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Researching people's experience of narrative therapy:

Acknowledging the contribution of the 'client' to what works in counselling conversations

by

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This paper explores the possibility of developing a way of evaluating narrative therapy conversations that acknowledges clients' contribution to 'what works' in counselling conversations and at the same time contributes to further rich description of clients' preferred stories of identity.

Keywords: *evaluation, therapy, client contributions*

Having worked with a number of counselling approaches and having been a user of counselling services myself, I am aware of the cultural discourses that privilege the expertise of the counsellor in evaluating the 'success' of therapy while locating any 'failures' of therapy as due to the client's 'denial' or 'resistance' etc. For me, these understandings leave so much unexplored. I am curious about finding ways of inquiring into what works for people who have come to consult with me in therapy that will acknowledge their contributions to these conversations. Some of the questions I am trying to explore include:

- How do people experience narrative therapy conversations?
- How do narrative ways of speaking and understanding the world fit with people's own preferred beliefs and values?

- How might people experience being consulted as to what has been helpful in therapy conversations?
- How can these inquiries keep the power relations of therapy visible?
- How can these inquiries be structured in such a way that would contribute to thickening people's preferred identity claims and developments in the alternative and preferred stories of their lives?

These strike me as important questions as I try to develop a way of evaluating narrative therapy conversations that acknowledge clients' contributions to 'what works' in counselling conversations.

A starting point

To begin the explorations I found it helpful to keep three key questions in mind:

1. What maps of practice might help an inquiry into people's experience of the narrative approach?
2. How might I do this in a way that would be in the service of the people who come to consult with me as well as being of service to my own practice?
3. What ethical considerations might I need to take into account?

Reflecting on these questions, I decided to invite those people consulting with me to engage in co-research conversations. I thought that a re-view format might create a framework to reflect on their experiences of therapy. I thought I might use the re-authoring map (Epston & White 1990, Carey & Russell 2003) to help thicken what people had found helpful in the conversations we had shared. I had hoped that this would be an experiment in co-research as we explored together what it was about the narrative approach they were finding helpful and whether there was a link between the approach and what people held precious. It seemed important to me that I clearly acknowledged the contributions those who were consulting me were making to my life and work.

What emerged in these initial co-research conversations however was a centring of my skills and a de-centring of the 'clients' efforts. I had not taken into account the pervading influence of the dominant discourses of therapy. The people who came to consult with me were not cognisant of their own contributions to our therapeutic endeavour and accorded various positive developments solely to my skills and expertise as a therapist. These conversations were not catastrophic and I managed to find ways of re-centring people's own skills and knowledges but they brought forth dilemmas which I felt I had to attend to. These dilemmas were connected to the power relations of therapy and the discourses from which they emerge (White 2001). This centring of my skills and knowledges in the co-research conversations led me to reflect further on the power relations in therapy relationships. I was disheartened by these initial co-research conversations as they were counter to the purposes of my work and in no way fitted with the rest of my practice. It dawned on me that in trying to create this new approach I was somehow privileging the micro-world of

therapy over the macro contexts of people's lives (White 1997). By asking questions that focused only on developments that took place in the therapy room I was not creating opportunities for people to acknowledge the steps and developments that had taken place in their own homes, lives, relationships etc. This realisation was both somewhat shocking to me but also provided an opportunity for further reflection on the ethics that are important to me in my practice. I realised that I wanted to create a re-view conversation that centred the 'efforts' of those consulting me and de-centred my skills and contributions. I realised that I wished to create a re-view conversation that would centre the values that people bring to therapy conversations and that would acknowledge how these values have guided the therapeutic conversations that we have shared together.

In order to keep me focused on my intentions I decided to create a format for a re-authoring conversation that would help me scaffold the values that people who consult therapists bring to these therapeutic conversations. I will enclose this format of questions here:

A format for a re-authoring conversation about how people step into and engage with counselling conversations.

