Conversations with divorced parents:

Disarming the conflict and developing skills of collaboration

by Anne Kathrine Løge

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Parents who have divorced often experience conflict-saturated accounts of each other and their relationship. This paper shares some narrative approaches which seek to help divorced parents 'disarm the conflict' and develop skills of collaboration. This work involves exploring each parent's preferred values and purposes with linguagrams, inviting divorced parents to act as outsider witnesses for each other, and inviting in other divorced parents to act as outsider witnesses for the parents seeking therapy.

Keywords: parents, divorce, conflict, outsider witness practices, linguagrams, narrative practice

In my work as a counsellor, I often meet with parents after they have divorced and are seeking assistance to deal with conflict related to the co-parenting of their children. Most of these parents are in significant conflict with each other, and their relationships may have developed a character of hostility, distrust, and aggression. This paper describes ways of enabling collaborative conversations between parents after divorce. This process involves 'disarming the conflict' and enabling the development of skills of collaboration.

DISCURSIVE POSITIONING

Michel Foucault sought to de-centre the position of the individual as 'the creative force of society and history' and proposed instead a view of personal subjectivity as constantly in the process of negotiation with the discursive context in which we live[1]. John Winslade (2003) has taken up this concept on a local level in his descriptions of 'discursive positioning'. He describes the ways in which people take up positions in relation to discourse[2] in the very moment of making utterances in conversation.

In my meetings with parents who are in conflict, I often witness one person taking up a discursive position of verbally 'assaulting' the other, which then invites the other to defend him/herself, and invites the counsellor to evaluate them both and to develop a solution to the problem. Parents who are caught up in a prolonged conflict have also often formed an internalised and blaming description of the other. The dominant narrative shaping their interactions will often be that 'the other is to blame'.

Positioned in a combative discourse, parents often expect the problem to be solved by the counsellor. This expectation is built on the idea that when conflict occurs, the attainment of the interests of one party is incompatible with the interest of the other party. The parties seek to defend competing interests and to undermine the position of the other. Conflicts are understood to occur when individual interests are not being met.

In this context, many parents are worried about what our conversations together will be like. Previous efforts to talk with one another to find solutions to their problems have often resulted in humiliation. Despite this, in many therapy contexts, most parents are invited to a common meeting without any prior preparatory conversations with the counsellor. It seems hardly surprising that the result is often further conflict.

REPLACING A PROBLEM-FOCUSED APPROACH WITH A NARRATIVE APPROACH

When meeting with two people who are displaying significant hostility towards each other, I know from past experience as a counsellor and mediator that a problem-focused approach can invite me to believe that problems are personal, to start wondering who is right and who is wrong, and to start seeking out what is the 'true story'. In the past I have found myself narrowing my task to one of 'moderating' or 'balancing' what is seen to be a dispute about different interests.

This thinking contrasts with a poststructuralist approach that suggests there is no single definable reality. Rather, there is a great diversity of ways in which we make meaning of the events of our lives, and it is inevitable that differences will result from this diversity. From a narrative perspective, it is possible to understand conflict as an almost inevitable outcome of diversity, rather than as the result of the expression of individual divergent personal interests. In summary, conflict is likely because people do not have direct access to the truth of any situation. Rather, we always view things from a perspective, from a cultural position (Winslade & Monk, 2001).

As counsellor/mediator, if I step into a position of 'balancing a dispute', then I become concerned with 'facts, interests, and solutions' rather than the way parents are making meaning of the events of their lives through story-making. If I ignore the realm of meaning-making, my ability to create a context for the deconstruction of dominant stories will decrease. If I further replicate the dominant story-line of 'incompatible interests', the result might inadvertently be to give the parents further experiences of insecurity, resentment, and/or distrust.

In the beginning of 2005, determined to generate an alternative way of working, I asked my colleagues to refer to me divorced parents who were currently in conflict in relation to the parenting of their children. Through our work together, a way of using narrative ideas to disarm the conflict and to develop skills of collaboration has been developed. Here I will describe in some detail the conversations that have taken place with two parents, Solveig and Robert.

THE STORY OF SOLVEIG AND ROBERT

Here I wish to tell a story about Solveig and Robert, and I first want to give my heartfelt thanks to them for their contributions to my work and for their permission to share some of their experiences.

Solveig is the mother and Robert is the father of three boys: Tor, who is twelve years old, and the twins, Jan and Erik, who are ten years old. Solveig has the primary care for the children, and Robert has them to stay with him every second weekend.

The couple divorced half a year after the twins were born (nine-and-a-half years ago). Solveig has not remarried nor re-partnered. Robert is now married to Marit and they have a common child, Tiril, who is one year old. The families live in two different villages in the south of Norway.

Robert approached The Family Counselling Office where I work, wanting a meeting with one of the counsellors, together with Solveig. He said that he was worried about the care of the children, and his proposal was that he should take over as the primary carer for the boys.

In this first meeting, Solveig and Robert richly described the dominant conflict stories to the counsellor. The stories had developed a character of hostility and suspicion, and they both had an internalised, blaming description of the other. This dominant discourse affected the positioning of the parents to each other, to the extent that they listened to each other and to the counsellor, and it affected which events were being storied in their descriptions of the conflict. Neither the parents nor the counsellor were very happy about this first meeting. The parents were asked if they wanted to consult with me, and they both indicated that they wanted to give it another try.

