

With wings outstretched: Reflections on belonging, solidarity and transformation following narrative informed group work with women

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Volume 2

Issue 1

Spring 2019

Keywords:

narrative, solidarity, transformation, groupwork with women, becoming, belonging

Citation Link

Abstract

This paper presents and invites reflections on belonging, solidarity and "being with" from within and between a practice and research frame. The paper explores the interconnected stories of personal development and transformation that emerged from a four year doctoral research project whilst also paying appropriate attention to the practice context, which is centralised given that the research is practice-based. Deliberate connections are made between the author's own experiences of transformation and the stories of transformation that women who were part of the research have shared. In so doing the importance of solidarity and being with is privileged. In a climate where group work is often viewed as an efficient way to teach "psychological skills" to people who are viewed as lacking such skills, offering a different (relational) frame challenges the individualised, deficit-defined discourse.

Murmurations

Heart pounding at speed
I feel the reaches of my outstretched wings
Almost touch another
I sense the fluttering of feathers
And the beating of hearts
Echoing in my blood
We move as one, left, right
Subtle shifts and movements in the air
Swooping down as one
Swift, ferocious
Diving into the unknown
A union in the air
We do not think, we *feel* the way
Memory living in our wings
And in our mind
We feel ourselves within the flow
We are the way, we know!

Belonging

I wrote this poem in the middle of a four year doctoral research project into systemic practice. My inquiry focused on experiences of being part of groups I have facilitated with women who have experienced abuse and oppression. At the time of writing this poem, I was seated at the window of a rented cabin, looking out at a forest scene and was imagining myself to be one of the birds flying around the woodland. In my head were ideas around solidarity and connectivity. I was, in the moment, feeling connected with the nature I saw around me; temporarily, at least, feeling that sense of unity with my environment that Gregory Bateson might call the unity of “*mind and nature*” (Bateson 1979). Nora Bateson (2016) has further explored the inseparable relationship between “*humanity and nature*” and I was feeling connected with this thinking, feeling a part of the natural environment I was within.

I was somewhere in this time/space whilst writing this poem. As I re-read it though I am also aware (remembering) that, at the time, I was feeling partially lost and somewhat isolated. I had not long started a new job, and did not at that point have a sense of where I fitted within the structure of the organisation. I had just moved back to Wales, following four years of living away from home on a British island. I was connecting and re-connecting with people, places, ideas. I was also on this day spending time with old friends who have always been for me a touchstone, a connection with my home town, my young adulthood, my sense of collective identity. I had played a team sport (rugby) with them, one way of feeling a *part of* something, something bigger than myself, a team identity, a sense of solidarity, moving with others at my side, a murmuration, if you will.

As I was looking out of the window though I was feeling much more *apart from* than a *part of*. I was thinking about myself in relation to my *shifting* identity, moving into a new phase of my life, trying to make sense of myself as a doctoral researcher. Where did this fit with my family and culture of origin identity? Nobody else in my immediate family and not so many people from my friendship/ social group had studied beyond secondary school education. What does this mean for me, and my sense of belonging?

I grew up in an industrial town. We were, like most other people around us, a white “working class” family, at least that is the classification I have probably most identified with over the years. But this is not clear cut. I have never really had a clear sense of fit. As a family we sort of moved between socio-economic status through my childhood and adolescence and I probably, looking back, never *did* feel quite sure where I “belonged”. I have travelled a lot through my adult years and this is probably not unconnected.

I realise, as I look back then, that the poem is not just telling a story of unity it is also reflecting this *yearning* for fit - for a sense of collective identity. I was, I think, somewhat out of kilter with, not my physical surroundings, the nature that was around me, but with the *culture* of my home town and the people I love. This was an uncomfortable place to be and I can recall that discomfort, it was a pit of the stomach kind of fluttery feeling. Each group I seemed to move into or between - work groups, my university cohort, my friendships, my family group all seemed to slightly rub rather than gel. It was as if my tuning had changed and I was tuned in to differences rather than sameness. All I could see was reasons why I thought I did not belong. I wanted to touch someone’s outstretched wing and be touched back, to feel connected.

I remember at the time thinking this was ironic given that I was researching group work and reading/thinking so much about group identity and solidarity. I had not long written a short paper about belonging (Salter 2017b) but where on earth did I now belong?