1. Can you tell me a little bit about how you have stepped into these therapy conversations. Can you tell me a bit about what you did.
2. What would you call these ways of stepping in? Do you like them? Why?
3. What is it about your intentions and purposes for your life that this fits with?
4. How did you get ready to do this? What steps did you take to prepare yourself? What did it require of you in the ways of skills? Or, what experience did you have to draw on?
5. Which values or beliefs do you hold that made you prepare for and step into therapy conversations in this way?
6. Do these values and beliefs have a history in your personal life? What might I have seen you doing in the past that would reflect these values and beliefs back then? Can you tell me a story about that?
7. What were your understandings about the world that were important to you back then? What general principles do you hold about ways of being with people that this way of stepping in or engaging is an expression of?
8. Who, from your life might join you in the importance of this principle?

9. Was it a real person or a character from a film or a book? What would they think of what you've been achieving with these ways of engaging?
10. Has your relationship with them assisted you to keep these ways of being close to your heart and expressed in your life?
11. In keeping this principle, this way of being, alive in your life, what are you standing for? What kind of commitment would you call this?
12. What further steps might you take to develop these ways of being? What kind of care might you need to take of this?

My hope for centring people's values in this way was to more richly describe the alternative stories and preferred identity claims of people's lives.

Conversations with Kay

To convey what these explorations look like in practice I wish to describe here some of my consultations with a woman called Kay that were shaped by the questions above. I had been seeing Kay in the medical practice in which I work and we had already had five meetings prior to the one described below. Kay had been making some discoveries about her life which were significantly altering some of the long held, and mainly negative, conclusions she had about herself. Kay had come to realise that the sexual abuse that had been perpetrated upon her by her stepfather did not relate to any weakness on her part and was not her fault.

In our conversations we had talked about some of the many ways Kay had tried to protect her mother and stepsisters over the years. The renewed visibility of these efforts and the determination to which they spoke, was acting as an antidote to the guilt that had sprung up when Kay had recently learnt that, in spite of all her efforts, her step sisters had also been sexually abused by their father.

Kay had mentioned to me that one approach that was really helping her in the therapy was the way she had been talking about her 'young girl self'. Kay said to me that it had really been helpful to look at this young girl as if she was 'someone else'. She called this way of looking 'externalising' and her naming of it in this way was both a surprise and a possible invitation to inquire about what else might have been helpful in our therapy conversations. I have always come away from my conversations with Kay with a

powerful sense of her engagement with the conversations and this had made me curious about what was behind this engagement: what values and beliefs about relationships did this engagement speak to? I thought that the review format I had been working on might thicken some of these new and preferred conclusions Kay was making about herself. I also hoped they might make visible the values and intentions that were a foundation for these new identity conclusions.

In setting the context for this conversation I made my purposes explicit. In order to stay de-centred I explained that I was interested in what she was bringing to the conversations and not in a review of my skills. I see this context setting as part of de-centred practice (White 1997). In making my intentions transparent I hoped to invite Kay into a consideration of what she was bringing to the counselling conversation and how her contributions might fit with relationship practices and practices of self that were evident in the macro context of her life.

As we started the conversation I soon came to understand from Kay some of the ways our therapy consultations had been helpful to her:

Amanda: ... I know you said you were a bit scared and disappointed with yourself that you had to come to therapy, and yet you very quickly started talking ...

Kay: That was always the difficulty for me, because I knew I *had* to talk to somebody, somebody who was not involved, and yet I was reluctant to do so. I found it helpful to externalise things.

Amanda: Is that something you have always found helpful?

Kay: I don't know, because I have never talked about my problems in that way to other people. If I have talked to anybody in the past it has been to people that I know and I have been wary to say things to them 'cos I didn't want to upset them ... this meant that I couldn't be so honest

Amanda: So externalising helped you look at things in a more 'honest' way?

Kay: I suppose I began to look at myself in a different way. I looked at myself as somebody else, like a young girl who was in that position. I was taking a step back and it really took the emotion out of it. It's quite difficult to describe. It was easier to imagine that this was a story about somebody else, so it was easier to understand the reasons why. It was as if I was more detached.

Amanda: I am understanding you saying that in our conversations together you looked at yourself as

somebody else, as a young girl and that looking at yourself as somebody else made it easier to understand the broader context and everything else that was going on...is that right?

