

The complexity of listening – listening for complexity: Narrative consultancy work in organisations

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Abstract

Listening is an important skill in organisational consultancy that contributes to rich story development. What is often overlooked is the complexity of listening. We illustrate how listening is an active and selective process that has an effect on which stories are noticed and thickened and which stories are left unnoticed and untouched in the consultation. Listening for complexity and stories-in-the-making leads to even small beginnings of stories becoming explored and developed. Finally, we suggest a particular tuning of the ear and specific ways of listening that keep complexity alive. Throughout the article, we relate our theoretical ideas to an excerpt from an interview in a two-day consultation with a job-training centre.

Keywords: organisational development, consultation, narrative practice, listening, complexity

Listening for stories-in-the-making

We got by for a long time with an energetic concept of motion, where ... we are the source of movement. Running, putting the shot, or so on: effort, resistance, with a starting point ... All the new sports – surfing, windsurfing, hang-gliding – take the form of entering into an existing wave ... The key thing is how to get taken up in the motion of a big wave, a column of rising air, to ‘get into something’ instead of being the origin of an effort. (Deleuze, 1995, p. 121)

Making the topic of listening the subject of our attention and curiosity and has enriched our practices immensely. This is an article about very specific practices within narrative consultancy in organisations – that is, practices of listening. Giving special attention to listening is relevant to our work within the domain of therapy, as well as in organisational process consultancy. There are, however, several skills at different levels needed in narrative consultancy work. We regard listening as a central, in-the-moment, facilitation skill and we also see it as a skill that can be improved by training.

The aim of this article is to share our reflections on the complexities of listening. Some of these reflections are of importance in all areas of narrative work, but here we will mainly focus on the importance and the possibilities that the skills of listening offer in working with organisations.

In working as narrative consultants, one of our central tasks is connecting with the stories that people tell in an organisation. That goes for stories that play a dominating role in people’s working lives, as well as for stories-in-the-making. The task is not to re-author new stories out of thin air, but to contribute to a richer development of the multiple stories that are brought into consultation. We assume that there will always be fragments of, or attempts at, stories that differ from the dominating ones. If we are successful at connecting with and unpacking these (often very indistinct) traces, we can contribute to more stories becoming voiced within the organisation.

The introductory quotation from the French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, captures one of the exciting challenges in the work of narrative consultancy: how can we enter into the (often subtle) movements that are so easily overlooked? Just as the windsurfer must use his sense of waves and the direction of wind, we, as consultants, must ‘*keep an ear on*’ small beginnings or traces of stories-in-the-making.

Within the domains of therapy and process consultancy, a lot of attention has been drawn to the asking of questions – possibly because listening is assumed to be a relatively simple task compared to asking questions. Listening – how complicated can that be? Well, actually it isn’t that simple.

Both when working together as co-consultants and when working together with trainees, we have often had episodes like the following. The interviewee says certain things that could have been heard as a potential *unique outcome*¹. However, for some reason this wasn’t given particular attention in the subsequent question. In talking about this experience afterwards, it has often become clear to us that the interviewer, who otherwise thought she was listening intently to what was being told, hadn’t even heard this particular sentence.

This has led us to an increased focus on the way in which we listen. It has also sharpened our understanding of how much there is to gain by a raised attentiveness to listening. The questions which have been raised for us in this inquiry are listed in Box 1.

Box 1

- Which beliefs about and habits of listening can stand in our way of hearing and connecting to the subordinated and emerging stories in the organisations that we work with?
- How can we 'tune' our ears so that we listen in ways that help us contribute to conversations that are useful to the persons concerned?

Excerpts from a consultation

In our understanding, organisational consultancy is about orchestrating myriads of conversations. This includes structuring who is talking to whom during the consultation. Sometimes the consultant will participate as the interviewer. At other times, the consultant will initiate conversations by providing an interview guide and the participants will work in pairs or in small groups interviewing each other. In this article, the focus will be on those types of conversations where the consultant takes the role of interviewer. Some will be one-to-one conversations, others will take place with the rest of the participants as audience.

Some time ago, we did a two-day consultation with a job-training centre. There were thirty-five people employed and a daily manager. The organisation is part of a larger structure and it is a semi-governmental organisation. As part of the consultation, some employees and the daily manager were interviewed in the presence of everyone else. The following excerpt is from one of these interviews with a team leader, Helen. Helen was the manager of a team of five persons and she had been in the organisation for the previous seven years. Below we shall use this example to make some comments about practices of listening.

