

Outsider-witness practices and group supervision

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This paper describes the work of a 'narrative supervision group' organised and run in Sheffield, UK. It conveys how the work of supervision reached out of the room in which the group met and touched the lives of the people who were at the centre of the discussions. In doing so, this paper illustrates a possible model for the use of outsider-witness practices in group supervision.

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Our supervision group consisted of myself, Hugh Fox, a family therapist, plus five other workers: three psychologists, one social worker and a counsellor. We met once a month for nine months. Our sessions lasted for three hours and took place in an upstairs room of my rock climbing partner's house. Throughout this time, we devised a number of different structures to scaffold our conversations. The one that we used most often went like this:

Stage One: A group member ('the worker') is interviewed by another group member ('the interviewer') to elicit the background to the piece of work the worker is bringing. The rest of the group listen.

Stage Two: We all listen to a piece of audiotape of an actual session where the worker is talking with the person who is consulting them, usually for around five or ten minutes.

Stage Three: The rest of the group discuss their responses.

Stage Four: The interviewer and the worker talk some more.

Stage Five: Everybody talks together.

Stage Six: The discussions are audiotaped and the worker takes the tape back to the person at the centre of the discussions.

I thought that this would be a good format to use in that it largely reproduces the outsider-witness practices of narrative therapy. It could be thought of in the frame of:

- A telling - The background interview and the tape presented by the worker.
- A retelling - the responses of the team.
- A retelling of the retelling - the worker and interviewer respond to the team.
- More tellings and retellings of any degree you like! - everyone talks together.

The person at the centre of the discussions is in the audience position to all the tellings and retellings when they listen to the audiotape.

I hoped that this process would decentre myself as 'supervisor' and help to place the knowledge, experience and skills of the group members more centrally. It was also my hope that working this way would give group members practice in themselves centering the lives that were being talked about - the lives of the people who had come for help. In centering these lives I hoped that it would also give group members experience:

- in finding signs and clues of alternative preferred stories of people's lives and of thickening these stories; and
- of noticing how the stories of people's lives were connected with their own stories and in making explicit these connections.

Finally, and perhaps centrally, it was my hope that, by recording our discussions and passing the tapes back to the people whose lives were at the centre of our discussions, we would be able to contribute something back to them in return for their helping us by allowing us access to their lives in the generous way that they did.

In preparation for working this way we all read Michael White's two pieces: 'Reflecting teamwork as definitional ceremony' (1995), and 'Reflecting teamwork as definitional ceremony revisited' (2000). I would say that the broad outlines that we had drawn from this were:

- acknowledging the experience of the person at the centre;
- acknowledging their preferred ways of being, their values, commitments, hopes and dreams;
- acknowledging our own responses to what we had heard and the aspects of our own experience which gave rise to those responses (resonance);
- acknowledging how our lives had been affected by what we had heard (transport).

My experience in the group was that, while the first two 'stages' were relatively easy for the group to grasp and enact, the third 'stage' was harder and the fourth 'stage' relatively rarely achieved.

Sometimes it was difficult to step fully into the conversational style that Michael White suggests, and occasionally we had to struggle to avoid serial monologues.

Marie

For this article, I have chosen to describe in some detail a series of conversations concerning 'Marie' (not her real name). I have chosen this, not because these conversations are an especially good example of our practice matching the model, but because I remembered Cathy, the worker, telling us how positively Marie, the woman she had been working with, had responded to hearing the tape. Marie had found it so positive that for a period she had listened to it every day.

I also chose this particular example for practical reasons: Cathy is still in the same job and still seeing Marie, and so it was practical to seek consent from Marie and Cathy. Also this meant that I could have access to the tape of our discussions in the group so that I am able to quote from it. And perhaps most importantly it meant that I could meet with Marie and Cathy and talk with them about their responses to what we had done and what it had meant to them.

On the afternoon that we listened to the tape that Cathy and Marie had made together there were five of us taking part: Cathy, myself (Hugh), Catherine, Martha and Adrienne. Catherine interviewed Cathy about the background to her work with Marie, while Martha, Adrienne and I formed the outsider-witness group.

