

# Narrative practice and supervision – the re-population of identity

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Working as a counsellor/ psychologist / therapist can be a lonely experience.

People who come to consult us frequently bring complex and frightening dilemmas that take us to the limits of our skills and abilities. We can feel worn down and inadequate to the task. How can supervision address these challenges and which narrative ideas and practices might be particularly influential in finding ways for participants to experience themselves as re-energised, re-inspired as well as being re-connected to ideas about how to proceed with their work?

In this paper I will discuss some ideas and practices from narrative therapy that I bring to the supervision conversations I have with those who consult me. I will be thinking particularly about how we might address workers' experiences of failure and isolation and will discuss the 'heroic' culture of psychotherapy and how we might address it.

For the purposes of this paper I wrote to the people who consult me for supervision and asked them:

1. *What stands out for you about the narrative supervision you have experienced that might be different from experiences you have had in other supervisory contexts?*
  2. *What kind of experiences do you have of yourself both as a worker and in relation to other aspects of your life in this narrative supervision?*
  3. *What might be some of the contributions this makes to your sense of 'knowing' how to go on with your work?*
- With their permission I will include some of their replies.

## **Narrative practice and supervision**

The narrative approach to supervision has people collaborating to author and re-author stories of professional identity in different contexts (Winslade, 2002). People familiar with narrative practice in the therapeutic context will see that supervision practices are isomorphic with therapeutic ones. When we are developing stories of professional identity we use the same skills and ideas as we do when people come to us as clients. We can interview the worker about themes, dilemmas, about particular individuals or families they are working with using all the same practices. We can inquire into their skills and local knowledge and what it is they give value to in life. We can ask about the history of some of these understandings and the characters that are implicated in these stories.

Here is a quote from one of the people who comes to consult me for supervision:

*"I feel that narrative supervision uses a range of different techniques to get me thinking about how the personal and the professional are linked. It makes me curious about my own dilemmas, assumptions, questions etc in a way that other supervision doesn't. Therefore it helps me personally as well as professionally. It can be*

*more challenging because of this though! I think that it leads to me being more curious and challenging of myself and also more creative."*

There are a number of different directions open for supervision conversations and we always have to bear our statutory responsibilities in mind and listen out for any abuses of power. Sometimes 'workers' come with particular dilemmas and want to know what to do next. This request can fit with more traditional ideas about supervision. e.g. *"the general goal that one person, the supervisor, meets with another, the supervisee, in an effort to make the latter more effective in helping people"* (Hawkins & Shohet, 1989, p. 41). This is connected with the discourses of education which hold that *"knowledge' is something objective, to be transmitted to students"* (Giroux, 1985, p. xv) and that teachers/supervisors are the holders of such 'knowledge' and their role is to deposit 'it' into the 'trainees'. The culture of supervision and education has traditionally privileged 'expert' knowledge over 'local' knowledge. This expert knowledge is global and universal and can be devaluing of people's everyday skills and understandings and connections (White, 1997). It can promote the notion of 'the (super) heroic' therapist who has all the skills and knowledge required to fix the problem. This fits with cultural discourses that promote independence over connection; rugged individualism over relationality. In the context of supervision I frequently meet with people who feel failed in their ability to help the people consulting them and who think if they just had a bit more specialist knowledge they would be so much more successful. When we are called on to respond to a request for 'expert' advice it can be tempting to want to be generous with our experience and share our knowledge. If we are sensitive to the cultural discourses we can do this collaboratively.

### **Options for supervision**

- In response to a request for expert advice, the 'supervisee' starts by interviewing the 'supervisor' about what they might do in the particular dilemma and the supervisor responds with examples from their own practice. Then the 'supervisor' interviews the 'supervisee' about how they might respond to what they have heard. The supervisor might ask *"Where have my answers taken you to in relation to your initial dilemma? What ideas do you have now about how to go on? What steps might you take as a result of this conversation?"* In this way we understand that knowledge is collaborative and that we create our understandings and meanings in relationship to people and ideas.
- Sometimes people want to think about theory and we might discuss particular practices and map them on to a particular dilemma.
- Sometimes people are keen to explore their developing practice more generally and to have developments and initiatives more richly described and contextualized in the stories of their lives and we might develop re-authoring conversations (White, 2007).
- Sometimes there is more than one person present and then the opportunity to collaborate with others means that we can use Outsider Witness Practice (White, 2007) where people reflect on the preferred developments in people's practices around shared themes and values.

