Collective narrative practice with rape victims in the Chinese society of Hong Kong

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This article presents an example of collective narrative practice with Chinese women who have experienced rape. In a cultural context where rape is an immense taboo and a source of shame, this group project linked individual women to the collective. The use of the Tree of Life methodology, re-authoring conversations, outsider witnesses, therapeutic letters and documents, and definitional ceremony, has richly described the knowledges and skills of these women which have helped them, and which could contribute to the lives of other women. In addition to acknowledging personal agency, the cultural dimension and social construction of sexual violence was exposed in local language and practice, and the power of dominant discourses was revealed and challenged.

Keywords: rape, women, Chinese, collective practice, narrative therapy, collective documents, Hong Kong
BACKGROUND

This collective narrative practice project in relation to trauma experienced by women victims of sexual violence took place in the Chinese society of Hong Kong. It was conducted in collaboration with the Association Concerning Sexual Violence Against Women which provides a one-stop crisis support service, RainLily, for women who have experienced sexual violence.1

The work described here is informed by post-structural feminism. For feminist post-structuralism, all meaning and knowledge are discursively constituted through language and other signifying practices. Language and discourse constitute subjectivity which is never fixed or essential (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1997). Discourse refers to an interrelated ‘system of statements which cohere around common meaning and values ... [that] are a product of social factors, of powers and practices, rather than an individual’s set of ideas’ (Hollway, 1983, p. 231, quoted in Gavey, 1989, p. 464). It is through discourse that material power is exercised. Not only should these dominant discourses be contested, but social practices and structures have to be addressed in order to enhance personal agency, to change subjectivity, and to struggle for changes in social discourses, practices, and social arrangements (Weedon, 1997).

Sexual violence is a form of gender oppression expressed in sexuality. The dignity and worth of women are negatively affected by sexual violence, and their suffering must be acknowledged. Much of the pain, however, is created and sustained by beliefs about sexual violence, the women victims and the male perpetrators, and how they are treated by the various community systems after the incidents. These beliefs are socially constructed and therefore can be deconstructed. The practices of community systems are also informed by the social discourses of sexual violence and need to be revealed in a specific cultural context. The objectives of this project were to overcome the trauma of sexual violence and secondary trauma caused by community responses; to hear from women victims about their hopes, values, dreams and commitments; to deconstruct the cultural construction of discourses related to sexual violence and victims; and to speak to others who have experienced sexual violence in Hong Kong and other places. This project used collective narrative practice (Denborough, 2008) to break the isolation of individual women who have experienced sexual violence and to link individuals to social action initiatives that challenge social practices.

PREPARING THE PARTICIPANTS

In the local cultural context of Hong Kong, it can be challenging to bring women together to share experiences in relation to sexual violence. In order to create a group for women who use RainLily’s services, I had to make my intentions very clear to RainLily counsellors who then referred their previous and existing clients to me and the group. I prepared a brief proposal so that the counsellors were able to provide a clear explanation to the women who were to be invited. This proposal acknowledged that rape is an immense taboo and source of shame in the Chinese culture and that it is therefore often difficult for rape victims to share their experiences with others. It also explained that I did not intend to make the group more homogenous by restricting recruitment along any dimension(s), because I think that sexual violence is something that can happen to women of any background, and I believe that a shared experience of surviving rape is sufficient to create a sense of connectedness between women. The proposal also introduced ideas of narrative practice to the counsellors who had been applying other counselling approaches.

A total of six women were referred by the RainLily counsellors. It was a diverse group in terms of their age, employment, educational, and religious background, and the length of time after the rape incident. The age range was 30–60. One woman in the group had experienced childhood rape incidents which she had kept to herself for fifty years, while others had experienced more recent sexual assault, ranging from one to five years in the past. Two of them had brought their cases to court, but in one case, the perpetrator was not convicted. Another participant was preparing herself to act as a witness in court. Two of the participants were divorced; both believed that the sexual violence they had experienced was the cause of this.
In order to build trust and prepare the women for participation in the group, I sent a letter to each of them which was also to evoke the concepts of insider-knowledge (Epston, 2001) and enabling contribution (Denborough, 2008):

Dear ...

Thank you very much for accepting the invitation from Arnie and me. We shall be seeing each other very soon.

This group is a journey of recovery for people with the same experiences who will come together to share how we have passed this period of time, how we have handled the incident itself and our experiences in encounters with various institutions after the incident. I am curious about the ways that you have engaged to handle the pain and hurt. I deeply believe that you must have some wisdom to share with other women who have experienced sexual violence and are now feeling helpless, puzzled, lost, and disturbed, which could help them to stand on their own feet. We shall record your wisdom and share it with other victims of sexual violence.

I am sincerely inviting you to participate in this narrative practice journey with other Chinese women. This will be a new experience, but I am sure we shall together walk through a meaningful process.

Shirley.

### THE GROUP SESSIONS

Six sessions took place, each three hours long. Although I had made a tentative plan for each session beforehand, I was open to revisions and modifications based on the responses and will of the participants. In fact, the sequencing of content was revised after the first session as I had gained a better understanding of the meanings that the participants ascribed to sexual violence, and the content of each session was designed in response to what stood out in the previous one.

### SESSION ONE: TELLING STORIES ABOUT COMING TO THE GROUP

The session started with me introducing myself and a discussion of issues of confidentiality followed by members briefly introducing themselves. I welcomed the group by using a journey metaphor (McPhie & Chaffey, 1999; White, 2002) which gave the sense that they would be moving forward, and postulating an image of the women as travellers who would experience, explore, and see. The metaphor of a ‘treasure map’ was utilised to instil a sense of hope that within our group conversations many treasures would be discovered.

