# Narrative practice and community assignments

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This paper describes explorations of the relevance of narrative practices to working with communities which are facing various concerns and predicaments. These explorations have been undertaken in the context of community assignments that have been initiated in response to approaches from communities. In describing these explorations, this paper highlights the assumptions that have oriented our participation in these initiatives and some of the principles of narrative practice that we have found to be of particular importance in them. As well, this paper presents some special considerations in regard to addressing the psychological pain and emotional distress that is the outcome of trauma; discusses the priority given to the development of partnerships between the members of our team and between team members and community members; and provides an account of the structure of the community-wide gathering phase of these assignments.

Keywords: *community, narrative practice, trauma, Derrida, doubly listening, definitional ceremony.*

# Contents

# Introduction

The focus of this paper is on explorations of narrative practice in community contexts. The mode of engagement with communities that is illustrated here is based on adaptations of narrative practices that have been found to be relevant to working with individuals, couples, families and groups. Over the last nine years, we have taken these practices into various community assignments within Australia. These have included assignments with communities of shared experience in relation to mental health concerns (see 'Speaking out and being heard' 1995), HIV/AIDS (see 'Living positive lives' 2000), and assignments with specific Indigenous Australian communities (see 'Reclaiming our stories, reclaiming our lives' 1995).

It is not my intention to describe specific details of any of these assignments in this paper. Rather, the focus here will be on the contribution and special responsibilities of the members of the team that is contracted by communities to undertake these assignments. This is a responsibility to contribute to the building of safe and constructive contexts for community members to address the marginalisation, disenfranchisement, and trauma they have been subject to, as well as current predicaments, concerns, and dilemmas that are an outcome of this.

This paper is structured in four parts. The first offers an explanation of how we conceptualise our work with communities in terms of specific assignments. The second outlines various assumptions that we do not hold about these assignments and key assumptions that do inform our work. The third part of this paper explores in some detail the role of community consultations in this work and how two key practice principles of 'transparency' and 'doubly listening' underpin these consultations. Considerable space is dedicated to exploring how doubly listening enables alternative ways of responding to trauma, pain and distress. The fourth part of the paper describes the importance of partnership as a principle of practice. And the final section describes the structure of the community-wide gatherings that are a feature of these assignments.

# PART ONE

# Overview

## Narrative practices and community assignments

Along with a team of people[1] who are associated with Dulwich Centre, over the past several years I have been engaged in working with specific communities of people over particular issues that have been of significant concern to them. These have been relatively disenfranchised and marginalised communities, whose members have experienced considerable trauma. The concerns that have been at the centre of our work with these communities have covered a range of vexing dilemmas and predicaments, many of these associated with contexts of social injustice, and for which there have been no apparent and readily available solutions.

To date, all of these engagements with communities have been initiated by the communities themselves, via their representatives. These community representatives have approached us with a request that we join them in their efforts to address specific concerns. In describing these concerns, these representatives usually provide some account of the circumstances that have given rise to them, and that have frustrated efforts to address them. Invariably this has been an account of conditions of disadvantage and of the workings of the power relations of local culture that have impacted the lives of the people of their communities. Apart from describing these concerns and circumstances, these representatives invariably provide accounts of the consequences of these circumstances for the people of their communities, which have strongly featured a shared sense of helplessness, impotence, hopelessness, and pain.

Our work with communities has not been premised on the idea that we have something special to offer particular communities of people. To reiterate – we have stepped into these 'assignments' in response to approaches from communities. These approaches have been informed by some knowledge gained by certain members of these communities about our work with other communities, about narrative practices, and by some assumptions held by these community members about the relevance of these practices to addressing their particular concerns. For example, some of the communities that have invited us to join them in assignments have been communities of Aboriginal Australians that have achieved some familiarity with our work through their connections with other Aboriginal Australian communities. These have been communities that have had a sense that narrative practices might resonate with the oral story-telling traditions of their own culture, and also a sense that the structures of the community-wide meetings that have been a feature of our work might be culturally relevant and appropriate.

## Community assignments: definition and overview

The word assignment seems an appropriate definition of the initiatives that we have participated in with communities. When we step into these initiatives we understand that we are being assigned a task by these communities, one with clear terms of reference, and one with clear limits in regard to what it is appropriate for us to be undertaking.

