

Abstract

Author: Gwen Hanrahan

TITLE: From the other side – translating our encounter with real and imagined borders.

'Your discovery was my land; my discovery is your borders' (*). As systemic-psychoanalytic consultants, we discover a client's land from the other side, the outside. We encounter and cross their organisational borders and contours and seek to translate these embodied experiences to make sense of what else, unconsciously, might be going on and getting in their way.

We bring with us into this work our multiple identities, identities that may carry meaning in the client's historical and contemporary socio-political contexts. Our identity can become enmeshed with what we encounter there. Rather than considering such enmeshments as a psychic wall or barrier, where difference is not allowed, the author invites consideration of the concomitant unconscious dynamics in order to complement and expand our understanding of the client's particular predicament.

- What does my crossing of their borders allow me to detect, decipher and distil?
- What does my 'self-as-instrument' pick up and in turn reveal?
- What happens to me and my identity while in their land?
- How is 'the awful moment' a gift? What might it communicate?

This paper will explore, through two contrasting client engagements, how the consultant's Irish identity – together with being female and Tavistock trained – took on a particular use and meaning in relation to the client dilemma and to the intervention task itself. In both cases, the presenting issue was an organisational change that left the senior leader puzzled as to why it was not working or anxious that a wider leadership of the change occur.

The work took place in early summer 2019 against the socio-economic and political backdrop of a UK polarised and ensnared in a decade of social care cuts and austerity measures and three years of Brexit wrangling with the pernicky 'Irish (border) question' and all its ramifications. In the UK today, and particularly England, Irish identity is still enmeshed in particular roles and blind spots in the psycho-social unconscious of Britain, at times resurfacing as the tolerated other, the belligerent other, and/or the denigrated other (Lucey, 2015; O'Toole, 2019).

The first case considers work as a consultant pair with a not-for-profit social housing organisation in Greater London. The second with a private wealth management firm in central London, the UK division of a European owned company. In the first, Irish identity embodied the client's invisible yet internal 'hard borders' and also the tolerated other in the managerial system in place of the competent Black female manager. In the second, Irish became the irritant, troublesome other in the consulting team, mirroring the client's projections onto their 'foreign, demanding' owners.

The paper will present salient moments from each case and draw on psychoanalytic and systemic concepts and theories to consider the unconscious projective processes into and within the consultant system that mirrored the dynamics and anxieties of the clients system. It will invite consideration of how identity may be unconsciously used and, if reflected upon as part of the work, can deepen our understanding of our client's experience at work, be that of a contested primary task, task and role anxieties, social defences, power/authority relations, and leadership/followership.

Tajik, I. (2019) citation from a public art installation by Iman Tajik, a Glasgow-based Iranian artist, Bankside London October 2019.

Lucey, A. (2018) Paradoxes and blind spots: an exploration of Irish identity in British organizations and society, in *Thinking Space: Promoting Thinking About Race, Culture and Diversity*. pp 166-183, Karnac. London.

O'Toole, F. (2018) *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain*. Head of Zeus, London.

SHORT BIO:**Gwen Hanrahan**

Gwen Hanrahan is a consultant and coach, specialising in organisation and leadership development. Her experience are primarily in commercial sectors in Europe and North America, and more recently with public and NGO organisations. She is a visiting lecturer at the Tavistock Clinic, a supervisor on the Executive Coaching Program at Tavistock Consulting, holds EMCC Accreditation as Senior Practitioner, and staffs on group relations conferences internationally.