



The Politics of Knowledge

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According to his mum, Kathy, and his dad, Ray, Simon, aged 13, had always been fearful but, ever since his only friendship had dissolved some eighteen months ago, he had gone in to exile in his own home and no longer wished to attend school. He had begun experiencing 'panic attacks' when his parents wished to leave him behind. In order to prevent this from happening, he would throw himself bodily in front of their car in their driveway. His fears were having him encourage his younger sister, Joanna, aged ten, to keep him company in his fearing. His parents strongly opposed Joanna going in to exile with him.

I, David Epston, met with Simon, his sister and parents on December 23 and summer holidays were looming on the horizon. The fact that we would very likely not be able to meet again for well over a month explains the urgency with which this conversation was conducted.

At the beginning of our meeting, Simon was unable to audibly tell me his name and appealed to his father to speak up on his behalf. We all soon came to the conclusion that Fears were giving Simon a pretty hard time and had tricked him into believing that his parents should do his 'bravery' for him. Externalizing Fears allowed for quite a different reading of events than had previously been the case. We were able to conclude that the Fears had led everyone, and in particular, Simon to the inescapable conclusion that he was inadequate to the task of living his life but instead required others to be adequate for him.

Following our first meeting I wrote a letter to the family, which is my custom and in part, conveyed the following:

It is clear from what you told me that Simon is becoming increasingly Fear driven. His Fear driven life style has pushed him in to retreat and a form of self-exile. His Fears are like terrorists terrorizing him. His desperation is such that he has come to believe, much to the satisfaction of his Fears, that he should turn more and more to his parents to do his bravery for him. By doing so, is Simon unwittingly co-operating with his Fears by going on to their side and weakening his side? By inviting his parents to do his bravery for him and his sister to join him in a Fear lifestyle, is he turning the clock back on his growing up and instead could he very well be growing downwards?

Before we had got very far in this discussion, his parents ashamedly and somewhat reluctantly offered themselves as culpable for the Fear Problems. Both parents had experienced 'panic attacks' ten years previously whenever they tried to leave their home in the first few months after they immigrated to New Zealand and were 'finding their feet'. As both were now successfully employed in workplaces outside their





home, it was clear to all concerned that they both had overcome this problem. We co-researched the history of this struggle and arrived at what we came to refer to as their 'bravery knowledge', a knowledge they were only too willing to share with their children (Epston, 1999- NEED REFERENCE).

Such was this family's plight at the outset of our first meeting. We will return to Simon's story throughout this chapter in efforts to bring the ideas we describe here into practice. But first let us begin to establish the social and political context to which we are drawn in making sense of persons' lives and of the problems with which they sometimes contend.

In this postmodern age when difference and discrepant images of daily life are just a mouse-click away, and where diversely populated urban centers combine to hold the majority of the planet's population, it becomes increasingly apparent that any homogeneous or single view of either culture or identity, what they look like and how they ought to function, is inadequate. Lee Heller suggests that,

What is needed in studying the literature and culture of the Americas are new categories of organizing knowledge and experience that rise out of the subject under scrutiny, categories that resist totalizing per se, capable of imagining culture in terms of contingent, shifting sites of difference and multiplicity (1998, p. 351).

In the current era, an opportunity presents itself to challenge any authoritative claim to knowledge regarding human experience, in favor of a multi-vocal expression of *knowledges*. The anthropologist Victor Turner (1994) wrote about the creative possibilities that reside outside the lines of uniformity and pointed to the opportunities found in "communitas" beyond "the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships" (p. 128). He suggests that in conditions that appear normatively ordered, there are openings for resistance and creativity:

Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure in inferiority... and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency (p. 128).

We approach the site of childhood where just such liminality, marginality and inferiority are commonly found to demarcate the boundaries within which children are often confined and made out to be irrelevant. "From the earliest ethnographies which attempted to discuss all aspects of social life, children appear to be outside the main society, waiting patiently to be regarded as interesting only when they grow up" (Montgomery, 2005, p. 475). However, just as Turner predicts, it is in this restricted space where innovation is most likely to occur. We refrain from conceptualizing families and their predicaments within normative structures of thought and speech and instead reserve and invigorate a space for personal coinage and initiative. We do so by means of the questions we ask, always with a determined intention to maximize opportunities for self-





agency. For example, questions such as these were discussed at some length with Simon and his parents:

