



Who is the Outsider in Insider and Outsider Witnessing Practices?

Toward a theory of oversight in narrative therapy

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Since we introduced Insider Witnessing Practices just over four years ago, one of the most common questions that we have received is “What is the difference between Insider and Outsider Witnessing Practices?” When developing a new practice, it is easy to get sidetracked by the intricacies of the practice, the “how-to’s” so to speak, and consequently, our early answers to this common question focused more on the distinctions in practice between insider and outsider witnessing. We quickly became thoroughly dissatisfied with trafficking in the land of technical distinctions and decided to engage in a close study of Michael’s writings on outsider witnessing in an effort to discern the shared purposes and commitments of both insider and outsider witnessing. While we were not surprised to find more similarities than differences between the two practices that we will outline this paper, we stumbled upon, what we consider to be, a theoretical gold mine for narrative therapy; a theoretical framework that extends all the way back to the origins of narrative therapy perhaps waiting to be revealed. Not surprisingly, it can be found in the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, who Michael and David had decided would be one of their lead sources for the reimagination of narrative therapy which they promised to take up before Michael’s untimely death. So, what is this undiscovered theoretical framework, you might ask?

Bakhtin and Outsideness

In our very papers on insider witnessing practices, we reported a rather surprising discovery that changed the way we think about narrative therapy. Gary Saul Morson, perhaps the most prominent translator of Bakhtin, introduced the term “authorial agency” referring to the freedom of the author to view the story from the outside. The notion of outsideness in order to come to know or see oneself is based on Bakhtin’s belief that since we can





only see our selves and our lives from the inside looking out, we need the “essential surplus of seeing” that other’s, especially loving or intimate others, can provide. “Only other people can see our body as a whole object in the world; we can never see ourselves surrounded by the space in which we are situated. Only others can hear our voice and see our facial expressions; we know ourselves from the inside but not in the way others know us from ‘outside’” (Pollard, 2011, p. 11). Holquist, another Bakhtin scholar put it this way, “In order to have her own vision, each must use the means by which the others see. In dialogism this sharedness is indeed the nature of fate for us all. For in order to see our selves, we must appropriate the vision of others” (Holquist, p. 28). Holquist continues, “it is only the other’s categories that will let me be an object for my own perception. I see my self as I conceive others might see it. In order to forge a self, I must do so from outside. In other words, I author myself” (Holquist, p. 28)

In fact, Morson (1994) , following Bakhtin, argued that for a person to become an author of their own story, outsideness is required. For Morson, outsideness, or the view of the author, is critical in order to allow a person to move beyond seeing themselves as mere characters in a story, “The author makes the world, a character dwells in it, the author is located outside the world...The author alone can *mean directly*” (p. 94; emphasis added). And from this authorial view of one’s life, “the author exists in a different kind of time, one that makes the whole of the character's life subject to contemplation as it could never be in the character's own time. Once there is such a whole, then each moment of my life figures in advance...” (p. 94). The distinction that Morson makes here between being an author of own’s story versus a character in one’s story is seems particularly important here. Without creating the means for oversight, when people are speaking about their own lives, from within their own stories, they are likely to experience themselves as characters and not authors of their life stories. The question is, how do we provide the means to lift a person outside of their stories, to see their stories from outside of their lives? Or as Emerson put it, “How do I get outside of my life – with its pain, indignity, missed opportunity, crimped perspective –so as to shape it into something I can live with, that is, shape it





as I might shape an artistic creation?" (Emerson, 1997, p. 217).

But First a Bit of History

In our first paper on Insider Witnessing, we mentioned that we decided to take the name Insider Witnessing Practices in honor of Michael's Outsider Witnessing Practices. Little did we know at the time that there would be a great irony in the naming of these two practices. But that is for later. The source for our study of the similarities between these two witnessing practices were Michael's writings on outsider witnessing, his summaries of client accounts of their experience of outsider witnessing, as well as a study of the comparable accounts of our client co-researchers who have been so instrumental in our efforts to theorize and extend insider witnessing.