'I think we've had a hard time lately. You know, after the new management took over, I think we all thought everything was going to be fine. They talked a lot about development plans, plans for getting rid of the waiting lists, plans for education and so on [pause] ... At least I had a lot of hope for the future and the way things were going.

But now I [pause] I am really getting worried [pause] ... it is as if things are getting more and more confusing [pause] ... new guidelines are circulated every week, it is hard to make priorities and to find out what not to do, you know [pause]. Yes, but [sighs] I mean [pause] I don't know [pause]. And we hardly ever see Susan, the manager, she is always gone for meetings. When we have a meeting every now and then with her, she seems busy [pause] and [sighs] I know she has a lot on her mind and big demands from everywhere, but eh [pause] well I know the pressure is getting harder most places these days [pause] it is [deep breath] ...

I think [sigh] I'd wish [pause] she'd look more into what is happening in the groups before everything goes totally berserk. I don't know [pause]. I guess she tried to do it the last time [pause]. But [sigh] really, as it is now, it is not working well according to my standards. There are just too many changes [deep breath] ... it is just all over the world these days [pause] but it shouldn't be like that.

I talked to some of the others about all this [pause] well [pause] and to a friend of mine. And people agree that it ought to be different [deep breath] but also [sighs] ...'

A dominant focus on speech rather than listening

No one would deny that talking necessarily implies listening, and yet no one bothers to point out, for example, that, in our culture, there has always been a vast profusion of scholarly work focusing on expressive activity and very few, almost none in comparison, devoted to the study of listening. (Fiumara, 1990, p. 5)

A vast supply of great questions

Our narrative training has supplied us with a broad selection of creative and useful questions and maps that inspire our work with organisations. In fact often, when we reflect on what one could have done differently in an interview, we have been preoccupied by reflections on, 'What else could have been asked?' Hardly ever do we discuss what we in our position as consultants had specifically been listening for or, just as importantly, had not been listening for and, therefore, not heard.

Skills of listening are rarely described

In meeting with Michael White, Maggie Carey, John Winslade, Shona Russell, Art Fisher, and many other narrative practitioners, we have become aware of their refined skills when it comes to the art of listening and of how these particular skills in listening contribute to rich story development. Each in their own way succeeds in capturing almost inaudible traces of stories that they will later unfold and thicken by means of further questioning.

We see these skills of listening work as pre-requisites for their further questioning. In spite of this, the skills of listening are often not as exhaustively described as their practice of questioning.

We believe ourselves to be good listeners, but it isn't possible to hear everything

Many everyday phrases suggest that someone is *either* listening or *not*. We often speak of listening as if our ears work like a tape recorder. If the record-button is pressed down, it will be possible to reproduce everything that was said in exact detail. This assumption can lure us into thinking that listening is easy and simple. All there is to it is to open your ears to what the person is saying. However, it is our experience that listening is far more complex and selective.

A situation like the following, where the question of what was actually said is being debated, will probably seem familiar to most:

'No, that wasn't what you said.'

'Yes, it was. You just didn't listen. Everyone else must have heard it. Didn't you?'

'Yes, I actually heard you saying that. She's right. She did actually mention it.'

You feel absolutely sure that something was never mentioned. You considered yourself to be listening, but your ears failed to hear what reliable sources claim had actually been said.

In situations like these, you often don't have any recollection of what you haven't specifically noticed. It has 'passed in through one ear and out through the other' without leaving any trace in the memory of the conversation. In spite of the belief that you have heard everything that was said, the act of listening must imply some sort of differentiated selection. The ears have caught some things and let others pass by unnoticed.

A little intermezzo featuring a Labrador and a bag of dog biscuits

Think of a Labrador lying dozing in its favourite corner of the living room. There are a lot of sounds from children playing and adults tidying up. In spite of all this noise, the dog seems persistently calm. That is, until there is a rustling noise from the cupboard, where the dog biscuits lie. Instantly, the dog's black ears prick up and move towards the direction of the sound. 'Hey! What was that?'

Other sounds have a similar effect. The sound of the dog leash rattling against the coat hook in the hall is often the first sign that someone will take the dog for a walk. The fascinating thing is that there are just as many sounds that the dog apparently doesn't hear at all: the sound of someone opening the kitchen drawer, of someone flushing the toilet, or of the door to the basement being slammed. These sounds are completely ignored by the dog. It seems as though the dog's ears have a capacity to focus on and pick out exactly the sounds it wants to be disturbed by.

