

Re-engaging with ‘the Person is not the Problem, the Problem is the Problem’: Neoliberalism, Narrative Therapy, and Relationship Counselling

Michael Edwards, he/him, MSW RSW¹²

Abstract

The author tells a story of how neoliberalism found a way into his counselling practice and had a strong influence in his work with relationships. He talks about how a turning point allowed him to both identify the presence of neoliberalism in his practice and to see the negative effects neoliberalism was having in his work with couples and families. He writes about how by re-engaging with the principle, ‘the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem’ (White & Epston, 1990) he gained a renewed understanding of using narrative therapy with relationships, which helped to re-orient his practice-vision away from competition and suspicion, and towards solidarity, possibilities and understanding.

Keywords: neoliberalism, the person is not the problem the problem is the problem, relationship counselling, solidarity, outsider witnessing, friendship

Introduction

Before I begin this paper, it is important to situate myself for the reader. I have lived in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada all my life. I am forty-two years old. I am a cisgender male, in a heterosexual marriage with a cis-gender woman; we have two cisgender sons, ages six and four. When I was twelve I was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder and used methylphenidate until I was twenty-four. I love the Grateful Dead, and consider myself a Dead Head. I am also an advocate for improving public transit and active transportation in Winnipeg. I started my career as a Helper when I was twenty-three supporting people with intellectual disabilities. I have been a Social Worker and counsellor since I was thirty-one.

¹ Mike is a counsellor in independent practice who works with young people living in the child welfare system in Manitoba, Canada. He works and resides on Treaty One Territory, the original lands of the Anishinaabe, Anishinew, Ininiwak, Dakota, Dene and Red River Métis.

mike@michaeledwardscounselling.ca

² Thank-you to Shannon Edwards, Scott Erickson, Candace Neufeld, Kelly Bernardin-Dvorak, and John Koop-Harder for their help with this paper.

Both my parents' families come from settler-European backgrounds; my father's family came from Scotland and France to settle in southern Saskatchewan in the early 20th century. My mother's family came from Scotland and England and settled in southwestern Manitoba in the late 19th century.

Narrative therapy has played an important part in my life since my first encounter with it in a seminar course in 2009. I found the idea of using the narrative metaphor in helping work intriguing, as I had fond memories of listening to my grandfather's stories of adventures in his youth. For my Master of Social Work program, I used narrative therapy with men experiencing mental health concerns. I have worked hard to learn and live narrative ideas and ethics (Freedman & Combs, 1996). However, looking back on my career from 2023, there was a piece missing. I had struggled in my work with couples and families. Attributing this struggle to inexperience, I continued on. Yet, after ten years of working as a counsellor, I met with a family last March and realized that I needed to step away, as uncertainty and confusion had taken away confidence that I could help this family. I then knew I needed to take a closer look at my use of narrative therapy with relationships. After taking stock, I could see that over the years when uncertainty and confusion clouded my practice-vision during relationship counselling, I would resort to practices that individualized problems in the other. It was not until recently that I was able to see how neoliberalism was finding a way into my practice-vision. Knowing now what the missing piece was, I could see that I needed to renew my understanding of the principle, 'the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem'.

This paper is about the use of narrative practices with couples and families. My purpose is to speak to beginner and novice narrative therapists so they can learn from both my misunderstandings, as well as the ideas and practices I've used to reorient to preferred directions. It documents these misunderstandings; the influence of neoliberalism in my practice; and the ways I have renewed my approach to focus on solidarity, possibilities, and understanding. By no means have I arrived at a place of true understanding; the ideas here came to life through the writing of this paper. Inevitably there will be setbacks, and these ideas and practices will continue to change and evolve.

The person is not the problem, the other person is the problem

When I started as a counsellor, I found it easy to relate and empathize with the person seeking counselling. In the beginning, listening was my primary focus as I did not feel confident enough to intervene in any significant way. Furthermore, people seemed to appreciate my listening, often telling me that they found our times helpful. As many beginner counsellors do, I was listening with the ears of a caring friend, and responded to their stories of hardships or injustice much the same way I would have responded to a friend's stories. This involved taking a position against others the person saw as acting against them. Often this would lead to 'side-taking' and gossip; where portions of the meeting were devoted to talking about how morally irresponsible the other was, and how the person seeking counselling could best cope with the negative personality traits of the other. Looking back, while I know participants appreciated my listening and having someone on their side, it seems likely these meetings further mired people in negativity, and made the relationships in question harder for the person seeking counselling.

