

The Task of Confronting Identity in A Large Group: A Reflective Essay

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Religious gatherings. Protests. Riots. Supermarkets. Malls. Chaos. Mindlessness. Schools. Institutions. Obliteration.

If you asked me three or four years ago, what I think of when I think large groups, these would have been my associations.

In 2019, at the Summer School with the theme of Tolerance: Harboring Diversity, I was a part of a large group which unfolded over three days. It seemed that people were able to carry their history and tell it with a sense of conviction, this is not something I thought people could do, only textbooks. For the first time, I was able to put a finger on a feeling that plagued me on and off. It felt something akin to what I imagine an insect feels like if you were to pick it up from where you found it and drive outside the city and let it go. My essay is an attempt to conceptualize the thoughts behind that feeling.

Since that time, I have been participating in several large groups. In each of them – whether it was the Large Group sessions organized by GASi or what has come to be called the Alternative Large Group that is hosted in India or the AAGP Sydney Large Groups, I have found myself signing up and participating in these groups, often with a feeling of “Why am I a part of this?” - “What is my part in this?”

In the Foulkes lecture on Large Group Perspectives, De Mare says “It is only in the larger group that cultural dimensions can be comprehensively explored.” If I think about it, it seems logical, however, I do not think I was prepared for the emotional challenge of this exploration. I was eerily aware of a fear of revealing something that I was too afraid to see, or exposing something that would betray my sense of identity. I did not know where to place these things.

In the abstract of a paper on Bi-Cultural Dilemmas, Teresa von Sommaruga Howard says: “The large group often reveals what a society has tried to forget” (2012). My essay is an attempt to uncover and stew in something of what has been forgotten in the social environment I grew up in – the ambiguity of navigating the separation of us and them. For me, this has been a central struggle in discovering my identity. I want to use this essay to outline some struggles in processing a sense of belonging as connected to my identity in a Large Group.

What is in an Origin Story?

I was born in Kerala, a state in the South of India, and raised in Goa, the smallest state in a very large country. My mother tongue was a language that did not quite sound like the language – Konkani – spoken in Goa. My mother tongue did not sound like any other language I heard, yet, it seemed to have words borrowed from several languages. Even within my own family, it seemed that my immediate paternal and maternal family spoke very differently from the extended family. This is not something I questioned, it seemed like a thing to adapt to, it was true of all my relatives, the language of the family, the state, and the country were not the same. This made the question of where are you from a little complicated – because it would seem that neither the geographical state where I was born nor the state I was raised in was where I am *from*. I realized that the question was about the “origin” of my family – which in some way is equated with my origin.

My family’s origins are in the North of India, near Kashmir, on the banks of Saraswat. During an invasion, my family fled to the South, to Goa, and when Goa was colonized by the Portuguese,

then to Kerala. I realized I heard this story once in one of my history classes, as a nameless group of people that would flee. I have equated this fleeing with survival - survival to preserve a social identity – more specifically, perhaps a religious identity. We fled successfully, by that I mean that we were not forced to give in to the history of any of the conditions laid down by an oppressor (at least overtly), but it created (..and continues to create..) a strange sense of rootlessness. Some erasures are more tolerable than others. A feeling of belonging everywhere and nowhere at the same time. A feeling of being categorised as something by one who sees me – and not feeling that it is a true categorization.

Within my family structure, however, there is a successful categorization, of what is us and them – A structure of what we eat and do not eat, of things we wear and do not wear, of how we do and do not present ourselves, and of who we mingle and do not mingle with. Within my family's structure, one finds emphasis on similarities and differences – of this is what we do because this is how we do it in this family versus this is what they do and we do not do that in this family. However, in that, I find myself in something of limbo – I am a member of my family and at the same time, I do share their ideologies and beliefs, I am an “us” and a “them” at the same time.

The dichotomy of denigration – idealization and bad – good, is often spoken about, however, I find myself identifying with that what is denigrated and idealized in my family, does not make recognition of my identity even more difficult? Perhaps my family needs to preserve this idealization, lest, they feel much like I do, struggling to grasp my identity.

My first fear in a Large Group was of not having a simple identity to present like some of my colleagues might have the pleasure of. If your origins come from history to flee to preserve your identity and find yourself in an entirely different social existence – did you succeed to preserve it? In trying to preserve our religious identity what did we lose? We do not discuss this in our family. I, however, find myself not believing in my family's religious inclinations. Where does this leave me? I am a Hindu by birth and I do not follow the religion, similarly, I am a Keralite by birth and a Goan and perhaps Indian, and yet I do not feel a sense of connection with any of these identities. I never feel identified enough.

