

Narrative therapy and outsider witness practice: Teachers as a community of acknowledgement

Sarah Walther & Hugh Fox

When people meet together to hear, respond to and acknowledge the preferred accounts of people's lives, it is referred to in narrative therapy as 'outsider witness practice'. In this paper, we describe how the outsider witness practice framework can support staff in educational settings to acknowledge preferred accounts of identity. We summarise the broader orientation to life, identity and relationships that inform narrative therapy as a context for locating outsider witness practice. We then describe the outsider witness practice framework and scaffold in some detail and illustrate this with an example of a piece of therapeutic work with a young man.

This paper is intentionally written in the first person. This reflects our wider commitment as narrative therapists to inviting and promoting a sense of personal agency, ownership and accountability.

Keywords: narrative therapy; schools; community; outsider witness.

IT HAS BECOME COMMON for people's identities and selves to be understood as an essentialist part of them, with the self-located as a core part of a person. This core self is variously theorised to be the result of personality traits, characteristics, unconscious motivations, drives and so on. These are known as structuralist understandings of identity; that is, identity is determined by the internal structure of the individual.

As narrative therapists, we are interested in a different understanding of personhood, a non-structuralist understanding – also referred to as post-structuralist understandings, in some contexts – in which identity is seen as being shaped in social and relational contexts:

Post-structuralist understandings account for identity as a social and public achievement – identity is something that is negotiated within social institutions and within communities of people – and is shaped by historical and cultural forces. (White, 2000, p.62)

We are also interested in the idea that narratives are the means by which our identities are shaped in these social and relational contexts; the stories or accounts that we tell, and that are told about us, shape not only

how we think about ourselves and others but our actions and living practices.

As no single account or story can ever reflect our entire lived experience, narrative therapy holds an understanding that life is multi-storied: That there are many possible accounts that can or could be told about who we are and how we live. However, some stories about our lives are told and heard more than others; they can become dominant in defining our sense of self and limit the actions available for us to take. We do not always get to author these accounts or have a say in which ones are told. This is particularly the case when problems or difficulties are around and when the people who are sharing problem stories about our lives are in relative positions of power.

Schools shape identities

Schools may just be one community in which a person's identities are storied, but they are a very significant community. Staff rooms are an informal but powerful social and public setting in which problematic identity conclusions about children are shared and sustained. In more formal contexts, accounts of children written by educational profes-

sionals carry power and a truth status that other accounts of a young person, authored by their friends, for example, do not carry. School events and teacher opinions are frequently documented, circulated and understood as truths to people outside the school context. They are told and retold throughout and even beyond a person's educational career as part of their 'record', having significant effects that can extend into the future.

It is in these sorts of ways that problem stories can begin to become the dominant influence in a person's life. They can seem to speak a truth about who we are and have the power to totalise our identities, marginalising all other possible narratives. A person's life can be reduced to this problematic account and become single-storied; their preferred sense of who they are – what is important to them and how they wish to live their life – goes unacknowledged and becomes invisible even to themselves.

In these situations, narrative therapy seeks to bring forward these alternative 'preferred accounts of identity' with the understanding that, once these are made visible, the person can more clearly see ways forward that are congruent with how they wish to live their life. However, it is difficult for a person to step into these alternatives unless they are noticed and honoured by others. It is more likely that people will be able to sustain and develop their preferred living practices if their efforts to live these preferences are recognised and told by audiences; if they are put into circulation and acknowledged.

Narrative therapy and acknowledgement

Narrative therapy is often referred to as a therapy of acknowledgement. We try to make visible the ways that people would prefer to see themselves and would prefer to be seen by others. In addition, we invite others to recognise and acknowledge these preferred accounts.

It is in having these alternative stories of 'who they are and how they might become'

acknowledged by others that the person can experience this story as authentic and credible, which in turn enables it to be influential in shaping their life. It becomes an option for how they may seek to live their life, an option not available when the problematic account of identity is the only account and is taken to be true.

