

Trauma, silence and the work of linking: Reflections on a group with Aboriginal mothers and their babies

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This paper will explore the idea that trauma breaks links, and that use of a psychoanalytic group space enabled some links to be formed with and between mothers and their children, their personal and cultural history, and with the group facilitator, bringing greater coherence and meaning to all who were involved.

Bion (2013) in his paper, 'Attacks on linking' describes the unconscious mental process of severing links as 'ways not to see, not to speak, not to connect, not to think' because to form connections risks annihilation (Christoff, 2019, p. 167). This describes an internal function of the mind, designed to destroy meaning. A key experience of psychological trauma, as Judith Herman (1992) observes, is disconnection from others and healing involves the forming of new connections that can occur only within the context of relationship.

This has deep resonance for the mothers' group I was asked to facilitate some six years ago and which concluded in March this year. Its formation was the result of a discussion between the Aboriginal midwife at a local Sydney hospital and some psychoanalytically oriented professionals at Gunawirra. The midwife conveyed that she had a cohort of very young, inner city Aboriginal women aged between 15 and 25 in need of social and emotional support at the time of entering motherhood. The thinking for the establishment and ongoing running of this group was always psychoanalytic at its core. The aim was to provide a space for Aboriginal mothers and their babies to come together and bring whatever experiences they chose, consciously or unconsciously, that needed hearing.

There is a concept in many Indigenous cultures, referred to last week by Mishel McMahon, of 'deep listening', or Dadirri as understood by Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr (2017) from the Daly River region in the Northern Territory. She describes Dadirri thus:

'To know me is to breathe with me; to breathe with me is to listen deeply; to listen deeply, is to connect'. Although there is no precise concept in Western thinking that can be substituted, there are some similarities between the concept of a psychoanalytic thinking presence and Indigenous 'deep listening'.

There are so many experiences with regard to the origin and continuation of the mothers' group which can be understood in the context of 'broken links', whether the source of the attacks has been external, or internal. Historically Indigenous people have been very connected – to land, to the past (60,000 years of uninterrupted links), to their families, communities, to their laws and to their purpose. Linking was

everywhere – weaving, story-telling, yarning, Dadirri, community, responsibility to land and responsibility to each other. Indeed, as Mary Graham (2014) notes and Mishel explained so clearly last week, relationality underpins every aspect of Indigenous culture. I would extend this by saying that there is no room for solipsism in a two-way, relational world – community is the opposite of narcissism.

Externally broken links can be understood in terms of the Indigenous experience in Australia of colonisation over the past 250 years. The impact of colonisation on different Indigenous communities varies from location to location depending on the timing and nature of the appearance of Europeans in this country. However, Indigenous author Judy Atkinson (2002) outlines a ‘traumagram’: six generations of suffering and trauma in most Indigenous families since and as a direct result of the arrival of Europeans. Each generation’s experience can be understood as traumatic in its own right, but must also be understood as cumulative trauma. There is individual and collective evasion in hearing and understanding this – Bion’s argument that ‘we don’t always let ourselves think’ because it can be too terrible and too overwhelming to imagine. Yet that is exactly what we must do, if some form of healing is to take place. We must allow ourselves to hear, think, wonder, feel, imagine and try to understand.

Broken links abound in Indigenous history since the arrival of the Europeans:

- Disease epidemics, killings
- Massacres, poisonings
- Missions, relocations, abuses of children, women and men
- Dehumanisation, damaging government policies, ongoing racism
- Dispossession, disconnection from country – loss of purpose, loss of place and sense of belonging
- Breaking of community and family bonds, most clearly seen in the Stolen Generations
- Cultures devalued and desecrated
- Disconnection from language, cultural knowledge, way of life
- Substance abuse as a means to self-medicate (Atkinson, 2002, p. 165)
- Unprocessed trauma re-enacted in communities that then further traumatises

Silence can also be a potent form of attack on linking, especially in the context of trauma. Trauma overwhelms the mind’s capacity to know. Laplanche and Pontalis (1973) define it as ‘an event in the subject’s life defined by its intensity, by the subject’s incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization’ (p. 465). Indigenous people in their experience of trauma, and we others who also live on this land, for the most part, have historically shared a silence, an absence of a comprehensive narrative which encompasses all Australians. The experience of silence in the face of trauma is elucidated by second-generation Holocaust survivor Ruth Wajnryb in her book *‘The Silence’* (2001). She says, ‘Tragedy so devastating sweeps away everything in its path – and more, even the capacity to represent it.’ She says the home she grew up in was ‘bathed in a silence wrought by trauma’ (p. xi). I submit that as Australians, we have not been well-equipped to talk readily to, and form links with, each other; too much trauma lies between us that has not yet been jointly acknowledged and spoken about. I feel it was so with the young mothers in the group. There were complex

histories of personal and cultural trauma in their families, some of which was known, and some un-known.