Simultaneously, during this time I was learning more about narrative practices and started to incorporate its ideas and ethics into my work. I started where many new narrative therapists begin, externalizing the problem and the principle of 'the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem'. When sitting with individuals I started to externalize problems with some success. While there was clumsiness (which still exists to this day), I was able to convey that the person was not the problem, and asked questions that languaged the person as in relationship with the problem. This enabled new ways of dealing with challenges that would not have been possible otherwise. However, when it came to the part that others were playing in the person's life and the problems they were experiencing, I was still going along with portraying the other as acting in bad faith: the other person was still the problem.

As my understanding of narrative ideas and ethics continued to mature, I started to ask questions about ways problems were affecting the person's life and relationships, and what was supporting the problem to be a part of the person's life. I misinterpreted Michael White's idea of discussing the life support system of problems by portraying others as acting as a life support system for problems (White & Epston, 1990). I started to ask about ways other people were

“contributing” to problems, or “helping” problems. For instance, when a person was experiencing a problem such as Sadness, and told a story about Sadness that involved someone from their life, I would ask, “Were there any ways that this person was helping Sadness to be a part of your life?” or “in which ways was this person contributing to your experience of Sadness?” These questions kept conversations stuck in stories about conflict and encouraged blame and judgment of the other person.

As one could imagine, when meeting with couples and families, the practice of characterizing others as helping or contributing to problems increased the intensity of conflict among participants. Typically, the path these conversations would take was to engage with participants to externalize an initial problem and map the effects of the problem in the lives of participants. But once discussions turned to what was supporting problems, the conversation stayed at the individual level. My questions would characterize participants as either inadvertently or advertently helping problems to influence persons’ lives in negative ways. In turn, conversations would break down, confusion and uncertainty would set in, and hurt feelings would flare, leading to a strong sense of failure. From here, I would defer to what I deemed to be a more “efficient” form of relationship counselling, for fear of losing participants to dissatisfaction or impatience. This more ‘efficient’ form of relationship counselling involved resorting to problem-solving, where the couple or family attempts to resolve conflicts in front of the counsellor so that the counsellor can rule on what the problem “actually was,” diagnose the cause of the problem, and then teach participants how to communicate more “effectively” in attempts to solve the problem. When engaging in this problem-solving practice, I would “roll up my sleeves” to “get to the bottom of things” with couples and families. This created a level of chaos that made my intention of generating new and preferred stories impossible.

The influence of neoliberalism

Jim Silver (2014) described neoliberalism as,

“Neoliberalism involves turning more economic decision-making authority over to the private sector, especially large corporations, and correspondingly reducing the role of the state-especially governments’

social spending. Thus, neoliberalism may take the form of privatization, deregulation, reductions in government expenditures, reduced levels of taxation and the introduction of measures that make it more difficult for Canadians, and especially lower income Canadians, to receive various kinds of benefits, such as employment insurance, social assistance, social housing or retirement benefits. It is this way neoliberalism typically leads to persistent high levels of poverty” (p. 41-42).

In Canadian society, knowledges and practices of neoliberalism have become taken for granted and given truth status. Indeed, from a neoliberal worldview, maximizing monetary return on investment is deemed to be the highest priority. Each of us are constituted as an entrepreneur in the “free” market; as such, we are seen as in competition with one another, where to survive we should view the other as a threat (Freedman & Combs, 2020). Furthermore, from the neoliberal worldview the capitalist market is portrayed as a “level playing field,” where we all have equal access to the same privilege, opportunities and resources. As a result, there is an emphasis on “individual responsibility,” which tells us that when we encounter difficult life circumstances we should expect little in the way of government assistance. Experiencing poverty is seen as the outcome of character flaws; when people come on hard times they simply need to “pull up our bootstraps” and “work hard” to benefit from the capitalist market. Implicit is neoliberalism’s denial of issues such as racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism, amongst others (May, 2014; Stanford, 2008).

Until recently, when looking through my practice-vision I was seeing the other as acting on their “competitive nature,” and promoted the notion that the other should be viewed with suspicion. This was a reproduction of the neoliberal worldview, and pitted persons seeking counselling against each other. Moreover, when this approach broke down with couples and families, I was guided by neoliberalism’s “market rationalization” and set out to provide a more “efficient” form of counselling (Sugarman, 2015). This led to a kind of “free for all” approach, where whoever had the power to dictate the story outside of counselling had the very same power to dictate the story inside counselling as well. Furthermore, when I would intervene as the “expert referee” and attempt to rule on what the problem “actually was,” diagnose the cause of the problem, and then teach participants how to “communicate more effectively,” I was doing so not only from my position of power as a counsellor, but also from my position as a white,

European settler, heterosexual, educated, cisgender male. Within this “free for all” setup, led by an expert practitioner representative of the dominant culture in Canada, it was unlikely that power differentials could be mitigated, nor was it likely that experiences which had been marginalized would be heard and understood.