### **Narrative practice and identity**

One of the purposes of narrative supervision is the re-authoring of professional identity. Narrative practice proposes that identity can be approached as a socially negotiated project (Geertz, 2000; Bruner, 1990; White, 1997). We make ourselves and others up through the diverse directions we choose. Different possibilities for identity are opened up through examining and revising our

relationships with problems, with particular discourses and cultures (Freedman J. & Combes G., 2002). What we give value to is shaped by those individuals, communities and cultures that have been significant in our lives. This assists us to understand that identity is not fixed as it is continually being negotiated or achieved; that no single story can encapsulate our identity; that many people contribute to the conclusions that we draw about ourselves. Narrative approaches privilege intentional state understandings, reflecting ideas of William James and some non-western cultures which propose that people act in pursuance of their values and dreams. It is what we give value to in life that draws us forward. The categories of identity associated with this are *intentions and purposes, beliefs and values, hopes and dreams, principles and commitments*.

### **Narrative practice and supervision**

If we understand identity to be relational then one conversational pathway open to us is to enquire into the multi-voiced identity of whoever is consulting us. In the context of supervision this enquiry is an antidote to the notion of the heroic therapist and dominant ideas of individualism. It allows for the social and relational history of people's values and understandings to be privileged.

Michael White developed a practice called re-membering. Drawing on ideas developed by Barbara Myerhoff (1986), Michael White proposed life could be evoked as a 'membered' club and identity as an association of life. This association of life has membership drawn from the significant figures in people's past, present and possible future, with some people having elevated status in a person's sense of who they are and some having less say. These voices are influential on matters of people's identity and the allocation of membership status in our lives is never a totally voluntary matter of individual choice. Some people earn their privileged status through care and consideration; some achieve it through abusive and undermining practices. These memberships constitute our experience of ourselves and they can seem to speak of the truth about who we are.

Re-membering conversations offer us the option to revise our relationships in this club of life: "*Allowing people to know themselves in a community of choice, rather than one of chance*" (Freedman & Combes, 1996).

When people speak of conclusions about themselves – negative or positive - we understand that these conclusions have developed in relation to particular people or particular cultural discourses. When people talk about a precious value, we would understand that this too has developed in relation to particular people or discourses. This way of thinking can have a profound effect on people coming for supervision.

Here is another quote from a 'supervisee':

*"Our supervision looks at dilemmas that arise from our practice, which we often locate in the context of my identity. Similarly actions I take outside are given agency through my identity. This enables a personal professional connection that ensures I remain mindful of my values, and of discourses that act on or constrain me, and provides a foundation for de-centred practice. By introducing agency and identity into our conversation it enables me to feel connected to different 'knowledges' that mean I have ideas of 'how to go on'."*

### **Re-membering conversations in practice**

A clinical psychologist (D) came for supervision. She told me she felt stuck with a particular family whose child had a diagnosis of ADHD. The parents were finding his behaviour very difficult

and had become more and more punishing in their responses to him. D said that in spite of all her hard work and good ideas the family never seemed to progress and she had become increasingly disheartened and more and more judgemental of the parents. She felt unhappy about this and, on reflection, she thought that she felt judging people was wrong and unhelpful.