There is much that needs to be thought about and borne at the gateway into motherhood, not least for these mothers: their youth, the arrival of their first baby, social isolation, difficult socio-economic background and trans-generational trauma. Much that needed to be tolerated in this group at the start was the experience of not-knowing – my own and theirs. Psychoanalysis offers a unique way of approaching, bearing, and holding the unknown. Furthermore, in a more active way psychoanalysis assists in thinking about relationships – relationship of mother to baby, to family and partner, to community, to the group facilitator, to the other mothers in the group and to self. Thinking, and space and time, allows for the possibility of forming links.

However, I had no idea how to bring young Aboriginal mothers into a group run by a white woman where there is a historical context of trauma perpetrated on Indigenous people by white people. While contemplating and waiting for the group to ‘begin’ and in an effort to try and begin it I attempted to build as many links as I could, including visiting local Aboriginal health services and connecting with the Aboriginal midwife and some of her young patients at the ante-natal clinics, while trying to encourage the young cohort of mothers to attend the group. I waited and held the space for what seemed like forever, as in fact I did not know how long I would have to wait, or indeed if my waiting was in vain. It was a bit like the agony of waiting and having to hold the possibility and impossibility, of bringing something new into existence – trying to conceive.

Eventually, it became possible to animate thought into action and a launch date was set, offering belly and baby hand and feet casting, and travel on the community bus from home to group and back again. These active steps were, I believe, what helped to bring the women in both literally and figuratively. And so the group began in February 2014, with four mothers and their babies, with the group growing to eight mothers and eight babies by the end of that year. When I asked the mothers how it was for them that as the group facilitator I was not Aboriginal some said they were glad I was not, as they would be able to talk more freely because I had no community connections and would not ‘spread their business’ around. However, there were likely other thoughts about this too, which were not expressed – something in the silence, no doubt.

My place with the group was an issue that, as a white person from South Africa with its history of apartheid, and not Australian-born, I struggled with, as it led me to wonder what I might possibly have to offer these women and how my presence among them might be experienced. This was such a knotty problem that I gave up trying to untangle it, and arrived at a point in my own mind where I decided I was simply a person among a group of people, who was interested in and wondering about the mothers, their babies and their experiences, and who might have something to offer, and also something to learn.

Interestingly, for the first few years of the group’s existence, when I went to speak with the mothers about Aboriginal culture and history and their own family stories, I found it extremely difficult to do so. There was a gulf, an unknown territory which I tried to navigate, between their culture and history and my own. In those moments, I

searched for words that did not yet encapsulate formulated thought. It took me more than 20 years of living in Australia to be able to meet and work with Indigenous people; this in stark contrast to my experience of having lived in South Africa, where race and culture were and are debated, loudly, ardently, sometimes violently. Difference between people is acknowledged and is a given and is part of the public conversation; the worst of this was the apartheid regime and its legacy. However, in Australia, for a long time, Indigenous people have been ‘marginalized’, denied, even, in the mainstream of the population’s thinking and certainly its perceived history.

This is clearly expressed in the Australian historian Henry Reynolds’ (1999) book, *‘Why weren’t we told?’* in which he challenges the silence of the prevailing narrative in the dominant Australian culture on the fact of Indigenous existence and the impact on Indigenous people of the arrival of the Europeans. This is in part due to numbers: according to recent census information black people in South Africa account for 81% of the population (Statistics SA, 2016). In Australia, Indigenous people account for 3% of the population (based on Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011 Census).

But that is insufficient to explain what Stanner, in his 1968 Boyer lectures (in Reynolds, 1999, p. 92) refers to as ‘a cult of forgetfulness’ – something Matthew McArdle referred to in his presentation earlier in the series – a deliberate attempt to erase Indigenous people and the violence perpetrated on them by white people, during the period of European arrival and beyond. Here, I believe that Stanner and Reynolds are referring to links of knowing that they were being attacked. Reynolds suggests many reasons which may contribute to this ‘mental block’, including an ‘evasion’ and ‘reticence’ regarding what ‘must have been a larger violence, a more comprehensive terror in the past’ which is not yet understood (p. 99). If indeed past historians have ‘draw[n] a veil’ (Spencer & Gillen, in Reynolds, 1968, p. 115) over our history, then this leaves us ill-equipped to know the past and therefore to know each other, and ourselves. The veil persists, and we are rendered disconnected from one another. Links between peoples and links in knowing are attacked, leaving blank spaces and within them, unresolved trauma. Perhaps this in some way explained the absence, the unformulated space between the young women and myself that was a key part of my countertransference experience in the group room.