PREPARATORY WORK AND TRANSPARENCY

My first interaction with Solveig and Robert was through an invitation letter that I sent to them both. My intention was to be transparent about my own work and the ideas that inform it. The main principles I outlined in this letter included:

- The person is not the problem, the problem is the problem.
- The parents are the 'experts' of their own lives.
- My intention to work towards further developing my own counselling skills with divorced parents.
- My purpose to explore the parents' knowledges and skills, and to hear about their intentions, values, hopes, dreams, and commitments.

In this letter, I emphasised that the conversations would be focused on developing skills of collaboration between the parents, and not on negotiations regarding a written agreement about parenting arrangements. I also mentioned my understandings about confidentiality, and introduced the idea of using outsider witnesses (Russell & Carey, 2004; White, 2000) and videotaping in our work together. After some days, I called both of them. They had no questions about the letter and they both wanted to attend an initial conversation. I invited them to a common meeting and emphasised that the purpose would be to negotiate the structure of our conversations.

During this first meeting, they both told me that they wanted to separate themselves from the conflict stories and that they wanted to keep the focus of our sessions on how to collaborate, and not to simply negotiate another written parenting agreement. We then discussed whether we would have common or separate conversations. Robert and Solveig's previous disputes had made it difficult for them to talk freely in front of each other and, as such, discursive positioning might affect what they felt they could – and couldn't – say in a common meeting. I explained that I had found separate meetings – at least initially – provided a way to interrupt conflict, and for me to be able to build trust with each person. Both Solveig and Robert wanted to start with separate conversations, and I made three appointments with each of them.

I also informed them that I regard it as my responsibility to structure later joint conversations in ways that would limit the possibility of conflict during the sessions. To this end, I introduced the idea of the outsider witness. I proposed that our later joint conversations would be structured with me interviewing one of them, while the other acted as an outsider witness to this conversation. Finally, I asked whether they were interested in receiving letters from me, instead of me writing formal case notes. They both agreed to these proposals.

'DISARMING THE CONFLICT'[3] – INDIVIDUAL CONVERSATIONS

Trying to practice in a de-centred way (Morgan, 2006; White, 1997), I re-emphasised that my interest

was to help identify what both of them wanted in their lives as parents, to determine their preferred ways of interacting with themselves and others, and to assist them to reconnect with their own skills and knowledges about this.

In our initial meeting, Solveig and Robert had both stressed that they didn't want to bring the children to these conversations before they were feeling more comfortable in relation to each other. Instead, I invited both of them to bring pictures of their children to the future meetings I was to have with them. Robert and Solveig brought a lot of pictures to these individual meetings, and they introduced me in tender ways to the lives of their boys. With a great sense of caring, pride, and respectfulness, they both let me know their boys as active and creative children.

After these heartfelt presentations, I had no worry about the daily care of the children. I also checked out that the children were not being subjected to abuse/ trauma as a result of the parents' problems. The boys related loyally to both parents, but the conflict was clearly having an influence on them. They were not saying anything about one parent to the other parent, and they were not contacting one parent when staying with the other.

After this, in our individual meetings, I invited both Robert and Solveig to give an account of what had brought things to the point of conflict that led to the consultation being sought. Narrative ways of working are based on the idea that people's lives and relationships are shaped by the stories they develop in order to give meaning to their experiences. Careful listening, then, involves hearing not just what has happened, but also what constructs are at work to make sense of what has happened. John Winslade and Gerald Monk have proposed the term 'discursive listening' to describe this process (Winslade & Monk, 2001). At the same time, it's important to listen for signs of what the person gives value to in spite of all that he or she has been through, which Michael White describes as 'doubly listening' (White, 2004).

For me, it's also important to show an attitude of gentle curiosity, wonder, and exploration. In this way, ordinary, everyday words are rendered exotic. Even 'taken-for-granted' subjects are of interest, and a process of 'un-packing' the ordinary renders more material available for meaning-making. It's my hope that this 'attitude of curiosity' might also help to loosen the certainty that 'one is right and the other is wrong'. In addition to these ideas, I think that the most important groundwork in 'disarming the conflict' is to enable the parents to realise that the other person and the problem are not the same thing.

EXTERNALISING CONVERSATIONS

Robert told me that he and Solveig had lived together for nine years before Solveig fell pregnant with Tor. He said, 'I didn't feel prepared to become a father'. They didn't talk much about their expectations with each other, and didn't exchange ideas about responsibility and values linked to parenthood. He said, 'I had a hard time in my relationship to Solveig', and, when the twins were born, 'There was nothing left of my good feelings for her'. He explained that what caused him 'enormous irritation' was all her 'mess and chaos'. He left the family when the twins were six months old and said that he didn't expect Solveig to become a decent parent for the children because of the 'mess and chaos'. I started to inquire about what the 'mess and chaos' had done to his way of thinking. He then introduced 'distrust' as a phenomenon that had influenced his relationship to Solveig through all these years.

In understanding problems as arising from discourse rather than from the expression of individual human 'behaviours' or 'needs', I have become drawn to a different way of speaking, that of 'externalising conversations' (White & Epston, 1990, Freedman & Combs 1996). Externalising problems help people to extricate themselves from an internalising logic and a close attachment to the conflict as an expression of who they or others 'are'. If the person and the problem come to be seen as one and the same, this can result in people feeling helpless to take action or can restrict them to actions that reinforce the problem.