The term assignment also seems an appropriate description of the position of our team, for it acknowledges

the locus of authority that prevails throughout these initiatives. As for any assignment that is given by those who have the authority to do so, we understand that, in the performance of all tasks associated with any community assignment, we will be responsible to those who invited and contracted us to undertake the assignment – that is, the people of the community.

We know that our engagement with any community will be time limited, and that, in the tradition of assignments, there will specific stages. For example:

a) a significant consultation stage that, amongst other things, is identifying of information that will provide a foundation for our work with the community, and for the development of partnerships with community members;

b) a preparatory stage at which time the information from the community consultations is compiled and taken up into the development of a tentative plan and program for a community-wide gathering;

c) further consultations over the proposed plan and program in which these are reworked according to the feedback of community members;

d) a planning stage in which the arrangements for, and structures of, the proposed community-wide gathering are finalised;

e) the community-wide gathering proper;

f) the documentation of the assignment;

g) the follow-up stage.

The community assignments discussed in this paper have all featured a very significant consultation of community members. This consultation extends from the preparatory stage through to the closure of the assignment, and throughout all processes of the documentation of the assignment. At the outset of these assignments, these consultations with community members are identifying of the themes that are of particular relevance to the community, and provide a context for the building of partnerships between the members of our team and the community members. The information gathered in these preliminary consultations is then taken up in the development of a program for a residential community-wide gathering that is held over a period of two-to-five days at a location that is chosen by the community.

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# PART TWO

# Assumptions

## Assumptions not held

Before discussing some of the key assumptions that have shaped our participation in community assignments, I first want to address some of the assumptions frequently made about our work that do not fit with the tradition of community engagement that we have been developing. The notion 'community work' is one that now has a significant history, and is one that is associated with many different sentiments of community practice. Some of these sentiments are drawn from particular and quite distinctive traditions of working with communities, and some are derived from an account of community work that is quite generic. Although we find ourselves in accord with many of the sentiments of community work that are 'at large' out there in the world of the professional disciplines, we find that some sentiments of community work are associated with assumptions that contribute to a misreading of what we have proposed in the name of community assignments. At times these assumptions about our work have endured despite efforts to clear up this misreading.

I believe that spelling out some of the assumptions that we do not hold in our work with communities will serve to clarify the nature of the task that we set for ourselves in these assignments, and will also provide a background to the special considerations and responsibilities that we take up as we step into these.

Before doing this, I would emphasise that, in elucidating our position in regard to these assumptions that we do not hold in working with communities, it is not my intention to claim any special distinction in regard to this work – there are many other traditions of community work that share this position.

## Problem solving

At times it is assumed that the introduction of problem-solving strategies that might contribute to problem resolution, and mediation practices that will contribute to conflict resolution, is required in order to address the concerns and predicaments of communities. Although we can appreciate the appropriateness of such strategies and practices in some circumstances, and the relevance of concepts like 'problem resolution' and 'conflict resolution' to some cultural contexts, these are not assumptions that shape our work with communities.

We do not enter into these assignments with the assumption that we have any relevant, ready-made, responses that will satisfactorily address the specific concerns and the predicaments of the communities that have approached us. We do not assume that we have in our possession or at our disposal any special problem-solving strategies or mediation practices that are appropriate to the culture and to the circumstances of these communities. And, in appreciating the fact that the concepts of 'problem solving' and 'conflict resolution' are socio/historical constructs that are unique to particular cultural contexts, we do not assume that these are generally relevant to our work with communities.

## Providing maps

In the culture of the professional disciplines, and in popular psychology, there are many maps that have been developed to guide people in their efforts to address trauma, and to lead them through what is often referred to as a 'healing journey'. There are also many maps readily available to people that provide an account of appropriate personal, group and

community developmental processes and life cycles. These are maps that are usually considered to be universally relevant to all peoples in all places, in all cultures, in all eras. However, we consider all of these maps to be products of history and of distinct culture, and none of our engagements in these assignments have been informed by such maps.

For example, in the professional disciplines and in popular psychology, there has been a flurry of map-making activity in response to addressing grief in relation to loss. Many of these maps specify the stages of the 'healing journey'. This has been associated with claims about the veracity of the understandings that have shaped the development of these maps, and about the general appropriateness of these understandings to the 'human condition'. While we recognise the popular appeal of such maps, and do not question the relevance and utility of these maps to some people, in some places, at some times, we do believe that the 'human condition' referred to here relates to certain traditions and ways of living that are judged to be preferred and that are privileged over other ways of living in particular social locations in contemporary western culture. Although some of the community assignments that we have been invited to step into have to do with addressing very significant losses, including the community trauma that is an outcome of these, we do not assume to know what personal and community appropriate processes would be relevant to satisfactorily address these losses and the associated trauma.