There have been significant efforts over the past number of years to address this silence at a societal level, and Indigenous rights and recognition are gaining increasing prominence, e.g., with the current public debate around Recognition, Treaty and the Uluru Statement from the Heart, and through the numerous programs which are being developed to address the many resultant traumas of colonisation. However much of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous experiences of the past remain unspoken, unacknowledged, and unknown by the public at large and at times, by Indigenous individuals and communities themselves. I feel this deep problem formed part of our joint experience and presented at an interpersonal and at a psychic level, as a particular kind of silence between me and the mothers, where I frequently found myself stumped, confused, aimless and searching for words that did not seem to be available to me, and often retreating into my own silence of confusion and disorientation.

As group facilitator I shared some overlap with the mothers – all of us were women; and indeed we were all mothers, as it happened. On the face of it we spoke the same

language; but words too, were attempts at links that did not always reach. We inhabited the same land but were strangers to one another. We were united in coming together in the group, in that time – we shared a space. When the women first arrived in the group, about half had a partner who was involved with them and the baby. All except one had deeply fractured relationships with their own mothers. The fabric of the family, and of the community, had been massively disrupted over generations. There was one 17 year old, who lived with her mother, grandmother, brother, cousin, and baby; this was the only young woman whose immediate family was close, present and supportive.

Despite this experience of family isolation, most of the mothers over the course of the group's running undertook further study with some obtaining their driver's licences and undertaking training and employment. Almost all also reconnected with their own mothers and re-established relationships with them and between the grandparents and their grandchildren.

I propose that the women's regular attendance at the mothers' group contributed to these positive changes. In being provided with a consistent, open space for being and relating, without judgement, expectation or advice, the mothers and their babies were able to experience a reliable and psychologically holding environment, and a listening, a witnessing of their experience, even if not always accompanied by my knowing and understanding. In this I had in mind to offer, in Winnicott's (1965) words, a 'facilitating environment' which he determines is necessary to the healthy development of the infant (p. 39). According to this model, I attempted to provide what I imagined the mothers and their infants might need physically and psychically.

The mothers were able to share much of their experiences with each other and with me. I would suggest that this was integral to their increased capacity to discover themselves and their relationships, and develop their availability for, understanding of, and enjoyment of, their children. Links were formed at many levels.

There was no agenda for the weekly, three hours of group time, apart from the fact that a space was held open for them. The experience of the three hours was itself of value and worthy of reflection. Sometimes the time felt endless – much longer (literally but also exponentially) than the 50 minute sessions, to which as a therapist I am accustomed. The experience of reaching 'the end of my capacity of time' after a while, and then the time continuing on, and on, allowed for an experience of timelessness, itself an Indigenous way of being in the world, even though the group time was bounded by Western ways of a three hour time limit. Something of an ongoingness, presence and availability was experienced, which lent itself to exploration, imagination, dreaming and discovery in the space. Sometimes the silence felt disorientating and disquieting; sometimes it allowed for imagining and for something relational to emerge.

At first the time was unstructured, however over time a structure evolved organically that provided a holding experience for us all. By the final year of group, the first half hour comprised all of us together in the group room once the mothers and children arrived on the bus. This time was for greetings, any major news to be shared, the children to show their toys from home, and the time for me to make hot chocolates all around, even in the sweltering heat of summer. This was something of a ritual and

could not be omitted. The mothers and children arrived in the room set up with the regular box of toys, books and paper with crayons, child's table and chairs, a bag with cushions and sheet for a cubby house, and a healthy morning tea. All had something to eat and drink at this point. After the first half hour, the children would go down the short corridor with our art therapist for an hour of art therapy. This aspect of our work evolved as the needs of the children became increasingly important to meet separately, as they grew more into individuals. This adaptation also had the significant benefit of allowing the mothers an hour without interruption to talk at a deeply personal level with each other and with me.

After the hour, we would reunite and share a healthy cooked lunch together. All the mothers said it was often the only cooked meal they would have in the week, and that they were always so full afterwards that they would not need dinner that night. After lunch there was the opportunity to pack the remaining food into take-away containers. In addition, there was food on offer from local charity Oz Harvest. For the mothers, they would go home laden with nutritious food that they could share with their extended families or use later in the week to feed themselves and their children. Then, if the weather was fine we would traipse outside for a play; if not we would stay indoors and continue to talk while the children played. When there was a birthday we would celebrate with cake and candles.

