



A friendly invitation to this Special Release on Co-Research

In 2009, I was invited to 1^{er} Encuentro Internacional de Psicología y Psicoterapia (The First International Conference of Psychology and Psychotherapy) in the remote Mexican city of Chihuahua along with many other representatives of “therapies,” almost exclusively North American in origin. In addition, Victoria Chavira, Coordinadora del Coloquio Politco, asked me, along with the others, to address a special meeting to be attended by the Mayor of Chihuahua and local congressmen/women and senior officials of the Social and Mental Health Services in the city and state of Chihuahua. Both the questions and the answers were to be then compiled and forwarded to the local government authorities.

The fifth question we were asked to address was: ‘What would your recommendations be to our three local branches of government on mental health and family violence issues?’

I was perplexed by such a daunting request but sought to provide service to such generous hosts the best way I knew how. But in responding I realized recently that I had summarized a ‘methodology of practice’ I had been engaged in for some time, perhaps even from my very beginnings. I have somewhat revised the original paper below (see Epston, D., More Travels with Herodotus: Tripping Over Borders Lightly or ‘Psychiatric Imperialism, *Journal of Systemic Therapies*(2011), Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 1-11).

My vision calls upon our own humility in the face of others and our own suffering. And to do so, we may have to reconsider the very idea of ‘knowledges.’ I have added an ‘s’ to indicate their plurality rather than insisting upon a professional or cultural monopoly over the others that would be either dismissed or erased and thereby not counting for anything. Can those who suffer be conceived as not merely passive recipients of our knowledges but creators and users of their own knowledges, albeit of a very different species? And can those who provide service accept this very prospect? And if some of us assumed the role of anthropologist, we might find such otherwise unauthorized knowledges to serve many purposes we cannot serve as well. Can we restore the dignity of others any better than the communities in which they live? If we dismiss or disregard such situated and subjective knowledges of those who suffer, are we unwittingly impoverishing them of what matters most to them? Perhaps it is their knowledges, more than ours, that gives those who suffer the moral stamina to go on with their lives. And if we could conceive of such stuff as moral stamina, could we then participate with those who suffer to endow both them and us with this? My vision has to do with moral stamina as a framework to unite those who suffer and those of us who seek to alleviate their suffering.

Now there is a distinct problem if we are to bring this vision down to earth here in Chihuahua or anywhere else. Those ‘insider knowledges’ (I am using that term to distinguish them from ‘outsider’ or professional knowledges) are distinctly different than what Foucault refers to as the ‘regimes of truth’ of the professional knowledges. In fact, they may have to be considered to be an entirely different genre of knowledge that can only be measured in their own terms. In





the same way, an anthropologist does not judge another culture against his/hers but rather regards it as a distinctive way of making sense of the world.

With this in mind, let me paint in words a picture of ‘insider knowledges,’ given that they embrace fact as well as aspiration, value, commitment, passion, and hope. I would describe an ‘insider knowledge’ as innocent as a newborn child; as delicate as a sprouting seed that has just broken through the soil, as shy and apprehensive as children arriving at what will be their school for their very first day. When we try to speak about them, we can seem as awkward as a fish out of water. ‘Insider knowledges’ are often before or without words, and for that reason, when inside knowers try to speak about their skills/knowledges/theories, they can appear either foolish or to be making unjustifiable claims. The philosopher Michael Polanyi referred to ‘insider knowledges’ as ‘tacit knowledges’ (1974) and asserted that we all know more than we can tell. For all these reasons, ‘insider knowledges’ find it almost impossible to compete with the well established and sanctioned professional or ‘outsider knowledges.’ And it is rare that the latter ever acknowledge ‘insider knowledges.’ In fact, they commonly dismiss them as anecdotal or hold them in contempt as a willful disgrace of their power and authority.