## Thinking system

In the social sciences there is a long tradition of the theorising of communities, 'domestic' and 'exotic', and much of this has been informed by the notion that the community is a 'system'. These theories of community usually give rise to the development of systems of analyses that are regularly employed to make sense of a range of community phenomena. There are many such analyses – perhaps the most commonly employed at this present time being 'needs analyses' – that provide the basis of, or the point of reference for, 'service delivery' and 'strategic planning' in communities.

However, in our work with communities, we do not hold the assumption that communities function as a 'system'. Nor do any other theories of community shape our participation with these communities: general theories of community, specific theories about problem formation in communities, or theories about the well-functioning community. While we appreciate the fact that these theories and the systems of analyses associated with them may be appropriate in some contexts, these do not provide the basis of our engagement with communities.

## Ideal communities

In general conversations with others about our work with communities, and in sharing our explorations of this work in teaching contexts, it has often been assumed that we are contributing to the development of more 'ideal communities'. These assumptions are often associated with notions of the 'healthy'[2], 'well-functioning', or even 'good enough' community. These notions are sponsored by normative ideas that are held out for communities to aspire to and to reproduce.

These normative ideas do not shape our engagements with communities. Rather than prescribe to notions of the 'healthy', 'well-functioning', or 'good enough' community, we find it important that we question all universal assertions about what makes for a healthy community, and, for that matter, even those more modest but nonetheless preconceived notions about what would make communities better places to live in.

## Idealising communities

In popular culture one can find many accounts of 'the good life' that are idealising of 'community'. In these accounts there is an assumption that there is intrinsic merit in simply bringing people together as a community to address their concerns and predicaments. It is proposed that in this coming together the essential 'nature' and the 'true will' of the community will prevail, and that this will contribute to a positive outcome for all community members.

This idealising of community is not a feature of our community assignments. We do not subscribe to the assumption that special qualities that are true to the nature of communities can be counted upon to address community concerns and predicaments, and we do not engage with the assumption that it will be simply beneficial for groups of people with shared interests to get together over shared concerns. We understand that at times and under specific circumstances it may be a good idea for people with shared interests to get together over shared concerns, and that at other times under different circumstances such meetings

can be quite hazardous, and can generate significantly negative outcomes for community members, and for their communities.

## Community organising

There is a tradition of community organising and advocacy that is highly valued and has been effective in assisting communities to address a range of social phenomena, particularly those that contribute to structures of disadvantage and racism. To many of us, this tradition was most evident in the socially turbulent 1960s, but it is a tradition that has a very long and rich history. Although the shape of this community organising and advocacy has changed considerably over the past couple of decades, it is still a significant social force in contemporary times.

At times, our work with communities has been taken by others to be of this tradition of community organising and advocacy. Although this is a tradition that we value highly, we are not community organisers or advocates in the context of our community assignments. Our work is of a different tradition, and engages us in different practices with communities.

## Assumptions held

Our participation in community assignments is based on the understanding that we cannot know, ahead of our engagement in them, what might be the knowledges of life and skills of living appropriate to achieving the goals of the people of these communities. This is so whether the goal of the community is, for example, to:

a) challenge marginalisation and tokenism in mainstream service delivery;
b) provide a context for the exploration of, and for further building upon shared purposes;
c) achieve healing in relation to significant losses; or to
d) address a range of specific social injustices.

However, we do enter these assignments with assumptions about:

a) the knowledges of life and skills of living possessed by community members;
b) the relevance of these to addressing the predicaments and concerns of the community;

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c) the conditions favourable to the rich description of these knowledges and skills; and about

d) the circumstances conducive to these being taken up by community members in achieving the goals of community.

In this section of this paper I will outline some of these assumptions.

## Knowledges and skills

We have the assumption that all communities have a stock of knowledges about life and skills of living that are relevant to addressing the concerns and predicaments faced by the members of these communities. These knowledges include systems of understanding that make it possible for people to interpret their own and each others' actions, and that form a basis for their responses to each other and to the wider community. These knowledges also include maps that guide people's journey through life, that contribute to the marking of transitions in these journeys, that direct efforts on behalf of community members to address the unexpected, and to resolve situations of difficulty. Included in this are knowledges of processes of healing in response to trauma and loss. All of these knowledges are associated with the larger, culturally specific canonical narratives of life that provide an account of what life is all about, and that specify, legitimate and constitute particular ways of being in the world.