To women who have experienced rape, seeking services requires enormous courage, seeing a counsellor needs more courage, and meeting with strangers is an even braver act. Attending a group that is led by a stranger is in itself a brave act which should be acknowledged. This first group session was therefore informed by a curiosity about why the women had chosen to come and what would sustain their participation in the group. Members were invited to tell a story about their decision to join this journey using questions adapted from Julie Sach’s work (2007):

- What are the hopes and dreams that led you here?
- Tell us a story about your decision to be here.
- What kind of a step was this, to come to the group?
- What are your intentions for coming to the group?
- What does taking this step say about what is important in your life?

The women were also asked to identify one idea/thought/thing that could keep them from coming to the group.

Everyone was very much impressed as members shared their stories about their decision to join the group and the motivations to continue to attend sessions. The stories were different for each person. Their intentions included: working through the impacts of child sexual violence on marriage and child rearing; helping oneself and others; curiosity about the effectiveness of the group; finding ways to
cope with going to court; and expressing thanks to
the counsellor who invited her to the group. Implicit
within each of these intentions were particular
values – the value of marriage and child rearing,
contributing to others, curiosity, and gratitude –
which they have remained very committed to,
despite the experience of sexual violence. These
values, and the survival of these values, were
acknowledged in the group.

Members were then invited to write down the
‘hopes and fears’ which took place immediately
after the incident, and current ‘hopes and fears’.
The wide-ranging effects of sexual assault were
richly described through this process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Immediately after the rape incident</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fears</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• not knowing what to do</td>
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<td>• not being trusted by others</td>
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<td>• believing that it was their fault</td>
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<td>• speaking to others</td>
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<td>• reporting to the police</td>
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<td>• others finding out about it</td>
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<td><strong>Hopes</strong></td>
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<td>• forgetting</td>
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<td>• problem solving</td>
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<td>• having someone to help</td>
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<td><strong>Current</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Fears</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• mentioning about the rape incident</td>
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<td>• facing the court</td>
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<td>• the perpetrator being released from</td>
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<td>• prison</td>
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<td>• touching the bodies of other people</td>
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<td>• environment similar to that of the rape incident</td>
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<td>• people who look similar to the perpetrator</td>
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<td>• sexual violence happening to self again</td>
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<td>• divorce being a wrong decision</td>
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<td><strong>Hopes</strong></td>
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<td>• forgetting</td>
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<td>• facing the future</td>
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<tr>
<td>• having the perpetrator face justice</td>
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<td>• regaining confidence to live happily</td>
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When these real effects of sexual violence
the women had experienced were named and
communicated in the group, this was experienced
as a significant acknowledgement. At the same
time, the group’s ‘current hopes’ revealed a future
orientation and a sense of personal agency. The
ways in which women’s hopes had changed from
immediately after the rape incident to now,
demonstrated to members the possibility of moving
forward.

And yet, after this exercise, I also detected that
participants were influenced by a sense of
powerlessness and sadness. And so I decided to
change the theme for the second session, which
was originally on social discourses of sexual
violence, to that of the ‘Tree of Life’. I reasoned that
the ‘Tree of Life’ methodology could assist women
to reconnect with their own skills, knowledges and
preferred storylines of identity in a way that would
make it more possible for them to challenge the
dominant social discourses.

**SESSION TWO: THE TREE OF LIFE**

The ‘Tree of Life’ collective narrative practice
methodology (Denborough, 2008; Ncube, 2007)
was conducted in the second session. After each
participant had drawn their own trees and related
the different aspects of these to their heritage,
skills, abilities, values, hopes, dreams and
significant relationships in their lives, each
participant was then invited to present her ‘tree’ in
front of the group. Other members were encouraged
to ask questions and provide feedback. When all the
trees were posted on a whiteboard, this evoked the
imagery of a forest. We were then able to discuss
the ‘storms of life’ that affect both forests and
women’s lives.

The ‘Tree of Life’ powerfully constructs
alternative storylines of identity. There was no
mention about the rape incidents throughout the
whole session, but instead, a focus on women’s
knowledges and skills, hopes and dreams, and the
history of these. When each participant introduced
her tree, there was a resonance in the discovery of
narrative resources and how one’s ‘roots’ – family
history, ancestry, and significant figures in one’s life –
have nourished the development of skills and
hopes. The forest metaphor represented shared
experiences, mutual support, and friendship which
gave strength to the members. And by externalising the concept of storms, the ability of women to survive and grow despite early suffering and hardship was acknowledged. (for other examples of the use of the Tree of Life see: www.dulwichcentre.com.au/tree-of-life.html)

One group member found this metaphor particularly resonant and suggested that over time she could add many more items to the different parts of her tree. This idea was embraced by others. In this way, the Tree of Life took on a life beyond this single session, and beyond the existence of the group.

**SESSION THREE: RE-AUTHORING AND OUTSIDER WITNESSES**

This session was designed to re-author the women’s stories through double-story development and rich descriptions of the alternative stories of women’s lives. Two members were interviewed in turn, with other members acting as outsider witnesses (White, 2007).

I have selected parts of my conversations with one member, Fanny, who initially defined the problem she was struggling with as not winning her court case against the man who raped her.

**F:** If things were like [the member who won the case in court] and I won my case, then I could say that the law is fair. We all know that it is not, it is not fair.

**S:** So, you have been very keen about justice but you have also always endured injustice. What is behind this ‘endurance’?

**F:** It’s about consequences.

**S:** What sorts of consequences?

**F:** Even if that man was put into jail, I would always then be thinking about his wife, his children …

**S:** But that man hurt you …

**F:** I still think about his wife and his children to the very last minute.

**S:** When are those thoughts with you?

**F:** Perhaps especially when I read about Buddhism.

**S:** Is there a longer history to this? When you were young, were you also thinking about the needs of others?

**F:** I have been this way from a very young age.

**S:** When did you start to think for children, the children of others?

**F:** I love children even at a very young age because they are innocent and very naive. It’s not their fault, is it?

**S:** How did you come to care for children when you were very young?

**F:** Because of my uncle, my siblings. I am the eldest and I took care of my siblings and my cousins. I cooked for them when I was six, seven years old and gave them baths, all on my own.