I recognize more parts about myself that are not this, than parts that are.

Is that why I am detached from my history? Is this why I am wrapped in feelings of terror as I enter large groups?

In his paper on racism, Dalal (2006) talks about the paradox of belonging – in that, to belong to one in to not belong to another. He makes reference to Winnicott describing an infant's *I-am and not-me* moments which create a paranoid moment – fearing attack from those not me elements in the environment. I relate my fear to this experience, however, I wonder if my sense of meaninglessness is created by an inability to accept my belongingness. In failing to somehow believe that I belong to all the categories ascribed to me – Keralite, Goan, Hindu – am I making, as Dalal (2006) says, the belongingness category so large that it is meaningless? Or is my fight to preserve the I, an attempt to negotiate how much of me is *us* and how much of me is *them*?

Does this internal struggle count as a reflection of what made my ancestors flee from one land to another, in an attempt to constantly negotiate what is us and what is them? If so, in the attempt to become an “us” to Group Analysts, who are the “them” I am setting myself apart from? Who are the “us” and “them” of Group Analysis? Who are the “us” and “them” in my training?

“Us” and “Them”

In school, I did very well with History. It was taught as an impersonal narrative of events that occurred between communities that existed before my peers and I were born, it is there that I learned about the history of Colonialism. It seemed like a thing that had happened and gone. The most we thought about in class was an exam question about the advantages and disadvantages of the railway system. This education system, my history teacher explained, was a gift of the British Raj (The British Rule). As were machinery and the judicial system. They made us less "backward". My mind and perhaps the minds of my classmates were internalizing contempt for ourselves. It emerged with great force when I experienced my first large group with people who share a history of being colonized and a history of colonizing. I felt like I should shrink away and not speak.

The narrative of the British coming into India to form an “alliance” and introduce educational, political, and economic systems was absent from the narrative of what that took away from us. In the years before that, the history of India being invaded by rulers of different lands was written and presented with such glory that it shadowed everything that was violated and broken – people, lands, or narratives. I wonder if the textbooks were trying to hide the shame of having welcomed what seems to have destroyed us or perhaps of not being able to fight back.

Perhaps thinking about colonialism as a concept in the textbook allowed me to further dissociate from how much of it I carry in my identity – My childhood was full of praise for my ability to speak English fluently, of being able to use the right cutlery despite using my hands for most meals and a struggle of nuns in a convent school trying to get to sit and speak in a ladylike manner, while I resisted these attempts overly, something stuck because going into a Large Group made me want to be "proper". Is this a nudge of wanting to be the "us" in a Large Group dominated by white voices?

Thinking about this, I understand something of what Fanon has written about, which is recollected in Blackwell's Foulkes lecture about “internalizing the colonizer's valuation of the superiority of whiteness”. Adding to that the question of am I “us” or “them”; I relate my experience as being a representation of “them” while being “us” in the Large Group. The Large Group also brings to mind instances of when I started to mix with students from other parts of the country my ability to be proper was something I was ridiculed for -if I spoke English, I obviously could not speak other Indian languages, surely not with the same fluency.

Which side am I on? – This is a question that emerges very often in my mind in large groups. Perhaps it is my illusion that I get to pick, as I mentioned in the section before, the categories have been assigned and I have to navigate through this categorization to establish my identity. I wonder if the right question to ask might be *What side am I NOT on?*

Perhaps in my mind, the boundaries between us and them are dangerously fluid and this scares me because I recognize that to hold on to an identity, I will have to separate my identity from something else and perhaps that is not something I am ready to face. My ancestors had to separate their identity from whoever ruled the land at the time and ended up feeling a sense of rootlessness. The country I belong to had to separate itself with a partition as it created its identity. India's "independence" shares an anniversary with a partition. The pain of this independence is buried deep under a pile of violence and terror, there is an explicit recognition of enmity between the part that was split off and what remained to be called India.

Dalal (2009) makes the argument that it is possible to frame both encounters in terms both of similarity and of difference and I am inclined to agree, however, it involves navigating an ocean

of terror and anxiety and perhaps it is much too painful to do so – perhaps why my family chooses to preserve their “us” as do several Indians.

This pain, this limbo, that I find myself trying to navigate is much better narrated in a short story by Saadat Hasan Manto a writer and a playwright, born in India and after the partition lived in Pakistan. He writes an Urdu story called Toba Tek Singh about the exchange of patients between Asylums in India and Pakistan, based on their religion. In the story there are several conversations about why they are being sent to the other side even though they do not speak the language or have never been there, in that, their sides are decided for them.

