

Narrative Explorations Letter

by Gayle Chell



Gayle has worked in professional pastoral care and counseling roles for 12 years in a variety of contexts, including providing specialized support for Chinese international students in New Zealand. After completing a Master of Counseling in Narrative Therapy at the University of Waikato in 2006 she relocated to China in 2009 to take up the challenge of establishing a counseling service at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC) campus.

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Dear Explorations,

I was interested to read the article, 'Interview with Angela Tsun On-Kee' in the last edition of *Explorations* (2011, No. 1). I am currently working in China as a counsellor in an international university setting (University of Nottingham, Ningbo, China) and I greatly appreciated this piece as it touched on themes which are very much a part of my own work and reflection. I found myself wanting to join your conversation.

Angela, you spoke of a 'spirit of welcoming' new ideas in your context in Hong Kong. I can only echo that I am also experiencing openness in the Chinese mental health and counselling world. I am very conscious of the generosity and respect of both the University of Nottingham and our Chinese hosts in making space for what I have to offer as a narrative practitioner working within a Western (New Zealand and United Kingdom) ethical framework, and it is proving to be a very rewarding professional experience.

However, that does not mean that I am not negotiating difference as I seek to understand the complexities of this context more fully. A lifelong project perhaps! I was interested in your comment John, about the 'strong story' in some of the literature, which suggests that 'Chinese cultural traditions mean that people prefer the kind of therapy in which they are given instructions and told what to do'. I am familiar with this 'story' and the other day I came across it again in a recent article, which stated:

An effective counsellor, one who seeks to be consistent with Chinese culture, will take into account this cultural peculiarity, which results in brief consultations in which practical advice is dispensed. (Lim, Lim, Michael, Cai & Shock, 2010, p. 4.)

This 'story' presents a dilemma for me, as, being informed by the New Zealand bi-cultural context, I do try to offer counselling which is both culturally congruent and non-colonising. So far, however, my experience with Chinese young people is proving to be insightful. As I endeavour to make conversations available which might be different from what they are perhaps accustomed to, like Angela, I am witnessing a positive response. One young woman described her experience of counselling as 'our friend-like conversations', and another young man said, 'I like having a conversation that is different from me saying one sentence and then getting ten sentences back'. I need to add that I am finding that more mutual engagement produces conversations which often extend beyond one session.

That is not to say that I am not regularly given the very strong call to give instruction and advice. I am learning how to recognise this 'position call' – it can be implicitly rather than explicitly expressed – and to gently refuse it. Sometimes I have needed to do this very clearly by making explicit my position as 'wai guo ren' (outside country person) with a lot to learn about Chinese culture, and therefore my advice might well be seriously inappropriate!

To date, no-one has challenged me on this point and I have found that it can actually open the way to explore the knowledges the person holds with respect to cultural contexts as they experience them.

As I write, I am thinking of the possibilities for extending externalising conversations about advice-giving with questions like, 'What is the history of 'advice-giving' in your life?' 'How has advice-giving worked for you in the past?'

I have also found that the question, 'Who might you go to for "wise-advice"?' can work to take the spotlight off myself as the 'expert' and invite the inclusion of important relationships in the young person's life, leading to a richness in the storytelling.

Angela, I am particularly interested in your comments about Confucianism. As 'wai guo ren', one of the things I hold in tension is to recognise the effects of relationships of power produced by this discourse at the same time as opening space for conversations of respect and pride for Chinese cultural traditions. At present I am sitting with 'the call to care for relationships' as a key idea. However, I am sure there is much more to be said in this conversation.

I did appreciate your contribution as it has stimulated my thinking, and I would welcome further reflection and conversation about working with those from Confucian heritage backgrounds.

Warmest regards,
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References

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