**S:** What do you think children need?

**F:** They have to be taught from our hearts.

**S:** What about justice? Where did you learn about justice?

**F:** I’m not like [another member], she does not live near the perpetrator. I live nearby him. The way that people look at you is scary, don’t you know that? I don’t know what they are thinking, but I think they must be laughing at me.
S: How do you know that they all know about the case?
F: It was in the newspaper and many talked about it.
S: What is the effect of people's staring at you?
F: It makes me feel useless and as if I am without wisdom in every aspect: dealing with people, fulfilling tasks and relating to others. It even makes me feel as if kindness is useless. My own experience tells me so.
S: So, the injustice and unfairness of the law, and then the injustice and unfairness of people staring, has many effects on your life. If you could give these effects a name what would it be?
F: It is ‘Ghost’.
S: So, do you like the impacts of ‘Ghost’?
F: Of course not.
S: What makes it not ok with you?
F: I have lost my confidence and without confidence, I can do nothing. No goal, no peace ... I am collapsed.
S: Why do you think these impacts are not all right? Is there anything that you treasure that these effects are keeping you from?
F: I treasure ... ‘Peacefulness’.
S: What is peacefulness?
F: It’s about relationship with others.
S: So, ‘Ghost’ has taken away ‘Peacefulness’? When did you start to treasure ‘Peacefulness’?
F: When working with colleagues at my workplace, after coming to Hong Kong.
S: Can I come back to what you were saying earlier about ‘endurance’? How does this relate to ‘Peacefulness’? Are they related to each other?
F: Endurance and peacefulness ... would make the world better.
S: When ‘Ghost’ comes, do you endure this because you want to have ‘Peacefulness’?
F: I always refrain from using my authority in my work position. I am so ... quiet ... never really speak up.
S: When you don’t use your power and speak up, what is that about?
F: It’s also about ‘Peacefulness’.
S: So how does this relate to your appearance in court? You did appear in court and you spoke up and you took action. Was this a different sort of endurance, action, and usefulness?
F: I felt bad. This is one matter. And I had to do something about this. Not being willing to hurt his children is another matter. Both are important to me.

This was a complex interview in which Fanny articulated multiple effects of injustice and unfairness and also a number of key values which she is trying to live by in the face of these injustices and unfairnesses. The members who acted as outsider witnesses expressed that the interview was very emotional because they could see the hurt and stress that Fanny had been experiencing. Some group members spoke of a shared concern about caring for people who had hurt them. One member recalled that she experienced a similar struggle when she pressed charges against the perpetrator who was her boyfriend when the rape occurred. At the time, she was worried about hurting his mother. Fanny’s kindness and sympathy for children and her struggles in relation to justice and care was powerfully acknowledged. Her pursual of the court case was recognised as a brave act to stop the perpetuator from committing sexual violence in the future even though he was not convicted. In this way, her actions were seen by outsider witnesses as representing both justice and care.

During the telling and re-telling processes, Fanny relaxed a bit. She found the outsider-witness responses significant, but she still concluded that she was ‘useless’. The meaning of ‘uselessness’ is cultural. In the Chinese culture of Hong Kong, ‘uselessness’ has a negative connotation which is often used to describe a person who does not have
the ability to perform according to social expectations. It implies not measuring up, but it is about more than just inadequacies: it is a totalising description of a person who has little worth as a person. As Fanny’s strong sense of powerlessness and her totalising description of being a failure brought some misery and sadness, and as sexual violence and dominant discourses in relation to sexual violence can contribute to women experiencing themselves as ‘useless’, I decided that we would pay significant attention to this theme in subsequent weeks.

**SESSION FOUR – THERAPEUTIC LETTERS AND INTERVIEWING ‘USELESSNESS’**

The use of therapeutic letters is a powerful way to acknowledge knowledges and skills, and values and intentions, and to thicken the description of alternative stories (White, 1995). This session started with sharing two therapeutic letters given to the two members who were interviewed in the last session. They were invited to read the letters out loud to the group. This was followed by a short interview with Fanny about ‘Uselessness’, as a continuation of the last session. The other members continued to be outsider witnesses. There was then a group interview of ‘Uselessness’ in which I acted out this role. I had prepared a set of questions and distributed these to the participants, who took turns to ask them. The group discussed the interview afterwards.

**Therapeutic letter to Margaret**

Dear Margaret,

Thank you very much for sharing with the group. You mentioned about ‘Bomb’ which often comes up in your daily life and your dreams, which has brought to you fear and self-doubt, and it also makes you want to escape from any news reports related to sexual violence.

You also mentioned that when ‘Bomb’ appears, you would say to yourself, ‘Bombs cannot hurt me’. You also chat with your friends and found that when you face the incident with ‘Dignity’, the power of ‘Bomb’ disappears. To you, ‘Dignity’ is to admit in your heart that the incident did happen and it is the fault of this man. The fault is with the perpetrator, not you. You also mentioned that when you advocate for the use of a shield in court by speaking to government officials, together with RainLily counsellors, you have a total control of ‘Bomb’.

Margaret, you spoke of ways in which you can control the ‘Bomb’. From your words it appears that ‘Dignity’ has appeared and has become your ally. It sounds like ‘Dignity’ will stay with you to keep ‘Bomb’ under control. It sounds as if ‘Bomb’ is no longer so powerful!

Shirley.

**Therapeutic letter to Fanny**

Dear Fanny,

Thank you very much for sharing with the group. I vividly remember that you spoke about the injustices in law and that you have made a great effort, but still cannot bring the perpetrator to conviction. I am curious: what is behind your efforts to bring him to justice? What are you striving for? Why do you think bringing him to conviction is so important that it has brought you to appear in court with such bravery? Is it the same thing that has supported many other women who appear in court?

