

Researching 'suicidal thoughts' and archiving young people's insider-knowledges

by
Marilyn O'Neill¹

This paper explores the significance of enabling co-research conversations about the effects and tactics of suicidal thoughts, and about effective forms of resistance. It describes one such co-research project that involved three young people in Sydney, Australia. The ideas that informed the co-research are described and extracts of the young people's co-research conversations are included.

Keywords: *suicide, suicidal thoughts, hostile thoughts, co-research, failure, narrative therapy, young people*

Over a number of years various young people have come to consult with me and with Gaye Stockell about the effects and tactics of suicidal thoughts. Through our conversations with these young people we began to gather ideas and information that seemed to be very valuable. The notes that we had been taking on these matters grew into a small archive, and eventually we started to offer the ideas generated by one or other of these young people to other young people who were consulting us on similar themes. This exchange of insider-knowledge occurred over a couple of years and we heard very good feedback about this. We heard that this exchange of information was providing very useful ideas and suggestions as to ways of dealing with these negative thoughts. We also heard that the process of exchange was particularly significant as it contributed to making these young people feel not so weird or bizarre or isolated. Instead, they felt joined with others in what became a co-research project (see Stockell & O'Neill 1999; Epston 1999; Dulwich Centre Publications 2004) into 'suicidal thoughts'.

In talking together, Gaye and I then decided to try to create a forum in which these young people could meet together in person to share and build upon their insider-knowledges about dealing with suicidal thoughts, self-harming and experiences of failure. We also thought that such a forum would enable these young people to give us feedback about various adult responses to their experiences. We hoped to find out about the real effects of various professional responses and what they judged to be more or less helpful to them in dealing with suicidal thoughts.

We gathered three young people together, Angela, Brett and Jess, and interviewed them for about two hours about their ideas and experiences. Some extracts from this conversation are included on pages 41-42. To us, this was a form of post-structural ethnographic research. The interview evoked certain knowledges that Angela, Brett and Jess have developed about the operations of suicidal thoughts and we believe that these knowledges could be of significant assistance to others. Angela, Brett and Jess described that the

process itself was valuable to them. Meeting together to discuss these matters, and sharing their experiences, contributed to a sense of not being so alone. It also contributed to undermining the sense of shame that had often in the past forced these young people to seek cover and had prevented them previously from sharing their thoughts.

The sorts of questions that informed the co-research included:

- How do you see your relationship with suicidal thoughts?
- What are your understandings of this relationship?
- What are the things that increase the forcefulness of suicidal thoughts, what makes them more destructive or harmful?
- And what are the things that nourish you in freeing yourselves from these thoughts?

A number of these conversations revolved around experiences of 'failure'. Many of the young people with whom we meet have had considerable experiences of failure and these experiences of failure may have suggested to them that their views are not worthy of sharing, that their voice is not worth hearing, and even that they are not worthy of life itself.

Influenced by Michael White's writings about failure (2002) we were interested in deconstructing certain discourses about modern life that dictate what are normal, adequate, successful, moral and authentic ways of living. We came to see that these discourses are replicated, often without question, in many contexts of our lives – at home, school, university, the work place, the employment office, hospitals, etc. Speaking openly and investigating the effects of these discourses allowed us to appreciate how certain unhelpful ideas can become part of our everyday internal dialogue and direct our lives. We came to see that, when there are so many prescriptions as to the ways you are meant to live your life, we become vulnerable to experiences of failure.

In talking about these matters, Angela, Brett and Jess all described that taking time to articulate their own intentions, preferences, dreams, values and commitments for their lives was significant to them. This created the opportunity for them to reflect on how their own visions for their life stood at odds with some of the requirements for measuring up to various 'normal' ways of living and achieving. In turn, this helped them to develop more appreciation for the uniqueness of their lives.

Michael White's (2003) ideas on the multiple meanings of expressions of pain and distress inspired various questions that informed this project. In our co-research conversations we were interested in exploring:

- how distress, rather than being evidence of how much we are not coping, can be a tribute to what we really stand for and to what is being disrespected or disallowed;
- how distress may represent how much we are not prepared to give up and consequently what is it that drives our integrity or dreams for being in the world;
- how ongoing emotional pain might stand as a testament to what is cherished, believed in and hoped for by a person;
- how both pain and distress might represent a proclamation of what we prefer for our lives.

Discoveries

This co-research project has led to various discoveries. First of all, the co-researchers discovered that there were similarities in their experiences with self-harming thoughts and with suicidal thoughts. This first discovery led to further research into the histories of these thoughts.