Background

Cathy is a very experienced counsellor in a general practitioners' surgery in a small town just outside a large midlands city in the UK. Cathy had made an audiotape with Marie especially to bring to our group. Later I was to learn that Marie had viewed this with some disquiet but

that it was her trust of Cathy that had encouraged her to make the tape and to trust us. I realised then what an incredible responsibility we had shared that afternoon for keeping faith with that trust. Cathy had hoped that the group's responses would help her work with Marie move on into areas where she was finding it difficult to go but which she thought might be helpful to Marie.

Stage One: Catherine interviewing Cathy (about her work with Marie)

Unfortunately the initial interview with Cathy (by Catherine) does not seem to be recorded on tape. Perhaps we forgot to switch the recorder on? But we heard that Marie was 53 years old and that her father, whom she had experienced as an important source of support, died 10 years ago. Since then, Marie had been struggling with feelings of anxiety and a sense of worthlessness. This made it hard for her to go out on her own and had her worrying about what people thought of her. Marie and her husband had moved to this area recently and her new GP had referred her to Cathy.

Stage Two: Marie and Cathy's tape

Cathy then played us a ten minute extract from a much longer tape.

On this tape, one of the issues for Marie that we heard about was Marie's sense that she was worth less than other people around her. Some of these people were of higher ascribed status, such as the doctor, whilst others lived lives just like hers. This sense of being worth less had Marie constantly considering every action before she took it, and judging her actions (and herself) after she had taken them.

In contrast, we also heard how Marie was able to relate to some old and dependant people living in residential care in a spontaneous way with which she was comfortable.

The excerpt started with Marie talking about her ability to understand and reach out to older people. She was talking about an incident that took place in an old people's home:

Marie: One lady, who was not aware of what you were doing, in fact not aware at all, one hand starts going [shaking] and I just touch them. Touching, it stops, the shaking stops ... I imagine these things, that they must be feeling some-thing inside, feeling alone ... I can see it calms them ...

Cathy and Marie then talked about how it was that the fear that usually came between Marie and other people didn't prevent Marie from reaching out in this situation. Marie decided that it was empathy that enabled her to feel for other people with a strength that dismissed the fear. She said how with these old people 'you never know the depths of their mind'. She went on to express how her husband sometimes responded to her understanding of minds:

Marie: He always says that I think too much, you see. (Laughs)

Cathy: I guess it's down to you, what do you want for you? ... The question I would ask you, in terms of how you want your ... your hopes for your life, is, does showing compassion and empathy fit with your hopes for your life or not fit?

Marie: What do you mean, in what sense?

Cathy: How you'd like your life to be?

Marie: What sticks in my mind is different things I've said in the past, and you've said about it, it must be tiring, when I've said I have to think about this and doing that and I have to do that, I have to make sure that that's right, or I have to think before I do that, and it's like safeguarding every angle, and you said, that must be tiring, that sticks in my mind, and now I think to myself, that is tiring, that *is* tiring, and it's no good to me and now I'm thinking, well, why is it no good for me then?

Cathy: When you're thinking about how to relate to the old people, that seems much better for you, you just find yourself doing it ...

Marie: ... that's right ...

Cathy: ... and it's not something that you spend a lot of energy thinking about.

Marie: No, it's just what comes.

Cathy: Is that how you want it to be?

Marie: Yea ... yea ... yea, you see there's another thing where you say, 'do you want to ...', or 'is it a thing that you want to ...', ... I keep thinking, 'let things come out of my mind now', ... and I think that's what's working ...

Cathy: For you to be thinking about what you prefer for your life?

Marie: Yea.

Marie went on to say that, since the previous session, this comparison of herself with other people had been somewhat less of a problem, and she had been thinking that 'putting herself on top of a mountain, surrounded by cotton wool' was pointless; 'It's very lonely up there isn't it?'

Also, she had been thinking that the only person who would worry about her and think about her, her father, was dead, and she thought 'it should be different from that'. She concluded that she would never be able to relate to the extent that she wanted to if she kept isolating herself.