‘The person is not the problem, the problem is the problem’

The ethic of, ‘the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem’ enables counsellors to connect the personal with the political. It offers to zoom out from the personal to encompass culture and politics. However, because of gaps in my understanding of this ethic, when engaging in relationship counselling my lens was stuck on the personal level. Neoliberalism has been accorded truth status in Canadian society, and as a result, it went undetected in this part of my practice. In turn, when working with relationships, the questions I generated placed blame and judgment on the other, and prevented me from working in full accordance to my preferred ethics and values with couples and families.

I was not at all comfortable with performing discourses related to neoliberalism in my counselling work, and how it was leading me to portray the other as the problem. After serious reflection and consultation, I realized I needed to re-engage with the ethic of ‘the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem’, and re-learn and re-understand this narrative ethic as it pertains to people, relationships, and problems. To zoom out of the personal to include the cultural and political levels of life, I needed a closer understanding of modern power, the constitutionalist perspective, and the narrative mode of thought.

Modern power, the constitutionalist perspective, and the narrative mode of thought

Michel Foucault, a philosopher and historian of systems of thought, offered the concept of modern power, which saw knowledge and power as inseparable. As such, where traditional forms of power operated through violence to punish subjects who disobeyed edicts of the state, modern power created and shaped life through knowledge and associated practices (May, 2006; White & Epston, 1990). Starting in the seventeenth century, dominant culture discourses related to patriarchy, Judeo-Christian traditions, and capitalist economy were reinforced by the Enlightenment when discourses related to science were accorded “truth”

status. These scientific discourses acted on persons by turning them into “docile bodies” where people were categorized by differences based on dominant culture norms, measured according to these norms, and incited to act on themselves as objects that needed to be “treated” to meet these norms. Through “normalizing judgment,” people were incited to compare themselves and others to dominant culture standards in acts of self-surveillance (Madigan, 2019; White & Epston, 1990). As such, modern power was an extremely efficient form of social control. In this modern form of power, dominant culture discourses marginalized knowledges and practices which countered those of the dominant culture (Madigan, 2019; White & Epston, 1990). An example of a marginalized discourse in Canadian society has been practices and knowledges of Indigenous medicine which are portrayed in the European settler mainstream as a “less-than” form of medicine.

Michael White’s constitutionalist perspective was a progeny of Foucault’s philosophy of modern power. White (White, 1993a), along with others (Bird, 2000; Epston 1989; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Law & Madigan, 1998; Marsten, Epston, & Markham, 2016), criticized ‘truth’ claims present in the social sciences, specifically psychology, which posited human life could be studied objectively and that the human condition had universal characteristics that applied to all people and all cultures. These dominant culture claims and resulting normalizing judgments led to the marginalization of people and communities who were considered outside of a standardized range set by the ‘truth’ claims of psychology. The constitutionalist perspective described life as being shaped by culture and history, and that while science and psychology had been anointed with special ‘truth’ statuses, they too were cultural constructs shaped in this manner.

Michael White (1993b) wrote:

“The constitutionalist perspective I am arguing for refutes foundationalist assumptions of objectivity, essentialism and representationalism. It proposes that an objective knowledge of the world is not possible, that knowledges are actually generated in particular discursive fields. It proposes that all essentialist notions, including those about human nature, are ruses that disguise what is really taking place, that essentialist notions are paradoxical in that they provide descriptions that are specifying of life; that these notions obscure operations of power. And the constitutionalist

perspective proposes that the descriptions that we have of life are not representations of life as lived, but are directly constitutive of life that these descriptions do not correspond with the world, but have real effects in the shaping of life” (p. 125)

Modern power and the constitutionalist perspective enabled a new critique of the hegemonic status of science in the domains of personhood and human life. In turn, it became possible to separate from the logico-scientific mode of thought and move towards a narrative mode of thought (White & Epston, 1990). If life was constituted by descriptions of life, as opposed to our descriptions of life being representations of an objective reality, then narrative, stories, and meaning-making took on new significance. Through the narrative mode of thought, meaning became the central concept in human life and the development of personhood (Bruner, 1990). Meaning-making was achieved through the story metaphor, which provided a structure for time (beginning, middle and end), characters, settings, and points of view, while also evoking judgment and emotion (Bruner, 1986; Frank 2010; Senehi, Flaherty, Kirupakaran, Kornelsen, Matenge, & Skarlato, 2009).