Both Insider and Outsider Witnessing Practices are part of a shared history and borrow heavily from Myherhoff's definitional ceremony. Given the centrality of Myerhoff's definitional ceremony in Michael's thinking about Outsider Witnessing Practices, and his great enthusiasm for its potential to transport practice, it is surprising that so very little has been written about it since its introduction to narrative therapy in the mid 1990's. Michael referred to a definitional ceremony as a ritual of acknowledgement and regrading of persons' lives. The term ritual is relevant here as it sets it apart from traditional practices of therapy by engaging person's in a witnessed retelling of their lives. In his writings over the years, Michael offered up several definitions and purposes of definitional ceremonies. We would like to share three of them with you below that are of a particular interest to us. We will offer a brief commentary after each quote to situate how we relate them to the shared interests and commitments of Insider and Outsider Witnessing Practices.

Definitional ceremonies deal with 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 (Myerhoff, 1986, p. 267).





It is important to point out here, that Michael seems to be arguing that some stories, due to the extent to which an identity has been rendered invisible and marginalized leaving little room for action in the world, require the use of definitional ceremonies. We take this to mean, that sometimes, and perhaps most times, when faced with gripping problem stories, we need to find ways to do more in our work that extend beyond our everyday therapy conversations; ways of working that garner ‘witnesses to one’s worth, vitality and being.’ We believe, as did Michael, this is especially true when working with people who have been subject to abuse and the ways in which problem stories seem to grip their lives (White, 1995). Definitional ceremonies are especially suited for this purpose as they serve as ‘rituals of regradation’ (White, 1995); we especially refer to rituals that have the effect of regrading and re-politicizing a life from the effects of individualizing discourses that continually degrade identities of those who suffer from abuse and de-politicize their suffering by stripping it from the very contexts and conditions in which it was created in the first place; leaving people with a collection of symptoms that is devoid of any history or backdrop that tells the story of what people have been up against in life. It is in the face of such invisibilized and marginalized histories, when problem stories are particularly unrelenting of people’s lives, that we need witnesses to tell our stories on our own behalf. Insider and Outsider Witnessing Practices call on ceremony and ritual that garner witnesses who engage in a retelling of the counterstories of people’s lives.

Definitional ceremonies... *“establish conditions that conspire to engage people as active participants in their own history and in making themselves up... These ceremonies provide people an ‘arena for appearing’ and for ‘opportunities for self-proclamation of being’ (White, 1995, pp. 177- 178).*

Michael was very enthusiastic about the possibilities of engaging persons in definitional ceremonies. Being a witness to one’s own life, Michael commented “provides for people something akin to a *quantum leap* in possibilities for re-authoring of their lives, and for action in the world.” He





goes on to say, “Of all the therapeutic practices that I have come across in the history of my career, those associated with the definitional ceremony have the potential to be the most powerful. Time and again I have observed witness retellings achieve what is quite beyond my potential to achieve in my role as a therapist.” Michael’s enthusiasm here seems worthy of our attention.

Due to his excitement and enthusiasm for the possibilities of definitional ceremonies Michael engaged in an initial evaluation of effects of Outsider Witnessing Practices on clients’ lives. Here again are Michael’s words, “This was undertaken on a basis similar to that of David Epston’s study of the value of therapeutic documents...How many sessions worth of good therapy is a good reflecting team discussion? The outcome of this evaluation was fascinating—at an average of 4.7 sessions!” (White, 1995, p. 195). In addition to these more formal evaluations of practice, Michael also engaged in informal interviews with people regarding their experience of participating in Outsider Witnessing Practices. As a result of these interviews, Michael was quite clear that the most beneficial part of Outsider Witnessing Practices was when they were in an audience position listening to a witnessed retelling of their lives by team members (step two of Outsider Witnessing Practices). In fact, people were far less enthusiastic about the usefulness of other aspects of Outsider Witnessing Practices, especially when they joined in the conversation with team members. Here are a few of the comments that Michael summarized based on his interviews with clients.

- “I found it more helpful to *sit back from my life*, and to be an audience to the team, rather than *sitting in my life* in direct discussion with the team” (White, 1995, p. 196).
- “If you get into a discussion with the team, this has the effect of depriving you of the option of standing outside your life and experiencing it from a different perspective (White, 1995, p. 196).
- “When it was my turn to listen to the team, it felt that I was somewhere else, not with the problem. I could see how I didn’t have to be with the problem. This didn’t happen the time I was talking with





the team. It is not that I didn't enjoy talking to the team, but it wasn't the same as listening to them" (White, 1995, p. 196).