Stage Three: Reflecting team

The group started by acknowledging Marie's experiences that had led her to consult with Cathy.

Hugh: What was your sense of what Marie had been experiencing in her life?

Martha: It was painful ... something of having had some kind of a struggle on her own through life ...

Hugh: Sounded like a back-to-the-wall kind of life, waiting to see who would judge her ...

Adrienne: Under attack or being undermined all the time...

Hugh: ... it sounds like Marie and the people in her life had only described her shortcomings ... it was as if only one half of her life was being talked about ...

Martha: I was thinking, Cathy and Marie have probably talked about this, and I wondered where these ideas, these kinds of descriptions, the way Marie talks about herself, came from.

Hugh: I wondered about the history of all that, and only probably one tenth of her life told.

Adrienne: And in the telling of one part the forgetting of the rest.

We also talked about her experience of having to evaluate all her actions and how tiring and isolating this was.

Next we started to talk about some of the exceptions to this story that we had heard about. These included the reaching out to the old person; her having learned sign language previously; and her relationship with Cathy.

Martha spoke about a friend of hers who had learned signing:

Martha: It took a lot of commitment ... being very dedicated ...

Hugh: What does this make you think about what Marie's commitments might be to?

Martha: Understanding of others, or wanting to help ... to encourage others to participate or share opportunities ... offer others the ability to communicate, closer relationships ...

We went on to wonder whether there might be people in Marie's life, past or present, who could tell stories of Marie reaching out to them and helping them to feel less isolated and more a part of things. We wondered how all this would fit in with Marie's hopes for her future and what she might be able to experience in life. And we thought that when Marie spoke of Cathy asking her what *she* wanted, and this being what worked, that we heard some excitement in Marie's voice, and that perhaps this presented a wonderful new vista full of possibility.

Stage Four: Catherine's second interview with Cathy

Catherine now talked with Cathy about her responses to the team's responses. Cathy responded to the idea that Marie's life was only partly told by talking about her sense that Marie's father was the only person who saw and appreciated Marie. She told a story of how Marie's father would comfort her by putting a piece of chocolate under her pillow. Catherine wondered if Marie was like her dad, good at acts of kindness?

Cathy told of an example of Marie's caring ways:

Cathy: She [Marie] came in one day and said: 'Are you alright?', and you know how you do when you're the counsellor, and she said 'Are you sure?', and she was determined that I wasn't, and I wasn't actually ... She knew on some intuitive level without exchanging any words, that I was having a pretty rough time ... Where did she learn that sensitive way?

Catherine: And how has she kept it alive?

Cathy: ... however much she has felt afraid this thing is bigger than that ... the bit about the vista, such a lovely way to think about having choices ...

Catherine: And I felt some excitement in Marie's voice [when she was talking about that]... and I guess you can feel scared at the same time ...

Cathy: ... it is scary thinking about having choices rather than being in a prescribed sort of way, there's a safety in that, but having choices and stepping outside the tramlines can be quite scary ... and yet she's doing that despite whatever the fear, she's doing that ... and I find that exciting, to be part of that ...

Catherine: ... I think I got a bit excited as well when I heard her say towards the end of the bit [of tape] you played, 'it's no good for me then, but why isn't it any good for me?', and it felt she was going to ask that question ... and I did feel quite excited.

Stage Five: Everyone talks together

In this part of the process I assume a more central position. I take it as an opportunity to pick up on any issues in relation to the work that don't seem to have been covered so far. This may centre the concerns of the worker who brought the tape. It is also an opportunity to directly address the learning needs of the group members, and thus to centre their concerns rather than the concerns of the person whose life we have been hearing about. Also, of course, there is space for group members to contribute or to ask questions. At the same time, we continue to record the discussion, and the person whose life we have been hearing about (in this case Marie) will hear our discussions and so it remains important to continue to attend to the question of how our discussions may contribute to or take away from her life.