Although Michael White and David Epston (White & Epston, 1989) had been recruiting audiences during their work for some time, White writes of the significance of the work of cultural anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff in developing a 'fuller understanding of the significance of the audience's contribution' (White, 2007):

Unless we exist in the eyes of others, we may come to doubt even our own existence. Being is a social and psychological construct; it is something that is made, not given.
(Myerhoff, 2007, p.31)

This idea is a key principle of narrative therapy and reflects the shift away from individualised approaches towards the more social and relational orientation that narrative practice embodies.

Acknowledgement by the therapist

Most people who seek counselling have their lives storied by dominant problematic accounts. Alternative narratives are often asked about, made visible and acknowledged in the first instance by the therapist. For example, a young person may be seen as aggressive and unco-operative by those around them – parents and teachers and so on. However, in therapeutic conversation between the young person and a counsellor, it may emerge that actually there are many actions they take that do not fit with this description; there are likely to be many occasions when they might have caused trouble in school but did not. These actions are expressions of something other than aggression and unco-operativeness and can be asked about further. They may turn out to be expressions of a wish to learn and a determination to make something of their life, but this determination is rarely seen, existing as

it does in the shadows of the dominant story of aggression and lack of co-operation.

In noticing and asking about these occasions, the therapist can then confirm and explicitly witness the preferences they reflect:

So this episode, where you could have gone off in class, but you kept quiet and got on with your work, that was because you want to make something of your life. Have I understood that right?

This response is highly acknowledging of the young person's alternative ideas of what is important to them, and by acknowledging it in this way it starts to make it possible for the young person to see this identity claim as one that is possible or authentic.

Acknowledgement by others

If identity is understood to be a social and public achievement, rather than an intrinsic characteristic of a person, then it is even more powerful when these alternative identity claims are publicly acknowledged by people other than the therapist. Narrative therapy does not centre the therapist as heroic. It privileges the macro-world of life over the micro-world of the therapy room, based on the principle that it is in social contexts that we are able to authenticate our identity claims more richly.

As the lives of the people with whom we meet are often dominated by the telling and retelling of problem accounts, in narrative therapy we work to create relational contexts that are authenticating of preferred identity claims by recruiting audiences who can offer acknowledgment. We refer to these recruited audiences as 'outsider witnesses'.

Identifying teachers as outsider witnesses

There are many possibilities for recruiting wider audiences from various aspects of the person's life, including friends, neighbours, colleagues, family members and so on. Teachers make particularly good outsider witnesses when they are open to hearing alternative accounts of a young person's life.

They are people of power and status in that young person's life and, as such, their contribution will be highly significant to the young person. Also, they may be able to respond to the young person outside the therapeutic context, that is, during the 'ordinary' macro-world of school life, in ways that are supportive of this preferred identity. Furthermore, they may be a means of spreading the news of this alternative identity more widely within the school community. The more widely this account is spread, the more it can contribute to shaping the young person's life and to giving a sense of authenticity to their preferred identity claims.

The person who is to be at the centre of this audience should be consulted about their interest in the process and about who they might like to have listen to and witness their stories:

Who in your school might have had a glimpse of your determination to make something of your life? Would you be interested in inviting them to come and hear about the efforts you have been making to make something of your life? And in me asking them some questions to find out what they think about what they have heard?

Teachers identified in this way may be thought of as having the potential to form a community of acknowledgement, a community that will support the life of the young person's preferred account of their identity.

Recruiting teachers as outsider witnesses

Once a teacher has been identified as a potential outsider witness, there are many ways to invite that person into the process. However, it is important to confirm that they will indeed be able to contribute to an enrichment of the young person's preferred identity. The therapist can begin by explaining their connection with the young person and the conversational context in which the potential outsider witness was identified. This acts as a foundation for enquiring about the outsider witness' knowledge of the person's preferred story and their willingness to share this explicitly:

I have recently been speaking with a young person about his life. He has told me that although many other teachers seem to see him as a person who doesn't want to learn, he thinks that you may be one of the few people who noticed who has something different about him, who may have guessed that he does want to learn. Is that right? What have you noticed? How come you have been available to this?