As Robert and I negotiated an externalised name of the problem, he decided to call it 'Distrust'. He had already said that the Distrust started to influence his thoughts more than ten years ago, and, in this way, Distrust was put into a story-line. Robert told me that some of the effects of Distrust were 'irritation, anger, and a feeling of powerlessness'. He evaluated these effects as having a negative influence on his collaborative work as a parent, and in being an influential father. He said that this was not his preferred way of being a father, as he wanted to be

respected and acknowledged by Solveig. He added, 'I don't want my children to witness all this nagging and hassling between their parents'.

In telling her story of being a mother, Solveig told me about being left alone with the responsibility for the care of the children when Robert left the family. She talked about the great support she got from her own family, and from Robert's family as well. She had been working full-time all these years to support her children, and her own wish to start an education had never been fulfilled. She said, 'I often feel humiliated by Robert. He doesn't acknowledge my contribution as a mother, and he is blaming me for leaving the children too much to themselves when I'm at work'. She also said, 'I don't trust men any more and that's why I have stayed out of any new relationship with a man'.

After some negotiation, Solveig named the problem she was dealing with as 'Suspicion'. She told me that the effects of Suspicion were 'anxiety, self-blame, to avoid talks and meetings with Robert, and a sense of being chased by Robert'. She evaluated these effects and said that, 'I don't feel comfortable with them' and 'the anxiety and avoidance are isolating me and the boys from their father'. Her justification for these evaluations was 'as long as the children show confidence in me and they are well-valued by school, family, and friends, I should allow myself to estimate my own competence as a mother a little bit higher, and not think that I have anything to hide from their father'.

ENTRIES TO PREFERRED STORY-LINES

Narrative ways of practice include re-authoring conversations, based on the assumption that no one story can possibly encapsulate the totality of a person's experience. There will always be other story-lines from the events of our lives. Our identities are not single-storied – one story cannot sum us up (Russell & Carey, 2004).

And what are the points of entry to these alternative stories? Robert and Solveig both gave justifications or explanations of their evaluations of the effects of the problems on their lives. Justifications like these might be useful entry points. Other openings might have been 'unique outcomes' – a step they took which sits outside of the problem-saturated account. Another possible entry-point could be expressions of 'the absent but implicit' from these conflict-saturated stories (White, 2000).

In this case, Robert and Solveig's justifications described their interest in being acknowledged as 'good parents'. I wanted to explore this joint wish as a pathway to new story development. At this point, I introduced the idea of using 'linguagrams'[4] to explore in more detail the meanings Solveig and Robert give to the terms 'good mum', 'good dad', and 'good collaborative parent'. This process is discussed in more detail below.

KNOWLEDGES AND SKILLS

Michael White defines a 'skill' as *All those little everyday acts of life that have to do with the making of a living, with getting through the day, with the forging of an identity and with the fabricating of relationships – referred to as practical insider know how.* (White 2001, p.26). These practical skills of living also include problem-solving skills. These are historical and cultural products, as are all the knowledges about our lives:

> *The knowledges that we develop about our lives have much to do with what we give value to. Whatever it is that we accord value to in life provides for us a purpose in living, with a meaning for our lives and with a sense of how to proceed in life.* (White 2004, p.48)

When I introduced my intention to explore some of the other knowledges and skills that Solveig and Robert demonstrated in their lives, Robert commented, 'I hope you don't forget the problems!' I tried to assure him that these knowledges and skills we would be exploring might assist his problem-solving work. When Solveig and Robert had relayed their conflict-saturated stories, they told me no events of sharing experiences and expectations as parents, and gave no affirmation of the skills and knowledges of the other or of themselves as parents.

They shared the idea that 'collaboration is important and creates benefits for the children', but said they had never thought about what kind of knowledges and skills a person might invest in collaborative actions, or that each person might invest and develop different skills.

My focus was therefore to identify the knowledges and skills that Solveig and Robert had been putting

into action in their daily lives, and to thicken the description of these skills and knowledges and place them into story-lines associated with being a 'good father', 'good mother', and 'collaborative parent'.

PERSONAL AGENCY, INTENTIONAL STATES, AND LINGUAGRAMS

'Folk psychology', as described by Jerome Bruner (White, 2001, p.8):

> *Shapes our endeavour to come to terms with the unexpected in life, provides a basis for our efforts to address obstacles and crises, and makes it possible for us to come to terms with a range of predicaments and dilemmas that confront us in everyday life.*

Folk psychology is distinguished by the notion of personal agency, which casts people as active negotiators and representatives of their own knowledges and skills, who are attempting to live their lives according to certain intentions supported by values, beliefs, and commitments (White, 2001).