In this stage in particular, I was aware of the relevance of matters of gender. Not only was I the only male in the group, but I was the supervisor and in this stage of the process I take a more central role. This was something that we talked about specifically at our first meeting. We did not come up with easy solutions. The group was clear that it was important to them that I avoid stepping into a patriarchal role where I would be responsible for them in a paternal sort of a way, and this felt like it was important to me too! I took responsibility for checking during the life of the group how they were experiencing the process of our interaction, and this included checking in about issues of gender.

In this particular example, I started stage five by picking up on what Cathy had said about Marie's father. I was wishing to open up space for Cathy and Marie to have a re-remembering conversation in relation to Marie's father, whose death seemed to have initiated a particularly difficult period in Marie's life, a period which she was still struggling to recover from.

In the group I wondered whether her father was still in Marie's life, and whether she ever felt his presence with her. I went on to wonder about what he would appreciate about what she was doing now to recover her life, and about the way she reached out to the old lady; what he would still recognise as things that he used to love in Marie. In asking these questions I was guided by Michael White's use of the 'saying hullo again' metaphor (White 1988).

I also spoke of some resonances with some aspects of my own life that had been stirred up by hearing about Marie's life. These aspects had to do with my relationship with my mother. I acknowledged that hearing about Marie's ability to 'reach out' had affected in helpful ways how I understood these aspects of my own life. This was an acknowledgement of transport (White 1999). In making these responses my intention was to embody my responses (White 1995b) and to acknowledge the contribution made to my life by Marie, locating what we were doing as a two-way process (White 1997).

I wondered aloud about the 'intuitive level' which was a phrase that had cropped up repeatedly during the discussion. This phrase, as I understood it, referred to Marie's ability to reach out without undue self-reflection or self-criticism.

I wondered what special knowledges Marie had that constituted that intuitive level; that enabled her to understand people without them speaking a word; what her sensitivity, which

she herself acknowledged, represented in terms of knowing how to understand other people. I did this in order to try and open up the possibility for Cathy and Marie of deconstructing these naturalistic structuralist categories ('intuition' and 'sensitivity') and moving instead to descriptions of knowledge and skill, and of intention, value and commitment - non structuralist categories (White 2001).

Finally, I went on to wonder who she might become if she were able to further value this 'intuitive level'. And I shared *my* excitement in wondering about this! Here, I was working within the re-authoring conversations map (White & Epston 1990; White 1992, 1995a). Marie's actions of reaching out to people without self-criticism (landscape of action), were linked to a re-authored understanding of her identity as a knowledgeable and skillful person, who had developed these knowledges and skills in the context of intentions, values, commitments and hopes (landscape of identity). These considerations were then taken into the future through speculating about what Marie might find herself doing if she were to consider this possible re-authored identity to be of value, and if she were able to hold on to valuing these new-found identity conclusions.

Summary of process of group supervision

This process probably took a little over an hour. While the group had the opportunity to take part in outsider-witness practices in relation to Cathy's conversations with Marie and with Catherine, we were also able to engage in a number of other narrative practices:

- acknowledging experience,
- use of externalising language,
- identifying unique outcomes,
- identifying possible preferred stories,
- thickening descriptions,
- exploring histories,
- moving from naturalistic to non structural descriptions,
- embodying responses,
- using dialogical process in reflecting,
- re-membering conversations,
- deconstruction,
- re-authoring conversations.

... Perhaps you can spot some more?

This list, of course, only relates to this particular example; doubtless to say, if we were to subject another example to this degree of analysis then there would be other practices that are not on this list; and equally, no doubt there were opportunities here that the group did not take.

This format for supervision then provides rich opportunities for developing familiarity with narrative practices and with narrative conversations.

Follow-up

In order to write this article, I contacted Cathy and on my behalf she approached Marie, seeking her agreement to meet with myself and Cathy so that I might find out her experience of hearing the tape of our discussions. I had already heard from Cathy, before the supervision group had stopped meeting, that Marie had been listening to the tape every day and that she had responded to it very positively. So I was interested to hear more about this.

I was also interested to hear Cathy's sense of how this process had contributed to the work that she and Marie have continued to do together. And I also took the opportunity to ask Cathy about how she felt this process of group supervision, throughout the life of the group, had contributed to her understanding and practice of narrative therapy.