Drawing on my understanding that what people believe and hold dear is relational, I asked her where she might have learnt of the idea about not judging and she told me she thought it might be from her grandfather. She said, as a young girl, she would watch the wrestling with him on the television and he always used to cheer for the underdog and say how horrible it was to be defeated. When I asked her what she thought that said about what was important to him, she said she thought it was about putting yourself in other people's shoes and considering their feelings. As she told me other stories about her relationship with her grandfather she began to make connections to the directions she had taken in life. She thought that ideas about consideration of others people's feelings and fairness had played a big part in her work practices and she realised that to some degree her grandfather was implicated in this. She thought he would be really pleased and surprised to know that, even though he had died when she was a teenager, his legacy in relation to the values he held dear was living on in his granddaughter's life and work. I asked her what this connection to her grandfather might mean for her current dilemma. She paused and then said she thought when she next met with the family she would be much more curious about what it was like for the parents to have been struggling with all the family problems. She said that if she got 'stuck' she would think of her grandfather cheering her on and stay curious and considerate.

When I saw her the next time I asked her how the session with the family had gone and I wondered if her grandfather had been called on to help. She told me her renewed curiosity and consideration for their feelings had encouraged the parents to talk about how failed they felt in relation to their son, and how this had caused them to feel downhearted in relation to all the suggestions that had been offered. This conversation took some of the blame away from the son and allowed the parents to think about all the pressures they were up against and how their son's diagnosis had taken them away from their preferred ways of parenting. D said the conversation was much more hopeful and the parents had gone away to think more about what the next steps might be. Although D hadn't required her grandfather's help she said that she sensed his presence and that was very confirming for her. She thought that in future, in times of crisis, she might call on her grandfather's values and she was also interested in thinking about who else might serve as consultants to her practice.

As I have described with D, when people reconnect with these significant relationships they often experience themselves as joined with others around shared themes and values. In the context of supervision this assists people to re-member their connections with the people who are implicated in the values, knowledge and skills of living that contribute to their professional practice. When people are connected to what is important to them they have more ideas about how to go on with the dilemmas of life. When these values are authenticated by others, this allows for a re-population of professional identity and is an antidote to the isolation that people often experience at times of crisis. People talk about feeling more supported in their actions and re-invigorated in relation to their work.

Another of the people who consults me for supervision said:  
*“Making personal-professional connections also means I am connected to many other people and professionals. This lends a feeling of support that helps me to do my work. Supervision helps, when I feel disconnected, to re-member and re-connect so that I have more knowledges and people as support to help me to go on.”*

I might offer this direction for a supervision conversation when the person talks about a particular conclusion about themselves; a particular value that seems important or an upset in relation to their work. I ask about what has been upset, an understanding, a value or principle? I ask about who might have introduced them to what they now hold dear? How might this person have contributed to their sense of who they are in any territory of their life? What knowledge might this person hold about their particular skills and values? I also ask, *“What was it like for them to be in relationship with you? How might it have contributed to their sense of who they were?”* In this way Re-remembering practices provide for a two-way understanding of people’s relationships.

These kind of questions all fit with the re-remembering conversations map that Michael White initially developed in relation to the people who came to consult him about their grief and bereavement (White, 1988).

### **Consulting our consultants**

An extension of this practice for me has been to think about the contributions our therapeutic relationships make to our sense of identity as practitioners (Freedman & Combes, 2002). When I think about who we are accountable to in our supervision conversations, I am very clear that it is to the people who are consulting our services. When we consult the knowledge of those who consult us we collaborate in the rich story development of their lives (Epston & White, 1992). When we consult to them in relation to our own practice and re-member some of them into ‘our club of life’ we contribute to re-authoring stories of professional identity. We might not do this directly but rather through the practice of remembering conversations in supervision.

I include a transcript here of a conversation I had during a workshop about supervision. I hope this begins to demonstrate the consulting of consultants. This workshop took place in Eastern Europe and English wasn’t the first language of the person I was interviewing, so the translation may seem a bit awkward.

The female psychologist whom I was interviewing described her dilemma as being ‘stuck’ with a three-year-old boy (S) who she was working with. She told me she was finding it hard to get him to talk to her. I asked her if she had talked with other young children and she said she had. I will call the psychologist V.