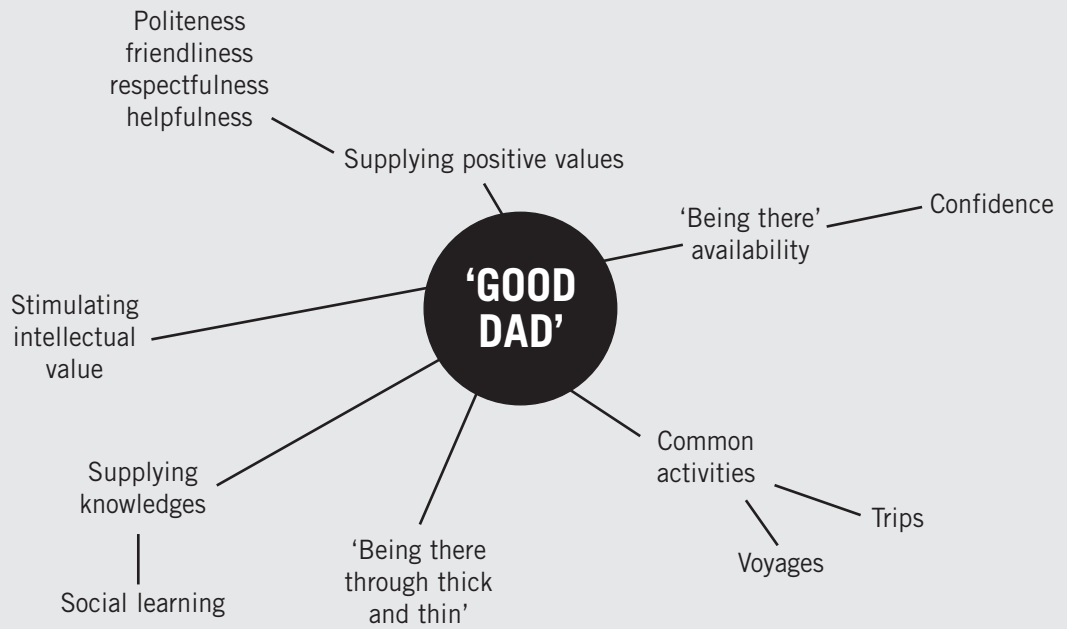
In their efforts to understand themselves as 'the good dad', 'the good mum', and 'the good collaborative parent', I think both Robert and Solveig put folk psychology into service. The tool we used to enable this was the linguagram. My use of the linguagram was influenced by Elspeth McAdam[4], who originally used the term 'mind-map' to describe a way to visually represent different concepts that emerge in consultations with people. The Norwegian counsellor, Tom Andersen (1995), later suggested the term 'linguagrams', which draws on Ludwig Wittgenstein's ideas about 'language games' and how the meaning of certain words change depending upon the contexts in which they are used. Linguagrams, as Elspeth McAdam (2001) describes, can be used to 'explore in detail the meanings, actions, emotions, moral orders and intentionality' (p.98) associated with significant words.

In order to investigate Robert's intentions, values, hopes, principles for living, and commitments, I asked him to use linguagrams to unpack their understandings of 'the good dad' and the 'good collaborative parent'. I used the same process with Solveig in relation to 'the good mother' and the 'good collaborative parent'.

ROBERT'S LINGUAGRAMS

While making a linguagram of 'the good dad', Robert told me that he never before had shared these thoughts with anyone. He and his wife, Marit, had talked about some principles of parenthood, but with no special focus on his ideas about being 'the good dad'.

ROBERT'S LINGUAGRAM OF THE 'GOOD DAD'



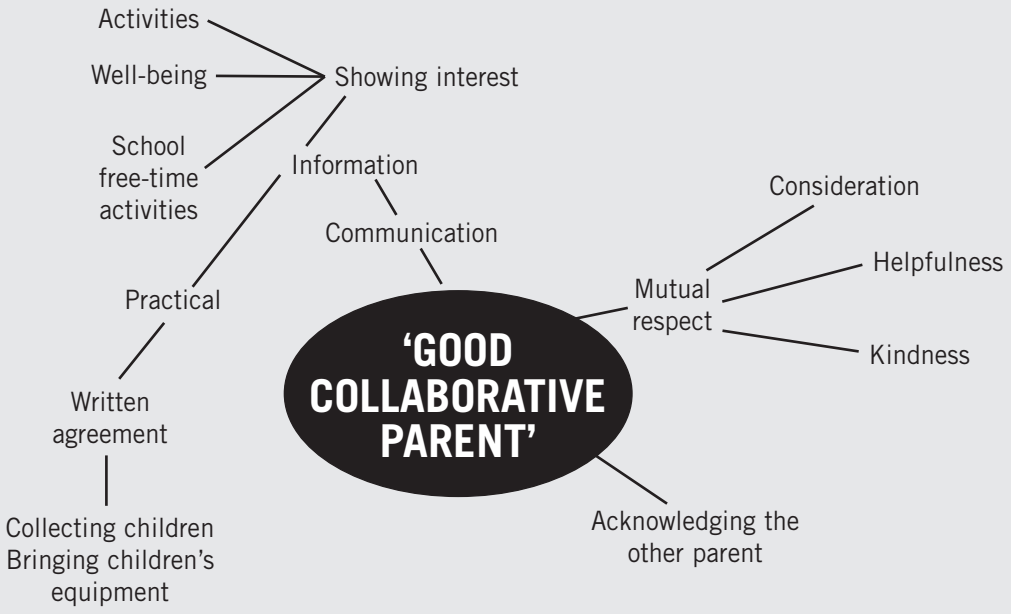
I asked Robert to give examples of times in which he enacted these different intentions in relation to his children, and we then explored the origins of the various values and principles described in his linguagram. Robert told me he had been thinking a lot of his own father and his relationship with him. He experienced his father's ways of relating as more influenced by nagging than acknowledgement, and he couldn't remember any joyful activities they had shared together. He said, 'I was a little bit scared of him'. In turn, these experiences were useful for Robert in then deciding what kind of father he wanted to be.