Marie's response to the tape

I met with Marie and Cathy at the doctor's surgery where they do their work together. We talked on tape for about 45 minutes.

Marie described her initial response to the tape. She had already described how she expected to hear criticism and negatives.

Hugh: So you didn't hope for anything but you did say that you would like to hear the tape ...

Marie: Yes ... then I was frightened of listening to it, when I took it home, I thought, oh dear, and when I went in to the bedroom on my own ... And put on my headphones, and I thought, wait for it now, and all I thought was that I'm going to feel really bad about this, it'll set me off on a chain of events, this will ... and as I put it on, and just listening to somebody saying something and I'm thinking, yea, that's true ... but it wasn't a negative thing about me ... it was like 'that's true' and as I was listening to more of it, I thought, I haven't met these people ... yet they're actually saying what I [think] ... I've given something away here ... they've understood that ... and yet it's something I keep hidden ... and then I'm thinking as it went on and on, I thought to myself, I had to really think, and then I thought, 'yes!'; and then it was like reactivating, I can only say that word, reactivating something in my mind because I have to think about things, this seems to ring a bell, because I had to think deeper and deeper and days I had to think and put it on again ... I had to analyse every single thing on it, everybody's voice, what everybody was saying, all the words ... pull every piece out of it just in case, you know, because I don't trust, you see ... and then it really came home to me there was somebody, people there ... I know Cathy understands me ... [they'd] received some thought of mine about the past, only I would think it was daft ... and now you were confirming those thoughts but in a positive way ... I thought, now, I don't think I'm on my own anymore, that was the main thing.

Hugh: ... you don't think you are on your own anymore ...

Marie: No, because the first thing she said, 'Marie's had some kind of struggle in her life on her own, and I thought, that's true ... and I thought, that struck a chord with me ...

Marie went on to further talk about her sense of acknowledgement and confirmation listening to the tape. This led on to her describing her experience of a lack of recognition in her life and how this had led her to cut off and isolate herself as well as to doubt her own judgement. Listening to the tape had helped her connect her present with her past, and Marie described that this 'makes me feel better'.

Following this, Marie spontaneously started to talk about how she used to study, getting psychology books from the library, in order to 'study body language, picking up every single thing ... because I didn't trust people'. She also talked about how, as well as watching the things she did, she studied the things other people did, working to understand 'why did they do that?' What had once been described solely as 'intuition' had now become unpacked. The skills and knowledges involved and the history of acquiring these skills and knowledges now seem more available to Marie.

We also talked about her experience of being understood in the ways that she had been talking about:

Marie: When you said about half of my life was spoken of ...

Hugh: ... told and not told ...

Marie: I thought, that's true, my half of life [that I tell] it's always the negative side I take on ... that's the way I am. That's like the way I think ... and then I'm listening to [people on the tape who are] saying, it isn't, that it's positive ... I wonder what Marie would have been, you said ... it was a cold shuddery feeling ... it was a good experience ...

Marie reiterated that it was the acknowledgement of struggle that was the main thing.

Hugh: Has that acknowledgement of struggle affected your life since?

Marie: Now? I think now that I could talk about it [the struggle], I've got backup.

Marie went on to explain how this sense of backup enabled her to talk to her husband about when she was a child and what it was like. He found it hard to understand her, but she persisted because of this sense of backup. When I asked if he understood her more as a result of this she said, 'Yes ... that's better for me because it makes me feel a bit more secure'.

I asked if anyone else had noticed these changes, and Marie told me about her friend who had said, 'I don't think that you are the same, you're not as depressive, I think that you are better than you were'. Marie told me that her friend can feel down too, and that what her friend had noticed was that Marie was 'pushing her more ... I'm pushing her more to be positive'. Marie said, 'and I think that's been since the tape'.

Marie said that there was nothing about the tape that was unhelpful, that it had been a big help, and that she still listened to it. Cathy asked her how many sessions of therapy Marie thought it had been equivalent to and she said 20. I said that, as she still listened to the tape, 'It's like the meter is still ticking, perhaps in a month it'll be 21 or 22 sessions!'

