issues splitting the host society.*

This statement was dubbed 'the Figlio-Rustin hypothesis'. It did not see the psychoanalytic profession only as a *microcosm* of the host society, which of course it is. But because of the intimate and largely unconscious transference-countertransference links between this profession and the host society the effect would be, so to speak, louder and clearer: a societal form of countertransference. In our discussions,

the hypothesis seemed to work well for England and the Irish Republic. Early indications are that it works equally in Northern Ireland. It seemed clear that with a little work on the psychoanalytic profession in a given society, one could get an immediate, powerful indicator of some of the issues dividing the host society. And such an intervention, according to Figlio's notions, should be beneficial for both the psychoanalytic profession – and for its host society! For with this analytic intervention the psychoanalytic profession would gain the possibility of being slightly ahead of the host society, instead of slightly behind. Perhaps even leading instead of following.

But these ideas gave rise to my own notion of a *resonant study group* (RSG). It seemed to be a possibility that one could form a multiethnic RSG from analytic people and sociological people, working together, all drawn from, or living long-term in, the host society under study, and with the analytic people working analytically long-term with individuals and/or groups in the host society. This would constitute an active psychodynamic societal probe – the first element in a societal consulting room. It was expected that hidden tensions in the society under study would be expressed in tensions between RSG members and factions.

### **The societal consulting room**

During 1994 and 1995, discussions ensued that resulted first in the establishment of IIPSS in late 1994 and later in the emergence of a psycho-social consulting room based on the RSG. It was decided that IIPSS would seek study grants to try out the psycho-social consulting room using as a subject matter issues relating to the Northern Ireland ethnic conflict. The participants formed an RSG to work on preparing the proposals, developing theory,

and doing some advance work. By late 1996 the RSG included

- Mitch Elliott – psychoanalyst, and current President of the Irish Psycho-Analytical Association.
- Paul Stokes – lecturer in sociology at University College Dublin, with 10 years experience as an independent sociological consultant.
- Jarlath Benson – a group analyst and a director of the Northern Ireland Institute of Human Relations, in Belfast.
- Kenneth Bishop – lecturer in sociology at Queens University Belfast.
- Professor Stephen Mennell – professor of sociology at University College Dublin. He is a world expert on Norbert Elias, doing mainly background research, whilst sitting in on some active exercises of the RSG.
- Ellen O'Malley-Dunlop – group analyst and Jungian therapist joined us early in 1997 and contributed from her own work, the group story.

The research format was concretized by Stokes' brilliant proposal to

- draw on the work of Norbert Elias and Thomas Scheff, which seemed highly compatible; and
- use as a major tool the sociological focus group but involving a group analyst and with three to five members of the RSG normally present.

The focus group would mainly be allowed to have free-ranging discussions, as in a therapy group. We soon began to call it an 'RFG' or 'resonant focus group'.

What would the focus groups focus upon? I proposed that early interviews by the RSG with local community leaders (whom we were later to call 'gatekeepers') would give us:

- an early appreciation of the intensities and the coloration of the important issues at the local level;
- a list of specific issues having overriding importance for the particular local community – a ‘topic guide’; and
- introductions to local people willing to participate in the focus groups.

The focus groups could then, at an appropriate time, be ‘seeded’ with local issues. For example, at an opportune moment, an RSG member might ask, ‘I’d like to hear what anyone might have to say about McCarthy getting a planning permission for a garage on Coleraine Street’, knowing that this was a contentious issue. This is not in contravention of psychoanalytic practice, having the same form as, ‘you mentioned a red wheelbarrow – what does that remind you of?’ In practice, once we commenced RFGs the group usually covered the topic guide completely without prompting, in free discussion.

Finally, the resonant focus group concept was later hugely enriched by group analyst Ellen O’Malley Dunlop’s addition of a ‘group story’ normally taken early in the first RFG in each geographical area. The group analyst in the RSG invited the participants to concoct a fairy tale, with participants adding phrases or sentences at random. Following the opener: ‘once upon a time’ the group story seemed to act like the first dream in an individual analysis, containing powerfully relevant symbols and structures: a borehole to the collective unconscious.