I remember reading and quoting Lang (2010) at the time who says that “...*belonging ... is the means through which human beings experience personal growth, social development, and socialisation and sustain relevance to and influence on the society in which they live, throughout their lives.*” I tend to agree. I also though see it as a *cultural* connection, a sense of cohesion with past, current and potential future notions of identity that are embedded into our personal, family, community and wider cultural narratives. I also feel it is not static. We do not either *have* a sense of belonging or do *not*. It moves about, side to side and up and down, a bit like my socio-economic status.

This paper then is an exploration of the interconnected story of my own personal development and the transformation I was noticing within me as I “became” a doctoral researcher, positioned alongside the stories of women I was talking with and connecting with through *their* stories of transformation.

Cultivating trees of life in group work

David Denborough (2008) writes about using “the tree of life” as a metaphor, for supporting people to share stories about their lives, to engage with current and intergenerational stories; cultural and personal. This idea has been used in many different scenarios, in health and in social care, and has been a common approach within popular education. Denborough references Sally Timmel and Anne Hope (1984) as the source for his discovery of the metaphor, and Timmel and Hope reference Paulo Freire as their influence. (Denborough 2008, p.72). I discovered it via David Denborough and have been using it for many years in individual therapy and in groups. Recently I have been using it in creative groups with women in secondary care mental health services, as a means to cultivate expression and grow creativity. I have also used it in group work with women who have been sexually abused as a way to provide a wider context to stories of abuse. It lends itself well to both these contexts.

It provides a template for thinking about the legacies that have influenced our lives and the legacies we leave behind us. It promotes flexibility and movement, between places and between times. It also speaks to centuries-old connections between people and the earth - a connection that we often forget about in western society. It *re*-connects us with earthly, spiritual *and* human relationships and with intergenerational stories of culture and tradition.

The different words on the tree of life speak to multiple relationships, relationships with those who have been before us and those who will come after us, and with the earth itself. It allows space to think about the legacy we will leave, not just the legacy we are living with. It allows us to think about what we have learnt from the generation before us, the one before that and ones in our long distant past. It helps people to explore their roots and experience a groundedness within their story telling.

These pictures (on the next two pages) are ones I have drawn within groups I have been part of. They show different version of “trees of life” with close-ups of some of the words that make up the stories that can then be told.



Figure 3. Tree of life (acrylic)

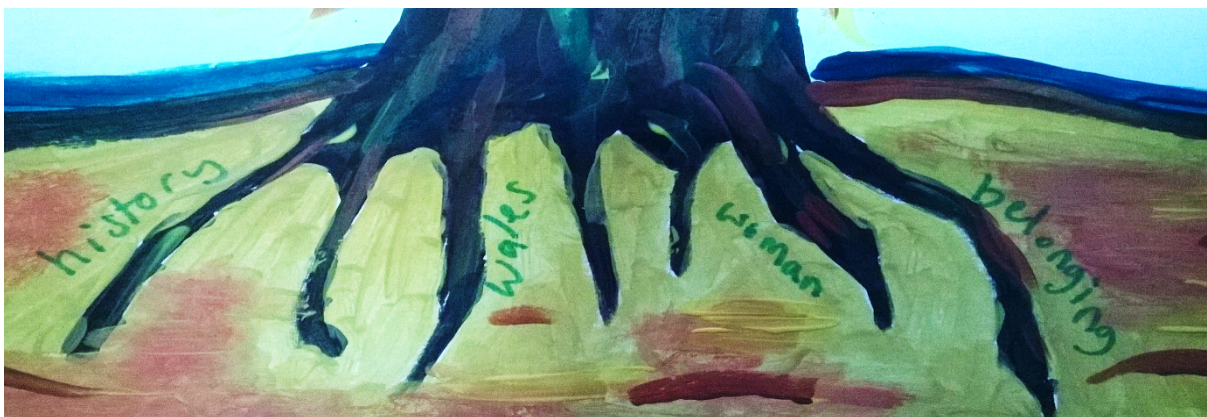


Figure 4. Laying down roots (from picture 3)

When I drew my own tree of life for the first time, some years ago now, I was able to honour my Welsh heritage - the Celtic stories that have been influential in my life and stories that I have shared with others. Closer to home I could also honour, maybe also for the first time, what my mother had taught me – so many things that I had forgotten to acknowledge. Despite the many challenges she experienced in *her* life, she taught me that it didn't have to be that way; that gender, class and geography need not dictate the choices I make. I was also able to make connections with my own beliefs, ideologies, spirituality and even creativity that otherwise (more often than not) might remain

hidden. I was also able to honour what I have learnt and gained from being with other women in group contexts.