Cathy's account of effect on the work with Marie

Because the conversation that I had with Marie was so riveting, I was not able to talk with Cathy for as long as I would have liked, and so I asked Cathy to send me some thoughts in writing. What follows is based on both the brief conversation we did have and on the writing that Cathy sent me.

Cathy told me that she had been very hopeful that the process might be helpful to Marie. She said that she had felt sure the process would contribute to enabling Marie to step out of isolation and experience a sense of connection. She hoped that it would contribute to Marie feeling acknowledged and understood. Cathy also saw it as a part of the work that she and Marie were doing together:

'I saw it as part of the work that I was wanting to do with Marie but couldn't do on my own ... I needed a backup! One of the things that happened as a result was that Marie told me a whole lot of different things about her life that she started to remember, including reaching out to people and what a difference she had made to those people's lives.'

Cathy described how certain events of Marie's life were now being taken into themes of belonging, in contrast to story-lines of isolation. Cathy also conveyed how Marie was now

being able to acknowledge that her life might have value to others through her reaching out to them. Cathy mentioned three examples from Marie's youth that they had recently been talking about together:

- Marie had befriended an ostracized girl with learning difficulties and had treated her as 'normal'.
- Marie had encouraged a boy in a wheelchair to learn to walk again.
- Marie had saved a child from drowning in a swimming pool.

Marie was also able to acknowledge her contribution to her friend (who Marie had referred to in our conversation together – see above). Furthermore, Marie had taken a risk and acknowledged to Cathy how important their meetings together were to her.

Importantly, Marie had shaken off self-blame's grip, saying, 'I know I'm not to blame now', and had started on a project to 'get her life back'. This included starting to drive again so as to lessen her dependency on her husband. Cathy also conveyed that they were working on Marie giving her own answers to questions during their sessions together, rather than Cathy speculating on possible answers. [I think that they must be making excellent progress with this because I was struck at how Marie was able to find answers to the various questions that I asked!]

Outsider-witness practice as group supervision

I also asked Cathy to comment on her experience of this group supervision process.

Cathy said that she thought that it was a good way of learning and that every time she came away feeling really excited and inspired. She thought that the most important thing that she learned was 'about me not being the expert on people's lives and putting the person I'm with as the expert'.

She also added the following list of more specific 'learnings':

- I am now less willing to be drawn into *supplying* the answers and am instead finding ways to *draw out* answers.
- I am increasingly understanding the process of zigzagging between landscape of action and landscape of identity questions, and then anticipating what this might mean for the future.
- To always listen for 'unique outcomes' and then to utilise them
- To ask more questions!
- To possibly do more sharing of myself when it is relevant.

Cathy did say that what she thought was lacking in the supervision group was the direct teaching of narrative techniques and illustration of them. She commented that recently attending a teaching workshop on narrative therapy had really helped in this regard. During the course of the supervision group I had interviewed two group members about issues in their lives, and Cathy said that 'people learned a lot' from this.

I too experienced a sense of frustration in relation to the teaching of both theoretical ideas and specific skills. Having publicised a supervision group, I regretted that this seemed to make it hard to structure our learning systematically. I have responded to this by now offering, instead of the supervision group, a course entitled 'Developing Skills in Narrative Practice' in which there will be a balance between reading, teaching, skills practice and group supervision. I'll let you know next year how this goes!

Nevertheless, my experience of the nine monthly sessions that I spent with the group was that it was a rich way to create a narrative space for contributing to the therapeutic work of group members and to the lives of the people who were consulting them. Wednesday afternoons were inspiring and energising for me.

The last word goes to Cathy:

'Previous experiences of supervision have often left me feeling sort of "inadequate", that there were gaps in my work with the client, or that the client was inadequate or "defended" in some way. This supervision group, however, left me feeling energised. It offered more possibilities for my work. People "wondered about", "thought of things", "were curious", etc. The work was much more co-operative and this brought about a sense of belonging for me too! Importantly, my client was always raised in regard.'

Note

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