Practice implications of re-engaging with ‘the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem’ when working with relationships

I will never forget the day I realized I was portraying relationship participants as helping problems. I was sitting in a coffee shop not far from my office. Earlier in the day, I had met with a family, and had begun conversations about Betrayal and how it had impacted their individual lives and relationships. However, once the discussion turned to how the family was first introduced to Betrayal, my questions characterized family member’s actions as helping and supporting Betrayal’s admittance into their lives. In hindsight, these characterizations were carried by an assumption that it was a person’s nature to go against another if it was in their own best interests. Responses to my questions characterizing family members as helping and supporting Betrayal led to conflict and discomfort to such an intensity the meeting needed to be ended early. As I sat in the coffee shop, I experienced a strong sense of frustration as yet another opportunity to work with a family had ended in disappointment.

In those moments at the coffee shop, I reflected on what it meant to characterize

someone as helping a problem and what this said about my views on people and relationships. As I considered my work with couples and families, I realized that by characterizing relationship participants as possessing a competitive or suspicious nature, I was restricting my practice-vision and limiting what was possible in my work with relationships. But worse than this, I was portraying people I worked with as inherently self-interested and driven to sacrifice their relationships for an outcome to their individual benefit. Indeed, I was more drawn to the idea of life as multi-storied, with many possible stories derived from culture and history capable of giving new meaning to people's actions and identities (White, 2001). Todd May (2006) quoted Foucault speaking in support of Vietnamese refugees refused entry into France and the United States during the Vietnam War, 'We are all ruled, and as such, we are all in solidarity' (p.129). By seeing each participant in relationships as constituted by culture and stories, this opened up new possibilities for my counselling work with couples and families. Truly, if there was no stepping outside of culture, if it was the copying that originated (White, 1993a), this meant I could interview all participants in relationship counselling not only about their actions; but also, the history of ideas that had informed these actions, the people who had passed on these ideas, why these ideas and actions had seemed desirable when enacted, and what these ideas and actions might say about what the person gives value to (Madigan, 2019; White, 1993a). By asking about the historical, relational, and cultural origins of each participant's actions, even if these actions had been harmful, stories would follow that cast the person and relationship in new ways.

Working with couples and families

Since going back and re-evaluating my understanding of 'the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem' and its use in relationship counselling, I have learned the importance of creating an outsider witness structure when working with couples and families (White, 2000). In the past, when attempting to have an unstructured conversation, or a 'free for all' counselling meeting, dominant culture approaches to conflict would take over. During these meetings, participants would yell and speak over each other, deploy arguments designed to win longstanding debates, or look to the counsellor for confirmation of who has been at fault for the problems the relationships had been enduring. All of these practices could be seen as representations of the influence of neoliberalism and its emphasis on competition as a way of life, its need for winners and losers, and

its denial of power inequities. As a result, in my previous counselling meetings with couples and families, whoever dominated conversations outside of counselling would continue this domination inside counselling as well.

As narrative practitioners, our aim is not to settle longstanding disputes, or even find solutions to problems, but to help participants come to new understandings of each other. A witnessing structure can assist in this as it provides structured time and space for each participant to speak and have their stories heard by others (Freedman, 2014; White, 2004b). As a participant tells their story, counsellors are able to ask questions helping persons seeking counselling speak to their unique experiences, and elicit new details and meanings based on what people give value to (White, 2000). When using a witnessing structure, one participant is interviewed by the counsellor, while additional participants are asked to step back from the conversation to listen. At the conclusion of the first interview, the interviewee is asked to step back into the listening position, while the participant who was previously in the listening position is interviewed about what they had heard during the first interview. This process can be repeated as many times as is helpful. Not only does this practice provide a framework that prevents 'free for all' counselling, but it also sets parameters that allow participants to listen and understand the others' stories without temptation to interrupt or contest. The witnessing process is intentionally structured so that the counsellor's questions can generate new stories, which in turn can be heard and 'made real' by an audience made up of partners or family members (Lindemann-Nelson, 2001). The reflections made during the re-telling of the initial story 'thicken' preferred narratives brought forth in the witnessing process by expanding on themes from the original telling and creating resonance between participants (Freedman, 2014; White, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2004a, 2007).