- Ray and Kathy, who was the first one to refuse to allow the Fears to tell you where and how far you could drive in your car? Or did you, alongside one another, reject the Fears?
- If you had surrendered fully to the Fears, would that have turned your decision to make a new home for your family in New Zealand in to a humiliating repatriation?
- Did the fact that you and your family supported the Liverpool Football Team for over three generations and witnessed remarkable come-backs on both their home ground and when they were playing away have anything to do with your bravery come-back?
- By any chance, when the going got tough and you wondered if you could go the distance, did you sing 'You'll Never Walk Alone' to yourself or one another?
- Simon, does it matter much for you to know that your mum and your dad pioneered their own bravery here in Auckland when you were a pre-schooler?
- Does it make it easier for you to take up your own bravery when all you have to do is ask your parents to tell you their stories about their bravery know-how?
- Kathy and Ray, can you recall who would have passed this bravery knowledge on to you both? Or did you have to make it up from scratch?
- Can either of you see any reason why Simon shouldn't receive it in his turn from his parents' generation?
- Do you think thirteen is the right age for his initiation into his family's tradition of bravery?

Let us digress for a few paragraphs...

Interests in *collaboration*, *self-determination* and more *egalitarian* and *strength-based* approaches to family practice have been taken up to some degree in current psychology and social work courses and accompanying reading (Hepworth, et al, 2010; Woods & Hollis, 2000; Nichols, 2010; Saleeby 2009). However, in spite of the space these sentiments find in current academic settings, these fields' predominant interest remains dysfunction, especially when we look beyond postulation to actual practice, and with it the bestowal of the *requisite objective seat* to the family therapist. Therapists are vested with the professional authority to settle disputed matters. Families, and certainly young people, are divested of the authority to know best.

This differential has been achieved by means of psychology's ascension to the ranks of the professional disciplines (e.g. law, medicine). As such, it lays claim to a body of knowledge that has been canonized and thought to be transcendent, more discovered than invented, more timeless than era bound (Watters, 2010). These 'discoveries' take on the appearance of facts that purport to be generalizable. Facts that can be generalized make possible the categorization of *kinds* of individuals. Such knowledge claims to capture the 'human condition.' It erases boundaries and crosses oceans, solving the mysteries of distant and foreign lands, collecting under one canopy a shrunken world of human experience that has been ordered and given a shared





taxonomy. It reaches into historical texts with a corrective pen, re-writing the past and re-casting the famous and infamous as bi-polar, personality- disordered, etc. Even fictional characters are subject to this objectified fate. Huck Finn, it turns out, suffered from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (Mintz, 2004; Nylund, 2000).

With regard to Simon, it is not hard to imagine the frustration felt by those around him and, in their search for explanations, the temptation to turn to the technical language that recommends itself for just such occasions. These are the moments in persons' lives when they are at risk of being assembled in assembly-line fashion, labels and all. Whatever creative composition they might have applied to their lives up until now can be edited out at just such pivotal moments.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2008) illustrates the dangers of attempting to establish a finite scientific template for human experience. She cites author Eduardo Galeano's depiction of Northern Brazil as "a concentration camp for more than 40 million people" (, p. 27). Scheper- Hughes focuses on a particular locale within this vast region and describes how, "in Bom Jesus, 'street kids' were the primary targets of a hyperactive death squad..." (p. 32). Illustrating their awareness of the extreme dangers they faced, she tells how "they could rattle off the names of dozens of their cohorts who had been killed, disappeared, abused in jail, or died of the 'bad sickness' (most likely AIDS)" (p 35). In the midst of such dire conditions, Sheper-Hughes "was surprised by the optimism of their personal narratives, their strong sense of self, value and worth and their sunny and upbeat drawings" (p. 32). She counsels us to resist the temptation to generalize and about the importance of context. In the case of the 'street kids,' they "faced grave dangers on the streets of Bom Jesus and they had access to money which made them valuable" (p. 33). "They described street life in positive terms, as 'good', as 'beautiful', and as 'liberating'" (p. 32). Where diversity would remind us to treat each encounter anew, canonical knowledge (e.g. criteria for PTSD), would incite us to assuredly predict an inevitable and tragic psychic outcome regarding these 'street kids.'

If children are brought into a therapist's office and problems are seen only through the lens of specialized/specialist knowledge, it is likely their contributions will be effectively lost to the more privileged deliberations. The door may be open to a process of engagement with them that involves building rapport and creating a friendly atmosphere. They may also be sought out by various means of talk and play in order to elicit feelings. To these ends, some contribution may be welcome, so long as the "child [is] defined exclusively as an object of sentiment and not as an agent of production" (Zelizer quoted in Olsen, 2000, p. 388). The work of therapy and the matter of tackling problems head on will likely be regarded as the private domain of adults and, in particular, professionals. They, the professionals, alone will formulate treatment plans. The parents will be required to follow the instructions deduced from such plans.