The shape that emerged, then, was a three-step process, which we can describe as constituting a psycho-social consulting room:

1. gatekeeper interviews; followed by
2. resonant focus groups run like group therapy sessions and including an early group story; and

3. debriefing sessions, allowing free play to intra-team tensions: the sociological counter-transference.

These core processes are preceded by documentary research and followed by a writeup, a formal written report. The RSG ‘debriefing’ meetings, normally held after each interview and after each RFG, enable RSG tensions to undergo some analytic articulation. In addition, each interview and each group is subject to a sub-report, circulated almost immediately to the RSG members.

### **The long view: society on the couch**

In the process of assembling this theory it became clear that the process thus initiated could be quite important. There seemed to be the possibility that the formation of an overlap zone between the sociological profession and the psychoanalytic profession could play an important role in future societal movements. Since the Second World War, efforts – admittedly only partly successful – have been made for nations to cooperate to put some kind of a lid on the destructiveness of war. A similar effort, quite a lot more successful, has been under way since the Great Depression of the 1930s to regulate economic cycles. Some efforts, with some success, have been directed toward the deadly Malthusian problem of overpopulation. Now there emerged, in theory at least, the possibility of tapping into the deep undercurrents that haunt the unconscious of humanity, with the notion of one day becoming better able to focus our energies, and get more clearly at the roots of war, revolution, economic cycles, and overpopulation – roots in the unconscious mind of humanity.

Let us allow our imagination to roam extravagantly. IIPSS, and/or organizations like it, could be constituted in many or most host societies. Each institute could

- seek funding from various organizations so as to become self-financing;
- retain a multiplicity of funding sources so as to maintain a degree of independence;
- keep archives of completed studies and important related papers, accumulating a growing database to draw upon, as well as the accumulation of living experience in the unconscious minds of the participants;
- train new people by classes, seminars, and participation, to ensure long-term continuity; and
- be open to the inclusion of linguists and anthropologists.

If this scenario could be initiated, then each study completed and paid for could be like one interpretation in an individual analysis. The process, over decades, would resemble a long-term analysis of the host society, with the ‘analyst’ growing as much as the ‘analysand’ (not unknown in individual analysis!).

Pie in the sky? Perhaps. In any case, our immediate task was to get one or more initial studies up and running, a process that was not to be without problems!

## ‘TRIUMPHS AND DISASTERS’ ALONG THE WAY

### Initiatives

In the belief that one or more outstanding study grant applications would be successful, in December 1995 and during the spring of 1996 IIPSS launched itself into a series of gatekeeper interviews in Northern Ireland. The first grant, from the Royal Irish Academy, was received in June 1996, albeit for less than half the amount we had applied for. The subject was siege mentality in Protestant communities in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland. Particularly encouraging were the com-

ments accompanying the grant. It was inevitable, perhaps, that the first cash grant should come through University College Dublin, rather than directly to IIPSS. Further gatekeeper interviews were conducted following the grant award, especially in the Republic.

Even in this early work, it was clear that there were obstacles to be surmounted. We can class these in, perhaps, four categories.

- resistances in society to being studied in this way;
- resistances and tensions within IIPSS;
- problems of adequate contact on the psychoanalytic plane with the ethnic unconscious structures in Northern Ireland; and
- logistical problems.

We can look at examples of each.

### Societal resistances

The societal resistances belong to two categories: resistance to the notion of psychoanalysis generally and resistance to a particular study. As an example of the first, more *general* resistance, we can mention being turned down on a grant application in Belfast ‘because our referees don’t agree with your methodology’. A bit of delving with friends in the administrative hierarchy in Belfast obtained for us the information that virtually all grant applications of this type in Northern Ireland would be referred for methodological vetting to a certain ‘Peace Studies’ centre, where the outlook would be experimental and statistical, and rather strongly anti-psychoanalysis. This particular centre was so prestigious, our informant added, that a civil servant would have to defend *not* sending an application to them for vetting. This methodological quasi-monopoly, and a reluctance to question it is, we feel, characteristic of the

monolithic, ‘engulfed’ societal structures (in both Northern communities) we had determined to study.