All of these knowledges of life are associated with specific skills of living. These skills inform specific practices of living – practices of living that shape relationship formation and practices of living that shape self formation. These skills of living also comprise a practical know-how for going about life. They shape a wide range of activity including those actions that make possible the social acknowledgement of people's transitions in life (for example, as in rites of passage), and the negotiation of the unexpected in life. These skills are also expressed in people's problem-solving activities and in activities that are guided by shared maps of what are considered to be due processes in response to the events of people's lives, including those that relate to loss and trauma. These skills of living and associated knowledges about life are inseparable – skills of living make it possible for people to act on their understandings of themselves and each other, and, in turn, these actions are

confirming of the understandings provided by these knowledges of life.

These knowledges of life and skills of living are social, cultural and historical products – they are manufactured over time within the context of people's social relations and culture. They are constantly being negotiated and renegotiated within the context of communities of people. In communities that have a strong sense of shared culture and heritage (for instance, an Indigenous Australian, or other distinct cultural community), many of these knowledges and skills are 'erudite'[3], and often associated with tradition and/or with the aesthetics of spirituality (although at times this tradition and spirituality may have been very significantly disqualified, with aspects of it only thinly known).

In communities that lack this shared sense of culture and heritage – for example, where communities of people have relatively loose relationships and a relatively recent history together (for instance, a community of people living with a shared experience of mental health concerns) – these knowledges of life and skills of living are mostly of 'local' or 'popular'[3] character. These local knowledges and skills are not usually time-honoured or widely recognised. In this context, the relationship between history and developing culture on the one hand, and the knowledges of life and skills of living that are being negotiated and routinely expressed by people of the community on the other hand, can be relatively invisible and not consciously appreciated by community members.

## Acknowledgement and rich description

When communities invite us into an assignment in relation to specific predicaments and concerns, we enter these with the assumption that there exists a stock of *knowledges* of life and *skills* of living within the community that are relevant to addressing these very predicaments and concerns. We also assume that many of these knowledges and skills, and the relevance of these to the present circumstances of the community, will be either thinly known or relatively invisible to members of these communities.

For communities with a strong sense of shared heritage and culture, this state of affairs is often the outcome of these knowledges and skills having been very significantly dishonoured and disqualified by the wider community. For communities that do not have this strong sense of shared heritage and culture, this state of affairs is often the outcome

of experiences of significant marginalisation on behalf of its members within the context of the wider community, and the absence of processes that would contribute to the clear identification, acknowledgement, and honouring of these knowledges and skills – the absence of processes that would richly describe these knowledges and skills, and that would contribute to a deep appreciation of the relevance of these to present circumstances.

Upon being invited to undertake a community assignment, we make the assumption that it is possible to arrange conditions in which these devalued and subjugated knowledges and skills will be identified, rendered more visible, richly described, and honoured. We also assume that under these conditions the sophistication of these knowledges and skills will become known, and the relevance of these to present circumstances will be appreciated. These assumptions have been powerfully supported by our experience with community assignments. Under the favourable conditions established in the context of these assignments, we have found that it becomes possible for communities to embrace these knowledges and skills in addressing their shared concerns and predicaments. This opens up a range of culturally and community sensitive and appropriate options for community action.

## Narrative practices

In regard to establishing conditions that will contribute to the identification, rich description, and honouring of these knowledges and skills of communities, we have the assumption that the employment of many of the 'narrative' practices that are appropriate in our work with individuals, couples, families and groups will be relevant. These are practices that have been developed historically in the micro contexts of therapeutic work, and that contribute to the rich description of the alternative stories of people's lives.

The members of our team have a strong familiarity with these practices, which include those associated with 're-authoring conversations' (White 1991, 1995a; Morgan 2000) and with the 'definitional ceremony' metaphor (White 1995b, 1997, 2000a), around which multiple levels of the telling and retelling of the stories of people's lives are structured. These practices have been well described in the literature, and I will not undertake a significant review of them here.

## Gatherings

We also have the assumption that community-wide gatherings are likely to provide fertile conditions for the identification, rich description, and honouring of these knowledges and skills, and for the further negotiation and renegotiation of them. This assumption has been strongly supported through the history of our engagements with communities, and the convening of community-wide residential gatherings has been a central feature of all of these assignments. In the final section of this paper, I will provide an account of the structure of these gatherings.