We also explored who in Robert's life could confirm his efforts to be 'the good dad'. He hoped that his children could confirm parts of this, and he also mentioned that his wife, Marit, and his parents-in-law might have something to say about this. Robert asked me to write out his linguagram and send this to him along with the letter summarising the session. Robert later named this linguagram as his 'steering wheel'.

We then continued to generate a linguagram of 'the good collaborative parent'.

Robert ended by stating that 'acknowledgement of each other as a parent' was an important value to him. We again explored examples of these values and principles, and he told stories of collaborative work as a parent with Solveig. He thought that most of these principles were present in his marriage with Marit, in his efforts to be a 'good dad', and in his workplace. However, he emphasised that he only 'succeeded one out of a hundred times', and we further explored how powerful Distrust was ruling his life.

ROBERT'S LINGUAGRAM OF THE 'GOOD COLLABORATIVE PARENT'



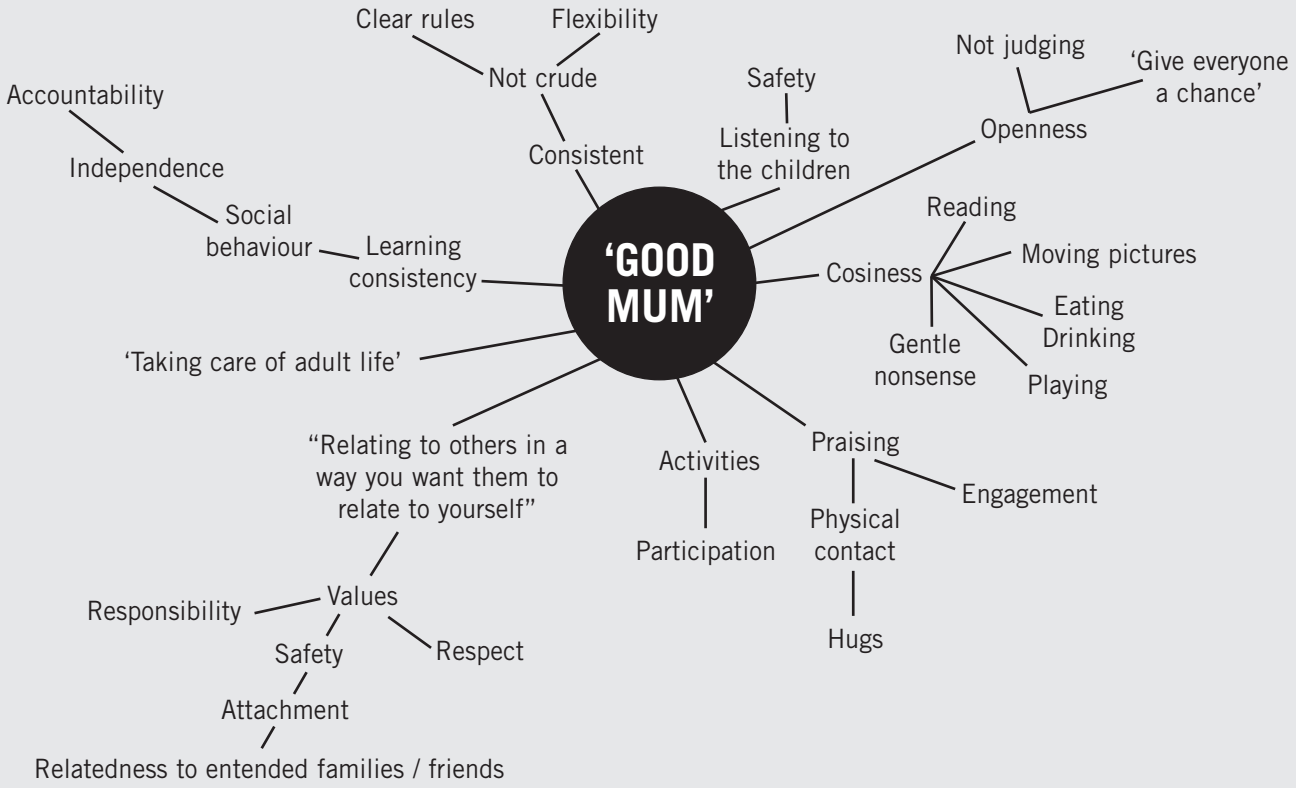
SOLVEIG'S LINGUAGRAMS

Solveig told me that she and her female friends often talked about motherhood, but that she had never related these conversations to her own values and principles. See page 10 for Solveig's linguagram of being a 'good mother'.

Solveig ended the process of making her linguagram by saying: 'A good mum has to take care of her own adulthood as well as her children's childhood', and that, in her life as a mother and employee, she currently had little time and capacity for her own 'adult life'.