An example of resistance to a *particular* study came from south of the border, in the Irish Republic. A particular topic – that of siege mentality among Protestants, North and South, for which we eventually obtained RIA funding – seemed important, even pivotal to us. Our early documentary studies had shown that there had been a remarkable decline in the Protestant population of the Republic since 1911. Kurt Bowen (1983) had researched these figures in the early 1980s, and we had to add in present-day estimates. The picture that emerged of the size of the Protestant community was approximately as follows:

- 1911: approximately 250,000 (in the 26 counties that were to become the Republic);
- 1926: approximately 160,000;
- present day: approximately 90,000 (or less).

These figures, especially the approximately 90,000 fall from 1911 to 1926, could not represent merely the departure of Protestant Ascendancy families and their close business associates; there were never more than a few hundred Ascendancy families. Even adding in the withdrawal of British armed services and their dependants, and including those lost in the Great War of 1914–18, would not come anywhere near the figure of 90,000. *This figure had to include substantial numbers of small business people, farmers, and manual labourers.* Why did they leave? The question was under-researched. Bowen’s lightly financed study, with the fieldwork done in the early 1970s, does not propose an answer. In his anecdotal examples, brought forward in a partial attempt to explain the

decline, Bowen does not hesitate to mention

- house burning and looting;
- physical intimidation, going at times as far as murder;
- boycotts; and
- mutual economic discrimination.

Although the record shows that the Irish government of the time spoke out clearly against attacks on the Protestant minority, it is equally plain that such attacks did occur. Anyone who has had more than one or two Protestant analysands in the Republic is likely to find such material in the family lore – as often, say, as mention of Black-and-Tan house-searches on the Catholic side.

The extent of such abuses has never been established and may never be. But the effects on Protestant attitudes seemed a rich mine for IIPSS-style investigation. And this could be important. What if the much talked-about Unionist ‘intransigence’ in Northern Ireland were in part a result of societal trauma, with frightened refugees having fled North?

In the initial efforts to secure funding for this type of study, two sources seemed to recommend themselves:

- the Department of the Taoiseach; and
- the Irish Forum for Peace and Reconciliation.

The Department of the Taoiseach had been recommended to us by John Alderdice. It seemed a likely target because it had a sort of a contingency fund and because, in the famous Downing Street Declaration, the then Taoiseach (Albert Reynolds) had offered to ‘examine any elements in the democratic life and organisation that can be represented . . . as not being fully consistent with a modern democratic and pluralist society . . .’

What were the results of our approach to the Department of the Taoiseach? A high civil servant, upon receiving our grant application, sent us a letter whose entire text reads as follows:

Dear Mr. Elliott,

Thank you for your letter of 17 January and enclosures which awaited my arrival here. With best personal regards, . . .’ etc.

Some weeks later, having heard nothing further than this perfunctory acknowledgement, I rang up the official involved. The ensuing conversation must rate as one of the more comical bureaucratic fencing matches on record! It was my aim to get this official to state that his office, and his boss (the Taoiseach), would not countenance such a study; if possible, I wanted this in a written reply to our carefully worked-out proposal. But the official’s position was clear. He could not be seen to be turning down what was, after all, a very reasonable request under the terms of the Downing Street Declaration. Especially as prominent (mainly Protestant) politicians had lent their name to our venture. On the other hand, he and his colleagues were at that time engaged in desperate negotiations to keep the IRA ceasefire going, and Sinn Fein involved in talks. This effort could be imperilled by *any* government acknowledgement that the Protestants in the Republic had suffered any bad treatment. So the official could only say, ‘I have no money, and I don’t know anyone who has!’

Why was this important? Senator Mary Henry, a Protestant and an IIPSS Advisor, had asked a prominent (Catholic) socialist politician what she thought was the reason for the decline of the Protestant community. The reply was revealing: ‘I guess they just packed up their money and left’ – implying that the decline was only a flight by Ascendancy families and wealthy Protestant

businessmen: a demographic nonsense, as we have seen. *Yet this unreasonable view is definitely part of the mythology of the Catholic tribe in the Republic.* One of the functions of this element of mythology is to retain the moral high ground by *according to the Catholic tribe the monopoly of victim status.* In this way, the widespread nod-and-wink covert support over several decades for extreme republicanism can retain some dignity. ‘Sure, the IRA have killed some people – but look what our tribe suffered!’ would seem to be the message.