Young people, while thought of kindly, are rendered relatively passive recipients in therapy. As problems such as night-fears, temper, school related difficulties and trauma intrude upon children's lives, professionals are





inclined to step in as lead agents. Parents are guided into positions of responsibility and young people are often positioned as objects of inquiry and consequent assessment.

The danger of clinical practice, especially as it gives rise to *evidence-based practice* (Hepworth et al, 2010) is the inflation of the role of the family therapist to that of *social scientist* and along with it a claim to a *reasoned* method in which people come to be understood in much the same way as would a mathematical equation. Being in possession of knowledge that takes on the appearance of a logical proof could make *knowing* ahead of the family, who they are and what they need, irresistible.

Scheper-Hughes (2008) describes a visiting pediatrician who knew ahead of time that those in the Northern Brazilian community he came upon, who had experienced trauma and starvation, would grow up to become “... psychologically damaged and disabled adults...” (p. 31). However, that was far from the case. Scheper-Hughes adds:

As adults these “resilient” survivors of childhood trauma held no grudges against their neglectful caretakers, they displayed few of the classic symptoms of trauma victims, and they viewed themselves as victors not victims, as having met death face-to-face and won! (p. 31).

In fact, Scheper-Hughes describes them as having a “talent for life.”

If, as we believe, we are bound to time and place, then knowledge, is more local than universal, and any broader claims to knowledge are questionable and always approaching expiration dates. At which time, some new and current fashion will wear, for a while, the same mantle of universal truth. We are drawn to an understanding of knowledge that can never be finalized or known outside of the context of people’s lived experience. This turns our interests away from specialized/specialist knowledge that is always vying to extend its reach, toward the local and particular. We look to the work of Arthur Kleinman (1995), the Harvard anthropologist who writes especially in reference to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder but also more generally about “how the clinician reworks the patient’s perspective into disease categories which distort the moral world of the patient and community” (p. 117). He elaborates:

Experts are far along in the process of inauthenticating social worlds, of making illegitimate the defeats and victories, the desperation and aspiration of individuals and groups that could perhaps be more humanly rendered, not as representation of some other reality (one that we as experts possess special power over) but rather as the vocation of experience that stands for itself (p. 117).

In David’s next letter to the family, summarizing the conversation he had with them, he takes care not to professionalize their experience by means of psychological terminology. Always with self-agency in mind, he is guided by the words they use to express what, for them, holds importance. This is evident in David’s efforts to stay near or get inside the family’s language.





However, Simon is extremely fortunate to have the parents he has. They know only too well the misery Fears can make of a person's life. You both have escaped a Fear driven life and you both struck me as very grateful you did. If you hadn't, you mentioned your lives would have been 'a shared prison' with your Fears as 'our gaolers'. Kathy, somehow or other, you must have realized that Fears were taking you over and you decided to stand up against them. Going to 'that counsellor' was what you referred to as 'a major step' and one that seemed to be a turning point in your life and the life of your family. Ray, you observed what Kathy was doing and started following suit. Together, you made your stand against Fearing and because you were not divided, you could not fall. You told us that when you both confronted these Fears, they could not withstand your combined strength of purpose and more or less dissolved in front of your very eyes. It is well known that Fears operate best when you turn your back on them or run away from them. You both have set a fine example for your children and possess an extensive 'bravery knowledge'. And I am quite sure there is a lot more to it than the relatively brief discussion we had in the time available to us.

With the irreverence so well known to the tradition of the Carnival (Hoy, 1992), we aim to upend 'truth', to bring it tumbling down from its lofty throne, and perhaps have some fun with it in the process. "The slave and jester become substitutes for the ruler and god, various forms of ritualistic parody make their appearance, and "the passions" are mixed with laughter and gaiety" (Hoy, 1992, pp. 770-71). We are reminded of Victor Turner's (1995) *rituals* of "elevation" and "reversal." We would do well to apply these concepts to children, as we, the adults in their lives, occupy the roles of witness and scribe in the presence of their original performances of knowledge (Epston & Marsten, 2010). David occupies such a role while interviewing Simon about his interest and readiness to address Fear:

DE: Simon, what's your sense about whether now is the right time to take on the Fears? Or if you'd rather let them stay in the lead of your life for a while longer while you give it some more thought and go into some training, say mental karate?

Simon: Now!

DE: Why would you say now is the time? Is there something you're seeing in yourself or in your family bravery that's telling you this is just the right time to turn the tables on the Fears?

Simon: We're a team.