You mentioned about ‘people staring’, which you called the ‘Ghost’. The ‘Ghost’ makes you feel that you have no wisdom and need to protect yourself against others. You spoke of how you don’t like ‘Ghost’ because you strive for ‘Peacefulness’ – the peace in relationships with others. You mentioned that you have used ‘endurance’ in striving for peacefulness. You also mentioned that, if you did not endure, your
After the two members read out the therapeutic letters, I invited Fanny to an interview about ‘Uselessness’. Previously, Fanny had said that losing the case in court, despite that she had made the greatest effort, had shaped her identity of failure, and a strong sense of guilt and indebtedness to those who had helped her. She had repeatedly and critically rehashed her performance in court, for example, feeling that she spoke too much and admitted weaknesses, and concluded that it was her ‘poor ability’ which failed to convict the perpetrator. She had also compared herself to another group member who won her case, saying that there was a huge difference between winning and losing. I began the interview with Fanny by asking what she wanted in going to court: what were the values that persuaded her that the perpetrator was wrong and she wanted to do something about it? We also explored the effect of this speaking out about the perpetrator.

In response, Fanny spoke about the cultural idea that men have to be accountable to their ancestors for their wrongdoings. She opined that, because she had taken the perpetrator to court, he would now not be able to easily face his ancestors (even though he was not convicted). This was a positive effect that her actions had accomplished. Fanny was then invited to name the value/intention of going to court, and she called this ‘Justice’.

I then asked Fanny what she thought about other women who stand up in court, and what kind of thinking supports their decision to do so. Again, she said that this was also to do with ‘Justice’ – the same intention as hers. This brought a connection between Fanny’s actions and those other women. I then asked the following questions:

- How might your experience help other women who will need to attend court, even though you did not get the result that you wanted?
- What advice would you give to these other women?
- What are some tips to deal with the court?
- What are some skills and knowledges that have helped you get through the ordeal?

**DOCUMENTING ‘TIPS OF DEALING WITH THE COURT’**

Fanny, together with the member who won her case, then identified certain tips that would help and could be shared with other women who attend court. We collectively produced the following letter, titled ‘To you who are striving for Justice’.

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**To you who are striving for ‘Justice’**

‘Justice’ is supporting you to appear in court.

Here are the ‘tips’ shared by those who have gone through court:

Report to the police as soon as possible after the violent incident.

Before appearing in court:

- Feeling unsafe and uncertain is normal and expected.
- Talk to those who have had similar experiences and social workers to understand more about the court situation.
When appearing in court:

- Never admit your weaknesses to prevent queries on your personal integrity by the defendant.
- Always stick to the statement that was given, because in telling more you will be challenged.
- Understand that there will be many questions that you are unprepared to answer, or which are also not easy to answer. Face them with calmness and wisdom.

Whether you succeed or fail to convict the perpetrator, what you have done has expressed your dissatisfaction and your strong will to seek ‘Justice’. You are also providing powerful support to other women, because if all women were controlled by ‘Uselessness’, ‘Shame’, ‘My fault’, ‘Guilt’, ‘My responsibility’, and ‘Self-hate’, the perpetrators would be able to get away with what they did, and continue to abuse other women, and society will continue to individualise sexual violence, and consider that it is the ‘fault’ of individual women, thus hiding the fact that it has always been society who has let this happen.

The collaboration between these two women to put this document together acknowledged the values of appearing in court irrespective of the result. A hard copy of the letter was given to each member in the next session.

Interviewing ‘Uselessness’

The therapeutic letter served not only to acknowledge Fanny’s struggles after the rape incidents; it also opened up a dialogue on ‘Uselessness’ which led to the construction of a story about struggling against it. In the letter, I mentioned my curiosity about ‘Uselessness’ which Fanny had described so strongly. I announced to the group that I was lucky to have talked to ‘Uselessness’ the night before and asked it a lot of questions, and that I invited ‘Uselessness’ to the group because all of the members had become quite familiar with it – perhaps they would like to find out more about it.

The following collective externalising interview was designed to reveal the deceit, control, sources of power, and the tricks and opponents of ‘Uselessness’. The interview script is included below. For more on this interviewing approach, see Sliep (1998), Wingard (1998, 2010).

1) **What is your name?**
   My name is ‘Uselessness’. I have other names too. You can also call me ‘no gui yung’ (no darn use), ‘no confidence’, ‘no ability’, ‘no wisdom’. Some of my friends call me ‘king mo yung’ (absolutely no use).

2) **How old are you?**
   I have existed for many, many years, right from the beginning of Chinese history when there were men and women, when there was sexual assault. I have a long life!

3) **Where do you come from?**
   I am everywhere.

4) **What is the size of your body?**
   My size changes when I am with different women who were sexually abused. I can be very big, as big as the women themselves. I can cover her whole body. I can be very small, but I don’t like to be small.

5) **Are you by yourself or do you have company?**
   I am, of course, not alone. I have a lot of company. I have friends with different names. They are ‘Shame’, ‘My fault’, ‘My responsibility’, ‘Hate myself’. They are all my friends, my good friends, and we do more or less the same things to women. All of us affect women who were sexually abused. Together, we are a powerful group.

6) **Who do you like to be with?**
   I love to be with women who were sexually abused. I’m crazy about them.

7) **What are the ages and backgrounds of those women?**
   Sexual violence happens to women of any age and background. So, it doesn’t matter as long as she likes me and lets me stay with her.

8) **Who do you hang around the most?**
   I love to hang around with those who believe in me the most. The more she believes in me, the more I hang out with her. My preference is those
who do not speak to other people, isolate themselves after the assault, and those who always mention my name to themselves. I am so happy that they always miss me and come to me many times a day. They come to me when they work, when they eat, when they relax, whey they sleep and even when they go to the bathroom. I am so happy that they love to be with me so much. How could I not love her when she loves me that much?

9) Why?
They love me so much. They won’t reject me. It makes me feel so powerful. I would have never thought that I could be that powerful. My name is ‘Uselessness’ but I am very useful, very powerful! Isn’t that amazing?