Approaches to the Irish Forum for Peace and Reconciliation were similarly unsuccessful. These examples will show, I hope, how resistance analysis in societal structures can, as in individual analysis, enrich the researcher’s appreciation of the structures and mythology of the society under study. When you actually get into it there gradually forms a much clearer picture than you could get from television or newspaper reports – or even good historical analysis. As an individual psychoanalysis, careful analysis of resistance yields information about unconscious structure.

### **Internal tensions**

The most important question about tensions within IIPSS concerns energetics. If a psychoanalyst in private practice can find it difficult to receive transferences from individual patients, how can a handful of individuals, even if knit into a functioning group, handle the much greater energies that come from questioning ethnic entities?

Have societies not often, or even usually, marginalized those – like the ancient Hebrew prophets – who asked the awkward questions? Were not Socrates and John the Baptist actually killed for putting questions that the power structure of their time did not want to hear?



The only theoretical answer can be that one must proceed with caution – ‘Take it easy – but take it!’ as one trade union organizer enjoined his striking members. In individual work, if we get too far ahead of our analysand, the analysand can break the analysis. Careful ‘dosage’ of interpretations in most cases precludes this unwelcome result. I am sure all long-term psychoanalytic groups gradually accumulate around them a sprinkling of partly analysed patients who have broken off treatment – a sociological existential testimony to the finiteness of our skill. In the societal work, not many mistakes can be tolerated, due to the very limited number of the subcultures with which we must deal.

In actual practice, we had one individual casualty very early, from within IIPSS. One of our directors had to leave work due to illness. He was troubled by fortnightly weekend-long bouts of explosive vomiting, which ceased as soon as he dropped out of our meetings.

After energetics the next concern was splits within the RSG. In theory, such splits, when analysed, should provide insights into the population being studied. One example was amusing. One RSG member who happened to be from the Catholic tribe had repeatedly cancelled or missed meetings. Several times this person had also failed to send on documents he had promised, or had sent them late. In one RSG meeting our group analyst, Jarlath Benson, asked me if there was tension between me and this man. I said how irritated I’d been feeling lately, and said I knew he must feel much the same. ‘I’m sure he feels I’m always prodding him,’ I added. ‘What was that word again?’ Jarlath asked, with a grin. We all laughed. ‘Prod’ is a nickname among Catholics here for Protestants – so that I was saying – without realizing it consciously – that I’d been trying to convert my

colleague to a more Protestant work ethic! Dealing with the ethnic differences between ourselves undoubtedly adds to understanding of the ethnic conflict we are investigating. Over several years, a number of tense situations developed within IIPSS, which turned out to be cartoon-like versions of the very material we were studying. Careful analysis of these cartoon-like stand-offs has succeeded so far in transmuted potential disaster into deeper understanding.

A second dimension for splitting – shall we say a perpendicular fracture plane? – is the division between the psychoanalytic members and the sociological members. The analytic members can be perhaps a bit too finicky about conditions of interviews and groups – from our tradition of the analytic setting. The sociologists are more used to just organizing it and getting it done. Also, one of our sociologists wonders whether the insights gained by being psychoanalytic are worth the opprobrium we often get from potential funding sources.

### **Adequate unconscious contact**

This problem concerned my analytic practice and me. In my practice in Dublin over many years I had dealt with all kinds of disorders in analysis and from both sides of the divide. In particular, I had had, and my colleagues as well, many fervent Republican patients, including some IRA killers. One IRA patient ordered a late colleague of mine to retract a certain interpretation ‘or I’ll stack the bodies of your children in your front garden!’ An IRA patient asked me about my case notes: ‘If someone came to your door with an AK47 and demanded your note books, what would you do?’ Another violent Republican patient threatened to come to my house at 4 a.m. and pour petrol in my letter box, then light it if I were to let him down in certain ways.

Armed with a decade and a half of colourful experience of this kind, I thought I was well equipped to do the IIPSS work. But about 6 months into the ceasefires, during a phone meeting, my Belfast colleague Jarlath Benson mentioned that there seemed to be an epidemic of mental illness there. ‘Since the ceasefires, all that had been held in for 25 years is being let go – there are a lot of breakdowns.’ I was stunned: I had no inkling of this through my Dublin practice. So I resolved to open a Belfast practice one day a week as soon as I could manage.