Solveig traced the history of her parenting intentions from the home in which she grew up. She described how she carries the rules, principles, and values of her grandparents, parents, and the friends of the family, into her home today. She also told me about an older cousin who was troubled by alcohol, and how, as a youngster, she had looked after this

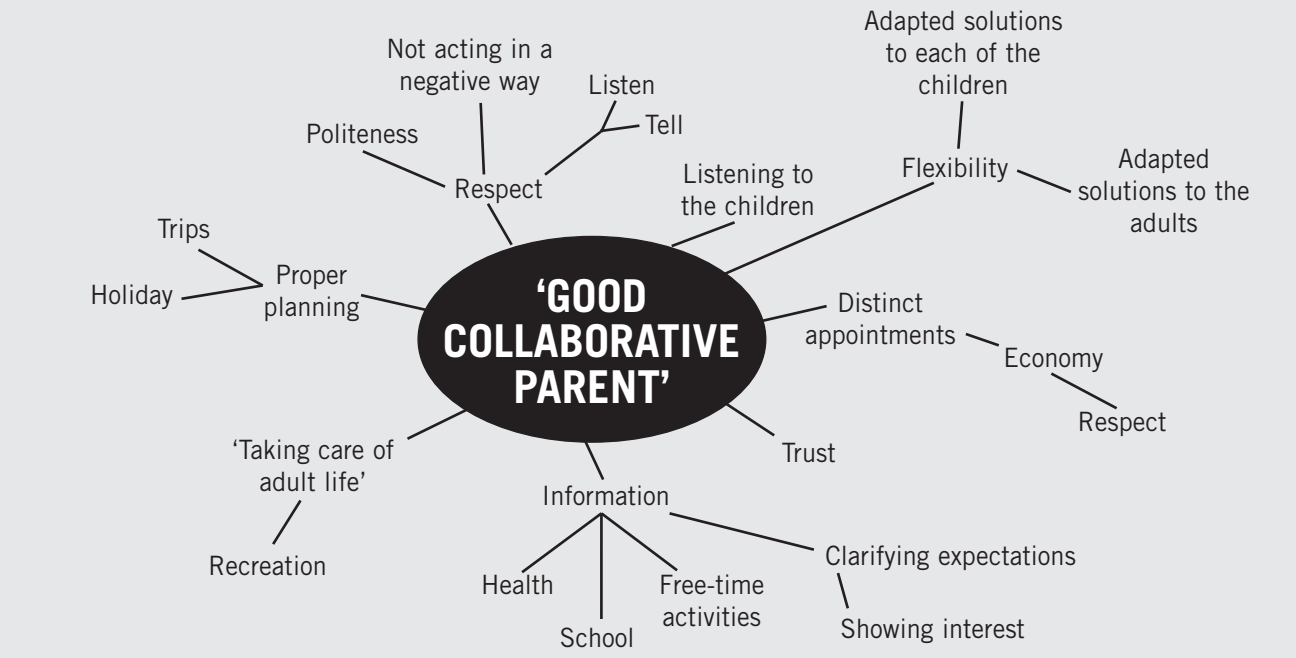
SOLVEIG'S LINGUAGRAM OF THE 'GOOD MUM'



cousin's children, and during this time she experienced the importance of safety and predictability in children's lives. Solveig told me she experienced a lot of affirmations of being a 'good mother' from her own mother, her sister, her grandmother, and Robert's mother and grandmother.

In exploring the idea of the 'good collaborative parent', Solveig created the following linguagram:

SOLVEIG'S LINGUAGRAM OF THE 'GOOD COLLABORATIVE PARENT'



At the end of this process, Solveig stated that one key value in being a good collaborative parent was 'to make plans for spending proper time with the other parent and to make your intentions visible to the other parent'.

Solveig identified that, for her, the values and principles of being a 'good collaborative parent' were similar to the values she had related in her linguagram about being a 'good mum'. Just like Robert, she didn't think that this map reflected her own skills today, but described her hopes and visions for her parenthood in the future. She emphasised that she had to keep Suspicion away in order to realise her hopes.

THICKENING THE NEW STORIES OF 'GOOD MUM' AND 'GOOD DAD'

Both Solveig and Robert said they were telling these stories about being a 'good mum' and 'good dad' for the first time. They both had experienced times of profound doubt about their own skills and knowledges, and about their efforts to improve their skills. In the past this had meant that they had found it impossible to imagine themselves as 'good parents'.

The social anthropologist Clifford Geertz defined 'thick description' to be 'a description of an action that is inscribed with the meanings of the community of persons to which this action is directly relevant' (1973, p.20). Conversely, thin description 'excludes the interpretation of those who are engaging in these actions' (White, 1997, p.15). In narrative practice, stories we tell about ourselves are socially negotiated and renegotiated in communities of people; identity conclusions are not independently manufactured, but are instead social achievements (White, 2001).

At this point in time, as I was apparently the only one who had heard these stories of the 'good dad' and 'good mum', I estimated them as 'thinly described stories'. I wondered how to thicken these stories, and at the same time strengthen the sense of personal agency of the parents. When meeting separately with Solveig and Robert, we tried to thicken the stories through therapeutic letters (White & Epston, 1990), the use of outsider witnesses (Russell & Carey, 2004), and re-membering practices (White, 1997).

Therapeutic letters

Writing letters enables me to take up another position as a counsellor. During therapeutic conversations, I am an active interviewer, which means I'm not able to adopt a more 'reflecting' position. When writing letters, however, I could re-tell the stories I had heard from Solveig and Robert from an outsider witness position. I could summarise our talks and speculate about different initiatives undertaken by the parents, and where various counter-plots might lead. During our work together, I sent both Solveig and Robert five letters and this played a key role in thickening the new stories of 'good mother' and 'good dad'. In reading and re-reading the letters I sent to them, Solveig and Robert were able to explore their skills and practices of preferred parenting and the histories of why these were significant to them. In turn, this meant these preferred parenting practices became more available in their daily lives.