The length and type of conversation at this stage can vary and may include other aspects of narrative practice. However, the intention is always to ensure, as far as possible, that the outsider witness will be available to hear and acknowledge preferred accounts of identity rather than seeing this process as another opportunity to relate the problem story.

Outsider witness practice and definitional ceremony

Meetings of outsider witnesses are structured in particular ways to form a 'definitional ceremony'. This description is again drawn from the work of Barbara Myerhoff, who recorded her connection with a community of elderly Jewish people in Venice, California. She observed their practices for 'telling and retelling, performing and re-performing the stories of their lives':

When cultures are fragmented and in serious disarray, proper audiences may be hard to find. Natural occasions may not be offered and then they must be artificially invented. I have called such performances Definitional Ceremonies. (Myerhoff, 1982, p.105)

Myerhoff also writes:

Definitional ceremonies deal with the problems of invisibility and marginality; they are strategies that provide opportunities for being seen and in one's own terms, garnering witnesses to one's worth, vitality, and being. (1982, p.267)

In summary, a definitional ceremony was described by Barbara Myerhoff as an 'artificially invented' occasion that provides a space for audiences to contribute to a person's 'worth, vitality and being'. Michael White developed outsider witness practice as a form of definitional ceremony specifically

for use in contexts of narrative therapy or community development. Witnesses are gathered together to hear the preferred accounts of a person's life, and are invited to make responses that lead to rich description of these preferred accounts.

The outsider witness practice framework: Tellings and retellings

The overall outsider witness process consists of three stages (White, 2007, p.185). Firstly, there is a conversation or interview with the person at the centre of the definitional ceremony. During this interview the outsider witnesses sit in the room listening, having been invited to notice what they are particularly drawn to.

Secondly, the outsider witnesses are interviewed using the outsider witness scaffold and, whilst this is happening, the person at the centre sits listening. The outsider witnesses talk with the interviewer and do not address their responses to the person at the centre of the ceremony. This puts the person at the centre in the 'listening position', where no demands are made on them to respond to what the outsider witness is saying since the structure discourages them from doing so, and they can, therefore, simply think about the responses without having to either agree or disagree with what has been said.

Thirdly, the person at the centre is re-interviewed to elicit their responses to what they have heard from the outsider witnesses.

These three stages can be thought of as:

- A telling of the significant life story by the person for whom the definitional ceremony is performed.
- A retelling of the story by the people invited to be outsider witnesses.
- A retelling of the outsider witnesses' retellings by the whom the definitional ceremony is performed.

In addition to this, a final part of this process may consist of everyone talking together to discuss their experience of the definitional ceremony, ask questions about the process and generally deconstruct and make transparent what has been happening.

The outsider witness practice scaffold

Just as care is taken to recruit outsider witnesses who will be open to hearing and acknowledging the alternative accounts of people's lives, so too it is important that care is taken to elicit helpful responses during the definitional ceremony. It cannot be assumed that the responses that people make spontaneously will necessarily be helpful and contribute to rich description. A definitional ceremony is not an 'anything goes' situation, but a carefully constructed witnessing. Rather than doing 'what comes naturally', witnesses are invited to respond in carefully structured ways; ways that are structured by questions asked of them by an interviewer.

Michael White (1995) developed a scaffold of questions that may be used to elicit outsider witness responses that both contribute to rich description and also lead to the embodiment of the responses. The interviewer is responsible for interviewing not only the person at the centre, but also the outsider witnesses. In doing this, the interviewer takes responsibility for ensuring that the outsider witness responses remain non-structural and contribute to a rich description of the preferred accounts of identity of the person at the centre of the definitional ceremony.

In order to be able to perform this responsibility, it is helpful for the interviewer to negotiate at the start of the outsider witness interviewing that they, the interviewer, may interrupt if they think that the outsider witness responses are going off track in some way. In our experience, people who are recruited as outsider witnesses are only too glad to accept this suggestion as they are often appropriately concerned that their responses should be as helpful as possible and that they should not 'say anything wrong'.

The outsider witness scaffold has four parts:

- identifying the expression;
- identifying the image;
- identifying resonance;
- identifying transport.