10) Why do you love to stay with these women?
[becoming boastful:] I control their lives. You better believe it. I become the master of their lives. In everything they do, they’ll think about me first and that would change their way of thinking. When they want to be happy, I appear and they will feel bad, down, and sad. Say, when they interact with others, they think of me. Everywhere they go, they bring me along. I have travelled to many places together with them. It’s wonderful, isn’t it? I hold them fast and won’t let them go. They won’t be able to get away from me. They shouldn’t even think about doing that.

11) How do you feel when you hang out with them?
I mentioned that already. You are so stupid! I feel powerful and that makes me happy. The worse they feel, the more powerful I feel. Ha ha ha.

12) When are you most happy to see them?
I love to see them isolating themselves, not talking to others about sexual violence, avoiding meeting people, doing things that make them happy, you know, doing things that make them challenge my existence.

13) What do you dislike most about them?
I hate it when they challenge me by asking questions about my existence, my power.

14) I do suspect that you have some mission in this world? What are some of the stuff that you do?
Ha, maybe you are clever after all. I do have an important mission – to make women who were sexually abused feel shameful and blame themselves, make women criticise each other, make them think that those who were sexually abused are close friends of mine.

15) What are your goals?
To make women who were sexually abused shut up. Shut up!

16) Who are the people that you work for?
I have many bosses. My number one/big boss are the perpetrators. When women shut up, these guys are safe. When women shut up, the perpetrators can carry on assaulting women without consequences. It’s good. I feel powerful when I control these women, and the perpetrators get what they want. I love my bosses.

17) Any others?
Yeah, a lot of people love me when I serve them. I serve the courts and the people involved, including the lawyers and the police. When a case is lost, I am with these women and I make them think that they are responsible. I told them that they have not done their best for a successful case. The court and everyone involved are happy because now they have no responsibility. It’s only because women stay with me – ‘Uselessness’.

18) Any others?
Are you interrogating me? I won’t tell you. Well, yes, I can tell you that society is also my boss. Isn’t it great? I serve the whole society. When women shut up, society doesn’t have to pay attention to the issue of sexual assault. They can blame these women for causing sexual assault and society has nothing to do with it. In this way, they can hide the fact that it is them who have allowed this to happen to women. They tell women that they have to protect themselves, they have to avoid seemingly dangerous situations. They spread ideas about women and girls who have been sexually abused so that it appears that the women and girls asked for it. I serve this boss well. In making women shut up, society does not have to do anything to help women who are abused or to help any women at all. Society uses me to let women blame themselves and also let others blame them.

19) What are the ways you use to achieve success?
I, of course, have a lot of tricks. I cling to the women and let them feel my presence in whatever they do. If they are unable to go to court, I let them
feel my presence. If they can go to court, I let them feel they must fail. If they fail, I let them think that they are responsible. Aren’t I clever?

20) Any other means?
I isolate them from others. I take them away from friends. I take away their self-worth. I take away their confidence, their competence. I tell lies that they have done nothing to help themselves, and they are not effectively helping themselves. I tell lies that they have the choice to let go of the sexual abuse. They can’t because they are weak and so they are responsible for it. I make them blame themselves. Ha ha, they don’t know that it’s me who is fooling them. They won’t be able to get away. They don’t have the choice to let go as long as I am here. I love it. They even blame themselves for not being able to let go!

21) If you are not sufficiently powerful by yourself, what do you do?
Remember I have many good friends. I shall call upon them – ‘Shame’, ‘My fault’, ‘My responsibility’, ‘Hate myself’. They are all very powerful. Sometimes, one of them is more powerful than the others. Sometimes, all of them are powerful. We, together, will make women feel that they are the worst, the most incompetent among all women who were sexually abused.

22) Are you always successful? Always filled with power?
I am successful and powerful most of the time. I am happy most of the time. [At this point ‘Uselessness’ is speaking just a little quieter]

23) So, are you always happy?
I am very sad to say that I am not always happy. I don’t like that. I don’t want to talk about it.

24) When are you less successful or less happy?
When the women start to query and challenge me. [Uselessness’s tone is now very low and sad]

25) What are you most unhappy to see these women doing?
I hate it when they talk to others about me. I don’t like it when women who were sexually abused come together to talk about me, or about me and my bosses. I hate it when they talk about the lies I tell, my tricks, my intentions, and my friends and their ways. I hate it when they go to places like RainLily for counselling. I hate RainLily. I hate the counsellors. I hate the social workers. I hate people who help these women.

26) Why?
When they start the conversation about me, it is very likely that they notice what I have been doing to them and other women. They no longer will allow me to stay with them. They will get rid of me. I have to leave them. [sobbing]

27) What is your greatest fear?
I am most fearful of more and more women who were sexually abused coming together to talk about me. If they talk to others about my tricks, my intentions, my friends and my bosses, I won’t be able to live much longer. I will just die away.

28) Do you have ways to stop them?
I have tried hard to think about ways to stop them from leaving me. I try to make them think that it is of no use to see other women who were also sexually abused. I make it as difficult as I can for them to see each other. I make them feel uncomfortable when talking in the groups. But sometimes it doesn’t work.

29) What if they are determined to get rid of you?
What will you do?
I will try hard, I will try hard, I will try my very hardest … I am worried that I may have to leave.

30) How long do you think you will live?
Don’t ask me this kind of stupid question. ‘Uselessness’ lives forever!