### **Logistics**

Another problem has been getting us all together – all busy professionals going in different directions. How can we convene a four-person RSG in Belfast or in Dublin? In addressing this problem we have evolved some tactics:

- Use of telephone conference meetings. (In the process we have learned *not* to initiate conference calls from Belfast, after one £100 call charge from British Telecom.)
- Development of quorum criteria. For some gatekeeper meetings we have reluctantly resorted to having only two members interview the gatekeeper(s) – provided one is sociological and one analytic.

The remarkable thing is that our Northern gatekeeper meeting series in 1996 was conducted by an active RSG of four persons, which just happened to include two Protestants and two Catholics, two sociologists and two analysts, two residents of the North and two of the Republic. So *any* curtailment of our team must seriously hamper our resonances. I would expect the threat of internal splitting to be with us constantly.

## **INTERIM FINDINGS FROM THE NORTHERN GATEKEEPER MEETINGS**

### **Orange Order and Sinn Fein meetings**

These interim findings are to be regarded as tentative, provisional hypotheses, much in the way that an analyst might say early on to his or her patient ‘We’ll have to consider the possibility that . . .’ Further work will confirm, or most likely modify, the hypotheses.

The IIPSS meeting with the Orange Order Official ‘B’ produced a general impression of a reasonable, rational man as a member of a reasonable, rational group, involved in a reasonable, rational defence of their way of life, their identity, and their tribal symbols – all of which were under attack. It is noteworthy that ‘B’ seemed to understand our proposed studies and welcomed them without question. The contrast was eerie between the patient, almost lawyer-like reasoning of ‘B’, and the paraphernalia of the office in which we met – all symbols of past tribal victories. The eeriness was compounded a few weeks later when, leading up to the 12 July marches, the whole structure of law and order in the Province was allowed to collapse temporarily under the impetus of many thousands of members of the Orange Order. A predictable backlash of violence and property destruction then followed at the hands of the Nationalists.

The flavour of the two Sinn Fein meetings was almost the perfect reverse. Councillor ‘A’s’ demeanour was mainly challenging and dismissive: ‘We’ve been researched for years, and we’re sick of it.’ The structure of Paul Stokes’ ‘damaged bonds’ study proposal was ridiculed by ‘A’ in our first meeting, for omitting references to ‘the Brits’ and to ‘colonialism’ – to the extent that Paul was still smarting from it

several months later! In the second meeting, it was clear that 'A' was suspicious of our motives, of the effect our intervention would have on his segment of the Nationalist population. Thus, most of the second meeting consisted of a (vain) search by Sinn Fein 'interrogators' for our political orientation. Our countertransferential wish to spill the beans, to tell all, was terribly strong at times. This aggressive suspicion was capped by 'A's' intervention when Jarlath offered to meet one of the Sinn Fein therapists – a colleague of Jarlath's – for coffee: 'A' leapt in, and cautioned, 'Check with me first!'

Now add to this 'A's' very interesting outburst in the first meeting: 'Our community has a history of getting itself crucified every generation – and loving it.'

Yet, on the other hand, 'A' was willing to *meet us twice, and very probably again*. Between the lines in 'A's' description of the sufferings of his community, and the ordeals of Nationalist prisoners, there seemed to me, as an experienced analyst, to be a desperate cry for help. Could one put words on it? Possibly it might be close to say 'We're at wits' end, we're immensely tired of it all, it's been going on for centuries; could there please be a way out?' This very subliminal message I seemed to receive – mobilizing the caring professional in me – was countered by the overt message of 'go away, leave us alone, we'll bear it out – and we'll win!'

Is it possible to characterize these two attitudes, apparently ethnic group attitudes mediated by the two spokesmen, in terms of classical analytical concepts? I believe the terms 'obsessional neurosis' and 'hysteria' may apply.

### **Hysteria and obsessional neurosis**

Hysteria and obsessional neurosis are, of course, the two classically recognized

forms of psychoneurosis. All psychoneurosis involves the defence mechanism of repression, implying a level of development at its origins that would have a place into which things could be repressed. This is, of course, in contrast with earlier disorders, the psychoses, which belong to the two-body mother-infant constellation, and involve processes studied by object-relations psychology, such as projection, identification, projective identification, splitting, and the like.