DE: Do you mean like Liverpool or a different kind of team? **Simon:** Kinda.

DE: Kind of like Liverpool?





- Simon:** Yeah?
- DE:** What have you picked up or appreciated about the teamwork you see amongst the Liverpool players? Is there a certain way they have to organize to make a come-back when they are down a goal or two? Is it every man for himself or are they working together?
- Simon:** Together, but sometimes someone makes a special play.
- DE:** Is there a particular player who really stands out and jumps out of the TV screen for you?
- Simon:** Steven Gerrard!
- DE:** What is it about his style of playing you admire most?
- Simon:** He's has clever moves and fakes out the other team.
- DE:** Does he ever choke or tighten up?
- Simon:** No, well maybe sometimes, but not usually.
- DE:** I don't know if Fear could get in the way of going for it on the field. If it takes bravery to step up and go for it. Do you think it's more about talent alone, Simon, or is there an element of bravery?
- Simon:** There's definitely bravery because he could miss, and he does sometimes. He doesn't have a perfect record.
- DE:** How much does he rely on the team to support him and how much would you guess he relies on his bravery?
- Simon:** About half and half, I'd say.
- DE:** How is it Simon, that you recognize bravery in him? Is this one of those *'it takes one to know one'* kinds of things? Doesn't a person have to know something about bravery himself to know when someone else has got it?
- Simon:** Yeah!
- DE:** Is this true about Simon? Does he in fact already have bravery knowledge?
- Kathy:** He absolutely does!





DE: Can either of you tell me a story that accurately goes to the heart of Simon's bravery knowledge?

Kathy: Oh, that's easy...

Kathy tells a well-known family story about Simon having exhibited Houdini-like talents as a toddler and figuring out ways to climb out of his crib and other confined spaces like his playpen and car seat. Ray listens and nods in agreement and obvious appreciation. Simon is wide-eyed and tickled at their recollections.

How we engage with young people and families whether in attitude, spoken word or in what we listen for, will determine whether we are reasserting claims to universal knowledge or making room for young people's, family and community wisdoms. Which we choose will determine how power/knowledge sits in the room and potentially, in the lives and relationships of families.

Speaking and Listening

By necessity, we rely on the terms of language in our efforts to understand and assist families. If we introduce and encourage the expression of *pent up feelings*, attempt to get at *core issues* or assist people in overcoming a sense of *emptiness*, we are relying on well-known psychological tropes to give expression and meaning to experience. Similarly, when collaborating with families, if we perceive *interactional patterns* or *family rules*, we are organizing our observations around particular metaphors to evoke specific images of family life from which to draw conclusions about 'what's going wrong.'

Our terms of language would seem to expand our descriptive opportunities and augment our understanding. But they can also function restrictively, narrowing our field of options and binding us within the limited range of the familiar (Epston, 1989). Linguistic constraints can both reflect and reinforce a bias toward dominant cultural understandings of daily life, producing a circumscribed range of expression whereby language offers itself up in the most conventional forms, directly impacting how we come to know ourselves, others, and the world around us. Mikita Hoy (1992) turns to the work of Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin to make a similar point:

Within every single word, within every single utterance, Bakhtin identifies a large and ancient collection of ideas, motives, and intentions utilized by centuries of speakers and writers. All language, according to Bakhtin, is prestratified into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, languages of generations and age-groups, tendentious languages, languages of authority, and, especially in recent media language, the discourse of various circles and passing fashions of the day, even of the hour (p. 767).





A few examples will serve to clarify:

A metaphoric view of the *self as private property* would support internalizing language and a therapeutic approach concerned with *space, individuality, boundaries and autonomy*. A *medical metaphor* would encourage the use of such terms as *mental illness, diagnosis, prognosis, and relapse*. People, in this view, would typically be referred to as *patients*, their status as such justifying practices of *baseline- measurement, assessment and treatment*. A *causal metaphor* as applied to human behavior would have us connecting dots between *antecedents* and their *consequences*, the plights of the people consulting us amounting to little more than these consequences. A *systems metaphor* would have us looking for *patterns* in the interactions of family members. These patterns would serve a *function* of ‘thermostatically’ maintaining *homeostatic* conditions.

These and various other favored metaphors (e.g. mechanistic, developmental, biological, computer, characterological etc.) serve up a sense of the world *as we know it* and would have us conclude that we are notating human experience accurately and speaking in literal rather than figurative terms. Rather than seeing from a contingent vantage point we would be seeing from what Snell (2006), quoting Rorty, refers to as a “god’s eye view” (P. 146). We would have access to a language that is thought to be neutral, but which comes to life only when we awaken it. We would be deceived into thinking that we were no longer haunted by the meanings of centuries past or bridled by current power relations, as if language would present itself in innocent form with each new utterance being unaffiliated and free of precedent.