When exploring this in groups, I notice that others have similar experiences, often noticing (as if with new eyes) their own resourcefulness and creativity and reconnecting with intergenerational stories that may have previously felt lost. Incidentally, it was after telling a story about drawing my tree of life and realising that I was using the same script of “I am no good at art” to describe (apologise for) my picture, that I decided that I was bored of telling that story and took up art lessons, which I engaged in throughout/ alongside the doctoral research. This is but one story of transformation- a reclamation of resourcefulness and creativity that helped me to feel more confident in developing more creative ways of being with others in group contexts. This has been transformative therefore for my practice also.

These are all important stories that reveal themselves through metaphor and through connecting with others; in a contemporary and an inter-generational sense.

In working with women who have been sexually abused, the addition (metaphor) of a “dung heap” within the picture (as seen in Figure 2) allows for experiences, stories and people that have been influential in a person’s life (such as an abuser or the impact of abuse) to be in the picture, part of the wider cycle of life but not in, on or connected with the tree. It offers a visual way to “bin” (or as some women have done to “set fire” to) old stories, including those of abuse. It can help to create distance as well as connection and belonging.

Hiraeth - exploring my own cultural story of belonging

Belonging in the *Welsh* language would be translated as “perthyn”, but the word that is often used is “hiraeth”. There is no direct translation to English for hiraeth but it can perhaps be best described as a kind of homesick that is *culturally* situated. A *longing for* maybe more than a *belonging to* is another way to story it. It is more emotionally resonant than perthyn, more connected with the landscape, the culture and the *relationship* between the land and its people. I have previously written about hiraeth in a special edition of *Context* that marked the impact that John Burnham’s (1992, 2012) “Social Graces” model has had on the systemic field. My contribution explored the role that geography has in our lives (Salter 2017). Liz Day, exploring her own Welsh heritage in *Murmurations* (Day 2017) also referenced hiraeth (as have many artists, writers and poets) so this is maybe a word that many people connect with within the context of belonging.

When I was living outside of Wales, I missed the land - the mountains and landmarks that gave me familiar reference points for my life and I experienced this sense of longing, a *hiraeth* for Wales. I had been longing for more space, for a wider geographical and cultural landscape, but once back in Wales, I seemed to be yearning something more intimate, more personal. It was not just about landscape, what could be called a *belonging to*, it was about *belonging with*. A yearning to be (long) with others.

Dion (2000) has written about belonging as a core component in making sense of group cohesiveness, and I agree that a sense of belonging is important in this context. Groups that are purposefully constructed are often done so around a theme that already connects people. Groups I have been part of and facilitated would fit within this concept of group cohesion and identity.

The ones that have resonated for me and which I continue to hold in my mind are the groups where I have worked with women who have experienced abuse and oppression. Some of these have been in Wales and some in the island community I lived and worked in between 2012 and 2016. These are the ones that my research centred on, in that same period.

These groups moved me to pay more attention to what could be seen as a movement from private to public domains, to invisibility to visibility. When women come together in groups that are defined by experiences such as abuse, they are taking a significant risk to become identified as having had such experiences and they become visible by coming together and owning and telling their story. I have taken this step myself in previous papers (Salter 2015, 2017a, 2017c) and I understand myself the discomfort that this can evoke.

Private to public

I am reminded of a conversation I had with Linda, one of the women who (through my inquiry) talked with me about her sense of visibility versus invisibility. Linda's experience of not having the sexual abuse she suffered in adolescence validated either by her family or by the legal system, had left her feeling invisible and unheard, compounded by the experience of living in a small community. When Linda then started to talk about/express her experiences within the therapeutic group setting this was a complex process, one that many of the women shared. Moving "into the light", to be visible within the community can be positively transformative but also holds significant risk when you continue to live and work in the community within which you experienced abuse or oppression. In a small community this visibility can be acutely felt. It can be a "fish bowl" existence that can mean that mistakes are never forgotten and that past experiences leave more than a mere trace. It would not be uncommon for people to be reminded (in every day talk) of not only their past, but that of their parents, siblings, cousins. This can be a "too closely felt" experience of connection and collective identity.

I recognise this from my own experiences of growing up in a small town and having experiences that were previously private entering into the public domain. For me it was the story of a violin teacher who had sexually abused his pupils. This represents - is an example of - a complex double edged sword. When sexual abuse becomes public it is usually because it has entered the legal domain and the hope for justice is kindled. For me, justice was realised and he went to prison at the age of 76. But of course this is often not the case. Often women feel that justice has been denied and they never had even the *opportunity* to feel heard and believed. Entering the public domain then can bring the hope of being heard into the frame. *But* it also means that previously private stories become more public and experiences of shame can equally be re-kindled. Shame, in my experience, is part of a *very* lasting legacy.