In the more sophisticated structures and processes of psychoneurosis, how does hysteria differ from obsessional neurosis? The concept of *the return of the repressed* is useful here. If repression could work absolutely, as it sometimes seems to, mere amnesia would be the main characteristic of these disorders. The process identified by Freud involves repressed material attempting a return to consciousness – usually a partial one. This can be regarded as a kind of failed attempt at self-healing. Psychoneurotic symptoms always involve a partial undoing of repression. If we can schematically describe the totality of a repressed experience as involving a *storyline*, along with its *associated emotions*, then we can say that *hysteria* involves the full return to consciousness of the emotions of the traumatic experience, whilst the storyline is partially or totally unavailable to consciousness. In practice, the emotional experiences are often accompanied by physical symptoms: 'hysterical conversions'.

*Obsessional neurosis* is practically the exact opposite of hysteria. In obsessional neurosis one is involved in action patterns and in rituals that declare the hidden storyline. Generally, however, the emotional coloration is greatly reduced, or missing. This exception here is anxiety – which can become frenetic and even violent if a ritual is interrupted or prevented. As with hysteria,

the meaning of this layer of anxiety has to do with the fear of resurrecting most painful and unpleasant material.

In this view of the two complementary emotional/structural disorders, all individuals would have many obsessional and many hysteric traits. Many people would tilt hard toward the hysteric; many toward the obsessional. A few of both would have symptoms severe enough to require treatment.

### **Applied to Northern Ireland**

If we can declare that the essence of hysteria is ‘emotion with depleted storyline’, we must not omit some of the peripheral characteristics associated with hysteria. The word ‘hysteria’ predates psychoanalysis by a very long time. ‘Hyster’ is classical Greek for ‘womb’ so that ‘hysteria’ signifies ‘womb-itis’ or ‘disorder of the womb’. That is to say that the disorder known prior to psychoanalysis as ‘hysteria’ had been observed so predominantly in women that ancient doctors thought it to be actually a disorder proceeding from the womb; I believe they visualized it as a ‘wandering womb’. Along with the historical distribution largely among females, hysteria has been associated with the characteristics that traditionally belong more with the feminine side of our makeup than with the masculine:

- masochism – in pathological form, inviting pain and trouble; in healthy form enabling us to hold out and survive vicissitudes;
- irrationality – which can be equally destructive, but which in healthy form is at the heart of all the arts; tolerating, or even embracing paradox is a key element here, which even scientific rationalism has been forced in our century to accept;
- failed attempts at self-control – again, an asset or a liability, depending on how it is worked out.

Obsessional neurosis, on the other hand, is generally seen to be associated with a list of traits that were traditionally viewed as belonging to the masculine side of each of our personalities:

- Exaggerated dependence on the intellect, on reason, and on legislation. This may seem ‘sane’ – but consider Emerson’s view that ‘A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.’ We might say, ‘hobgoblin of obsessional minds!’
- Denial or ‘extrusion’ of irrationality – a disturbed version of this could read ‘never mind emotions or intuition – just follow the rules’.
- Elevation of the letter of the law – while frequently violating the spirit of the law.

Given the riots of July 1996, which followed interruption of the tribal marching ritual, and the interviews we have completed, we need have no hesitation in setting down the following three-part hypothesis:

1. The cultural structure of Orangeism seems at present more weighted toward the obsessional.
2. The cultural structure of that part of the Nationalist community represented by Sinn Fein seems at present more weighted toward the hysterical.
3. The ongoing interactions between the two have apparently tended to reinforce this polarization of neurotic structure, forming a complementary-pair system.

In the case of the Orange Order, we have a nice match with obsessional structure. There is the legalistic preoccupation with rights and with making sure the wrongdoers (on the other side) are punished. There is a preoccupation with symbols and memorabilia. There is a compulsion toward

repetitive acts (marches), which seem to be all that stands between them and apocalyptic disaster. There is a rationalism, with an intent to justify all of one's own acts and to attack the irrational of the other side. And there is, in the unswerving execution of duty and law, and in the veneration of history, a curious insensitivity to feelings beyond the ambit of these preoccupations. Finally, the Order spends a lot of time and energy (desperately) celebrating past victories, in a repetitive ritual.