Kay: Yeah.

Amanda: So it wasn't just about you?

Kay: Yes.

Amanda: What were the other things going on that were helpful to think about? Was it thinking about how your stepfather was bigger and stronger?² Were these ideas that became more available to you?

Kay: Yes, I think so, and thinking about it that way, looking at myself as somebody else meant that I could understand it without being so emotional...It's really hard to describe.

Amanda: Are you saying that emotion had somehow clouded how you saw these events in the past? What has been the effects of emotion clouding things in the past? What has it had you thinking?

Kay: Well really, it has meant I didn't think things through. I got stuck on one point. One particular thing would upset me and I couldn't get past that point. But looking at it this way has made me more detached from it. I didn't feel as angry looking at it somehow. I knew it was me but it was as if it was someone else. It was like I was stepping out of the box and looking at the whole.

Amanda: And this is something that you are pleased about?

Kay: Yes, definitely. Being able to detach myself a little bit from it all and thinking 'that's the reason why this happened' has meant that I don't need to tell myself I'm stupid.

Amanda: So you are feeling a bit more knowledgeable, a bit cleverer ...

Kay: I like myself more. I think I am not a bad person. Every time I get upset about things I can say, 'No, it wasn't your fault. You know the reasons why'. I have never examined that before because I always assumed that everything was always my fault.

Having determined what had been particularly helpful to Kay in our previous therapeutic conversations, we then explored in more detail the effects that this had had on her life, the new skills that she had unearthed and who would have been least surprised to learn of these. To convey what was covered in this conversation I will enclose below the therapeutic letter

that I wrote to Kay as a summary. Firstly though, I will include here the re-telling that I made at the end of the session which involved a short summary of what the conversations I had shared with Kay had meant to me in the form of a taking-it-back practice (White 1997).

Amanda: We've been reviewing what you've found helpful in these conversations and what values you have brought to them. You've described how you now have got clear about a direction you have had in your life for some time and new ways of thinking which you want to identify with. I understand it's been helpful to, as you describe it, 'externalise the little girl that you were'. This has made a lot of things clearer and you have been able to see your life as if it were a story. I also understand that it has been helpful for you to think about the broader context – the landscape around the story; the power relations in your family as well as the values of the culture you live in. I understood from talking today that it was helpful linking events together as we exposed the values that you've been standing for throughout your life – of being a decent person, based on principles of supporting and caring for others and respecting yourself. You've described that this linking has worked for you. Is that right?

Kay: Yes, because I hadn't been aware of this history until now.

Amanda: If it's okay with you I would now like to let you know what it's meant to me to be in these conversations with you.

Kay: That's okay.

Amanda: Like you, I think I need some distance to think about things, but what I am left with right now is a reminder of how important it is to always ask about what seems to be invisible to people in terms of their childhood. Especially when there have been experiences of abuse. I know from you and other women that there is often a lot of guilt around.

Kay: Yes there is.

Amanda: And that it's important to look past this.

Kay: Yes it is.

Amanda: Also, I feel very invited into your world whilst we've been talking. I don't know if that's how you make everyone feel in all your relationships, but it feels like a very respectful place to be. That is something that has been a real contribution to my working week. How has all this been for you?

Kay: It's been great more than I could ever have imagined.

Documentation

After the session I wrote Kay a letter in doing so I began to realise how our lives were linked around certain values and practices. Some of the values that Kay holds precious are linked to respectful ways of treating people and to certain practices of thinking which I aspire to in my life and work.

November 4th, 2003

Dear Kay,

Here is the letter I said I would write after our last meeting.

It seems important to find different ways of documenting some of these new and preferred conclusions you are realising about yourself. Do you agree? I am also enclosing photocopies of the notes from all the conversations we have had, as you requested.

Here are some of the developments you told me about in our review on Monday:

- Externalising thinking.
- Out of the box thinking.
- Stopping and thinking thinking.

Were these kinds of thinking what you were referring to when you said you now had tools available to you that you hadn't known you had?

You told me that these different kinds of thinking had led to:

- 'Not having to tell myself I'm stupid'
- 'Realising I'm not a bad person. I know the reasons that things happened.'
- 'Liking myself and standing up for myself.'