The human ear is one of the few body parts that are not capable of much movement. We can turn our eyes towards something and focus on it and we can move our arms to catch something. But the ear is fixed. This might contribute to the common assumption that our ears are merely passive recipients of sound, which makes listening seem passive. The Labrador however illustrates how listening is always selective and organised around meaning. If we can assume that human meaning-making is even more complex than that of the Labrador, then we can also assume that the processes of selection of what we listen for might be correspondingly more complex.

A selection takes place under all circumstances

'To listen is ... literally, to stretch the ear' (Nancy, 2007, p. 5).

We can start thinking of our ears in a more constructionist way, not as mere passive receivers, but as active *devices* that can stretch themselves – reaching out and catching (only) certain things. This approach gives rise to a certain consideration about our work as narrative consultants. The selection that takes place when listening often works automatically and unnoticeably. We tend to think that we have heard everything that has been said.

Our first step has been to try to gain a better understanding of the different channels available for the *listening autopilot*, with which we all seem equipped. We have become interested in knowing more about what we typically hear and what we don't hear. What are our ears trained to stretch for and therefore hear? Which traces of stories do we pick up? What do our ears capture and what do they unknowingly allow to pass by? Are our ears tuned so that we actually succeed in capturing those traces of stories which could potentially be relevant and

important in a particular organisational setting? And how can the tuning of the ear be adjusted according to our commitment to create helpful and rich conversations in organisations?

At first glance, it might seem that we propose some form of strategic listening that centres the consultant. The consultant should be striving for a sort of nakedness and openness towards what is being said, so that it has a chance to unfold in its entirety. However, it is our belief that some sort of selection will take place in any case. It is impossible to obtain everything that a single employee says during an interview. By becoming aware of the ways our ears are tuned, it becomes possible to qualify our listening, so that our ears are stretched in particular directions or towards those elements that we regard as potentially enriching in narrative consultancy work.

A focus on the culturally shaped ear

'It was, in fact, the thought that shaped the sight [and the ear]' (Jensen, 2005, p. 51, our translation and addition).

The selection that takes place when we listen is not a random selection. It is shaped by experiences and by ideas acquired through our lives and by the discourses in which we participate and live. As for the content of conversations, we often listen for statements that are in accordance with our professional knowledge or theoretical position, as well as with our own personal experience. If, for instance, a clear job description is important to you, your ears might be particularly sensitive to statements like following in the interview with Helen.

'New guidelines are circulated every week, it is hard to make priorities and to find out what not to do, you know.'

This might also mean that you actually don't notice her subsequent statement.

'Yes, but then again [sighs] I mean [pause] I don't know [pause].'

You might not get the chance to inquire into other thoughts or knowledges that these half-sentences might refer to. If paid attention to, they might represent an emerging story about being appreciative of novel initiatives or...?

The particular mode or practice of listening we engage in is developed through the discourses in which we engage and live. Bronwyn Davies (2009) points out that particular practices of listening are familiar within the field of pedagogy.

- Listening for meaning
- Listening to judge the correctness of the other's understanding
- Listening in order to know the identity of the other.

These practices of listening are also common within the field of consultancy. When two participants express contradictory opinions, we might be tempted to listen for who is right and who is wrong. Our experience in training and in practice teaches us the advantage of stopping to take note of such traditional practices of listening, because doing so can help us notice when they get in the way of carrying out particular consultative tasks.

It is only possible to ask questions about those things that we have heard

Our point is not to favour the act of listening as more important than the act of questioning. We have no wish to abandon the importance of working with questions in narrative consultancy work. On the contrary, we want to emphasise the intimate relationship between listening and questioning.

Not being able to capture everything by our listening has substantial implications for our practices of questioning, as we are only able to connect to and further explore things we have actually heard. It is impossible to address questions to people about things we have not heard. In that sense, listening precedes questioning and, therefore, also restricts the range of possible questions. Only those traces that are actually heard get a chance to emerge and become more richly developed. Traces that are not heard stay in the background of the conversation and often come to nothing. If, for instance, we had not heard Helen saying that Susan had actually tried to look more into what had been happening in the groups, then we would not have been able to explore this further. In consequence, we would have lost the possibility of contributing to a rich story development about this particular experience.