Identifying the expression

This is an invitation for the outsider witness to say to what they have been drawn in the conversation they have just been an audience to; out of everything they have just heard, what expression in particular stood out for them: 'Whilst you were listening to this conversation, what did you hear that you were most drawn to?'

It is important that the interviewer draws out some actual words or phrases used by the person at the centre of the ceremony, as this forms the foundation for the rest of the conversation. It also ensures that the outsider witness response stays connected to what the person at the centre of the ceremony has said, rather than being connected to the hypotheses or interpretations of the outsider witness.

If the outsider witness does respond with an interpretation or hypothesis, for example, 'I thought they were brave', then it is important to follow up with a question such as: 'What was it that you heard that suggested to you this idea that this person is brave? What was it she actually said?' If the outsider witness' assertion about bravery is not connected with the stated experience of the person at the centre of the ceremony, the assertion may seem without credibility and possibly patronising.

Identifying the image

In this part, the outsider witness is encouraged to speak about the way that the expression to which they were drawn affected how they see the person at the centre, in terms of what they might give value to in life and any connected visual images this painted of the person for them. Whilst not all outsider witnesses find it easy to come up with pictures or visual images, these visual images are often very powerful for the person and are remembered in different ways from verbal responses.

As you heard this and as you listened to this account, what did it suggest to you about what might be important to this person? Or what hopes they might have for their life? Or what aspirations they might have?

As you think about this what images or pictures of this person come to mind?

During this stage, the person at the centre is able to hear the witnesses speak in ways that authenticate aspects of their identity. These expressions by the outsider witnesses are linked directly to what the person has said in the first stage of the process and, therefore, have credibility.

Identifying the resonance

If the outsider witness has been drawn to a particular expression, then there must be some resonance with their own experience of living. This resonance may be with events of their personal life or, where appropriate, with previous therapeutic conversations in which they have taken part. White (1995) refers to the witnesses' interest as being 'embodied'; by enquiring about this interest, it is made explicit that the outsider witness responses are personal responses based in their experience; that they are not authoritative truths based on abstract theory. We might ask: 'What is it about your own experience that meant that you were drawn to these things in particular?'

It is important for both the outsider witness and the interviewer to make and respect distinctions between what is personal and what is private. The intention is not that outsider witnesses should feel compelled to share personal information that they regard as private. If making these distinctions is difficult, it is perfectly permissible for an outsider witness to 'pass' on this question.

However, when embodied and personal responses are elicited, they connect the life of the person at the centre to the life of the outsider witness through shared themes. This connection around shared themes contributes to the rich description of the life of the person at the centre. Where an outsider witness is a professional and shares a resonance based on their work experience, then the life of the person at the centre may be connected through shared themes to the life of someone else the witness has worked with.

In this stage, as witnesses recount events from their own lives, they are likely to re-enter into those experiences and it is particularly important for the interviewer to ensure that the witness does not become the centre of the ceremony by telling more and more about their own lives. The interviewer has the responsibility for re-centring the response and may interrupt with other questions to do this, for example:

It is very interesting to hear how you to have experienced something similar. As you think about how the account you have just heard of how this person has responded to these circumstances, how does your own experience affect how you are seeing them?

The interviewer also needs to remember that this is not a forum for the witness to indirectly instruct the person how to deal with their problem, perhaps by recounting how they themselves dealt with a similar difficulty. The interviewer can again carefully interrupt if this becomes the case, to avoid the possibility that the person at the centre of the ceremony understands this as a criticism about their inability to manage or a direction about what they should do.

Identifying the transport

It is rarely acknowledged that therapy is a two-way process and that not only is the person at the centre affected by the process, but those who are in the position of 'helper'. If the witness has been drawn to certain expressions, and if these expressions have resonated with events in the witness' own life, then their own experience of these events will have been re-contextualised through this process; they will have been moved in some way from where they were previously and will have been taken to places where they would not otherwise have been taken. White (1995) refers to this as 'transport' and we can ask a range of questions about this:

Where has listening to this conversation taken you?

Having heard this conversation, what new ideas has this brought up for you that you might not have had without hearing this conversation?