The use of outsider witnesses

'Definitional ceremonies' involve people as outsider witnesses in telling and re-telling the stories of each other's lives. Definitional ceremonies contribute to a development of circumstances in which preferred identity claims can be acknowledged (Myerhoff, 1986; White, 2000). Some way into our individual meetings, Robert wanted to invite his wife, Marit, as an outsider witness to our conversations. As an outsider witness, Marit listened as I interviewed Robert about his intentions, values, hopes, and principles as a father and as a collaborative parent.

When I interviewed Marit about what she had heard, she highlighted 'Robert's patience', and mentioned all the times she had witnessed his careful preparations before calling Solveig. This patience she had witnessed resonated with Marit's own experiences of her father and 'his never-giving-up-actions'. Marit described that she had a dream that Robert, Solveig, and herself could one day be joyful together with the twins, while watching the oldest son, Tor, play football.

Re-membering practice

While Solveig didn't wish to invite anyone to our sessions as an outsider witness, in one of our talks we made an imaginary invitation to her mother and grandmother through a re-membering conversation (White, 1997). Re-membering conversations are based upon the understanding that our lives are like a club with 'members', that these members influence our experiences of ourselves, and that our identities are therefore 'multi-voiced'.

Solveig and I explored what her mother and grandmother had contributed to her skills and knowledges as a mother. Solveig described how values like openness, respectfulness, and joyfulness had been passed onto her by her mother and grandmother. After some discussion, Solveig said she knew that the principle 'give everyone a chance' could also be traced back to her grandmother. We then speculated about what Solveig's mother and grandmother might notice about the ways in which Solveig is continuing their traditions, and what it might mean to them to witness this. Solveig spoke of the pride she thought they would feel in relation to how she is taking care of her children, and how she has actively held onto certain values of her family.

MOVEMENT

At the end of our separate talks, Robert declared: 'Something has happened to Solveig'. He described this 'something' to be: 'She is more friendly to me and to Marit, and not so much in a hurry to get away after bringing the kids'. About his own contribution, he said, 'I've done nothing'. Solveig, however, told me, 'Robert is more friendly to me now, and the boys report that instead of letting Marit decide everything, he more often steps in to negotiate'. Both Solveig and the boys were appreciating these initiatives of Robert's. Interestingly, however, about her own contribution, Solveig told me, 'I've done nothing'!

I wondered what it would mean for each of them to hear about the changes they had noticed in each other, and whether this would challenge their ideas that they themselves had 'done nothing'. After five separate meetings with Robert and four with Solveig, they both decided that it was time to start some joint conversations.

SHARING LINGUAGRAMS AND STORIES OF THE 'GOOD COLLABORATIVE PARENT'

In approaching the first common meeting, Solveig and Robert knew that both of them had developed linguagrams on the related topics of the 'good mother', 'good father', and 'good collaborative parent'. Both of them wanted to present this work for the other. We decided to do this using a definitional ceremony / outsider witness approach (Russell & Carey, 2004; White, 2000). Before the joint meeting, I asked both of them to listen to the other and to prepare to offer a re-telling as an outsider witness.

They handed copies of their written linguagrams to each other, and I began by interviewing Solveig about her descriptions of being a 'good mum' and a 'good collaborative parent'. At the end of this interview, I asked if she had something that she hoped for herself in the near future, and she answered, 'I want to give Robert better information' and 'to try to loosen my grip'. She explained that the suspicious thoughts didn't let her give Robert the information that he wanted, and, during all these years, her thinking was more of 'how to avoid talking with him, rather than how to inform him'. Solveig had two wishes for Robert as well; 'to be trusted by him', and 'to be acknowledged as a good mother'. She added, 'the boys are doing well and my contribution couldn't have been that bad'.

In the audience position, Robert had been listening and not interrupting through these first twenty minutes. When I asked him to re-tell what struck a chord for him, he answered, 'Everything is nice to listen to. I feel happy to hear all of it'. He elaborated on why it was 'nice' for him to be a listener to Solveig's telling: 'I have never known about her values; they are good and they are almost the same values and principles as mine! These maps are so close to mine that it gives me hope for the future. We now know what to strive for'. He also said, 'I have to act more flexibly and do less complaining'. After hearing this re-telling, Solveig said that she wanted to be more aware of her own contributions in the future, and also to keep in mind Robert's goodwill.

Solveig and Robert then switched places, and I interviewed Robert about his linguagrams. At the end, I asked him about his hopes for himself and for Solveig. He thought for a long time before answering, 'I want to show Solveig more respect for her work', and 'I want to ask questions of Solveig in a different way'. His wishes for Solveig included, 'To get more information about the lives of the boys', and 'to have some more effort put into packing the children's bags before weekends at my house'. He explained that, given the history of Distrust in their relationship, 'Any questions, even the most simple ones, might sound critical to Solveig'. Robert explained that he wanted to find ways of not sounding critical.

When I interviewed Solveig about what she had just heard, she said that what had struck a chord for her was 'Robert's attention to the boys'. She didn't see this as a challenge to her own position, but as an

enrichment of the boys' lives. She also emphasised the resemblance of their different 'maps', and that she was a little bit 'in suspense' and hopeful about the prospects of their future collaborative work.