What do we intend to listen for in narrative consultancy?

‘Our culture is one that speaks rather than listens ... Listening to the world is not an automatic faculty, but a skill that needs to be trained’ (Back, 2007, p. 7).

Within narrative thinking, life is seen as multi storied. The variety of stories in our lives creates possibilities for places to stand, for coordination and development of shared stories and for a range of actions in various situations. It is an important goal of narrative consultancy to contribute to rich story development. We thus see it as the consultant’s responsibility to make it possible for many different stories to be told and developed. Such stories may sometimes go well together, sometimes collide, sometimes stand in opposition to each other or sometimes point in very different directions.

Finding entry points into stories that break away from dominating stories

In spite of the attention given to questions and maps, narrative work is, to a large extent, also characterised by a particular practice of listening, based on ideas about what the interviewer should be trained to listen for. When it comes to connecting to traces of alternative and subordinated stories, we have especially found inspiration in White’s concept of *double listening* (White, 2000; 2003, p. 30).

The purpose of double listening is to listen for dominant problem stories at the same time as to listen for unique outcomes – that is, for events that seem to be distinct from, or at least lie on the borders of, dominant stories and, therefore, to belong to more preferred stories.² Double listening involves listening for small initiatives, skills of living, knowledges of life, positions taken in relation to problems, or for discursive ideas at play, as well as for traces of preferred values and commitments within dominant stories that the employee or manager might bring to the table. When members of an organisation are struggling with conflict, we might listen for unique outcomes that would bring forth stories of cooperation. When they are struggling with

stress in their everyday lives, we might listen for actual episodes that could be part of a story about handling busy life in a less stressful way.

The concept of double listening has also helped us to remain attentive to those preferred stories that are somehow already being lived but, at the same time, are overshadowed by well-established, dominant stories. When carrying out a consultative task in an organisation, we try to address and go further into those elements of conversation that represent exceptions to dominating stories and potentially unique events. But, in order to do that, these exceptions must be heard, noticed and their significance discerned.

To keep an ear on clearly presented exceptions

There is a big difference between reading a transcript like the one above and listening to a live interview. In an actual interview, there is no possibility of letting your eyes wander back and forth through the text. That is to say, we aren't able to rewind if we miss something to begin with.

It can actually be hard to notice those kinds of exceptions that are served on a silver plate before us. For instance, a potentially unique event can easily be passed over, if followed by a vivid description of something the employee or manager considers an important problem. For example, in the interview above, Helen said later:

When we have our team meetings, it is a struggle to get things properly organised. It is a bit better now. But I mean, then again, it just seems that the changes keep exploding. The last year, this has been ruining our workplace completely.

In these sentences traces of a small alternative story can be heard. The team meetings are said to be 'a bit better now'. But this is almost instantly drowned by the mention of changes that keep exploding and that, according to Helen, are ruining the workplace. In spite of the alternative story being clearly presented, our culturally-shaped ears can easily miss it without even noticing. It takes a particular reshaping of our ears to pick it up. The ears of the consultant need training in order to capture such small traces of subordinated stories.

Narratives: Neat packages or a messy affair?

To illustrate how individuals link their experiences and actions over time in a narrative form, the diagram in Figure 1 is commonly used:

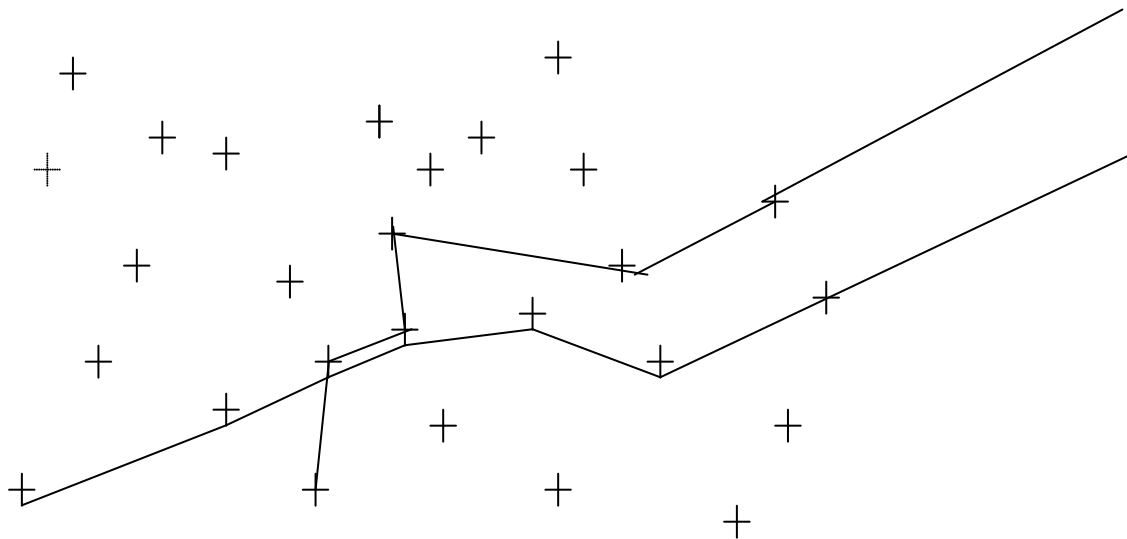


Figure 1 – Two storylines: Problem- and preferred stories (after Morgan, 2000, p. 55).

This diagram illustrates how many possible events seem to lie outside of the dominant story. The challenge is, therefore, to get hold of some of the episodes and experiences which are not a part of the dominant story.

Simple and clear as it is, the diagram could in some way lead us to think that stories are neat and linear and that alternative stories are to be created *next to* the dominant ones. It is as if the terminology of ‘preferred’ and ‘dominant’ stories tempts us to split our listening into only two, or at least very few, clearly-separated tracks. We have made great use of this diagram in our teaching of consultants - but we have become aware that it could leave the impression of organisations as made up of individuals, each with their own neatly-ordered stories. Just thinking how each will tell different stories, the consultant can easily lose some of her initial courage. Amid such complexity, it can be difficult to see how to make progress.

Nevertheless, we will increase the complexity further. We find it helpful to remind ourselves that this complexity applies to every single individual. Whether employee or manager, every person in an organisation can tell a multiplicity of stories about themselves, about each other, and about what happens in the organisation. These stories are neither well-ordered nor neatly-arranged into what we call dominant and preferred stories.

From numerous consultations and discussions, we have come to view stories in an organisation as quite messy. Experience is storied and re-authored continuously and in many different directions, and this complexity is very apparent when you interview employees and managers. Multiple stories are continuously born, changed, running in parallel or crossing each other, in a way that might be better illustrated as in Figure 2.