Jill Freedman (2014) asks those in the witnessing position to listen the way they would to a friend, 'How we want what is best for a friend, how we strive not to judge, how we stay in touch with what is important to them, how the listening is about them, not us, and so on' (p.14). This type of listening as a friend differs from the kind of listening by a counselor that was referred to earlier, which led to 'side-taking' and gossip about the other. Instead, by encouraging participants to listen as a friend we are interested in a perceptual shift, where a person goes from listening from the position of a competitor to listening from the position of an ally. Those in the listening position are encouraged to choose a specific friend

from whose perspective they can listen, someone all participants feel comfortable allowing into that role (White, 2004b). When people listen from the position of friendship, rather than competition and suspicion of the other, participants are exposed to new meanings that can be used to create a new path forward, whatever that path might look like. Using the position of friendship in couples and family counselling is in defiance of neoliberalism's competition and suspicion of the other. By encouraging a listening position of friendship, participants are adopting counter-positions of community, trust, equality and solidarity (May, 2014).

Here is an example of such a conversation:

Jeff and Nancy are cisgender partners in a heterosexual marriage. Nancy has three cis-gendered daughters from a previous relationship: Sarah, Cindy, and Meghan, all of whom are in their early twenties. Jeff and Nancy have known each other since childhood, but became partners later in life, with Jeff stepping in to take on a parental role with Nancy's daughters. Sarah, the oldest, has her own family and lives separately from her family of origin. Nancy, Jeff, Cindy, and Meghan live in a house together in Winnipeg. Nancy and Jeff came to meet with me due to a problem they called 'Miserableness'. This Miserableness issue entered their lives a year ago, due to differing expectations regarding how much young people should contribute to household work and when they should leave home to become self-sufficient. Miserableness had grown to such a size that Jeff had left the family home and was living at their cottage in Northern Manitoba, driving a four-hour daily commute to Winnipeg for work.

In setting up an outsider witness structure with Jeff and Nancy, I was transparent about my intentions. I explained that my purpose in facilitating relationship counselling was to help participants come to new understandings about their partner and relationship. I said that in my experience when meeting with couples and families, pervasive ideas related to competition and suspicion could interfere, and steer conversations in unhelpful directions. I also discussed how, when relationship participants were contending with conflict, participants often listened as if they were seeking evidence to strengthen their case against the other. I told Jeff and Nancy that I was interested in having a different kind of conversation than they were accustomed to (Epston, 1993). I believed that setting up an outsider witness structure could allow the person being interviewed to speak in

detail about their experiences while providing the listener with the opportunity to step back and listen in new ways.

Next, as a way to help the listener in the outsider witness structure relinquish listening habits related to competition and suspicion, and listen in new and more helpful ways, I explained that I was interested in helping participants listen to each other as a significant friendship would. At the outset, I asked both Nancy and Jeff to think of someone from their past or present who had listened to them with acknowledgment, understanding, compassion, or acceptance, with the proviso that this be someone their partner would feel comfortable allowing into the consultation process (White, 2004b). When asked about a friend who had listened with acceptance, acknowledgment, compassion, and understanding, Nancy identified her friend Christina, who had stood by her through health issues, and provided Nancy with support that had sustained her through these issues. Jeff expressed support of Christina's inclusion in the counselling, stating his appreciation that Christina had been a good friend to Nancy. In relation to the person who had listened to Jeff with acknowledgment, understanding, compassion, or acceptance, both Jeff and Nancy identified Jeff's younger brother Sam. Jeff talked about how when he was experiencing hard times he knew he could go to Sam's workshop, where Sam would listen and show unquestioned loyalty to Jeff. Since this practice of repositioning is not often found in the norms of daily life, during my interviews with the person repositioned to listen as a significant friend, I would remind participants to maintain that position by addressing them in terms of the cherished qualities of their friend's listening (e.g., "Jeff listening with Sam's loyalty") (Emmerson-Whyte, 2010; Lysack, 2002).

In our previous meeting, I learned that Jeff is mindful of Nancy's experience of mobility difficulties while maintaining the same amount of household duties; in light of this, he feels as adults Cindy and Meghan should be contributing more around the house to offset Nancy's responsibilities. Jeff views adolescence as a time when young people should be training to live on their own, getting ready to spread their wings and fly into the freedom of their own lives. He looks forward to this freedom allowing Jeff and Nancy's responsibilities to their daughters to change to enable Jeff and Nancy more time for their relationship. Jeff views paid employment as a way of life and expresses gratitude for his work, saying that everything he has is a result of his employment at the carpentry company he works for. Jeff devotes himself to his work as a carpenter, only taking days off

when his carpentry crew takes a week-long break during the summer.

The excerpt below is from my second meeting with Nancy and Jeff. I have just interviewed Nancy about her experience of challenges in the relationship, and have now turned to Jeff who has been listening to Nancy in the same way Sam would have listened to him. I started by providing a summary of my interview with Nancy and proceeded to interview Jeff about his reflections on what Nancy gives value to as a parent.