What has this left you thinking or planning to do?

What might be possible in your own life as a result of hearing this account?

Not only does hearing the responses to these questions acknowledge the two-way nature of therapy, it positions the person who has come for consultation as someone who has affected the lives of other people. This enhances a sense of agency and the significance of their life.

The effects of outsider witness practices

The last three stages of this outsider witness process can each be of great significance to the people on whom they are centred. Hearing others respond to and acknowledge what is important to them, when this has not been previously acknowledged, can be an almost overwhelming experience. Hearing that others, particularly where these are high-status professionals such as teachers, have also struggled with the issues that they are struggling with can be a revelation. Similarly, understanding that their life can be influential in the life of others can give people a sense of agency and an enhanced understanding of their ability to have an impact on the world around them that is new.

Practice example:

Callum, Max and Mrs Taylor

I was first introduced to Callum during a 'Team Around the Child' (TAC) meeting. Callum had decided not to come, so my introduction to him consisted of multiple verbal accounts by the 'Team' around the absent 'Child'.

Although these accounts were multiple, they were not multi-storied. Rather, they were multiple tellings of a narrowly storied description of Callum: That he was aggressive and cared for no-one but himself; that he only attended school when he wanted to; and that he would not engage with services. This account not only defined who Callum was in the present, but also extended into the future to predict that he would 'end up in prison'.

As these accounts were told, I became interested in a number of inconsistencies; events that didn't quite 'fit' with some of these broad descriptions. In particular, one worker present, Max, had sustained a long-term connection with Callum. I asked a few questions about this:

What was it that Max was doing, that meant that Callum wished to continue in this connection with him?

Why was it important to Max to continue to offer this to Callum?

What was Callum doing, that meant that Max wished to continue in his connection with Callum?

What might this say about what was important to Callum in this connection?

Max thought that Callum might be interested in these sorts of conversations and a week later I met with them both.

Identifying alternative accounts of Callum

I learned that Callum had met with many professionals over the years, but that many people only wanted to talk with him about problems. Max was one of the few people who Callum had found helpful. This was because he had consulted with Callum about what he wanted to happen; treated him like a young man, rather than a child; noticed things that he was interested in; supported Callum in speaking up; and offered him respect.

Max spoke about some of the things that he had learned about Callum over this time: His sense of humour; that he took opportunities; and that he kept going with stuff, even when things were very hard.

Identifying an outsider witness

This context offered a foundation to ask Callum about other aspects of his life:

What was it that was particularly important for Callum to keep going with, even when things were hard?

Who else would know this?

This last question is a way of identifying potential outsider witnesses in the macro-context of Callum's life. The connections

between people in outsider witness groups can be present in many different helpful ways, but when the witnesses are part of that person's ongoing life they can continue to notice, witness and support the actions people are taking to live their preferred identity projects.

Callum told me that he always went to school (even if sometimes he was a bit late) and that he liked cookery. He explained that he always went to cookery classes as he wanted to be a really good chef and make a good life for himself. He thought that his cookery teacher, Mrs Taylor, would know about this as he was one of the few people who turned up at cookery lessons with all the ingredients!

Recruiting Mrs Taylor as an outsider witness

With Callum's agreement I contacted Mrs Taylor. My intention was to invite her contribution to Callum's preferred story and to offer some preparation for her role as an outsider witness. I explained that Callum thought she might have noticed some things about him that other people didn't seem interested in noticing. I asked about what these were and whether Callum was correct that she might have noticed. I also asked a little about what it said about her preferred way of being as a teacher, that she took the time to notice these things:

We've spoken about how there are lots of ways to be a teacher. What does this 'taking time to notice' say about what is important to you in terms of how you want to be as a teacher?

What difference do you think that this makes to your student, that you take the time to notice?

What does it mean to you, as a teacher, that your students notice that you notice?

Would you be interested in other ways of letting students know what you take the time to notice about them?