“.....There was one Sikh who had been in the insane asylum for fifteen years. Strange and remarkable words were always be heard on his lips: "*Upar di gur gur di annex di be dhyana di mung di daal of the lantern.*" He slept neither by day nor by night. The guards said that in the long duration of fifteen years he hadn't slept even for a moment. When he found someone to confide in, he asked: "Where is Toba Tek Singh?" Some said it was in Hindustan, some said it was in Pakistan.....

“.....On the day of the exchange, wardens stood at what was marked as the border of India and that of Pakistan. He repeated the question of the officer, who said that it was in Pakistan, however, the guards insisted he was to go to Hindustan, they told him it is where he will find Toba Tek Singh. He could not believe either. The story ends with the man collapsing where he was standing in the space between the lines:

From here and there several officers came running, and they saw that the man who for fifteen years, day and night, had constantly stayed on his feet, lay prostrate. There, behind barbed wire, was Hindustan. Here, behind the same kind of wire, was Pakistan. In between, on that piece of ground that had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh.”¹

Fear of Vilification

If I am constantly navigating my identity by separating myself from a "them" and committing myself to an "us", the process is accompanied by a feeling of shame in the Large Groups I walk into. Perhaps, I am ashamed of my wellness in the Large Groups.

I was afraid of being confronted about it, if I was not a victim in the group, surely, I was the oppressor and my silence meant complying with the oppressor's narrative. It seemed to me that being in these groups meant that I was handed the task of representation. I am not sure by whom, but I felt immense pressure, immediately followed by a sense of shame in response to which I chose to remain silent, it seemed like the smarter thing to do. I think I was struggling to bring the news of what was happening around me, because it had to sound relevant enough to prompt a response, otherwise, I would fail the reputation of being seen as a vulnerable, poor country. What is the appropriate tone to convey vulnerability?

I felt like I had to accurately report the number of COVID cases and the number of deaths and give an analysis of the health care system, the lack thereof, and of the way the governance of those who run the state has failed the people, narrate stories of how migrant workers had to return home on foot, with no water, succumbing to illness as they travel and somehow that it was the responsibility of this person, that was currently sitting on a chair, indoors, stocked up on groceries and aware of where her loved ones were. I was terribly aware of how safety means different things to different people in the group.

The months before the lockdowns in response to COVID-19 were laid down, there were protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (Bill). This Bill essentially stated that Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian immigrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh who

arrived in India before 2015 would be citizens of India, as long as they provided the appropriate documents. However, it excluded the mention of Muslims. It also created the threat of people from lower socio-economic communities being rendered stateless and ending up in a detention camp if they cannot show the documents. These protests coincided with a riot at a university in the North of India that has seemed to voice the upheaval of the country at different times. While I participated in some of the protests, while continually having arguments with my family, who believed I should stay away from what does not concern me, I was also aware of the layer of privilege that protects me. I was born in a Hindu family. I was born in a Hindu family, with a history of fleeing when the situation got uncomfortable, flight had preserved my family for generations. Was this experience of shame and silence survivor's guilt? Is carrying guilt a way of deflecting responsibility? I have sat with these questions in many groups.

¹Translated from the Urdu by Frances W. Pritchett

I would often feel afraid to be seen. When pointed questions were asked about India, particularly, in the Alternative Large Group which is "hosted" in India, by the virtue of the organizer being in India, I felt like I had to answer with the same zeal my colleagues from Italy,

New Zealand, Israel, Palestine, Greece, US, London, Sydney, and some parts of China did. I have admitted more than once of being intellectually intimidated by the knowledge they seem to have. This was often responded to by a need to bring in feelings, or by an association or two. However, after so many groups, my intimidation stays the same and makes me wonder if it is an unwillingness to learn, and if perhaps this means that I am not good enough to become a group analyst. What sort of group analyst cannot take an authoritative stand?

Was my intimidation a misunderstanding of my feelings? Was I unable to understand the trauma that was being conveyed? Was it because I had been unable to locate the socio-political trauma within myself? Is this the cost of my survival? What if, I was on the "wrong" side of this? What if the history my family has cut off from was that of the oppressor? Survival feels like a privilege.

I must make it clear that I do not, as De Mare refers in his lecture, imply that the Large Group space is being experienced as a bad conscience or a persecutory environment, rather, I find it inviting me to be open and share my thoughts, but at the same time, it seems to invoke my superego, in a way that I have not been aware of before. I seem to find myself in limbo between feeling like I can speak freely and establish my identity or withdrawing and preserving the illusion of having an "independent identity". There have been several sessions where I have felt the invitation to speak, sometimes as the silent voice that has not said anything and other times as the Indian voice that seems to have gone silent. It makes me feel exotic. If our history says anything, it is that being exotic is dangerous. I perceive curiosity as an attack, it makes me wonder, how will I ever move to the fellowship that De Mare fondly refers to.