DOCUMENT ABOUT ‘USELESSNESS’
A discussion followed this group interview of ‘Uselessness’. For the first time, Fanny smiled at the humorous conversations and began to propose other ways in which women can escape the treacheries of ‘Uselessness’ that had not been mentioned during the interview. There was laughter in the group as we documented the tactics of ‘Uselessness’ and the ways in which women respond. Together, they collated ‘The book on “Uselessness”’. 
The book on ‘Uselessness’

Chapter one: The tricks of ‘Uselessness’

It is everywhere – Its name is ‘Ghost’.
Has the support of many friends, who are ‘Shame’, ‘My fault’, ‘My responsibility’, and ‘Self-hate’.
Makes you feel stupid, very stupid, and shameful.
Makes you feel responsible: ‘It’s all your fault!’
Makes you avoid people: ‘Tells you to hide!’
Makes you afraid of letting others know that you are useless, not knowing what they would think about you as a useless person.
Makes you want to beat yourself up.
Makes you think that everyone knows that you are useless.
Makes you feel that you don’t deserve to be helped.
Makes you think that you are not worthy.
Makes you think that there is no need to tell anyone else because no-one would help you.
Makes you think that you deserved it: ‘You are the problem!’
Makes you think that ‘the TV stories are normal, but you are not’.
Makes you think that ‘what the shows tell is real; so you avoid watching the shows, as you would feel beaten down!’
Makes you think that no-one would believe in you.
Makes you think that you are ‘useless’ because receiving letters from court puts you in fear.
Makes you think that you are ‘useless’ because you are scared to watch the news and any images related to sexual violence.
Makes you think that avoidance does not work; you cannot leave the social world unless you go into the deep mountains.

Chapter two: Ways in which women escape the treacheries of ‘Uselessness’

Confidence and courage.
When women act with dignity.
When many people gather to discuss about it, and the negative aspects of it.
Groups, collectives.
RainLily, and other organisations that work against sexual violence.
When women tell themselves that ‘It is not my fault!’
When women tell themselves, ‘Don’t go down so easily!’
When women tell themselves, ‘Hope that the perpetrator will be punished by the law!’
When women tell themselves that ‘Not watching images and news related to sexual violence doesn’t mean that I am coward!’
When women tell themselves that ‘I have the right to choose to be happy!’
When women challenge the idea that ‘Not watching sexually violent content is avoidance’.
When women draw the ‘Tree of Life’.
When women publish information to help other victims.
When women suggest publications to remind the public to protect children from sexual abuse.

A hard copy of ‘The book on “Uselessness”’ was given to each member in the following session.

SESSION FIVE – SOCIAL DISCOURSES ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE

After the group drew the ‘Tree of Life’, worked out the ‘tips on dealing with the court’, and created ‘The Book on “Uselessness”’, there was an increasing sense of empowerment among the members and I felt that they were now ready to challenge the social construction of sexual violence. Questions were adapted and revised from McPhie &
Chaffey’s work (1999). The group discussed the following:

**Identifying the social discourses of sexual violence**
- What are some of the ideas that people have about women and girls who have been sexually abused?
- How might these ideas affect sexual violence victims?
- How might these affect all women?
- Which of these ideas have troubled you the most?
- Have you heard about what people say about perpetrators who sexually abuse women?
- What have you heard about women who have experienced sexual assault?

**The social construction of discourses and power**
- How did you get this idea?
- Who encouraged this idea?
- How did they lead you into believing this?
- Who benefits when this belief pushes you around?

**Externalising**
- Give a name to this trick
- Talking to the trick
- Identifying the effects of the trick – confusion, guilt, self-hate
- Identifying the power and fear of the trick

**Identifying unique outcomes**
- Are there times that you break from the tricks and lies?
- Are there times that you doubt this trick?
- What kinds of things have you done to step away from the tricks?

After this discussion, the social discourses and their effects, their tricks in Chinese society, and the treacheries, were documented in a four-page booklet titled ‘The deceit of customary views on sexual violence victims’.

**THE DECEIT OF CUSTOMARY VIEWS ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE VICTIMS**

**How do people view female sexual violence victims?**
- Well, she didn’t say anything.
- She must have some personal issues.
- She is promiscuous.
- She caused it.
- She wears skimpy clothing/teases men by wearing skimpy clothing.
- She is careless.
- She always drinks too much.
- She took part in it.
- Didn’t she also want to do it?
- She is in fear, worried, and regrets that she accused the abuser.
- She wants revenge/or wants to slander the man after they have had a disagreement.
- She deserved it.
- She is too naïve to tell right from wrong.
- She is ‘bad’.
- Her family does not take care of her.
- Her family won’t support her.
- She doesn’t deserve genuine care by others.

They are responsible for the violence and should not be forgiven.

**What are the effects of these views on the victims?**
- Not fair to them
- Refrains them from telling others
- Discourages them from reporting to the police
- Takes away their confidence
- Makes them think that they are wrong
- Causes them to think that sex is dirty
- Causes them to suffer
- Causes self-criticism
- Causes self-doubt

**What are the effects of these views on all women?**
- Will dress to cover most parts of their bodies
- On alert all the time
- Will not fall asleep on public transport
- Will walk with caution
- Keep silent after being sexually violated because a woman could be reprimanded when she speaks up
- Will keep everyone quiet to avoid trouble
- Cause self-doubt
What do people think about the perpetrators?

- He is not that type of person (who would abuse).
- He doesn’t look like (an abuser).
- He is innocent.
- He was only wrong because he could not control himself.
- Men cannot control their sexual impulses.
- He thought that the woman also wanted it.
- When women say ‘no’, it means ‘yes’.
- He failed to save the relationship.
- He was only being impulsive.

They are not responsible. If it was their fault, they have reasons to be forgiven.

Who are these views serving? Who benefits from these views?