Similarly, what we hear often says more about how we listen than what is said. How we listen determines what we take to be meaningful and is likely to compel us to ask questions of a certain kind in order to elicit more of one kind of expression than another. Such inquiries would have us ‘hear more’ rather than ‘hear differently.’ This process can be more about confirming what we already know than about discovery or innovation. If, for example, we are in the habit of privileging problem descriptions and professional understandings, then our ears will bend in those directions and away from discrepant forms of expression such as family and community wisdoms that ultimately become unheard whispers (White and Epston, 1990).

If we are drawn to an account of children as hapless we might be unprepared for the kind of meaningful engagement that would support their growth and agency; and if we are drawn to a stable or single description of identity, the multiplicity of other expressions of the self would be placed beyond our auditory range. As Anneke Meyers (2007) describes it,

Through this discourse of innocence, children are reproduced as possessing an essentially virtuous and innocent nature. This nature makes them naive and vulnerable and turns them into helpless victims in constant need of adult protection. This discourse of innocence is extremely resistant to challenges, whether logical, experiential, evidential or otherwise (p. 89).





We are advocating for a *species of listening* that would ready us to receive the unfamiliar and tune in to what may otherwise be mistaken as background noise. Post-structuralism offers a critique of text in its assertion that the meaning we extract from the written (or spoken) word is particular and partial (Powell, 2006). There is always more to be found in expression than initially lands on the ear. This re-locates us to an expanse where multiple meanings are at hand, where families and young people are more than the problem-laden accounts to which we would otherwise be attuned. If they are more than their problems and if, as post-structuralism argues, they bring more than problem description to *every* dialogue, then how we listen will have determining effects on how families and young people come to be known to us and to themselves.

David takes up the conversation where he and Simon left it in the above.

DE: I gather you've heard this story before, Simon? Is that right?

Simon: Yeah (smiling)!

DE: This story sounds pretty amazing to me. Is it amazing to you as a thirteen-year-old remembering your boyhood?

Simon: Yeah! It's funny to picture myself doing those things.

DE: What's the best part of the story? Is it your talents as an escape artist at such a young age? Your dislike of being caged in? Your love of freedom, your bravery or something else entirely?

Simon: My talent as an escape artist! It's funny thinking of myself doing that as a baby. But I guess that's bravery too.

DE: Your talent as an escape artist and your bravery?

Simon: Yeah (laughing with obvious pleasure).

DE: If your Fears were listening to this conversation this very minute, do you think they'd be freaking out to learn about your love of freedom or that you are not so easy to trap or pin down or how far back your bravery goes?

Simon: Yeah, I guess so!

DE: Simon, if you're right, and now's the time to take on these Fears, how important a role do you think your parents' bravery knowledge will play and how much will your bravery figure in?

Simon: I guess about 50/50.





It is in the fragments of expression, the utterances and afterthoughts so easily overlooked and in the implicit elements of speech acts, that, if we are prepared to extend our curiosity beyond the canon, we will find entry points into conversations of another kind.

Knowing Causally

Dear kindly Sergeant Krupke, you gotta understand, It's just our bringin' up-ke That gets us out of hand. Our mothers all are junkies, Our fathers all are drunks. Golly Moses, natcherly we're punks!
(From 'West Side Story')

A causal view of identity, and in this case, childhood, would offer various theoretical grounds for 'why s/he is the way s/he is.' It is decidedly (1) her/his parents, (2) his/her brain chemistry, (3) innate, (4) developmental or (5) some combination of one to four. Kathy and Ray, you may remember, were drawn in by just such a causal view, and assumed the shared attitude of confession in the presence of an assumed authority and '*ashamedly and somewhat reluctantly offered themselves as culpable for the Fear Problems. Both parents had had 'panic attacks' ten years previously...*' While these various lines of reasoning sometimes compete for truth status, they each in turn open up a common professional space. In each instance there is an implied 'expert,' with a pre-existing body of knowledge, drawing a *proven* conclusion as to the agent(s) that set events in motion.