Mike: Jeff listening with Sam's loyalty, Nancy and I talked about a lot. We talked about how this 'middle-man position'³ for Nancy started when Cindy came back from university. We talked about walking on eggshells,⁴ we talked about worry and depression, and Nancy checking in with Cindy to make sure she was safe.⁵ We talked about nurturance, and how nurturance and talking had made difficult conversations with Cindy possible, and that talking led to a place where difficult conversations didn't explode⁶ the way they would have exploded two years ago. We talked about the medication and how the medications's purposes were aligned with Nancy's purposes in that they helped Cindy to ground herself and have balance, which were things Nancy wanted for Cindy. She told a story about how Cindy was able to experience empathy for you where she was able to see how turning the house lights on in the middle of the night was disrespectful, as you had to get up early in the morning for work. Nancy saw this as a turning point for Cindy in regards to her relationships at home. We talked about how with Meghan Nancy has been allowing some space for mistakes, and how that's been helping Meghan to learn about relationships and how she wants to be in relationships. I had wondered if allowing space for mistakes was about the 'letting go to grow' idea we had discussed last session, but Nancy corrected me saying that she has concerns about Cindy and Meghan just moving out and having to fend for themselves. Nancy said using this

³ I would have preferred to use more gender-inclusive language here. Referring to a 'middle-man' reproduces dominant culture discourses related to cis-gender male dominance in the work place.

⁴ Expressions such as 'walking on eggshells', 'exploding conversations' and 'abrasive ways' could be indications of power imbalances that would be important to explore.

⁵ There were no signs of physical violence during my work with this family.

⁶ The metaphor of 'exploding conversations' was used in reference to times when Cindy needed to raise her voice to speak over invalidation and frustration.

approach with Sarah gave her grey hairs and how she is worried that a similar situation could arise, and so she is more interested in supporting Meghan and Cindy where she knows they need support, and that this was a way of helping them learn independence without so many grey hairs. And so, Jeff listening with Sam's loyalty, of all this, what stood out for you from my interview with Nancy?

Jeff: It was good giving Cindy space to go to Athabasca U.

Mike: From my recollection that's the 'fend for yourself' approach that gives Nancy grey hair, would you agree?

Jeff: Yeah, I guess, when I was there I didn't see Cindy much, she was always in the basement because I was grumpy all the time, which was a part of the problem. I usually don't beat around the bush, so when I say something someone is flying off the handle.

Mike: I really appreciated Nancy's checking in with Cindy, and the nurturance she provided Cindy during difficult times, and making sure she was safe. She told the scary story about the knife, what would Sam have thought about the work that Nancy did to make sure Cindy was safe in that situation?⁷

Jeff: Sam would have thought that she did pretty good.

Mike: In which ways would Sam have thought she did good?

Jeff: To prevent someone from doing something stupid is good for the most part.

Mike: Would it be fair to say the nurturance and talking approach was helpful?

Jeff: Definitely.

Mike: In which ways was it helpful Jeff listening with Sam's loyalty?

Jeff: Nancy's way is better than Jeff's way because it is subtle and less abrasive

⁷ I increased my level of influence in this instance, moving the conversation away from stories about conflict and towards stories that speak to what is important to Nancy.

Mike: If it was less abrasive what was it?

Jeff: Gentle, softer.

Mike: The nurturing, talking, subtle softer approach, can you please tell a story of a time when these were helpful Jeff listening with Sam's loyalty?

Jeff: A lot of times, and it's not like there was this one time specifically, but through the years, she is gentle towards her and she can talk like that to her and I can't.

Mike: What part do you think the nurturing and subtle and soft approach has been helpful in getting Cindy to where she is today?

Jeff: It relaxes her and lets her think for herself.

Mike: Let's Cindy think for herself?

Jeff: Yeah like gradually, it lets her think for herself.

Mike: Can you help me understand what you mean? It lets her think for herself and make her own decisions, it helps her to think for herself and make informed decisions, or something else?

Jeff: Well good decisions yes.

Mike: I'm sorry for asking so many questions here Jeff, but I'd be really interested in finding a name for Nancy's approach to supporting Cindy, would you call it 'helping people make their own decisions' or 'helping people figure it out for themselves', or...?

Jeff: She has been 'guided slowly.'

Mike: Jeff listening with Sam's loyalty, what has been beneficial for Cindy in Nancy's use of the Guided Slowly approach?

Jeff: It lets her open up more, lets her feelings out more instead of shutting down, because she needs a release.