- "There is something that is so much more powerful about listening to a conversation about your life that is acknowledging and respectful of who you are" (White, 1995, p. 196).

In each of these quotes, it is clear that there is something quite powerful for people when they are in an audience position, listening from outside rather than inside their stories. In Michael's study of Outsider Witnessing Practices, clients described this as "sitting back from my life," "standing outside your life" and "I was somewhere else, not with the problem." When people re-entered the conversation with the team, it had the effect of "sitting inside" their stories and they were "deprived" of the gift of oversight that was afforded them when they were in the audience position. Michael goes on to say:

- "The power of outsider witness responses is much greater when the person concerned is not in the conversation itself. In the position as an audience to the conversation between me and the refuge workers, Luna could hear what she would not have otherwise heard had she had been in dialogue w/ Sally and Deane" (White, 2004, p. 49).
- "The process of retelling in which Luna was strictly in the audience position was very powerfully authenticating of what Luna accorded value to. Had Sally and Dianne turned to Luna and said directly to her 'Look, it's really important that you treasure this value that you give to children's lives, and that you hold onto this,' this would have made very little if any, difference to Luna. This could too easily be discounted, and would not provide, for Luna, that experience of resonance with the outside world" (White, 2004, p. 50).

Obviously, something was happening here that caught Michael's attention and he had a "plan to a more formal re-evaluation of this work in the near future" (White, 1995, p. 195). Unfortunately, due to his many other projects and his untimely death, Michael was unable, as far as we are aware, to carry





his theorizing about this audience or outside perspective any further.

Outsight in Insider Witnessing Practices

As we mentioned previously, early on in our study of Insider Witnessing Practices, our co-researchers commented over and over again about how this practice had a distancing effect, allowing them to see their lives as if from outside their stories and that this contributed greatly to their ability to see and relate to themselves as if they were another person. Here is just a sample of quotes from the co-researchers that we have interviewed thus far:

- During the Act 2, I felt that a level of detachment occurred for me. I was looking at someone else's story. I felt differently about my own story because it didn't feel like it was me. Seeing myself this way allowed me to feel compassion for myself even though it wasn't me, it was my story. How can I not let the compassion transfer over to the real me? (Miranda, 19)
- From this outside position, it put me in an unusual position as a judge rather than a critic of my life. It compelled me into a space that I had not thought of before, that stitched things together in a way that it could not easily be waved away. It had this quality to it that my internal critic can't just refute. (Lynn, 55)
- It's weird, to hear it as an outsider looking in. It is like reading a story. And you think about all the adventures that the person went through. And you're tying in the memories to all of that. It's kind of crazy to hear it in that form. People have told me that "you're one of the strongest people they know" and I don't get it. I've just survived. Gone through the motions. But then you hear it like that, like you are a hero in the story. Going through all these adventures. And it's just like, "wow." It's crazy to think about. Because it is actually me. (MC, 22)





Repositioning the Outsider in Insider and Outsider Witnessing Practices

When it comes to the naming of both Outsider and Insider Witnessing Practices, ironically, both David and Michael named the practice after the role that the therapists are to take up. For example, in, Outsider Witnessing Practices, the therapists are named the “outsiders” due to their role as witnesses from outside the client’s life. In Insider Witnessing Practices, it is the therapist who is designated the “insider” since their role is to engage in a witnessed retelling that is in the form of a portrayal of the client. However, both insider and outsider witnessing practices are intentionally set up to allow for persons to step outside of their own stories and to listen and see their lives with what we might call oversight rather than insight. If this is the case, which I am convinced it is, then both practices, Insider Witnessing Practices and Outsider Witnessing Practices, are really, when focused on the client, Outsider Witnessing. I don’t mean to suggest that we call Insider Witnessing Practices, Outsider Witnessing Practices but rather that we write this paper about outsideness as a way to call attention to what is at the heart of the matter with regard to both practices, creating the conditions by which oversight is possible.