Becoming visible

Linda told me that when she first came to the group that she attended she was full of shame and terrified of "coming out" about having been abused. She feared the visibility that the group brought but tells me that she only began to feel able to move on in her own life by feeling *part of* something rather than *apart from*. I recall the movement that Linda talks about and remember *seeing* it. She, as did many other women in the group, began to feel a sense of belonging, and this was *visible*, in the proximity to others and in the space she took up in the room. At the beginning of the group the space

she occupied was right next to the door. She set explicit boundaries about physical contact - no hugging, no handshakes, no touching. Which was, of course, honoured. But this shifted as the connection with the group shifted and ideas about how to "go on" in life were co-constructed. Linda (through the group and in our recorded conversation) had spoken poignantly about feeling different and feeling herself to be on the *outside* of life, rather than feeling part of life and able to fully partake.

She storied *her* experience of transformation through being part of the group in this way... *"It's just so nice to know others... My God, somebody else is like me... it resonates. I feel part of something... we are women who have come together. We need to not hide away..."*

Another woman from the same group, Anne, told her story in this way... *"...I set out to kill myself and sat out until daylight but I was able to snap out of it... I have more strength to do that now.... The group helped me to not fall in the hole... before I couldn't think, but now I can... it's given me a lease of life, 'cos there are others who need help."*

Anne's story is one of personal transformation, a move from planning to die to making plans for living. It is also a story of resistance, a resistance of shame and a resistance to the dominant discourses that undermine the resourcefulness of women who have experienced abuse by placing a single definition of "victimhood" on a much wider story of "survival".

Resisting

Allan Wade (1997) has inspired me to listen out for every day acts of resistance in the face of *privatising* experiences such as sexual abuse. Narrative therapy (Michael White 1990, 2004) has provided a similarly helpful frame of "*double listening*" - reminding me (as a psychotherapist and as a group facilitator) to not just listen *to* stories of *trauma* but listen out *for* ways that people have overcome and *resisted* trauma, abuse, oppression. I have also been influenced heavily by Vikki Reynolds who uses the language of "*leaning in*" (2013) as a radical position as an "imperfect ally" of people(s) who have experienced oppression on an individual basis and on a collective basis. Sheila McNamee refers to it as "*radical presence*" (2015) and this too has been influential for me, encouraging me to make my presence meaningful - to be socially active in my interactions with women who share with me their stories of abuse. In turn I have to "*dial up*" my ability to resist the potential to be overwhelmed by the enormity of sexual abuse. Knowing that 70% of women I will work with in mental health services have experienced sexual abuse (National Health Service Federation 2008) can have that effect. It can start to feel too big to do anything about. This is dangerous and I remind myself, in the face of such danger, to keep listening for (and responding to) the call to action.

In a group work context, being responsive in a moment to moment way to other people in the group and the stories they tell is part of the role of the facilitator. Listening out for personal stories of resistance and resilience is a further commitment. In this way addressing stigma, shame and isolation is explicit and it becomes an act of political resistance, of solidarity.

Solidarity

I believe, in the context of group work with people who have experienced oppression, that the role of the facilitator is central to not only bring people together but to position themselves firmly as an agent of social justice, not an agent of social control. This, for me, is where the power of the systemically informed group experience lies, in the ability to look outside the processes within the group, to pay

attention to the position *of* the group in relation to *wider* discourses of power and oppression. In so doing it has been important for me to be open to be transformed myself, and position myself as being in solidarity with the rest of the group.

In the Welsh language the word “dysgu” means both to teach and to learn, there is no distinction between the two. They are permanently in relationship, encapsulated by one word, a unity. This has been an important “motto” for the Family Institute in Wales where I trained in systemic psychotherapy and it left its mark on me. I have always experienced something similar when teaching and also in facilitating groups for women. I know I have a role in conveying certain information, knowledge, sharing of my personal and professional experience, but I am also always learning and assimilating what I learn into what I *do*. We are all part of story of transformation, all finding our own ways to “go on” (Wittgenstein 1953) individually and collectively, personally and politically (Hanisch 1970).