The definitional ceremony

A week later, Mrs Taylor and Max acted as outsider witnesses to a conversation between me, Callum and Max. This is the letter I

wrote following this meeting, which documents the telling and retelling that occurred:

Dear Callum

It was good to meet with you yesterday. We spoke again about school and you told me that your favourite lesson was cookery. You told me that getting all the stuff together for cookery lessons required quite a bit of planning:

- *You have to use your own time (not school time) to get the ingredients.*
- *You often have to go to a lot of different shops.*
- *You don't give up if you can't find the ingredients straight away – sometimes you have to blag a lift from your aunty to the supermarket!*

When I asked why you chose to make such an effort (in your own time) for a school lesson, you told me again that you want to be a really good chef. You said that the effort you made for cookery lessons reflected a commitment – not just to the cookery lesson, but also a commitment to yourself and to your own future. If you have a good job, then you can have a good life and give your family a good life.

Max said that he had noticed you showing commitment, not just to yourself but also to other people. He talked about how your friend had been feeling really low and fed up, but that you had continued to go round to your friend's house and see if he wanted to go out. Max said that he thought that your actions and commitment to this friendship – not giving up on your friend when he is having a difficult time – had made a big difference to him feeling better and being able to go out again.

Mrs Taylor told us that she REALLY appreciated the efforts you made, because not very many students always turn up with the ingredients. This gave her a real sense of how important it is to you to put effort into things – she had an image of you as a character in a computer game, trying to find ways round obstacles to collect all the cookery ingredients you need, with a little 'ting' sound every time you got one!

She said that this really stood out for her because it made such a difference when people wanted to get the most from her lessons: it supported her belief that what she was doing was a worthwhile thing and that lessons were not 'just about ticking boxes, but about giving people hope for life'. Mrs Taylor ended by saying that on the way home, she'd be thinking about all the young people she'd taught over the years who might now be able to cook meals for themselves or their families.

Callum, I hope I have included in this letter the things that you wanted to be written down and I look forward to seeing you again next week.

With best wishes

(first name of author)

Outcome

I met with Callum just one further time. I heard that Mrs Taylor had put Callum in touch with a cookery club and had also connected with his form teacher about how they might support Callum to access cookery as a GCSE. I also heard from Max that Callum had been speaking up more about his preferences. This had led to an organisational takeover and radical restructure of the 'Team around the Child': now re-named 'Team Callum' and strictly by (Callum's) invite only.

Conclusion

It is usual for a paper to end with a conclusion and we wish to honour this academic tradition. However, we also wish to honour alternative ways of thinking, writing, reflecting on and sharing practices that are congruent with narrative therapy and the understanding that life identity projects are fluid and ongoing processes, full of possibility and without conclusion. So this conclusion is in two parts.

Firstly, rather than informing you what you should have concluded from this paper, we invite you to consider the following questions:

- What is it that you have been most drawn to in reading this paper?
- What does this say to you about what is important in this way of working?

- Why is it you were drawn to this in particular? What is it about your own life or work that meant you were drawn to this?
- Having read this paper, what might you find yourself thinking or doing in the next few days or weeks that you may not have otherwise?

Secondly, we wish to conclude with a beginning: An invitation to ongoing practice possibility in the form of a brief practical guide for outsider witness recruits. We welcome your comments and reflections on this paper and would be particularly interested in hearing about your experiences of outsider witness practices.

An insider guide for outsider witnesses

What to keep in mind that you want to do

- Listening for the expression – what do you appreciate most about what it might take to live with the story that is being told and in the context in which it has been lived? What is this resonating with for you? How are you responding? What reflections or thoughts are evoked?
- Noticing what pictures come to mind as you listen to or recall the accounts of those at the centre.
- Acknowledging preferred stories and identities; what matters to the person, what they give value to, their hopes and aspirations, etc.
- This is an interviewing process and is conversational.
- Bringing the conversation back so it is centred on the person who is the subject of the process.

What to keep in mind that you want to avoid

- applause/pointing out of positives;
- pronouncing/giving opinions/advice/hypothesising;
- monologue;
- positive reinforcement;
- imposing values;
- sharing how you solved it;
- processing your own issues.

Address for correspondence

Sarah Walther & Hugh Fox

The Institute of Narrative Therapy.

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