While initially it had appeared to these young people that suicidal thoughts would simply 'suddenly just be in your head' as if coming out of nowhere, through this co-research project it was identified that these thoughts were often connected to trauma or something from the past that had been a very difficult time to deal with. The co-researchers described that this was a significant discovery.

In time they also determined that there were different categories of negative thoughts. They discovered that suicidal thoughts that appeared suddenly and were linked to histories of trauma were quite different from another phenomenon which involved a slowly growing long-term sense of 'I can't do this any more'.

The young people stated that making these distinctions between different types of negative thoughts was very useful in working out ways to stand free from them.

Further discoveries were made in relation to their experiences of interactions with professionals and how often these interactions had inadvertently reinforced the idea of them as damaged or as failures or as hopeless. The co-researchers spoke about how preventing this experience of failure was of the utmost importance.

Creating settings in which it is accepted that some people are subject to suicidal thoughts and where there is a possibility of actually talking about what these thoughts are on about, what their effects are, and where it is possible to ask questions about these thoughts, was seen by the co-researchers as very useful.

Over time, both Gaye and I have come to appreciate that this research project has also been very helpful to us. When someone walks in the door of our office and starts to talk about suicide and suicidal thoughts, our own sense of hopelessness or despair has the potential to render us as workers either impotent or panic-ridden. Being able to mention this co-research project, to share its learnings and to invite conversations from this position, has been enormously generative in our own practice. We hope that by sharing this work in writing that it may be of use to others.

We would be delighted to hear from others who have been having co-research conversations about the effects and tactics of suicidal thoughts, and about effective forms of resistance.

Note

1. Marilyn O'Neill works in independent practice in Sydney, which offers counselling to individuals, couples and families. Marilyn shares a working partnership with Gaye Stockell that is now of 16 years duration. The partnership offers training and (supervision) consultation in the development and application of

narrative ideas. They continue to be inspired in the use of these ideas by opportunities to co-research in the ways that are described in this article.

This piece was created from an interview with David Denborough, staff writer of Dulwich Centre Publications. All the co-researchers want to express appreciation to David and the Dulwich Centre for making their work coherent and thus available to a wider audience. All co-researchers may be contacted via Marilyn at PO Box 600, Cammeray, NSW 2062, Australia, or via email: oneillm@bigpond.net.au

References

- Dulwich Centre Publications, 2004: 'Narrative therapy and research'. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, No.2.
- Epston, D. 1999: 'Co-research: the making of an alternative knowledge.' In: *Narrative Therapy and Community Work*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- Stockell, G. & O'Neill, M. 1999: 'Bridging the Gap: Conversations about mental illness experiences.' In: *Narrative Therapy and Community Work*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- White M. 2002: 'Addressing personal failure.' *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, No.2. Reprinted in White, M. 2004: *Narrative Practice and Exotic Lives: Resurrecting diversity in everyday life*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- White, M. 2003: 'Narrative practice and community assignments.' *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, No.2.

A conversation with Angela, Brett and Jess about suicidal thoughts, failure and resistance

Angela, Brett and Jess may be contacted via Marilyn O'Neill at PO Box 600,
Camberay, NSW 2062, Australia, or via email: oneillm@bigpond.net.au

Angela, Brett and Jess each have more than five years of experience of claiming their lives back from powerful negative stories, including stories of abuse, psychosis, depression, addiction, anorexia and mental illness. In the extracts below, these three co-researchers describe some of their encounters with 'ideas of failure' and 'suicidal thoughts' and convey some of the knowledge they have gained about ways of resisting these ideas and thoughts. Significantly, these three co-researchers provide information that is useful to therapists and health professionals as well as ideas that sustain hope in their own lives.

Keywords: *suicidal thoughts, failure, resistance*

What do you see as your relationship with suicidal thoughts?

Angela: I didn't ask for these thoughts to come into my life and yet they're there and I have to deal with them. They make it complicated to talk about how I feel because having these thoughts can make me feel like I'm a bad person. Suicidal thoughts like to tell me that I'm bad and that I don't fit in society. What is confusing is that these negative, hostile thoughts can sometimes seem just like everyday thoughts. Until I could actually sit down and identify them as suicidal thoughts it was really hard. Knowing what they are is important. Everybody's way of dealing with them is different. We each develop different ways of understanding them and learning to cope with them.

What responses from others have given suicidal thoughts more of a life?

Angela: Over the last couple of years suicidal thoughts have been present for me at least once every day, and sometimes more often. I am living my own life out in the community, having an active lifestyle and working, but if I mention to someone that I've got suicidal thoughts they are likely to think I am mad. They are also likely to get frightened and the problem is, fear can make suicidal thoughts stronger, well it can for me. People also start asking all sorts of questions, 'why are you doing this, and why are you doing that', and if you don't want to deal with this, if you don't want all these people pushing you

around and telling you that you're mad and saying 'take these pills, or take that pill', then suicidal thoughts start to tell you that there's an easier way out.