- Perpetrators
- Government – there is no need to do anything
- Public institutions – there is no need to do anything

The sources of ‘Customary Views’

- Law courts that accept letters of appeal for the perpetrators
- Traditional ways of thinking – feudal ideas
- Mass media
- School

The tactics of ‘Customary Views’

- Showing up from time to time
- Many people talking about it
- Women criticising women
- Passing from one generation to the next generation
- Court procedures and judgement

The impacts of ‘Customary Views’ on sexual violence victims

- Unable to hold your head up high
- Low self-worth
- Poor sense of security
- Struggle, self-doubt

Experiences that challenge ‘Customary Views’

- Back to the basics – believing that it is not your responsibility, it is not your fault
- Many people saying the opposite
- Acting with dignity
- Revealing the tactics of ‘public judgement’
- Collecting evidence to demystify dominant discourses such as those about male sexuality
- Demand for public support for victims

‘Customary views’ are what Wade (2007) calls the ‘oldspeak’ about sexual violence in our society and culture. Exposing the oldspiek and tracing the social discourses on sexual violence in one’s personal history and the history of the culture can pave the way to challenging it. What people have said about women who were sexually abused and those who have sexually abused women, have become part of the broader culture and attained the status of ‘absolute truth’, or ‘common sense’, which is passed on from generation to generation through language, institution, and common practice. During the group session, the members were able to identify how and from whom they got these ideas. Externalising them was not difficult at all. After naming ‘the Customary Views’, they were able to identify their effects, who benefits when these beliefs push them/all women around, and some ways in which women challenge these customary views.

SESSION SIX – CHALLENGING SECRECY, DOCUMENTATION, AND DEFINITIONAL CEREMONY

Throughout the first five sessions, a theme emerged: how women decide not to tell anyone about the rape. The fear of revelation was particularly centred on how others would judge a woman who had experienced rape, and that ‘it would not help to say anything’. This burden of secrecy was enormous. In this last session, I asked questions to help identify ways in which the effects of secrecy could be challenged, feedback from the group was solicited, and all the documents we had produced along the way were presented to the group. This was followed by a definitional ceremony (White, 2007).
The idea of challenging secrecy was borrowed from Cecily (1998), and McPhie & Chaffey (1999). As a group we discussed the following:

**Leaving behind the burdens of secrecy**

- How do families and society encourage secrecy, especially in children?
- How do society/families react to anyone who doesn’t play the secrecy game?
- Who benefits from secrecy?
- Have there been times when secrecy has burdened your life? For example, what habits has secrecy recruited you into?
- Who has encouraged secrecy in your life and how? For example, by isolating you, or setting you up so that you feel that you are unable to talk to those who are closest to you.
- What kind of fears support secrecy?

**Challenging secrecy**

- Think of a time when secrecy didn’t ‘steal your voice’.
- What does it tell you about yourself that you stood up to secrecy on this occasion?
- What one thing would be different about how you treat or think about yourself if you weren’t weighed down by the burden of secrecy?

When invited to recall memories about secrecy during childhood, one member mentioned that she was asked not to talk about the poverty that her family experienced. It was shameful to let others know about these issues and she was reminded by her parents not to say anything. Another member shared her experiences during puberty when she was told not to talk about menstruation, wearing a bra, and body shape. Families and society encourage secrecy through shame and blame – for example, being looked down upon because of poverty and mocked as ‘sexually open’ when topics on sexuality are discussed. Although these secrets were not a great burden to them during childhood, the women were able to relate to feelings of unease, fear, and discomfort with having to tell lies. The group used ‘wearing clothes’ as an analogy for keeping a secret: ‘we cannot be naked and the secret is not to be revealed’. The women also said that keeping a secret, like sexual violence, is a great burden which steals their voices and is an injustice. Secrecy benefits the perpetrators, and society as a whole, including the police, court, and other public institutions, which can then continue to keep silent about sexual violence. Skills and tactics to challenge secrecy were identified, including helping others, not feeling alone by meeting up with other sexual violence victims, reporting to the police, acting as witnesses in court, being brave, and believing that they had done no wrong.

When one member raised secrecy with regards to the female body and sexuality, this exposed a whole new area of concerns that are very much gendered. A linkage was forged with sexual violence: something that happened to our bodies. Many topics considered to be guarded by secrecy such as sexual experiences in marriage were shared in the discussion that followed.

Challenging secrecy also opened up a significant conversation about one’s past experiences. For the first time, a member shared that she was sexually violated on the street when she was fifteen. She said she had acted in a straightforward manner: she followed the perpetrator and when she saw the police, she reported him. She appeared in court and the perpetrator was convicted. It was a significant experience of challenging secrecy. I asked what this experience told her about what she stood for. She said ‘Justice’, and she had always sought justice with determination – and that there was a link between this experience and her going to court in the near future, which was also informed by justice. I then shared the story of Cecily (1998) who had marked the one year anniversary of her experience of rape with a ritual dinner with her friends in which she openly celebrated her survival. The group members said they found this amazing, and one member said that as a result of hearing this story she may now try to tell some of her friends who she trusts about her own stories.

**REFLECTIONS ON THE GROUP**

In order to explore how the members considered these group sessions, they were invited to share their feelings about the group: what they found helpful, and not very helpful. As it turned out, these reflections were a wonderful part of the journey with each of them telling their stories of the treasures
they had discovered in the group. One member shared that the group had allowed her to reflect upon and take in different ideas with regards to sexual violence which gave her the incentive to seek justice. Other members shared their observation of the changes in each other. One member, for the first time ever, revealed that she was raped as a child. She had not told anyone and compartmentalised the experience in ‘another place’ which was separated from all of her other experiences including the recent rape, and she had not mentioned it to her counsellor. To her great surprise, she found that not only could she face the recent rape, but also the childhood incident. While she did not expect that the guilt and self-hate about both the childhood and recent sexual violence incidents could be resolved by attending the group, she had discovered that they had been. This revealed the power of deconstructing dominant social discourses of sexual violence.

The sharing of accounts of childhood sexual violence by two more members further challenged secrecy. As we revisited the topic of child sexual abuse, this time it was spoken about differently. It was not only a unique trauma that was experienced by the one member who had spoken about this at the outset. This group member had always thought that childhood sexual abuse had only happened to her, or perhaps the worst was that very few women had ever experienced it. When it was revealed that three out of the six members in our group had experienced childhood or adolescence abuse, everyone agreed that it had happened to many women and that many children are going through it now. Child sexual abuse as a secret was therefore discussed and challenged.