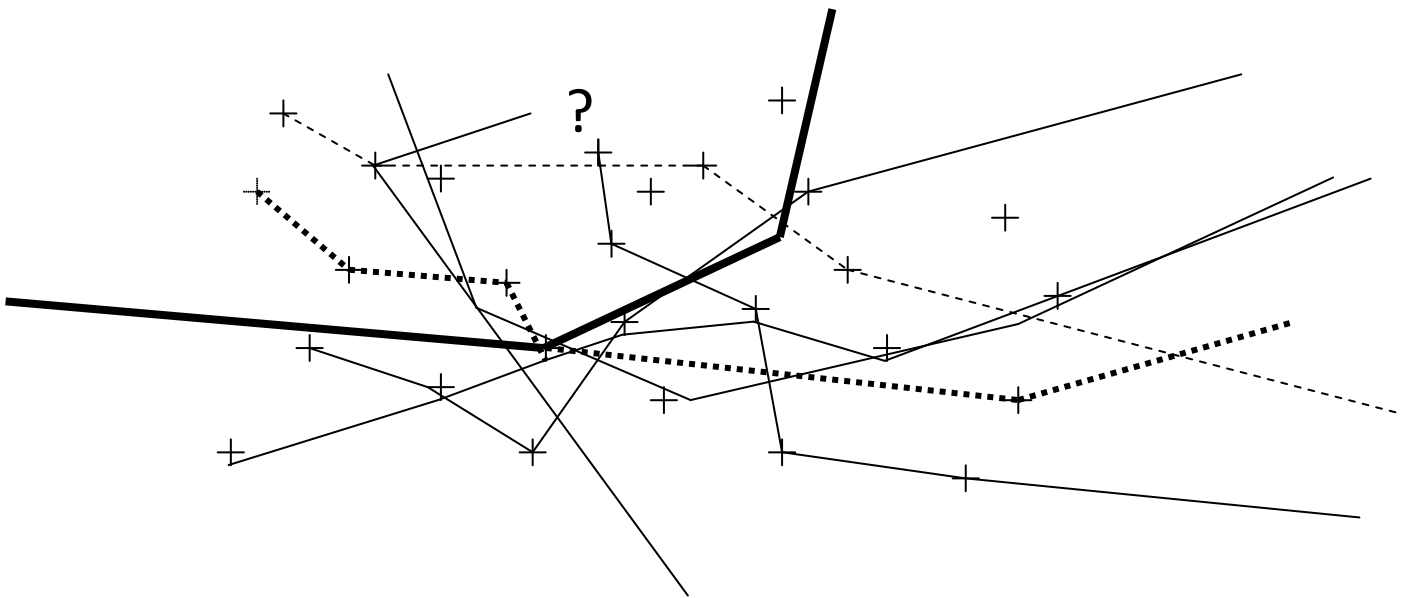


Figure 2 – Complexity of stories: storying as a ‘messy’ affair.

Having the image of a messy affair in the back of our minds enables us to listen for those story-ing and story-changing processes that are already going on – also for those that aren’t being set out explicitly. Using the words of Deleuze, we can listen for various possible waves to surf on.

It may assist us to keep complexity alive not to get caught in the beauty of *a particular* alternative story. When interviewing one person in the organisation – and at the same time keeping in mind that everybody else in the room has different stories about what is going on – we can easily be tempted to hold onto only one story-line, so that things can be simpler and easier to handle. Faced with complexity, dominating cultural discourses about ‘putting things in order’, ‘getting the overall picture’ and ‘knowing what this is really about’ can easily persuade the consultant.

In everyday life – as well as in much organisational thinking – it is a dominant assumption that, in order to find solutions, you must get to the core of the matter. You must find out how things actually are and therefore complexity must be reduced. As Per Olav Enquist (1991) puts it:

Earlier, I had secret dreams about adding everything up in such a way, that everything was completed, closed off. Thus one could finally say: ‘This was how it was, this was what happened, this is the whole story...’ But it would be against our better judgment. (p. 7, our translation)

Problems and conflicts often arise and escalate when complexity is reduced, that is to say, when the multiplicity of stories disappear in favour of single dominant stories. When people in the organisation go from multi-storied descriptions of collaboration to thinking and talking about their colleagues and the workplace in slogan-like terms, it becomes difficult to handle the dilemmas and challenges of everyday life in the organisation. With this in mind, the primary task of the consultants is to facilitate rich description of complexity.

Tuning of the ears – listening for complexity

‘... pay attention to the fragments, the voices and the stories that are otherwise passed over or ignored. The task ... is to admit these voices and stories and pay them the courtesy of serious attention’ (Back, 2007, p. 1).

How can we learn to listen in ways that capture and question more elements of ‘the messy affair’? What can help us track elements of the conversation when stories are continually being born, changing or colliding with each other? If we tune our ears in particular directions, then barely noticeable tracks show up and help us on our way.

Stories that interweave and intersect

‘The only possible introduction of language into music is that of conjunctions, encouraging us to spot all the but-or-and-hence-so-neither-since’s throughout a musical piece (Nancy, 2007, p. 34).

One track we can follow is the word ‘but’, since that can be an indication of two stories meeting (as John Winslade emphasises, workshop presentation, DISPUK, 2009). When Helen says, *‘There are just too many changes [deep breath] it is just all over the world these days [pause] but it shouldn’t be like that’*, the ‘but’ can give us a hint. Maybe Helen understands what is going on in the light of two different narratives that both are important in her understanding of the changes in her organisation. There are traces of at least two stories that, if we notice them, can be developed and further reflected upon. We regard these moments as bifurcation points³, where several stories collide or pull in opposite directions.

The crossroads where stories collide, meet or intersect is interesting to us, exactly because it can help us to keep narrative complexity alive. We are particularly interested in the way stories connect. Expressions of doubt, suffering and other troubles often seem connected to various preferred stories. Life in organisations often becomes difficult when people are stretched between stories that draw on important values but pull in opposite directions.

Listening for the ‘but’ and being curious about what is on both sides of it can create possibilities for meaning-making around the complex dilemmas inside or outside of organisations. It is possible both to gain reflexive distance from this complexity and also to avoid being handed over to a single alternative story – an alternative story that feels good but where the word ‘but’ has been erased. Such a ‘but’ represents another side to the story that will often reappear when the consultancy is over – possibly even with feelings of inadequacy attached.

