

## Interview with Angela Tsun On-Kee

*By John Winslade*



Angela Tsun On-Kee is an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Work at Hong Kong Baptist University. She had been a school social worker for three years before studying in the United States, where she got her masters degree in social work. Upon return to Hong Kong, Angela started to work in the capacity of Assistant Social Work Officer, with the Against Child Abuse. For three and a half years she remained in that position and gained solid fieldwork experience until she decided to take up her teaching career at Hong Kong Baptist University in 1989. She got her PhD degree in 2001 at the University of Bristol. In 2005, she received a post-graduate diploma in narrative practice from the Dulwich Centre in Adelaide, South Australia. In the same year, she was appointed the Associate Director of the Centre for Youth Research and Practice at Hong Kong Baptist University. Angela has been practising narrative ideas for more than ten years. Angela can be contacted by email: [oktsun@hkbu.edu.hk](mailto:oktsun@hkbu.edu.hk)

*This interview has been the product of an email conversation over several weeks. The primary goal was to find out about narrative practice in Hong Kong through the eyes of Angela Tsun On-Kee.*

*John:* Angela, I would like to start by asking how you become interested in narrative ideas?

*Angela:* Before I joined the social work department 21 years ago, I had been working with parents with abusive behaviours for three and a half years. I had the privilege to hear the stories of many parents and children. These stories included moments of frustration and disappointment, when children did not perform well academically and/or behaviourally. There were experiences of marital conflict, infidelity, and partner abuse. Some parents also told stories about personal experiences of being abused, and the lack of care and concern in childhood. Indeed, we have many theories developed to explain the phenomenon and the linear causation of child abuse. Yet, the more I read about these explanations, the more I could not agree with the ideas. The unique experience of each parent, the particularities of the predicaments, the strategies that they had used to combat the problems had been left unattended under the dominant discourse of child abuse – psychopathology in individuals, structural problems in the family. The power and control issue, and oppression were confined to issues that the abuser needs to realise and dissolve. Theories of individual and family work were also totalising of individuals and families, leaving marginalisation and subjugation of individuals and families untouched. Some theories, such as the ecological perspective, indicated that inequality and societal and cultural forces also contribute to abusive behaviours. These ideas were nonetheless not explored further. I was curious as to why would there be demarcation of the social work intervention into three discrete methods: namely, individual and family, group, and community. To me, individuals and families cannot be separated from the social and the communal.

*John:* So were you already becoming dissatisfied with other therapeutic knowledges and forms of practice before you encountered narrative ideas?

*Angela:* I guess so. I was teaching counselling theories and seeing people, and was struck by the influential role of the questions that I asked of people who came to consult me. I realised that where and how I responded to them reflected the agenda that I had in mind. The expert position and the power given me made me feel uncomfortable. Equitable relationship with respect is what I hope for in practice.

*John:* What was it that attracted you to narrative ideas?

*Angela:* When I decided to pursue my PhD degree in Bristol in 1994, I wanted to explore how mothers with abusive behaviours would evaluate themselves. I then read more on postmodern ideas, Confucianism, self theories and self-evaluation, and so on. They all inspired me to go further into exploring a therapy that would hear more of people's stories and of the impact of dominant cultural values on people's lives. When the research project almost came to an end in 1999, I started to search for alternative therapies and was told by a Mrs Mann (who was then a social work supervisor in the family service unit of a social service agency in Hong Kong) about the narrative therapy of Michael White. Without hesitation, I approached Michael to invite him to Hong Kong and, in March 2001, the journey of meeting with Michael, knowing more about

narrative practice, exploration of the ideas with local practitioners, persons, and communities started.

*John:* I am curious about why you did not hesitate? It seems to suggest that what you heard about narrative practice had immediate resonance for you. Is that right and why was this?

*Angela:* I had been searching for a therapy that was based on postmodern thinking and would not see people as problems but was focussed on wanting to know more of people's unique stories with respect since 1995. (In fact, I had read Michael White and David Epston's *Narrative means to therapeutic ends* before but had totally forgotten about this book.) At that time, I would ask almost every practitioner and family therapist I met whether they knew of any therapy or therapist with this philosophy. Perhaps, this search had begun since I had had the privilege of hearing so many unique stories and had been dissatisfied with the theories that I had been introducing to students who would become social workers with their influential role. I wanted to bring in alternatives, not only in our knowledge and skills, but, importantly, in our attitudes and our roles. At last, I had found a possibility – narrative therapy – I could not wait any longer!