By the end of our time in group there were four mothers and their four children who would come to the group. The children had known each other, and me, since their birth or very early months. They were all developing well on most parameters; however, strikingly, all bar one had been assessed as having significant speech delay. This may in part be a result of early trauma in the lives of many of the children: It could be argued that with these very young, disadvantaged and under-supported mothers whose own mothers, community elders and other role models had largely been unavailable and beyond access until relatively recently, these women had not been supported through the experience of engaging with their babies to foster their psychic development and that their attachment to their babies has been compromised by their circumstances.

However, I propose that the difficulty around putting aspects of thought and experience into words is not limited to the children but extends to their mothers, families, communities, and the broader population of all backgrounds: there are some things we find extremely difficult to speak about, in part because they are not yet known in a conscious way: unspoken, unprocessed trauma. It took us some time to begin to build a common language about the past. One example of this is when, in our final year of group, one of the mothers mentioned, in passing, that her grandmother had been part of the Stolen Generations and had been 'taken' from her family at the age of three. It had taken six years for this mother to mention this horrifying fact of her personal history. When I wondered aloud what it might have been like for her grandmother to be removed – stolen – from her family when she was three years old, and that the group member's own child who sat with us in the group room in that moment, was already four years old, a year older than her grandmother had been when removed from her family, the mother stopped, shocked, and said, "I've never thought about that – what would it have been like for my grandmother", and some of the impact of this trauma began to be brought into her awareness and the awareness of the group as we looked over to her own, very beautiful daughter and

contemplated the meaning of this. Links which had historically been annihilated but perhaps were 'lying in wait' were given the opportunity to form, allowing some meaning to flow.

The mothers' group provided a small experience of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people coming together to share a space. There was much not-knowing about their family and their backgrounds on my part, and most of the mothers would say they knew little about Aboriginal culture, or about their family's generational history. We would all sit with this absence of a shared narrative, at many levels. I do not know a better way to come at these experiences than through psychoanalytic thinking: to know that silence is a signal; and to hold the not-knowing. The countertransference feelings this evokes included confusion, a sense of lost-ness, unknowable vastness, the pain of absence and hopelessness at finding one's way. These feelings could feel unbearable at times, a great pain in one's chest.

And yet over time our connections to each other: myself, the mothers and the children, all developed into close personal relationships that ran to a deep level. We would sometimes sit in not-knowing, and process what we were able to. We came together, consistently meeting on the same day every week for many years. For some, Mothers' Group was the only relational experience outside of the mother-child dyad that was consistently available to them. The power of the group was evident in, for example, how mothers would help each other with their lived experiences. When one mother, stressed and distracted, was trying to feed her very fussy baby who had a cleft palate, the youngest mother in the group then aged 18, said to her, 'I think he needs to see your face', at which the mother turned to face her infant, and her fears. The infant settled quickly and went on to have a full feed, finally content in his mother's more settled gaze.

Through our time together we saw boyfriends come and go, witnessed and tried to solve housing problems, childhood illnesses, domestic violence, court appearances, deaths in the family, suicides in the community, employment struggles, financial difficulties, familial disruptions. We celebrated birthdays, children's milestones, new relationships, reconnections with estranged family members, job offers, completions of courses, driver's licences earned, new purchases, trips away, and much more.

There were many examples of the mothers' talking about their lives in which they gradually revealed more of themselves and their troubles, and joys, in the deepening relationships between us. They showed enormous levels of commitment, resilience, determination, hopefulness, potential, insight and alive-ness. They used the space provided for them, daring to trust and increasingly valuing the connections they found there. For many, there was no Women's Circle in their lives apart from Mothers' Group where they could sit and think about who they were and what they wanted for themselves and their children. The children always seemed to know what to do with the space, developed in themselves, and grew very close to each other. At times there was a silence which was not knowable; but some experiences were brought into the room and were able to be named, thought about and processed. Links were formed at many levels, bringing meaning and value.

Thus I tried to provide a space for the women and their children within a psychoanalytic framework where ideas, thoughts and experiences could be brought in,

held, thought about, even if no definitive answers were always found. Psychoanalysis is one of the most useful ways to be able to think about this, as it is to hold the absence of talk in mind, and to try and make sense of the non-verbal and verbal experiences which were brought into the room. Perhaps we possess the fragments of knowledge and experience, the part-objects; but we must do the work of linking: speaking, thinking, reading, learning, asking, listening, waiting, bearing - in order to find meaning and connection between and among us.

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