The Nationalist population, as represented by Sinn Fein, shows a different picture. There is a sense of enduring the unbearable, of lasting it out, nailed to the cross. There is a calm, unthinking toleration of opposites: 'We're sick of discourse, let's talk about it.'

Importantly, there is a gross omission in the storyline: 'get the Brits out' is all there is to it – the ethnic conflict, as well as the anguish of the Protestant population, are taboo territory, getting lip service at the very best. Last, but by no means least, we can add that these people spend a lot of time and energy celebrating past defeats, not to mention highly politicized funerals.

So on the face of it, there seems to be a good match with the model, with some good point-to-point equivalences. But is it true? Does it have a functional meaning? Are there underlying structures corresponding to these surface manifestations? All this must wait, of course. For this is still at the level of very early hypothesis. Ongoing research will not, I hope, eradicate the hypothesis, but will rather modify it and flesh it out.

### **Cain and Abel**

We have sketched a hypothesis contrasting hysterical configurations in part of the Nationalist side, and obsessive constellations in the Orange Order; we have

suggested that interaction has tended to polarize this, especially violent interaction. At the same time, sociologist and IIPSS director Paul Stokes has postulated that two dynamics described by Thomas Scheff seem to apply in Northern Ireland:

- the shame-rage cycle – each side undergoes a humiliation at the hands of the other, provoking anger and retaliation;
- the zero-sum principle – a gain by either side is seen as a loss to the other.

Is there any way that these two findings, one drawn from depth psychology and one from sociology, may be put together to provide clearer understanding of the unconscious dimensions of the conflict?

Experience from psychoanalytic practice with individuals suggests that the Scheffian passions of shame and rage, the zero-sum dynamic, and the Freudian hysterical/obsessional structural contrast are characteristic of a bipolar sibling-rivalry situation in a pair of individuals. We must therefore look at the possibility that the presence of these elements in the Northern Ireland conflict represents a societal resonance of sibling-rivalry dramas in thousands of individuals.

In other words we can state that, if this hypothesis is borne out in our research, a fundamental dynamic in the Northern Ireland conflict is a Cain-and-Abel dynamic, characterized by

- a complementary pair system of obsessiveness on one side, hysteria on the other;
- a shame-rage cycle as described by Scheff; and
- a zero-sum dynamic as described by Scheff.

If the hypothesis is confirmed, the Cain-and-Abel label ceases being only a

metaphor, and becomes a structured dynamic.

## IMPLICATIONS

No sooner had we stated this than we realized how general this might be. So many bitter ethnic conflicts have been described as ‘fratricidal’; for example

- Jews say ‘Shalom’, Arabs say ‘Salaam’ – both share a 4 or 5 millennia common Semitic heritage (at least); and
- Bosnian Muslims and Serbs speak the same language and have a long common heritage.

To what extent do other conflicts mobilize the same dynamic by transference? We must also ask: has individual psychological theory neglected the Cain-and-Abel dynamic?

## Individual theory

In its study of the individual, the psychoanalytic movement has focused quite correctly on structural development, and on attitudes to authority, because so much pathology resided in these areas. Some psychoanalysts, notably Jonathan Hanaghan in Ireland, would have given the sibling-rivalry constellation an importance equal to that of the Oedipus complex. For a child to break out of the cocoon of illusory narcissistic self-sufficiency, this view would stress, it is important to learn to relate horizontally, or quasi-horizontally, with one’s peers. Relating with one’s siblings, hopefully within a good-humoured but watchful family setting, is as good a training in this area as the Oedipus complex is for later courting and dealing with authority.

A review is overdue of the evolution of attitudes in the psychoanalytic movement towards sibling relations – good work has been done in the last 30 years. Such a

review would be beyond the scope of this paper. In IIPSS our conversations resulted in the elaboration of a developmental diagram (Figure 1). The vertical axis shows the traditional two-body/three-body development, with its implications for relations with authority; the horizontal axis shows the sibling relations, with their implications for relating with peers.