More words than the ‘but’ can indicate stories meeting. Many other conjunctions can be used to connect elements of stories, for instance, ‘and’, ‘or’, and ‘so’. Tuning our ears to listen for those we can identify, which stories or parts of stories are connected, and thus how the complexities of life in an organisation are understood.

That which hasn’t yet been storied – stories-in-the-making

In the example above, Helen explicitly mentioned both of the stories that the word ‘but’ was connecting. She stated that a lot of changes were taking place in the organisation *and* that she

had to remind herself that this phenomenon was not something exclusive to her particular situation but rather a common and time-typical tendency. In this way she presented both sides of the word 'but' as two relatively well-established stories.

The ear is easily attracted to those parts of the story that are presented in clear and complete sentences, a convincing tone of voice and possibly also with illustrative examples. This attraction may result from a cultural discourse that assumes a clearly-voiced answer to signal the degree of passion that the speaker feels about what she is saying. Or it may signal how highly preferred the story is in a particular cultural context.

In organisational consultancy work, however, we find that only a minority of a person's experiences are actually this clearly expressed. As Michael White (2007) puts it in the conclusion to *Maps of narrative practice*:

I began this journey with a blank page, a roughly drawn itinerary in mind, and many hopes and aspirations. I soon found that my head was overcrowded with ideas that wouldn't pour out neatly onto the page and that took me far past where I could be with the written word. I explored many routes in the expression of what I wanted to say, some of which I subsequently abandoned and others of which I saw through to preferred destinations. (p. 291)

In line with Michael White's description of his process of writing, we have started paying attention to how we speak when we are in the midst of some sort of reflection. Perhaps this happens when we speak about something we haven't already said out loud many times before, when we are feeling our way, or when we are trying to find the right shape for a thought. In those situations, we often speak more slowly and hesitantly, or gropingly say things like, 'No, maybe that's not it anyway', 'That's probably not how it is', or '... I think so'. We suggest that these ways of speaking are often a sign of a storying process going on that contributes to rich story development. As consultants, we remind ourselves that stories 'don't pour out neatly'.

When stories don't yet take the form of neatly-packed and well-established accounts, we must particularly listen for sequences that are not absolutely fluent. These are sequences of hesitation, sequences where sentences aren't completed, sequences followed by a thoughtful pause, or sequences where what we hear sounds like mere rambling. We can either choose to focus on the way things are expressed and thus make that the subject of the interview, or we can also express some of our own thoughts openly and ask the interviewee to share considerations of what might be causing the uncertainty. Here is another piece of the interview with Helen:

I think [sigh] I'd wish [pause] she'd look more into what is happening in the groups before every thing goes totally berserk. I don't know [pause]. I guess she tried to do it the last time [pause]. But [sigh] really, as it is now, it is not working well according to my standards. There are just too many changes.

Elements like 'I think', a deep sigh, 'I don't know', and later a 'but' and a sigh again – these are all small bits and pieces that could indicate Helen being in the process of trying to create a sense of coherence from several different stories, without necessarily succeeding. To connect with such a development might sound something like the following:

So Helen – you said that you'd wish that Susan would look more into what is happening in the groups. And then you said, 'I don't know'. My guess would be that you might have an eye for several different things that are going on and that gives you all sorts of ideas at the same time
...

Maybe you'd like to tell me some more about what was also on your mind, when you said, 'I don't know'. What might have caught your attention just now, when you were sitting here talking to me?

Helen responds:

Hmm [pause] yeah [pause] sometimes I get this feeling that this is going to go on like this. Somehow this is not going to change, no matter which management we get. And there is no point in trying to change the tide. There are days when it is not that easy for us as a team, but also [pause] we are getting the hang of it.

By tuning the ears to hear the small inserted or half-sentences, we begin to notice beginnings of stories about developments in the team that have a very different plot and that can be unfolded through further exploration. Inserted or half-sentences can indicate that the person speaking is in a process of moving from 'the known and familiar' to that which is 'possible to know'.

When trying to 'keep an ear on' stories-in-the-making, metaphors like 'being in transit', 'tracks' and 'traces', 'attempts', or 'run-ups' have been helpful. Such metaphors assist us to listen for statements best pictured as little seedlings or that have been mixed together with other statements or stories in such ways that make it difficult to tease them out as elements of alternative or subordinated stories.