This excerpt comes after about 20 minutes of conversation:

***Can you tell me about a couple of the children you have worked with? Relationships you were pleased with? Can you introduce them to me and tell me their names?***

*I will take the same age. So a boy called Y. He is three years and four months old. He was diagnosed with behaviour disorders. I was told he hits his new born sister. And does not obey his parents and so they cannot like a problem child.*

***Tell me a bit about some of the conversations or games you had with him?***

*We talked a lot because he is a very talkative person. He speaks well. He explained quite extensively why he does some things and does not do other things, and it was easy to speak with him.*

***What did he like about your way of talking with him do you think? I talk with him as if with an adult.***

**So did you sit down low?**

So we changed places. I sat him in my usual chair and I took the chair where he sat.

**Aahh.**

In an adult way. It was not baby talk.

**Not baby talk? Ok.**

And he was very proud.

**So you respected what he had to say as if he were an adult? OK.**

**What do you think it was like for him to sit in your seat?**

According to how he looked at the moment. He felt like an adult, he sat like an adult. He was very reasonable.

**How do you think it contributed to his sense of himself?**

So I think that he saw himself as a person who deserves attention.

**Ok.**

A person who is able to understand many things. That he carries certain responsibilities for his actions. That he does certain things and that he understands that he does them.

**And if we had Y here today. If Y was sitting here in a very grown up chair so he felt very important and perhaps if he had many words for his years. Because I understand he can talk a lot, but let's speculate that he can understand a bit like an adult as well and if I was to say to Y, "What was really great about the way that V worked with you?" What would he say to you?**

If he was able to think like an adult and speak like an adult he would answer that V listened to him attentively and that V was interested in what he was saying.

**And, erm, if he had some recommendations for you because he is a pretty knowledgeable little boy about therapy now.**

**Would there be some advice he would give you in your current predicament?**

Probably advice ... I try to find the right words. Provide enough respect to this little boy I am working with now, as a person. To give more attention to him to have the opportunity to give more attention in comparison with his parents.

**Ah, what kind of ways might he think you should give this boy more attention?**

Don't know.

**Like playing or drawing or talking?**

Probably Y would advise me to play with S instead of lengthy conversations with his parents and it doesn't matter what we play or talk. To give him some attention is important...

**What would you think about that kind of advice. Would you think this is advice to listen to or not sure?**

I already thought about that myself. I think I will try something like that on Monday.

Looking at herself through Y's eyes allowed V to re-connect with some of her skills and abilities. It gave her a sense of agency in knowing how to continue with her conversations with the other young boy. Reconnecting with Y's knowledge of her would allow V to consult to Y in other times of crisis in her work.

Linking re-remembering and consulting your consultants' practices in this way serves a number of purposes for me.

- It is honouring the people who come and consult with us and acknowledging the part they play in our own developing practice.
- It contributes to the practitioner experiencing themselves as many voiced and at times of crisis in their work practitioners have multiple consultants available.
- It decentres my expertise and centres the knowledge and values of the people who are consulting us.

- It also assists 'taking it back' practice.

*"Taking it back practices in which therapists embrace an ethical responsibility to identify the ways in which these therapeutic conversations are shaping of their work and lives, and in which they acknowledge the contributions of the persons who consult them to this"* (White, 1997, p. 202).

My intention in writing about re-populating practices in the context of supervision has been to share a few of the exciting possibilities for supervision conversations that narrative practice offers. When practitioners experience themselves as agents of their precious values in their practice – and in their lives – many new possibilities for their work become available to them.

Some of these ideas and practices may be familiar and some less so. I have included a format of questioning for those readers who might like to try this out for themselves.

### **Re-membering 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? Can you tell me a story that might illustrate this?*

*Does this story fit with something of importance about your practice?*

*What did the person consulting you do or say that contributed to this story?*

*What do you think this said about what was of value to this person?*

*If we could look at you through this person's eyes what do you imagine they appreciated about you? In your skills? In the way you responded to them?*

*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?*

*How might this conversation contribute to further developments in your practice?*

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