Laura (who was in the same group as Anne and Linda) talked about the impact that the experience of being in solidarity with others has had on her *outside* of the group context. She told me that the group has had “*a huge impact on others as well as me. For example my daughter has seen me grow, and she is growing.*”

Anne also spoke about this sense of “something bigger” than herself. She said, “*...in coming to the group the unique part was that I stopped seeing myself as an individual and started thinking wider about what people feel and need...The more we realised it was a safe space... we could see a future... it allowed us to see tomorrow.*”

I recognise in this there are multiple connections, in that many of the women are talking about change or transformation as being inherently connected to the group experience, they also connect it to “growth”, not in a size way, that can be accurately measured but in more subtle and sophisticated ways. Also the ways that they are able to connect within and beyond the group. Another way to story it maybe a move from personal to political and/ or private to public, which I think fits with Linda’s idea of “becoming visible”. There are risks involved in this, but taking the risk seems to have been transformative.

All the women I spoke with related to the sense that we were part of an act of resistance and of creating a better social world (Pearce 2007). I sensed that too, and feel we were all part of making a better social world by challenging oppressive practices, deconstructing limiting discourses such as ones of victimhood and patienthood and developing new more helpful stories. The research that all of the women took part in was also an act of resistance and part of making a better social world. It gave us all a platform for stories such as those highlighted here to be heard and to contribute to new ways of being with others.

Creating (better) social worlds

As soon as I begin an interchange of looks with another person, and I sense them as looking toward me in a certain way (*as they see me looking toward them in a particular way too*), a little ethical and political world is created between us. We each look toward each other expectantly, *with anticipations*, some shared some not, arising from what we have already lived through so far in our lives with all the others around us. [...] In our living contacts with an other or otherness, then, our mere surroundings are transformed into ‘a world’, or at least, into a partially shared world that we

sense ourselves as being *in* along with the others and othernesses around us.

Shotter 2011, p.1

My inquiry has provided the opportunity for me to have conversations with women from different communities; shaping a dialogue between practice and research across what otherwise may seem like geographical and cultural divides. It has highlighted movement, both subtle and explicit. In the shift from practitioner to practitioner-researcher for me; and the shift from client to conversational partner for women like Judy and Anne, Linda, Laura and Anna. For me this was an interesting journey into becoming a researcher and ultimately becoming a doctor, an academic. This was not without discomfort, as the earlier part of this paper speaks to. There was also, I think movement in how we talked and shared stories, in the group and later in the conversations we had as part of the inquiry. I found this personally transformative and notice that I am able to talk about my experiences in ways I have never felt able to do before. I think this makes me a better practitioner. I am more open and more willing to be engaged in “doing” justice, with and alongside others.

I think we were all boldly and purposefully moving to a more dialogic, more *public* space. This, in itself, is transformative and speaks to the power of solidarity. It has a relationship with wider social and political movement, a connection with social justice and resistance; of which research (as an act of resistance) is a part of.

Bound up in this were (and are) small *moment to moment* movements - the beating of hearts, the flow of breath as words form, so hard to catch, barely perceptible and yet also crucial to ideas of transformation. My inquiry did not centre on these subtle moments in terms of its design. I did not visually record movement or ask people to recall it so it could be argued that it is peripheral, but it also felt alive in every conversation and everything I wrote about those conversations. It remains alive in me now and moves me on.

An extract from my conversation with Judy (from one of the groups I have facilitated in Wales) highlights this idea of movement within the relationships that were developing in the group she was part of and how that affected her, and others. Judy is naming it here as a kind of spirituality.

*She said, “I guess...there was that connection, but there was also...there was something within us all that was having an effect on each of us, and it was very powerful, **very** powerful... though we weren’t kind of aware of it. Does that make sense? ...I don’t know whether you would (call it) spirituality? Or I don’t know if it was even that or...you know some **THING**... you know...cos we’re rebounding off each other in a very **connected** way.”*

Yalom (2005) suggests that the role of the facilitator in a therapeutic group setting is not only to take responsibility for the structure of the group but also be attuned to the *emergent* processes which can bring about change on an individual and collective basis. This seems to fit with ideas that emerged from my conversations with colleagues and co-facilitators.

My co-facilitator, Lucy said, “...I think... looking back... that was important ‘cos, you know it makes me **Angry** that people don’t know that these things happen... and it was like, if we can support people to kind of move forward from their experiences and develop within themselves then maybe they can get to a point where they feel strong enough to kind of stand up to the higher powers and actually get out there and say you know...it’s about (being) political...and being able to have a voice as a group...”