Children and their problems are seen as the inevitable consequence much like billiard balls being struck by a cue ball, driven helter-skelter. Rendered passive by this construction, it is easy for children to be understood as unintentional in their lives. Denied any of the ingredients (e.g. purpose, resolve, motive, etc.) that would bring them into view as compelling figures, they would simply be compelled. Such is the fate of "nonagentive objects" (Bruner, 1990). In efforts to address problems, a causal frame of understanding would imply causal solutions in the form of a curative catalyst of one kind or another (e.g. consistency, medication, healing environment, etc). However, the seeming elegance of such a logical line of thought (e.g. "*You were denied care and consideration; therefore you need a loving environment as a corrective measure*" or, "*You weren't given consistent consequences, therefore you need a sure and steady hand*" may not deliver on its promises. Once problems have taken up residence in the lives of families and young people, causal explanations as to how they started along with their consequent solutions are often inadequate in either their mitigation or resolution. The most serious effect, in our view, of adopting such a view in the face of difficult problems, is to turn our attention away from young people as protagonists, and toward 'best heads', usually ours, for enlightenment on causes and cures.

Interventions, even when allowances are made for subtle variations in how problems and solutions are conceptualized, can be formulaic. Because problems are often treated as quantifiable and generalizable, a finite number of templates for understanding and protocols for action broadly applied, across populations, are thought to be sufficient or evidence based. Young people are not seen as productive, but rather produced,





falling into a restricted number of categories or problem identities. This predictive method draws our attention away from intentional state understandings (Bruner, 1990; White, 2007) and instead in the direction of specialized/specialist knowledge and minimizes the opportunity for young people and their families to:

- Think effectively on their own behalves
- Engage in intentional and ethical considerations
- Assume a spearhead position in impacting their own lives
- Take decisive action under their own advisement and/or in consultation/collaboration with others)
- Draw upon those knowledges specific to them and those ways of doing things more in line with young people in general

By the time problems achieve a degree of momentum young people, while conceived of through “the rhetoric of the priceless child” (Olsen, 2000, p. 391) are made out to be relatively useless, at least by Western conceptions of childhood. We are not recommending a view of life devoid of rhyme or reason, or neglectful of past experience. But neither is it the case, as a causal view would imply, that life can be fully understood or predicted by a single link with the past. In fact, this notion of a single past, and more to the point, a single reading of our past, is more akin, in form and function, to an understanding of human nature, as drawn in the traditional 19th Century novel than it is to lived experience. “Utopian literature of the past two centuries, which characteristically draws on one or another “discovery” of history’s inner pattern, typically displays such symmetry” (Morson, 1994, p. 39). While the written protagonist is commonly drawn in a coherent and consistent style, everyday lived experience is disordered, contingent and contradictory. We may have any number of experiences in a stretch of time that confirms one identity conclusion right alongside an equal number of contradictory experiences that, if given sufficient attention, would cohere around other quite dissimilar conclusions. It is only when specific themes or story conventions are established that we have something to latch onto and around which to organize. Once we zero in on a specific theme, our awareness can be reduced to the re-tracing of a single storyline.

With regard to Simon, David’s inquiries were specifically intended to elevate and attend to what else the family knows about itself and Simon that stands outside of the story that, in a manner of speaking, the Fears would have them know. The questions David asked were made thinkable by virtue of his interest in and ear for “news of difference” (Bateson, 1972, p. 454). It is the belief that any single expression of identity, even one that enjoys dominant status and professional legitimation is partial and only in current favor. Once we expose the underlying assumptions that established its veracity in the first place and continue to provide it its abiding status, we can let our eye wonder and our ear tune into other frequencies without fearing we have lost our way.

Diagnosis as Knowledge

As persons, such as Simon and his family, reach out to the professions for help, they may be greeted by problematized identity categories, often by way of diagnostics. These categories can present themselves in





many forms but offer certain appeal if the medicalized accounting of young persons is understood according to the story convention of the knight in shining armour –science is soon to arrive on the scene. If it is the case that pathology assumes the role of protagonist, and the young person is cast as the damsel in distress, the experience of rescue can be short-lived and costly. With a new pathology-based version of the story at the center of everyone’s attention, any loose ends can be easily misinterpreted as irrelevant. In fact, loose ends – those events in life that do not fit with the Problem’s story about young persons and that might lead to very different identity conclusions – can be lost in the process. “By definition, no one can focus on what happens at the periphery of one’s attention” (Morson, 1994, p 77). In coming to *know* oneself according to the Problem, one’s impulse grows, with the urging of the professional disciplines, to *notice* oneself according to the Problem. Conclusions drawn from such inquiries can be devastating if they establish a monopoly and resign families, with the constant tug and pull of diagnosis, to an ineluctable sense of things, not just for the current lives of their children, but for their future prospects as well. The future, under these conditions is brought within reach. It is as if whatever happened in the past is more than a history with which to contend. It is a “branding” (Madigan, 2011) and thereby a foretelling (Morson, 1994).