In reading Teresa von Sommaruga Howard's paper titled Socio-political Trauma: Forgetting, Remembering, and Group Analysis, it dawned on me that these experiences are what transgenerational transgression of trauma feels like. In her paper, she writes of her experiences growing up in a country her family moved to, to leave behind the effects of what the war had done to them. She talks about what moving on does in the face of trauma. She talks about growing up with a sense of dissonance but nothing is available to help. In the abstract she writes: "Moving away, forgetting, or simply burying what is too painful disconnects the present from the past, making it difficult for subsequent generations to develop a coherent narrative of their history and identity." (2009, 1).

She says that Group Analysis could provide a space for individuals to look back at what is lost. I am inclined to agree with her through my experience. I think that being in a Group Analytic space

and looking at what could be possible, has created a willingness in me, to acknowledge my social identity, despite its pain.

Navigating my identity as a Group Analysis Trainee: A Struggle for Fellowship

My experience of the Large Groups in our training has been different. I'm not sure if it is because it started as a small group, at least, in terms of the number. I am part of the first cohort of Group Analysis, India. Establishing this training has been accompanied by a lot of uncertainty. In the Large Groups, this was accompanied by a deafening silence, sometimes it felt like a task of having to convey information about what the culture is like, our trainers did not share our cultural background, it seemed like they understood something of it, but I believe I sat through most of these groups with rage. I am unsure if my rage was internally an acknowledgment of how much about the "us" I did not know, and even in belonging to an Indian cohort, my inability to inform them could be mistaken for not being *actually* Indian.

In my intermediate year, the large group has more members than the first year. However, we all meet online. In the course of this training, I have moved out of India. To belong to the Group Analysis India cohort and no longer live in India seems strange. As everything is online over the past two years, its consequences do not seem so grave, I do not know what happens when we begin to meet face to face again. I carry the rage, though. It seems like that is all I do. Is it easier to hold anger in this space where people feel more like home as opposed to the other spaces where I feel like I am representing home? Sometimes in difficult conversations in the groups, I find myself splitting off – perhaps much like my social structures (my family and my country) have had to split off to preserve something. As part of the first cohort, is my responsibility in the Large Group also to make something easier for those who will continue to join?

Perhaps it is the paranoia I mentioned earlier in being called out as not belonging. As I navigate these feelings, in the Large Group in my training, I worry about my capacity for Fellowship. In my reading, I experience that as one of the goals of being in a large group.

I remember feeling called out in one of the groups, when someone said, You guys need to read more Dalit literature. In that instance, I belonged to the other, the category that had oppressed and was ignorant. However, I was also enraged, perhaps because I recognized the need to locate the oppressor, which in this case, being a Brahmin (Characterized as "upper" caste) Hindu would be me. My colleague was right, I do need to read more, however, before that, I think I need to make myself available for listening and I cannot do that if I do not find ways of processing my trauma.....and perhaps that is why I come into Large Groups. To find a space that will tolerate my ambiguity, in being one and another at the same time.

Perhaps the process is not linear. I am privileged and oppressed. Maybe I have to hate and be a part of the fellowship. Maybe I am here to heal something that has been fractured so many times I feel numb with apathy. Maybe I go to Large Groups, so I can find the courage to settle and call something home, without feeling the need to plaster on top of the cracks, but fill them in, slowly.

Perhaps my struggle is an embodiment of what Dalal refers to in his paper on the Paradox of belonging: "Although our experience is one of 'finding' groupings, they are all nevertheless in some in some sense not only always 'made', but also continually in a process of being 'made'; and further, unbeknownst to ourselves, we are all unwitting participants in this ongoing process." (2009, pp.2)

It makes me wonder how much work I have to do with myself to experience something positive. Am I so used to feeling traumatized that I refuse to process any of it? If so, can I become a Group

Analyst? Surely, there is more to this than 5 years of mandatory attendance, writing essays, running groups, reading, and being in supervision.

As I try to ease some knots in my mind, I think about what made me turn towards Group Analysis in the first place, why I chose to become a part of this group. In my experience, it has allowed its members to develop a capacity to tolerate what is unknown to explore it. It has allowed us and them to come together to create a dialogue and perhaps in witnessing these dialogues and trying to be a part of them, I will be able to embrace the fluidity of what it means to belong.

It may not be customary to have a title at the end of an essay, but I want to put one, I have had a recurring thought as I write this: The More I Write, The More You Know What I Don't Know

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