Mike: I'm curious about what this says about Nancy, about who she is, about

what is important to her as a parent?

Jeff: That she is teaching them, and that she wants them to be independent... slower than I want them to be independent, but with fewer grey hairs. She wants to make sure they're safe.

Mike: Why do you think it's important to Nancy as a parent to make sure Cindy and Meghan are safe?

Jeff: It can be harsh out there, it's not the same as when we were young.

After checking in at the conclusion of this conversation, I learned from both Jeff and Nancy they had never spoken as openly. Nancy commented this was the most Jeff had been able to contribute to discussions about their relationship and family. After this conversation, Nancy and Jeff met together for lunch to continue the conversations we had started, which turned into a regular occurrence after our meetings on Saturday mornings. As a result of these conversations, Jeff and Nancy started planning for Jeff to return home.

By externalizing problems that both Jeff and Nancy were experiencing, we were able to limit the influence of blame and judgment in conversations. By separating both Jeff and Nancy from Miserableness and treating it as an entity created in their social contexts, this provided an invitation for Jeff and Nancy to participate in conversations as respected and knowledgeable participants. By externalizing Miserableness, we were able to unravel both participants' respective experiences of Miserableness in history and culture. This meant conversations about not only the origins of Miserableness in the context of their family, but also the longer histories of expectations and norms that had fed the problem of Miserableness. For example, Jeff talked about his history with work and how his devotion to paid employment had sustained him in important ways his entire adult life. We were also able to learn about Nancy's experiences with Sarah when Sarah was transitioning to independence, the mistakes that were made during this transition, and how Nancy was determined not to make these same mistakes while Cindy and Meghan were transitioning to independence.

Using a witnessing structure allowed the time and space necessary for both Nancy and Jeff to share their experiences in detail. Purposefully setting out the witness structure of an initial participant being interviewed, with the second participant

stepping back into a listening position, allowed Nancy and Jeff to share without apprehension of being interrupted or challenged. For the listener, the purposeful nature of the witness structure also took away the temptation for Jeff and Nancy to interrupt or contest, and instead allowed the person in the witnessing position to focus exclusively on listening. This structure enabled the counsellor to ask questions designed not only to understand Nancy and Jeff's experiences with problems, but also to generate new meanings and elicit the values that were implicit in Nancy and Jeff's expressions of Miserableness (White, 2000). For Jeff, this structure allowed him to go into detail, not only about his own relationship with work, but also about why he felt that work was a path forward for Cindy and Meghan. For him, this was a way of expressing care and desire for Meghan and Cindy to live a good life. For Nancy, this structure allowed her to talk in detail about the struggles Cindy and Meghan had endured, the worry and stress she experiences about how these struggles could impact Meghan and Cindy's futures, as well as the steps they were already taking toward independence. She also discussed how she was supporting them in these steps and the importance she placed on their safety.

Through asking Jeff and Nancy to take the position of friendship while in the listening position, this enabled them to listen from perspectives that were not trapped in competition. Differing expectations had led Jeff and Nancy to take sides in a conflict over what was best for Cindy and Meghan. This had led to cut-off and communication shut down, and resulted in Jeff moving to their cottage, two hours outside of Winnipeg. By inviting Jeff and Nancy's community into the conversation we created varied perspectives from which to view Miserableness and the effects it was having in their lives, as well as the counter-story of Safety. The community members invited in were members who had listened to Jeff and Nancy with acceptance, acknowledgment, compassion, and understanding (White, 2004b). For Jeff, this was his brother Sam. While listening to Nancy in the same manner that Sam had listened to him, this allowed Jeff to tune into a different frequency than he was accustomed to listening to. Listening to Nancy with Sam's loyalty enabled Jeff to tune into a frequency that transmitted the ways Nancy had been guiding Meghan and Cindy towards independence. Listening to this frequency also allowed Jeff to hear the theme of safety, and to join Nancy in the acknowledgment that the contexts young people experience today are different than the contexts they had experienced during their youth.