Narrative ideas continue today to connect me with the stories of many people's lives that touch me so much! With the not-knowing position, curiosity and respect for people from all walks of life, each collaborative journey with persons is a process of deconstruction and co-construction, so that possibilities become available to persons to live their preferred way of life and to make visible their preferred identities.

These conversations not only provide space to the persons who consult us but also to me as a therapist or collaborator. Without a therapeutic agenda constructed prior to an interview session as happens in other forms of practice, I learned to de-centre myself and to listen to persons' stories with respect and with double listening. Whenever I witness persons leave the room with a smile, or become less affected by problems through the development of alternative story lines and see their life's club members accompanying them home, I am inspired to know and do more of narrative practice.

*John:* Tell me about narrative therapy in Hong Kong. How has it developed? How well is it known? What sort of community is there that is interested in narrative practice?

*Angela:* We have been developing training courses for local people in the helping field since 2005. Each year, the *Centre for Youth Research and Practice* at Hong Kong Baptist University runs an introductory course. We have also run an intermediate course for those who would like to explore narrative practice further after the introductory course. Michael White, Cheryl White, David Denborough and other teaching faculty members from the Dulwich Centre have visited my department to do trainings and conduct workshops. Through all these efforts, more and more people have come to know about narrative practice. In the last two years, the Government Social Welfare Department and several social service agencies have invited us to do training for their colleagues. My department also launched a Master of Social Sciences in Youth Counselling programme a few years ago and two of the courses are on narrative practice.

*John:* Who comes to these courses?

*Angela:* The participants of these courses are basically people in the helping professions, such as social workers, psychologists, clinical psychologists, teachers, pastors, and students.

In 2008 a course for just any people interested in narrative ideas was developed by another non-profit making community called *Narrative Community*. Parents and students joined the course. Though the course was held only twice, I saw the value of introducing narrative ideas to parents, students and people other than those in the helping professions.

*John:* In what settings do people who are learning about narrative therapy practice?

*Angela:* The service settings include child and family services, mental health services, services for the elderly, youth services, rehabilitation services.

*John:* How easy is it to generate interest in narrative practice in Hong Kong?

*Angela:* It is not easy for those of us who were trained in modern thinking, cost-effectiveness and problem solving approaches when a paradigm shift is experienced during the training. Yet, these experiences have been treasured as they are meaning-making processes for us all. I had been involved in collaborative projects with some social services agencies, such as outsider-witness practice with young people who use drugs. There are possibilities for other collaborative projects, such as co-research with people who have perpetrated sexually abusive behaviours towards others.

*John:* Do you have any new current plans to grow narrative practice in Hong Kong?

*Angela:* Together with nine practitioners and persons, we are working on a Chinese book on narrative practice (to be published this October).

*John:* What is this book going to be about?

*Angela:* All nine authors have been involved in the basic course on narrative ideas. A few have all been affected by depression and other mental health and life issues. As a group, we continued to meet up after the course and wondered what further steps there could be.

It has been six years since we had our first Chinese book published in June 2005 when the *International Conference on Narrative Therapy and Community Work* was held in Hong Kong. I have been hoping that we could have more articles on narrative practice written in Chinese. It was about time to work on another book. I do not like the idea of professionals doing the writing about the persons who should be the authors of their own stories. It's indeed an honour that the authors accepted my invitation and so we moved ahead. We have had two meetings and came up with the following titles for the book chapters:

- Chapter 1 An overview of narrative concepts and ideas
- Chapter 2 Establishing a new relationship with problems
- Chapter 3 Re-authoring
- Chapter 4 Personal agency
- Chapter 5 Preferred identities
- Chapter 6 Responses and reflection
- Chapter 7 Outsider-witness practice
- Chapter 8 Re-membering conversation
- Chapter 9 Therapeutic documents
- Chapter 10 Live stories of Jesus and my life stories

Chapters 5 to 7 are being written by a person and worker pair, as it is about the stories and conversations of a person who is affected by depression. Chapter 10 will be written by a couple who are practicing narrative ideas in their work place and the church. The other chapters are written by individual practitioners or persons. We may reflect on the other author's work later. It's a process in which new ideas evolve and take us to where we hope for this book.

Narrative practice is not developed exclusively for the helping professions. It is a philosophy of life practice. I have always envisioned a utopia where every individual can enjoy life in a community/different communities of which they choose to become a member. To start with, it was through the Narrative Practice Support Group (NPSG) in 2002 that a group of practitioners interested in narrative ideas began to meet once every six to eight weeks on a regular basis. Last October, I created a platform on Facebook (*Narrative Practice Link*) and hoped to gather a group of people interested in exploring indigenous narrative practice in Hong Kong. There may soon be regular gatherings.