Stories of ‘insider knowledges’ are there to inform as well as, in Eduardo Galeano’s felicitous phrase, ‘abrigar esperanzas’ (to give shelter to hope) (Fischlin & Nandorfy, 2002, p. 5), to excite the imagination, to go beyond what is already known, to secure the patience required to engage in trial and error learning, and above all else to pay careful attention to that which you, without knowing, come to know. There are those accidents that seem like random events. Likewise, we might pay heed to those seemingly unpredictable occurrences, which if taken up and examined like one would a strange sea shell found on a beach, we might find that on even closer examination, we have never seen anything like this before.

It would take practitioner/ethnographers to collect and archive such stories. They would be those who could feel comfortable bridging both worlds—the worlds of those who suffer and the professional worlds of those who intend to serve them. Such people straddling the borders between the two worlds might learn to speak both knowledges and mix them up. It’s at the borders where these two knowledges intersect that I believe ‘inter-cultural invention’ (Denborough, 2011) will take place, much like it always has at the ports and marketplaces where cultures have met to trade and talk at least since Herodotus’ time.

Co-research(ing) is admittedly and unashamedly contrary to the majority of the psychologies and psychotherapies and this certainly was evident in Chihuahua. Besley described the practice of narrative therapy as:

“A ‘counter-therapy’ which critiques existing therapeutic practices and the ways few therapies recognize that therapy is inherently a political activity, an activity and set of practices inscribed by power relations. Narrative ideas present a postmodern and especially a poststructuralist critique of structuralism and its influence on traditional Western psychology and of humanism and its associated forms of counselling. It forms a





self-reflexive, critical tone of a profession or discipline that turns the ‘gaze’ back on itself” (3)

It was this so-called ‘methodology of practice’ or co-research(ing) that both informed and guided the initiation, evolution and archiving of ‘Anti-anorexia/Anti-bulimia’ (see Archives of Resistance: Anti-Anorexia/Anti-Bulimia, www.narrativeapproaches.com) and the co-leagues that collaborated on this project (1) as well as many others (2) from the late 1980s to the present. I admit that such a practice with its ‘equity of epistemology’ is odd for practitioners to grasp, given their trainings in purported omniscience. And for that reason, these two releases of the Journal of Narrative Family Therapy- Co-Researching Anti-Anorexia/Anti-Bulimia have tried to provide you with many examples (more will be made available if there is an interest) in order to ‘show’ rather than to ‘tell’. I am indebted to Julie King and her daughter, Sophie (Part One of the Special Release on Co-Research), and Victoria Marsden (Part Two of the Special Release on Co-Research) who were willing to review and reflect on their experiences of co-researching ten or more years afterwards as well as other contributing co-leagues. We will also be including some anti-anorexic testimonials from Judy, circa 1994, (Part One of the Special Release on Co-Research) and more recently Lena, 2017, (Part Two of the Special Release on Co-Research) for your interest.

References

1. See Maisel, R., Epston, D., & Borden, A. (2004). *Biting the Hand that Starves You: Inspiring Resistance to Anorexia/Bulimia*. New York, WW Norton.

Epston, D. (2008). Anti-Anorexia/Anti-Bulimia: Bearing Witness. In Epston, D. (Ed). *Down Under and Up Over: Travels with Narrative Therapy*. Warrington, UK. [Available to read in full here](#)

Epston, D. and Maisel, R. (2009). Anti-Anorexia/Bulimia: A Polemics of Life and Death. In Malson, H. & Burns, M. (Eds). *Critical Feminist Approaches to Disordered Eating*. London, Routledge. [Available to read in full here](#)

2. Epston, D. (2001). An Interview with David Epston: Anthropology, archives, co-research and narrative therapy. In Denborough, D. (Ed). *Family therapy: Exploring the field's past, present, & possible future*. Retrieved from: NarrativeApproaches.com. [Available to read in full here](#)

Epston, D. (1999). Co-Research: The Making of an Alternative Knowledge. Retrieved from: NarrativeApproaches.com. [Available to read in full here](#)

See also ‘David Consults Ben’ in Epston, D. (1998). *Catching up with David Epston: A Collection of Narrative Practice-based Papers (1991-1996)*, Adelaide, Dulwich Centre Publications, 175-208.

3. Besley, A. (2002). Foucault and the turn to narrative therapy. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 30(2), 125-143.