You told me all this was a step in the right direction.

As you were speaking you began to get a sense of how much courage and determination you had had to draw on to come and talk to me. You also realised that there is a long history of courage and determination going back through your life that you had drawn on in the protection of your mother and your stepsisters.

It was a moving moment for both of us as you realised what this history of determination might mean for your future. You told me your tears might be tears of compassion for yourself.

You also told me that one of the consequences of all these changing conclusions was that you were feeling a bit lost. Not

identifying with the person you were so much, – 'thinking I was bad and a victim' – and still finding your way with identifying with the 'strong' person you might become. How are you going with the lostness? I had a sense that by the end of our conversation you were beginning to identify more with 'the decent person' who 'respected and liked herself'. Did you share that sense?

You told me that what you were valuing in taking these steps was 'respecting yourself' and 'not judging others with one set of values'.

When we began to think about how these values have appeared in your history you reminded me of the conversations we had had about your determination to get to art school and the festival you organised whilst you were there. Do you remember, we began to link some events from your life – standing up to your Dad about art school; organising the festival; leaving your first husband – around this theme of your values – respecting yourself and respecting others?

I was not surprised when you evoked the presence of your Uncle David as the person who would be most pleased that you had continued with these values. I have warm memories of the conversations we have had where I got to understand the contributions you have made to each other's lives.

We ended by talking about a commitment that you hoped you had in life, a commitment to 'being a decent person'. I understood that this decency was based on principles of 'supporting and caring for others and respecting myself'.

I talked a bit about how much our conversations had meant to me and the ways they might contribute to my life and my work. I said I might need a bit of distance to think more about this. These few days have given me time to realise that the values and principles that you have kept going with all your life are linked to the values I work with, 'a general respect for people and respect for myself' as well as 'not judging others with one set of values'. I also realised that I use some of the same tools as you 'Externalising thinking, out of the box thinking and stopping and thinking thinking'. I think this link certainly contributed to the richness of our conversations and I hope this was your experience too.

All good wishes,

Amanda Redstone.

PS I look forward to catching up in the New Year.

Acknowledging 'client' contributions

In thinking more about the values that I share with many people who consult with me, I have gone on to develop an exercise which I now use in training contexts. The exercise below helps me to acknowledge the significant contributions that those who consult me make to my sense of identity, as a therapist and a person. This exercise connects to ideas about relational identity and ethics (Freedman & Combs 2002) and also reflects the importance of re-remembering the people who contribute to our lives and identities (Hedtke 2001).

An exercise: Re-remembering the people who come to consult us

Think of a therapy relationship you are pleased about:

- What is it about this relationship that pleases you?
- Does this fit with something of importance about your practice?
- What does the person consulting you in this relationship do or say that contributes to this? Could you give me an example of this?
- What do you think this says about what is of value to this person?
- Who do these values allow you to be in this relationship?
- If we could look at you through this person's eyes what do you imagine they appreciate about you?
- If their version of you became more significant in the way you saw yourself as a practitioner, how might it help with more difficult times in your practice?
- What would it mean to this person to know they are making this kind of contribution to your practice. How would it fit with what you sense they stand for and for their preferred claims for their identity?
- What has it been like to have this conversation? How might it affect any further conversations you have with this person. How might it affect your sense of professional identity?

Conclusion

I would never have predicted as I set out on this inquiry into 'what is helpful' for people who come to consult with me that it would have such significant implications for my practice. Through these conversations with Kay and with other women, I have come to appreciate that the way people step into these therapeutic conversations is an expression of their particular values. These values direct how people engage with therapy conversations and how they take them into the larger contexts of their lives. Making visible these values of engagement allows for practices of acknowledgement and the rich description of people's identities. I feel that this is 'work' in progress and I am looking forward to further developing these practices of re-view and acknowledgement. I would appreciate hearing from anyone who is involved in similar explorations.

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Notes

1. Amanda Redstone can be contacted c/o ...
2. While it may seem as if I am introducing various ideas in this transcript these are all ideas that Kay had articulated in previous sessions.

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