Brett: I went to a doctor once because I had run out of medication. I didn't go there to talk, I just went there to get medication which I needed. The doctor started talking, which I understand she needed to do, but when she found out that I'd attempted suicide she started to put some sort of guilt-trip on me: 'what about your family? Wasn't that a selfish thing to do?' This value-judgement that some people make about suicide being selfish is so inapplicable to a person attempting suicide. It is something fundamentally different. Even though the suicidal person is going to feel that the decision is very personal, suicide isn't anything to do with individuality. It's more like a kind of soul destruction experience. It's like you feel that your soul, the whole fabric of life itself is wrong. Not just your own life, but life itself seems wrong. What's more, you don't just wake up one morning, after being a happy kid and then say I'm having thoughts of committing suicide. First you try every trick in the book. You try to ignore your problems, to attack your problems, to get rid of your problems. You even try to not try, because some people say 'the harder I've been trying the worse it is'. You've tried absolutely everything you can, and it didn't work.
So ...

Jess: Suicidal thoughts can be so convincing can't they? My experience has been that they latch onto things that you

think are important. That's how they get in. For me, suicidal thoughts always latch onto feelings of failure, and of not being good enough. The other thing that makes me vulnerable to them are the value-judgements of others. I can understand why suicidal thoughts can make other people desperate because of course, they can kill, but when people get desperate they don't always act in the most helpful ways. When people are judgemental about suicidal thoughts, if people say that you're selfish to have them, or if they say things like imagine how other people would feel if you did that, then this gives suicidal thoughts strength. It makes me feel less about myself, that I should be able to get a grip. It enables the suicidal thoughts to say 'see look, you really are just a failure and a selfish person, you don't have any idea about your own life or any concern for other people'. And somehow they start to convince me that the only way that I can stop being selfish and stop being a failure, is to stop being altogether ... to die.

Brett: I find it difficult when it seems like others are only trying to help me to stop attempting suicide, as opposed to trying to help me stop me feeling suicidal. There's a big difference.

Do you think your relationship with suicidal thoughts has changed?

Jess: Well, it seems like I've failed to carry out their requirements. I'd really like to say that I was sort of inspired to come to talk with you all, but I didn't come by myself. In fact I don't think I could've come alone. Back then the thoughts had been really trying to convince me that it would be much more effective and much more useful to you guys if I'd fulfil their requirements. They were even telling me if I died, somehow you would have been able to use what I'd said before. I told this to one of my friends who was bringing me here [to the co-research meeting] and she just laughed and her laughter was significant to me. I couldn't see that any other course of events was possible for my life, and yet when she laughed I realised that she must have had some other understanding. She must have a quite different understanding that made it possible for her to laugh. And that got me thinking ...

How might other people's points of view help diminish suicidal thoughts and not contribute to ideas of 'badness'?

Jess: Not being alone in it is the biggest thing for me. Being isolated is the worst because then no other logic can come in and I become trapped. It's when I am alone that suicidal thoughts and depression and anxiety and all those kinds of forces can take over a lot more.

Brett: That's true for me too. When I'm isolated I can feel as if I am not really alive, like everyone else is alive except me.

Jess: The thoughts want me to just stay quiet, to say nothing. They want to keep me feeling ashamed about anything I might say. They tell me that I'm different and that people will reject me if they know, so it's better to just stay silent. First of all, I sort of felt like I didn't measure up to be here talking about suicidal ideas. And then, when Angela was saying that it was really uncomfortable for her to sit here and have to talk about it, I noticed the courage that this took for her. I wanted to support that. I wanted to support her and talk with her rather than be a good subscriber to suicidal thoughts. Hearing other people's experiences and appreciating what they do to take a stand against these thoughts, even appreciating how they talk about it, how they're brave enough to talk about it, it all makes a difference to me.

Brett: There's strength in numbers and this is not a superficial thing. We're trying to un-do this deep knowledge we have of isolation. What we are doing in talking about these things means that we're not actually alone. We're breaking the isolation.

What is it like to be asked questions that might stand against the forces?

Jess: To actually put a name to some of these forces has been really beneficial to me. To name these things reduces the fear that comes when these forces try to push me around. If I can name the fear it's easier to deal with. It's easier to learn strategies to deal with something once you've named what it is that's trying to intrude on your life. I can then develop plans and strategies and put these into action. I can work out how I will respond the next time they try to get at me.