

Get your group on

A real problem with work relates to our actual experiences of being in groups. If you ask most people do they like groups they will say no, precisely because they can make us feel afraid and persecuted. For the more paranoid amongst us going to a team meeting provokes the same physical reaction as the prospect of doing outdoor athletics of a March afternoon. I'd rather break my own legs and save Katy Forster (no, names have not been changed to protect the evil) the sadistic pleasure of seeing me cry. Yup, and I don't do Christmas parties either. The experience of being in groups raises powerful feelings in us, often taking us back to earlier experiences of being in the family, leaving us feeling infantilized and overwhelmed at the prospect that nothing ever changes. Katy Forster grew up and became my line manager.

Thing about groups is that if you can stand the anxiety of being in one then you get to learn a lot about yourself and the nature of the world. In groups, we learn that the roles we adopt can change, depending on the group and time of our lives. During crises certain work roles are emphasised and others denied – the hero, depressed, angry, resistant to change, the stoic. Just as everyone with a past life was Cleopatra or Anthony we like to think that we are all heroes. The reality is that we are capable of being all things, including both bullies and victims of scapegoating.

The power of experiences in groups is that they reveal that nothing is predetermined and that we are all capable of change and adaptation. This is highly liberating, and explains the importance of work to our psychic development and personal growth. But you have to live with the knowledge that yes, you too, can be the mean-spirited passive-aggressive at work that quite enjoys other people's humiliating professional failures. Being in relationships is so hard precisely because they challenge our idealisations about ourselves, both good and bad.

Experiences in groups also show us that the people that have a role in your survival at work are not always the people you love or intimately tied to. Joining a union when your job is at risk is not a complex decision, collective power and legal expertise are two very important reasons for joining, but this does not mean that you actually love your representative. Some reps (I say this as someone who has worked for and within trade unions for most of my adult life) are not all that likeable. Some actually dislike their own membership, much like teachers who hate children and librarians who don't read; a perversion that exists in most professions. But also they are sometimes not likeable because we don't want them to be. We want them to be single-minded, angry and threatening with management so it's a bit much to then insist they have the manners of a Swiss finishing school graduate.

Our relationships with co-workers, often hilarious and well, lovely, can also be fractious. Collectivising is central to our survival because it offers us a way to grow and adapt (the definition of resilience) in a way that

we cannot do alone and a profound sense of place and support in the process. In today's workplace that is priceless. It does mean accepting the uncomfortable, irritating and often ridiculous behaviour and views of other people. When you've got over that, you might find that some of them are actually quite nice. They might not love you or think you're a hero but they can help you move from being a victim of work to a survivor of work.