NEW STORY-LINES

A story is defined as a sequence of events across time which is organised according to a theme or plot. According to Jerome Bruner (1986), every story consists of both a 'landscape of action' and a 'landscape of consciousness' (or what Michael White describes as a 'landscape of identity'). One of my important counselling tasks was to scaffold the conversations with Robert and Solveig with questions that would link certain initiatives more fully into story-lines. When we identified collaborative initiatives undertaken by Robert or Solveig that took place in the landscape of action, we sought to link these to particular purposes, values, hopes, principles, and commitments found in the landscape of identity. From this process, new story-lines began to develop.

The development of mutual respect

During recent months, Robert had experienced times in which irritation popped into his head in relation to Solveig. When he noticed this, he started to remind himself of his preferred purposes as a parent and ex-partner. He distinguished the tricks of Distrust, instructed himself not to complain or make unhelpful comments, replaced irritation with friendliness, and told himself that 'these things are not important' or that 'the event can be questioned another day'. Robert explained that every time he did this, Solveig's responses were friendly. And, usually, he then found he didn't want to make comments about the things that had irritated him. He linked these developments and these new skills to what he named as 'mutual respect'. This was an increasingly influential story-line in Robert's life and in his connection with Solveig. In reflecting on this, Robert said, 'I don't know what has happened, but in a way all that conflict stuff has become invisible to me'.

Living without suspicion

For her part, Solveig started to stay a little longer when she brought the boys to their father, and she had started talking at these times with both Marit and Robert. She also extended telephone calls with Robert a little bit, and said that, 'Suspicion doesn't bother me that much any more', and 'I don't have that grumbling feeling in my stomach any longer'. Solveig had started to see Marit not as a female rival, but as someone who was making a positive contribution in the lives of the boys. She commented, 'I've stopped to evaluate their purposes. They live their life. I live mine'.

ENGAGING OTHER PARENTS AS OUTSIDER WITNESSES

At this point, we invited another couple, who were working with similar issues, to be outsider witnesses for Solveig and Robert. Before the meeting, this second couple received a letter outlining the main principles for outsider witnessing practices, and I spent some time with them to clarify the intentions of the conversation. The second couple listened carefully to Robert and Solveig as they talked about their 'maps', and the steps they had been taking over the last months to establish better collaboration as parents for their children.

When the second couple offered their outsider witness response, the second father reflected on Robert's ability to become better at handling his questions to Solveig, and he was impressed by the way Solveig managed to be more open and inviting to Robert and Marit. The second mother was engaged by the new actions Solveig was taking in relation to Marit. She was also touched by the ways in which Robert was handling the distrust and irritation, and how he was encouraged by Marit to replace these with friendliness. The second couple also shared some stories from their own collaborative work, and their own wishes for the time to come. Robert and Solveig then offered a short re-telling of this re-telling. They spoke about being touched by the second couple's appreciations, and also by the similarity of their respective efforts for better collaborative relationships.

FINAL COMMENTS

Robert and Solveig both wish to continue counselling. They emphasised in our last meeting that 'the main work will be done outside this room'. They stated that 'we still have a long way to go, but as long as we both are contributing, we wish to be patient and take the time we need'. Robert added, 'We are two different families with many different principles of life. My main decision is not to fight this difference any longer, but to accept it and respect it'.

I asked Solveig and Robert what they had found most useful in the conversations we had shared. Robert answered that, for him, 'focusing on the positives' helped the most. He described how the strict structuring of the interviews had also helped him to feel safe in what was a difficult context. What's more, he said that he had shared with Marit all the letters I had sent him, and this had enabled her to share in his hopes and dreams, and this in turn had offered them new points of connection in their relationship.

Solveig said that 'the structuring of the meetings and the focus on values and principles' had been useful to her. She also commented, 'I've been feeling safe in the meetings. I do think that I'm an okay mother, but I've never shared what I'm proud of in a way like this'. Solveig didn't share her letters with anyone, but said that she found them helpful in 'linking this work together'. Both Solveig and Robert were appreciative of the contributions of the other couple, but they were most happy about their re-positioning in relation to each other.

SUMMARY

In this paper I have outlined an approach to enabling collaborative conversations between parents after divorce. This is an area of work for therapists that can be challenging due to the degree of conflict and hostility that is sometimes present. This approach, which involves the use of externalising conversations, linguagrams, therapeutic letters, and outsider witness practices, is proving extremely helpful in my work. I look forward to hearing from other practitioners if it is also applicable in their contexts.

NOTES

1 Michel Foucault was a French philosopher who lived from 1926 to 1984. For a discussion of Foucault's work, see Seidman (1994) and Winslade (2003).

2 Michel Foucault (1969) describes discourses as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak'. In her book *Social constructionism*, Vivien Burr (1995, p.202) explains discourse in this way: 'This term is used primarily in two senses: 1) to refer to a systematic, coherent set of images, metaphors and so on that construct an object in a particular way, and 2) to refer to the actual spoken interchanges between people.'

3 The notion 'disarming the conflict' is borrowed from Winslade & Monk (2001).

4 Elspeth McAdam, a counsellor on our Family Counselling Office team since 2004, introduced us to her ideas of using linguagrams in therapeutic conversations.

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