Our colleague, Janey (who Lucy and I are in conversation with in this extract) took this further to comment on how this was perceived. *"...there were some raised eyebrows about that, so because of that I think we started off maybe with the warning voices in our head saying "don't forget about boundaries" and you know... perhaps when we started we were more mindful of being "professional" women... rather than (being with) the group... but, over the weeks I think there was more of a sense that we were freed up to be ourselves... to be "fellow women"... I suppose as we all got to know each other... there became more trust in the group; we were all freed up a bit and that included "us", not just "them"."*

I think these excerpts illustrate the nature of the systemically and politically informed group work that we were all part of co-constructing and the role of the facilitator to promote the deconstruction of the language and the linguistic methods that sustain oppression, condone abuse, quash resistance and prevent justice. It also again though speaks to the relevance of the subtle interactions between people in groups (including the facilitator) that often do not get the attention they deserve.

Burlingame (2002) in a large scale review of the literature around groups, suggests that much of that literature only focused on the relationship between members of the group and the group; rather than on multi-dimensional relationships such as member to member and member to facilitator and (not even getting a mention) facilitator to group.

When I consider what Gelo and Salvatore (who view psychotherapy as an open, complex system) say, that *"everything taking place within this (therapeutic) environment which may be thought to stimulate the change of the psychotherapeutic system is a change agent of that system"* (Gelo and Salvatore 2016, p.381) then it seems surprising to me that these multi-dimensional relationships are not given more attention; and that the interaction between people, including with the facilitator, is rarely noted.

This moment to moment "stuff", this intra-activity (Barad 2007) and this way of being with each other is perhaps what Judy, Anne, Laura, Anna and Linda are talking about when they note the unseen or maybe just perceptible inter and intra actions that are bound up in the relationships that are formed, developed and performed in a therapeutic group experience. Judy, rather playfully, called this "candyfloss" or an invisible smoke that winds around and binds people. She felt it was almost spiritual. Others have talked about "sacred" moments in therapy, when (usually) therapist and client feel deeply connected, in a trans-personal/ transcendent kind of way (Pargament et al. 2014).

I certainly have, on many occasions, in therapy and in therapeutic groups felt *deeply* connected to people I am in conversation with, or who I am being with, including all the women named above. I have relished those experiences, they are warming, moving. They often leave me thinking about what it is was so special about that moment.

Cantwell and Stagoll (1996) note that these interactive moments are more than a *"casual presence"* but a moment where we *"experience ourselves as deeply involved with and deeply connected to another."* I cannot agree more. This intra-activity is what has helped me "go on" and how I have come to re-connect with a sense of belonging and identity back home in my country of origin. It is also what helps me to be a better (more open and radical) practitioner whether in dialogue with individuals, couples, families or with groups.

Some kind of conclusion

For me, collective transformation is not a story of what happens *to* people who engage in group processes, it is about what happens *within* and *between* us, all of us part of each moment, each intra-action. As such, it is also important to pay attention to how this connects within the wider societal structures that the group is part of.

I have been engaged, in my doctoral inquiry, in being *with*, listening *to* and learning *from* stories of transformation following group work with women who have experienced sexual abuse. Being *with* (being in solidarity) has been a core component in both the group work I was part of and the inquiry itself. Both were purposeful acts of resistance and have been personally and collectively transformative.

The stories I have shared (mine and others) are examples of this transformation, highlighting ways people have found to go on living; and collective stories of resistance in the face of the lasting legacy of abuse which can otherwise continue a discourse of blame and shame. I have been talking with women about ways they have understood themselves to be part of a collective transformation, something that is “bigger” than their own story of transformation and some of those conversations have been highlighted here in this paper.

I have also paid attention to the moment to moment ways of being together and understanding self in relation to a collective identity; and how this sense of transformation within a particular community of practice is part of a wider story of making better social worlds for us all, a world where abuse is not condoned, and where women’s stories of resourcefulness and resistance are celebrated.

I have made deliberate connections between my own experiences of transformation and the stories of transformation that women have shared with me in my research. I have done so to emphasise the importance of solidarity and *being with*. In a climate where group work is seen as a cost effective way to *teach* “psychological skills” to people who are viewed as *lacking* those skills, emphasising the transformative nature of “coming together” offers a different frame, one that speaks to resourcefulness rather than deficit.

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Citation

Salter, Leah (2019). With wings outstretched: Reflections on belonging, solidarity and transformation following narrative informed group work with women. *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice*, 2, 1, 14-27. <https://doi.org/10.28963/2.1.3>