In the example of young persons, if an intervention de-centers them and their lives are given over to a professional language-set, an understanding can emerge that suggests or implies permanence. Just as utopian fiction of the past two centuries provides clues in the first pages of the story to the true natures of its characters, affixing them from the outset to finite identities as heroes, villains, damsels in distress and so on, with the devices of narrativity and foreshadowing, diagnosis can claim to have ominously captured persons and made them fundamentally known. This is not to be confused as an attempt to distill the experience of meeting and living with diagnostic categories into a similarly predicative single story. It is, however to acknowledge that problems speak to us in an authorial tone, drawing our attention to a certain characterization of young people. When this interacts with power invested in pathology, without taking care and action, this could have us take note of evidence of just a particular kind, unwittingly foreclosing on persons’ futures. They become known according to their problems; and problems, with their capacity to degrade and demoralize young persons and their families can weave tales that constitute the present, color the past and conjure a future that ominously seals their fates.

In psychology, expedience recommends *linguistic surgery* by which we would trim the young person’s and family’s speech acts and purported meanings. In this operation the family’s speaking would be replaced with a medical device of sorts, or more precisely, medical language, by means of which they would be resuscitated and brought back to consciousness as *patients*. Simon faced overpowering fears that had him in dramatic retreat leaving the family in a demoralized state. At just such times there is ready guidance found in professional and diagnostic texts that provide exacting terms to apply to a person’s, or in this instance, Simon’s identity along with behavioral criteria to be on the look-out for and protocols for treatment. These pre-established modes of understanding and treatment planning also offer predictions about what might be expected over time. As Morson (1994) describes, “Their lives would truly be already over and would have





always been already over. Their choices would be illusory, for they would have already been made. Those aware of this depressing fact would not so much live their lives as *live out* their already-plotted lives” (p 51). As a result, any restorative considerations for one’s life could be made irrelevant, since such deliberations require that the possibility for future actions take one of many, as yet, undetermined paths.

Narrative Knowing

We are born storytellers. “Sometime between a baby’s first cries and his second birthday, he begins to know he has a past, and he wants to talk about it” (Engel, 1995, p. 113). The happenings and mishaps of daily existence give us the impulse to make ourselves intelligible. By a very early age the stories young people tell have narrative drive. Rather than recounting a string of unrelated or inconsequential moments, stories have coherence and arc or a highpoint to which they build. There is a development of some note, an unanticipated altered condition. “All forms of narrative, even at their most awkward and unaccomplished, are concerned with change. In one way or another, a transition takes place. Something happens” (Danius, 2008, p. 999). Narrative structure as utilized in a process of identity formation stands in stark contrast to Joyce’s story form in *Ulysses*, in which nothing exceptional occurs. We look in on a day like any other. In fact, the recorded moments of Leo Bloom’s day, detailed over a span of several hundred pages, are laid out with quotidian precision, where no event emerges or steps forward around which to excite the reader’s imagination. According to Danius (2008) “The background slowly conquers the foreground, and little by little the space of the unheard of shrivels up... turning it into a world of few surprises, fewer adventures, and no miracles at all” (p. 999).

The act of talking about our day-to-day experience locates us in the world amidst a distilled number of events that have been rendered significant and organized according to a theme, contributing to a coherent sense of identity. These events are woven together and are located in and across time (Bruner, 1991; Epston, 1998). Though an experience can be absorbing and momentarily suspend time, it is ultimately the case that we are bound to three spaces in time that have us alternately *detecting*, *reflecting* and *expecting*. A story describes something “that can happen has happened will happen...” (Danius quoting Stein, 2008, p. 994). A given experience in the present often has the effect of inviting reverie or reflection that transports us to relatable events in our past. The past can be selectively awakened and enlisted to confirm the current story under construction. It is less remembering or even reckoning and more a fashioning of past events with which we re-engage. Jerome Bruner describes it thusly, “It is always an interpretation of our experience, since meaning making or recounting is always interpretation” (Engel, 1995, p. 77). The future is then gazed upon and it is a particular future that presents itself in service of the story under development. “Narrative structure therefore falsifies in several distinct but closely related ways. It violates the continuity of experience by imposing a beginning and an ending; it reduces the plurality of wills and purposes to a single pattern” (Morson, 1994, pg 38). Narrative can become lifeless when only one future, derived from one privileged and narrowed reading of events, past and present, is made possible.