Hesitations as moments of bifurcation and thickening

There are several other elements we try to capture in order to 'keep an ear on' the stories in-the-making. Let us take a look at a sequence where Helen is on the verge of saying something but hesitates.

... but eh [pause] well I know the pressure is getting harder most places these days [pause] it is [deep breath].

Consultant: *It sounds as if you were about to say more. I don't know ... would there be other thoughts in the background or ...?*

Helen: *You know, it is this feeling of the unavoidable. They write about it in the papers don't they [pause] that this is how work life is getting nowadays. So maybe you just have to get used to it, and maybe you actually shouldn't. That it will ruin your life in the long run [pause] I really don't know.*

Helen is talking about how many work places are affected by increased pressure. When asked about her hesitancy, a landscape of considerations opens up a chain of reflections. Enquiring about hesitation can lead to the unfolding of meetings between several stories. Less established storylines about more persistent and undeniable dilemmas are being voiced. Hesitation can thus indicate new trails to follow. The speaker needs to take little breaks on the way in order to find out in which direction she wishes to go.

At other times, hearing and enquiring about hesitation has turned out to indicate a person thinking about events and experiences that were closely connected to the things she was talking about. Helen might also have answered that she was thinking about how unacceptable the whole situation was. Hesitation can thus also indicate the possibility of thickening the story or point to a moment where specific episodes and images emerge.

When we listen for hesitations, it is important that we don't pre-determine them as points of bifurcation, thickening or anything else. As in all other narrative work, we shouldn't take the role of editing people's stories. We cannot predict what these moments might or might not represent. They might not even represent anything of importance to the person being interviewed. Helen could answer that she just felt a little distracted at that moment. What *is* interesting about moments of hesitation is that they *can* indicate a lot of storying activities going on- activities, images or movements that we can connect to and unpack.

Surfing on the little waves of story-making

'All sorts of things are going through your head when you are being interviewed' (a trainee consultant after an interview exercise at DISPUK, 2009).

A focus on listening can give rise to many different forms of attentiveness. We have described some elements of listening that we find particularly interesting at the moment. Finally, we would like to share how this focus on listening has contributed to our own experience of doing narrative work in organisations.

Several times we heard Michael White emphasise that he didn't experience his consultations as hard work⁴. On the other hand, we, along with countless numbers of trainees at our courses, have experienced sweat on our brows as we work hard to find the gaps for elements of subordinated stories to be voiced. 'What can I ask? Should I ask that question?', 'I don't feel that much is happening', 'How do we get on from here?', and so on. Focusing on listening can contribute to a feeling of not having to work just as hard. The conversations in narrative consultancy work begin to feel easier.

If we start listening for the little beginnings and traces of stories, as well as for the many stories that are interwoven, intersecting or colliding, our attention is drawn to the many things that are already being told and that can be unpacked. We don't have to *discover* things by means of the right questions. Tuning of the ears literally leaves us more material with which to work. The tuning helps us use the many little waves and movements already in motion. Like the surfer, we can also get a sense of riding waves.

Focusing on listening has also reminded us of one of the central points of narrative thinking, that is, that people are always storying their lives. The people with whom we consult are constantly part of story-making processes. Meaning is not created in the very moment when the narrative consultant is interviewing. Meaning is made and re-made, stories are created and changed all the time. It becomes our job to make parts of these story-making processes hearable for both the person herself and for the other members of the organisation who are present. It thus becomes possible to unpack them, take a look at them and explore their connection with other stories in the organisation.

Notes

1. Unique outcomes are the episodes and actions that turn out not to fit with the dominant stories and are part of more preferred stories (White, 2007).
2. In Western culture and especially in the helping professions, there is a dominant focus on finding out shortcomings and deficiencies in an attempt to repair them. This focus often plays a part in shaping our

ears, and thus what we listen for, in such a way, that it would almost be fair to call them 'ears of deficiency' (Gergen, 1997; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2003).

3. Bifurcation point is a concept from the work of W. Barnett Pearce (2007) who studies communication. He uses it to stress that within every conversation or chain of events, there is always a possibility of acting differently.
4. He emphasised on the one hand how enriching it personally was for him to listen to people's stories, but he also underlined that people's lives are already multi-storied.

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