Another new development is that the Centre for Youth Research and Practice, of which I am a member, has been enjoying a collaboration with Dulwich Centre. We are now exploring the possibility of extending our collaboration to doing a one-year certificate course for local people. I really feel excited about this.

*John:* How is narrative practice accepted in Hong Kong by officials? By families? In other parts of China?

*Angela:* The Staff Development Section of Family and Child Services of the Government Social Welfare Department invited us to do a training for the social workers serving the Family and Child Protective Services Units and the Integrated Family Service Centres. We will probably do another one this year. I have also done training workshops and seminars in Xiamen and Guangzhou in mainland China for social workers and psychologists, in Macau for social workers and social work students, in Singapore and Taiwan for social workers, psychologists and students.

These training workshops were well received because of the postmodern concepts and possibilities that narrative practice brings about, not only for individuals, families and communities but for the participants as well as the trainers, whose life experiences were also visited with possibilities for their own lives and practices made visible.

*John:* In the United States there is a strong story about therapy that is being championed by Derald Wing Sue and others. It suggests that Chinese cultural traditions mean that people prefer the kind of therapy in which they are given instructions and told what to do. What do you think of this idea?

*Angela:* Oh, I haven't heard of this story. Indeed, contextual factors and cultural values affect our preferences and how we respond to or expect of the therapeutic environment. Chinese are believed to have placed high value on harmonious relationships, conformity to authorities and moral obligations. As such, conventional theories that position the therapists at the top with much knowledge and skills and the clients down the bottom to be helped receive focal attention. The professional regime was constructed with the establishment of professional bodies that serve to ensure best practice and to protect the welfare of clients.

As some of the professionals and persons who come to consult us are connected to postmodern thoughts and the hope for a just world and equitable relationship among people, there is a gradual paradigm shift. And, the more the narrative journey is introduced and enjoyed by both partners in the conversations, the more this becomes the preferred practice.

*John:* You mentioned Confucianism before. I understand that it still is a powerful discourse in Chinese culture. But that there are also other competing discourses as well. It sounds like there is, in some quarters at least, a spirit of welcoming postmodern and narrative thinking, even when it sometimes is different from Confucian thinking. Is this right and can you illustrate how this happens?

*Angela:* Haha, there is a lot more to tell here. I would say Confucianism is a philosophy that has been honoured for centuries in our culture. I was taught to be a nice, conforming and responsible child. Expression of ideas that were different from the elders and authorities was

unacceptable and labelled as rebellion. 'Harmony' has always been utilised to represent peace and thus prosperity. We are conforming to the requirements of authorities and of people up in the power hierarchy. Many people have experienced subjugation and oppression, because there are always some wise men who know more and could assess what is right and what is wrong. Modern power is taking control of our lives.

When I started to appreciate postmodern thoughts, I was in fact resistant to the way Confucianism was introduced and the purpose it was supposed to serve. It was, and still is, a control agent. I knew very little about Confucianism but, to me, being a nice person does not mean wearing a smile on your face at all times; conformity is not suppression of ideas and following authorities' instructions; nor does 'harmony' need to rule out diversity.

As I learned more about and experienced more of respect, equity, acknowledgement, honour, and so on, I came to appreciate how Confucianism had brought China back to 'order' in times of internal wars. There is peace in me because I no longer 'hate' Confucianism but honour it for the values and life principles it offers of commitment to love and peace in individuals, families, kin, communities, societies and the nation.

I have talked much about myself again. Yes, there is a spirit of welcoming postmodern and narrative thinking. Perhaps, people are looking for differences and alternatives – in life, at work, and toward the ruling parties. Problems of poverty, subjugation, and injustice are witnessed in different facets of people's lives. Some people may conform to what we've been taught and told. When interventions and treatments are not successful, it is either the persons' or the helping professionals' problems. Yet there are other people who are not satisfied with the positivist thinking that guides assessments and treatments found to devalue individuals with their local knowledges and skills in the therapeutic journey. There is a craving for alternative ideas, knowledge and skills. This is witnessed in training sessions, particularly when the participants experience the respectful and equitable relationship co-constructed in the process.

Having this said, I would always remind myself not to make postmodern and narrative thinking another regime that could be used to devalue other models that certainly have their unique role to play in history and in time.

*John:* Thank you, Angela, for sharing some of your insights into the development of narrative practice in Hong Kong, as well as some information about the particular paths along which it is developing in your part of the world.