At the same time the constraints found in any compelling narrative can just as readily function in the service of a preferred narrative in the making. "...constraints are not primarily intended as strict limitations but rather as creative stimuli for the artistic process; they reduce the endless possibilities – the common, rather naïve association of literature with boundless freedom and complete originality – and thus contribute to a stronger focus on the mechanisms on which genuine literature should be based: formal control maximal artistic concentration within an appropriate frame of constraints" (Geest & Goris, 2010, p. 82). It is with just such focused attention that we commit to the process of counter-story development (Lindemann-Nelson, 2001) in our encounters with young people. This intense focus can bring a story to life. Once a space is created to offer occupancy to the details and events that make up a counter-story a young person can step into it her/himself and take up the slack.

Back to Our Story

They returned in another month's time as agreed. This time, Simon led his family into my room and then requested them to be seated. He was proudly brandishing some sheets of paper in his handwriting. He took centre stage in the room, with all of us becoming an enraptured audience, wondering what in the world he was going to come up with. His parents had told me he had refused any help from them, as well as forbidding them to know what he was writing. He drew himself up to his full five foot and two inches, smiled at his family and began to read in a resounding voice. His parents, justifiably, looked upon their son with their family's dignity restored, as did his younger sister.

The following is the document he donated for me to pass on to any others who were being Fear-driven that I might meet in the future. When you read it, try to imagine that at the beginning of the first meeting he had been inaudible.

I knew that I was going to live a Fear driven life for the rest of my life. It felt like I was locked up in a cage and was not allowed out. My Fears were like terrorists terrorizing me. I felt I couldn't get a proper grip on myself and I was getting weaker and weaker within myself. I couldn't go anywhere and do anything but that was the way I felt I wanted to be.

My Fears were like a menu: some very small things, which really hurt the most, and some very big things. My Fears were staying the night with my friends, cousins, and so on, and going to the hot pools with them, scared when my parents went out, going to the movies, going to town, and so on. These Fears were very hard to cope with. It is very hard when your Fears take you over, because you can't go anywhere with your friends, and after a while, they get sick of you and go off you because you don't go anywhere.





I found it very important for me to find out about my mother and father having lots of knowledge about bravery. It helped me to realize what great parents I really had and that they had been through the same things as me. I felt in myself that I was ready after the first time I visited The Family Therapy Centre, which gave me extra support inside of myself. In my mind, I knew when my Fears were tricking me and weakening me. I didn't feel the same person when I was filled with Fears and I can tell you it is not a nice feeling at all. I finally beat my Fears by doing all the things I wanted to do, and not letting them beat me at all. Now I have many methods to overcome them. I am finding my life a lot easier now! My methods mean that I out-trick my Fears and it works.

This was a major victory. It helped me do more things, like going to people's houses, going to the city, the pools, the movies, and other places. These were my victories and from that I have no interest in a Fear-driven life style such as I had. I am willing to help anyone who has trouble with a Fear-driven life style.

Simon James, Liverpool supporter and anti-Fear person.

Simon returned to report many more 'victories' in the months that followed, including taking an active role in his education, especially remedial reading, extending his social network, and widening the range of his activities. His parents were so reassured about his 'bravery' that in due course, they were able to travel overseas for the first time since they had immigrated to New Zealand, leaving Simon and Joanna in the care of friends. Several Fears revisited Simon when he became complacent, but they never lasted very long.

Conclusion

Truth as it relates to human perception has been treated with renewed skepticism over the last 50 years by the poststructuralists. "Where once the orthodoxies of the West, and of culture, were founded on a belief in a certain metaphysical order of things, be it God, or full-existence, or the person and soul, now these orthodoxies are trace-laws, and embody a realm of half-entities and playful shadows" (Powel, 2006, p. 58). The long-sustained search for human experience in its authentic form is a fool's errand in pursuit of a chimera. Any essentialist characterization of young persons would be founded on notions of objectivity and reason that for so long have not delivered all that they have promised us. We approach young people with anticipation, knowing that if we extend our auditory range our questions may invite any number of manifestations of self. Young people can be vital to the task of responding to the problems that sneak or stumble into their lives. It is through the kind of invigorated engagement with young people we have described above that they can take a growing interest in their own skills for living. In the process they can develop more intimate understandings of what they think and intend for their lives. "An important theme in the research on children's moral development is that morality entails cognitive as well as affective competence" (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2007). Young people step into competence in social contexts where room is actively made for it. In addition to





supporting competence we rely on narrative structures to situate these experiences on a temporal plain, linking promising current events to antecedents and implied futures. It is narrative structures that allow meaning to come into focus and provide for a rounded sense of identity. Young people, in spite of Romantic notions of their delicate dispositions are up to the challenge.

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