Conclusion

After an experience where I needed to bow out of working with a family due to misunderstanding and confusion, I realized that in my work with relationships, I was unintentionally pitting people against each other. Dominant culture discourses related to neoliberalism led me to characterize the other as possessing a competitive or entrepreneurial nature. When working with couples and families, my initial attempts to externalize the problem and map its effects and supports would break down when my questions portrayed participants as helping problems. Often, this characterization of participants as helping problems increased the intensity of conflict. In response, I would resort to problem-solving and 'free for all' counselling, which recreated the same conflict and power imbalances in counselling that occurred elsewhere. Following these realizations there was considerable disquiet in my practice life. In response, I returned to the beginning of my relationship with narrative therapy and re-learned the theories and philosophy behind the principle, 'the person is not the problem the problem is the problem'. Doing this led to the understanding that we are all constituted in culture and history. This renewed understanding meant that the ethic of 'the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem' could be extended to all participants in counselling; meaning the counsellor could ask all participants about the historical, relational, and cultural origins of their actions. When working with couples and families, I learned that creating an outsider witness structure was essential to ensure participants had the time and space they needed to tell their stories. I also learned that inviting people's communities into relationship counselling and asking participants to listen in ways significant friendships had listened to them, limited the presence of competition and suspicion, which enabled trust and solidarity so that new stories and understandings could be created.

References

Bird, J. (2000). *The heart's narrative*. Edge Press.

Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Harvard University Press.

Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Harvard University Press.

- Emmerson-Whyte, B. (2010). Learning the craft: An “Internalised Other” interview with a couple. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy & Community Work*, 8(2), 3–21.
- Epston, D. (1989). *Collected Papers*. Dulwich Centre Publications.
- Epston, D. (1993). Internalized other questioning with couples: the New Zealand version. In S. Gilligan & R. Price (Eds.) *Therapeutic conversations* (pp.183-189). W.W. Norton & Company.
- Frank, A. (2010). *Letting stories breath: a socio-narratology*. University of Chicago Press.
- Freedman, J. (2014). Witnessing and positioning: Structuring narrative therapy with couples and families. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 1, 11-17.
- Freedman, J., & Combs, G. (1996). *Narrative therapy: Social construction of preferred realities*. W.W. Norton & Sons.
- Freedman, J., & Combs, G. (2020). Individuals in competition or communities in connection? Narrative therapy in the era of neoliberalism. *The Sage handbook of social constructionist practice*, 193-202.
- Lindemann-Nelson, H. (2001). *Damaged identities, narrative repair*. Cornell University Press.
- Lysack, M. (2002). From monologue to dialogue in families: Internalized other interviewing and Mikhail Bakhtin. *Sciences pastorales/Pastoral Sciences*, 21(2), 219–244.
- Law, I., & Madigan, S. (Eds.). (1998). *Praxis (etudes Et Documentation Internationales (firm))*: *Situating Discourse, Feminism and Politics in Narrative Therapies*. Yaletown Family Therapy.

- Madigan, S. (2019). *Narrative therapy* (2nd ed.). American Psychological Association.
- Marsten, D., Epston, D., & Markham, L. (2016). *Narrative therapy in wonderland: Connecting with children's imaginative know-how*. W.W. Norton & Sons
- May, T. (2006). *The philosophy of Foucault*. McGill-Queens's University Press.
- May, T. (2014). *Friendship in an age of economics: Resisting the forces of neoliberalism*. Lexington Books.
- Senehi, J., Flaherty, M., Kirupakaran, C. S., Kornelsen, L., Matenge, M., & Skarlato, O. (2009). Dreams of our grandmothers: Discovering the call for social justice through storytelling. *Storytelling, self, society*, 5(2), 90-106.
- Silver, J. (2014). *About Canada: Poverty*. Fernwood Publishing.
- Stanford, J. (2008). *Economics for everyone: A short guide to the economics of capitalism* (2nd ed.). Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.
- Sugarman, J. (2015). Neoliberalism and psychological ethics. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 35(2), 103.
- White, M. (1993a) Deconstruction and therapy. In S. Gilligan & R. Price (Eds.) *Therapeutic conversations* (pp.22-61). W.W. Norton & Company.
- White, M. (1993b). Commentary: the histories of the present. In S. Gilligan & R. Price (Eds.) *Therapeutic conversations* (pp.121-135). W.W. Norton & Company.
- White, M. (1995). *Re-authoring lives: interviews and essays*. Dulwich Centre Publications.
- White, M. (1997). *Narratives of therapists' lives*. Dulwich Centre Publications.
- White, M. (2000). *Reflections on narrative practice*. Dulwich Centre Publications.

White, M. (2004a). Folk Psychology and Narrative Practices. In *Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference, Feb, 2001, Adelaide, SA, Australia; This chapter was presented at the aforementioned conference*. Sage Publications, Inc.

White, M. (2004b). Narrative practice, couple therapy and conflict dissolution. *White, M.: Narrative Practice & Exotic Lives: Resurrecting diversity in everyday life*, 1-41. Dulwich Centre Publications.

White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice*. W.W. Norton & Sons.

White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. W.W. Norton & Sons.