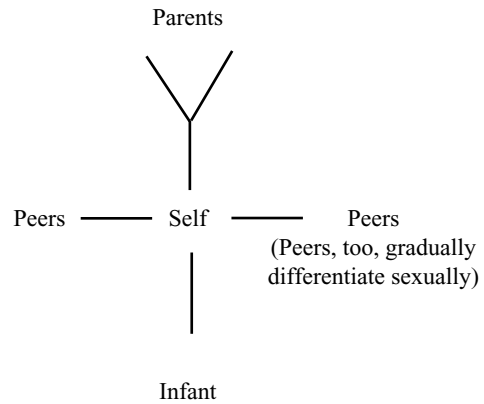


Figure 1. Developmental diagram.

A strong case could be made for a Cain-and-Abel complex in everyone, including the only child. This would help explain the phenomenon of imaginary playmates – as well as those first children who beg the parents for a brother or a sister. A putative natural impulse in the horizontal direction in all individuals should be of great interest to our sociologist friends – especially in this century of the demise of monarchies and the rise of democracy.

In a detailed development of the Cain-and-Abel theory – which is beyond the scope of this paper – one could develop ‘sibling triangles’ and get an idea of what better or worse evolutions would be like. Indeed, such an effort would seem to be overdue. Winnicott’s play theory, which has

already been extended to the Oedipus complex in a previous paper of mine (Elliot, 1993) could doubtless be profitably applied to the Cain-and-Abel dynamic – perhaps to posit a ‘good-enough sibling relationship’, and how it develops.

We can note in passing that, to use Karl Figlio’s (1993) language, just as the mother-child relationship ‘entails a primary sociality’, so do the Oedipus complex and the Cain-and-Abel structure. And within this Cain-and-Abel constellation, obsessional neurosis may ultimately be seen as the affliction of the guilty victor, whilst hysteria would be the disorder of the defeated. One is reminded of Desmond Morris’s depiction of a ritual of deference between males in the higher mammals: the loser presents his hindquarters in sexual invitation. This gesture establishes the male ‘pecking order’, and may underpin in humans the obsessional-hysterical split between victor and vanquished.

In dealing with adult clients recovering from ‘Cain’ or ‘Abel’ traumata, reversals are a necessary part of the process. A ‘Cain’ sooner or later will have to become a defender of the weak and the helpless. One is reminded of the Samurai code or the code of chivalry in Europe – interestingly enough, highly developed in island nations at opposite ends of the Eurasian landmass. As for an ‘Abel’ – he or she will have to learn to be a victor, and may pass through periods of bullying.

### **Societal applications**

In the Northern Ireland context, it seems clear that ‘parental’ involvement in Cain-and-Abel needs to be handled with care. It may be that when the ‘parents’ – the Republic of Ireland and the UK – are estranged, resolution becomes virtually impossible. We note that the peace process became possible following the Anglo-Irish

Agreement of 1985, and has developed almost in parallel with the level of Dublin-London cooperation. This means, moreover, that the motives overt and covert of the ‘parents’ *must* be studied, and intensively.

Moreover, we are not surprised that in the painful path to peace, reversals have been necessary. Part of loyalist disaffection at the moment in Northern Ireland is a perception that their Catholic counterparts have been receiving more grants and governmental assistance than themselves: apparently a necessary part of the process. At the same time, one is reminded at an older sibling at the dinner table: ‘why . . . why . . . he’s got a bigger helping!!!’

Finally, revolution and war are two major scourges in human history. Can we say that if one involves the overthrow dynamic of the Oedipus complex, then the other has its parallel in the Cain-and-Abel syndrome? It would be unrealistic to think of eliminating these societal ills. But like so many other problems that we address in the individual, can we not hope to render them less robotically compulsive, and more considered and articulated in their societal manifestations?

### **SUMMING UP**

We have outlined a new hybrid methodology, developed by the Irish Institute for Psycho-Social Studies in Dublin for the psychoanalytic investigation of societal phenomena. It involves a resonant study group (RSG) in a societal form of countertransference. The methodology is in three main stages – gatekeeper interviews, resonant focus groups (RFGs), and team debriefings to articulate dealing with RSG splits.

From the gatekeeper stage of IIPSS studies in Northern Ireland a hypothesis was formed that the opposing societal groups seem to suffer from societal forms of obsessional neurosis and hysteria, and that these form a complementary pair,

reinforcing each other. A second hypothesis identifies this pairing as possibly belonging to the Cain-and-Abel dynamic, which may be fundamental to a broad range of human conflicts.

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