As you can tell, challenging secrecy proved to be an extremely significant theme. It was not until this last session when secrecy was the focus that members revealed their early experiences of sexual violence. Doing so in the last group session also served to strengthen the determination to speak to others, including women who had experienced sexual violence, other women, and various public institutions.

Near the end of the session before the definitional ceremony, members were invited to extend and expand upon the list of ‘today’s hopes’ that we had created in the first session. Their new hopes, including ‘forgetting about the past, facing the future with courage’, ‘serving justice to the perpetrator’, and ‘regaining confidence and being happy with oneself’ were honoured. A definitional ceremony was conducted at the end of the session, which signified the transformation of their identity from being a ‘victim’ to ‘survivor’ who can exercise personal agency against ‘Uselessness’ and ‘Customary Views’. The group also decided that their idea of a survivor was someone who also contributed to the lives of others by speaking to them about their experiences. As part of the definitional ceremony, I handed out certificates to all participants:

**Certificate of a survivor**

*This is to certify that*

______________________________

*has survived*

‘Uselessness’ and other forms of self-destruction


______________________________

6 November 2010

**REFLECTIONS ON COLLECTIVE NARRATIVE PRACTICE WITH RAPE SURVIVORS**

The goals of this project have been largely achieved. The group enriched each other’s stories with their questions, feedback, and support, and new identity conclusions emerged in the group as an appreciation of their competencies was reclaimed and their intentions and values were revealed. Along the journey, the women exhibited particular knowledges and skills which help them, and can contribute to the lives of others. There were also people who have given the women support after the incidents that they wanted to acknowledge. There were also people who they wanted to share their concerns with – not only for themselves, but also on behalf of other victims.
In addition to eliciting and supporting personal agency, broader cultural understandings and constructions were exposed and deconstructed. The power of dominant discourses was revealed and challenged. Collective work was effective in this regard as, eventually, subjectivities shaped by discourses of ‘the misfortune of an individual’ were shifted to those of survivors amidst injustice.

Linking individuals to a collective can make individual and social action more possible. This is by no means easy, however, particularly when social discourses and practices not only affect the women in the group, but also their family members and friends. One participant was constantly under pressure because her husband kept complaining about her visits to RainLily and her participation in the group. This has led me to wonder if, in the future, her husband could be invited as an outsider witness in an interview with her about her intentions and hopes for her family. Another member indicated her concerns about her future marriage when she was told that childhood sexual abuse had affected one group member’s marriage, contributing to her divorce and poor relationships with her daughters. After discussing the operations of social discourses about sexual violence victims and perpetrators, these women became more aware of these discourses’ oppressive effects on women, and were ready to challenge them. However, they live in a world where women’s chastity is honoured and dominant understandings of rape imply immorality and that the wrongdoing lies with the victims. It is in such a social context that these women will continue to meet for support, and speak to other women victims, the various institutions, and society at large.

The sequencing of the content of this group always involved choices. The readiness and the mood of the group were taken into consideration, but it was always what stood out from the narratives and dialogues in one session that informed what was next discussed. I believe that effective collective narrative practice is informed by the group involved and that the facilitator has to travel along the journey together with the participants.

Lastly, it is my privilege to have had this opportunity to work with participants in this journey of regaining a sense of power. As a Chinese middle-aged woman, I share the same culture with the participants and I am in their age range. I spoke to them as a counsellor, an educated professional who identifies as a feminist, and social activist. These positions certainly influence my stances towards sexual violence and the way that I relate to women who have experienced rape. And the contributions of the women in this group will certainly influence my future work and the ways I understand my life as a Chinese woman.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to the women who have shared with the group their wisdom of surviving sexual violence. I would also like to acknowledge Arnie, social worker of RainLily, and other counsellors of the organisation who have granted me the privilege to work together with them. I must also thank Susan Stevens who spent her valuable time to read and give suggestions to improve this paper, particularly during a challenging time of devastating flooding in Queensland. Last but not least, without the encouragement and support from Sekneh Beckett, Cheryl White and David Denborough, I would not be able to publish this paper. Thanks to you all.

NOTES

1. Alongside the work described in this paper, a research project took place. From late 2009 to early 2010, twenty-two women were interviewed. The major objective of the research was to assess perceived secondary victimisation – that is, the degree that these women had experienced painful incidents with various community systems. The research findings reveal that the women suffered from secondary victimisation caused by the responses of various community systems including social welfare, medical, and legal systems. They shared in common feelings of distress and hurt, self-doubt, sadness, and self-blame caused by sexual violence and queries about whether the sexual violence was ‘real’ or made up due to other motivations such as revenge, attention-seeking, or threatening the male perpetrator for various gains. For more information about this research project, please contact the author.

2. The names of the persons I worked with have been changed for the purposes of this paper to protect their confidentiality and privacy.

3. There were some other complexities in the outsider-witness responses. In Chinese culture, as in many other cultures, it is common in a group context to make judgments and give advice. Preparing group members to be outsider-witnesses is therefore a significant task. It is also vital for the facilitator to be influential during these retellings, to ask questions to
link the outsider-witnesses’ responses back to the relevant categories (White, 2007). Despite the preparations I had made, and my efforts to be influential in the re-tellings, one outsider-witness directly commented on Fanny’s ‘problem of not letting go’. The idea of ‘letting go’ to heal oneself is dominant in the Chinese cultural context. We are socialised into discourses that encourage the releasing of anger and suffering by appealing to a higher level of meaning about each individual life. This way of self-healing, however, does not attend to justice and can have different implications for men and for women. It can also have specific implications for those who have been subject to sexual violence. The cultural discourse of ‘letting go’ can be victimising because according to this understanding, there is a choice in the hand of victims – to forgive and let go or not to do so. As a facilitator, I believe it is important to find ways that these complexities of cultural messages are articulated and revealed within group discussions (see also Verco, 2002).

REFERENCES