We have come to see both insider and outsider witnessing practices as rituals whose direct purpose is to create conditions for oversight. When people are transported into a position of an outsider to their own life stories, it makes it more possible for them to see how they have actively participated in the shaping of their own counter stories and counter histories of their lives. Listening to a witnessed retelling of their lives by trusted witnesses creates a powerful arena for people to appear unto themselves as active agents in the living and shaping of the events of their lives all along. And isn’t this the purpose of narrative therapy after all? While he didn’t have the language for the term outsideness or oversight at the time, Michael White, when asked about the purpose of narrative therapy in an interview stated, “This work is to encourages people to take up an observer... position in relation to their own lives...to become the narrators of the events” of their lives (White, 1995, p. 134).





If we look at the history of narrative therapy, especially its beginnings, externalizing conversations appear to be another means toward oversight. According to Michael, “externalizing conversations employ practices of objectification of the problem against cultural practices of objectification of people” (White, 2007, p. 9). Through the objectification of a problem, the person is invited to take up an observer or outside position in relation to their lives. Elsewhere, Michael proposed that through externalizing conversations “persons experience a separation, and an alienation in relation to these [problem] stories. In the space established by this separation people are free to explore alternative or preferred knowledges...” (White, 1991). The separation and alienation and the space that such a separation offers people, sounds akin to Miranda’s detachment from the story and Bakhtin’s outsideness. However, up until now, outsideness, through externalizing conversations, has only been used in the territory of the problem story. As we have seen from the comments above from Michael in his study of Outsider Witnessing Practices and from our co-researchers and our study of Insider Witnessing Practices, is that there is a whole new territory, the alternative or counterstory of a person’s life, where the power of oversight can have, as Michael put it, “quantum leap” effects. Perhaps, oversight has been the overarching theory of narrative therapy all along.

Returning to the quote above, we believe that Michael’s use of the term narrator is quite interesting here. A narrator isn’t just someone who tells the story, a narrator is someone who is outside the story looking down at everything that is happening. What we have found so fascinating is that time and again that clients’, in their feedback of Insider Witnessing Practices have spontaneously continue to echo and expand on what Michael’s beginning research into oversight proposed. Donna, one of our co-researchers, in a more lyrical form put it this way, “It was like I am standing up there on top of the earth and can just feel the earth rotating around... Before, the earth tilted to one side and now it has righted itself with me on top of it all.”





Insider Witnessing Practices as an “Extended Performance”

In his book, *Maps of Narrative Practice*, Michael wrote about a “variation on the stages of definitional ceremonies” that involves “an extended performance” (White, 2007, p. 199) of the retelling or performance that extends the time that the client is in the audience position. Michael argued that this was particularly important “when the person seeking consultation has little sense of personal agency, as is common among people who have been through significant trauma” (p. 199). Michael continued, “When people who have little sense of personal agency, they often feel irrelevant, empty, desolate, and paralyzed—as if their life is frozen in time.” (p. 199).

In such circumstances, when there is little personal agency and person experiences their life as frozen in time, Michael proposed that it is important that we find a means for people to experience “katharsis” or the experience of being transported “in response to witnessing powerful expressions of life’s dramas” (White, 2007, p. 194).

We have developed Insider Witnessing Practices for this very purpose, to provide the means for people to become witnesses to their own powerful life’s drama through an extended performance of the definitional ceremony. White states that “these extended performances... can include letters, audiotapes or videotapes sent [or performed] to the person whose life as at the center of the definitional ceremony” (White, 2007, p. 199).

This is where the difference, but not intent of Insider Witnessing Practices and Outsider Witnessing Practices lies. In Outsider Witnessing Practices, during stage two of the process, the client is an audience member to abbreviated retellings by several different team members which lasts for about 10-15 minutes. During Insider Witnessing Practices, however, the client is an audience member to an extended retelling of their life’s drama (by way of a recorded performance of their life story as told by an intimate witness—their therapist), a story that portrays them as moral agents who are and have always been actively shaping and bending the events of their lives according to their own moral purposes. When people are witnesses to





such a retelling, when they see the counterstory of their lives performed before their eyes, an unmistakable throughline appears that holds the entire story together; the throughline of their own personal agency. Sam (age 45), one of our co-researchers put it this way, “There was an arc to the interview...a story that unfolded...a throughline...that went all the way back.”

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