## Thorough preparation

As previously discussed in this paper, there are assumptions 'abroad' that are idealising of community, and that sponsor the idea that, in regard to community meetings, it is 'just a matter of trusting the process' and having faith in the 'spirit of community'. These assumptions are inspired by many narratives about the nature of communities and of the possibilities associated with the coming together of communities of people. While we can find many of the aesthetics of relationship and community that are proposed by these narratives to be attractive, we do not share the assumption that things will work out okay if we 'just trust the process' or place our faith in a 'community spirit'. Rather, we step into these assignments on the assumption that to leave things to chance with any community gathering is hazardous.

We assume that there is less risk of an untoward outcome if adequate and careful attention is given to the structuring of our participation in these community assignments. I believe that this attention is evident in the care that is taken in consultations with community members ahead of the gatherings, and, in the context of these consultations, the attention that is given to identifying not just the common concerns and predicaments, but also the themes that join the lives of community members together in shared purposes, values, hopes, dreams, and visions.

The next section of this paper describes in some detail the consultation phase of these assignments and the principles that inform this.

# PART THREE

# Community consultations
# and the principles that inform them

In the consultation phase of these assignments, team members meet with community members over a range of matters: over community members' understandings of their shared concerns and predicaments, over their personal experience of these, and over their responses to various vexing events and circumstances. These consultations also have the purpose of:

a) introducing community members to details of the proposed community assignment, and of conferring with them about this;

b) providing an opportunity for team members to describe the narrative ideas, practices, and structures that we routinely bring to these assignments, and that might contribute to the community members efforts to address their concerns and predicaments;

c) establishing a platform for the partnerships that are to be built between community members and team members, and that will guide team members through the different phases of the assignment.

From the outset of these consultations, community members are informed that the information drawn from these consultations will be taken up in preparations for the proposed gathering. Stories of other community assignments can be shared with community members at this time, contact details of the people of these stories can be given, and team members make themselves available to clarify the various ideas and practices that might be brought to the assignment, including to the community-wide gathering phase.

In this section of the paper, I will give special consideration to two principles that inform these consultations. Firstly, I will describe the significance of a commitment to transparency and how this can assist us as

team members to reduce the likelihood of us losing our way in these assignments.

Secondly, I will describe in some detail the importance of doubly listening as a principle of practice in this work and how it enables the identification of themes that join the lives of community members together in shared purposes, values, beliefs, values, hopes, dreams and visions. To fully describe the significance of doubly listening I will make links to the work of Jacques Derrida, and will provide an account of how doubly listening enables responses to expressions of trauma, pain and distress that otherwise would not be possible.

## Transparency

From the earliest conversations that are had in response to approaches from appointed representatives of communities, every effort is made to ensure that community members are fully informed of what is within our capacity to bring to the different phases of these gatherings – of what is within our capacity to bring to the:

a) development of proposals for community assignments,
b) community consultations leading up to the gatherings,
c) planning of the program for the gathering,
d) preparations for the gathering itself,
e) community-wide gathering proper, and to any
f) post-gathering meetings

We assume that it is important for us to be as transparent as we are able to be in regard to the narrative practices and structures that we might bring to community assignments. As previously mentioned, these are practices and structures that have the potential to contribute to the identification, rich description, and honouring of those

knowledges and skills of the community that are relevant to efforts to address their concerns and predicaments. We assume that this transparency is important for several reasons:

1. First, this transparency of practice provides communities' members with an account of what it is possible for us to bring to these assignments that could assist them in their efforts to address shared concerns and predicaments. In so doing, this transparency also emphasises our understanding of the limitations in regard to our potential contribution, and in regard to our participation in general. This is important because it sets the scene for a modesty in expectations in regard to our part, serves to emphasise our understanding about the time-limited nature of our engagement in these assignments, and brings into immediate focus a principle aim of these assignments – that is, to establish a context that brings the knowledges of life and skills of living of community members to the fore in addressing shared concerns and predicaments, and in subsequent community action.

2. Second, this transparency of practice provides communities with options to choose from, albeit limited, in terms of what it is possible for us to bring to these assignments. There are choices to be made from a finite range of structures and practices that are familiar to us, and that we might employ in these assignments, and selections to be made from a range of possibilities in regard to the scope and extent of our participation with communities.

3. Third, in that this attention to transparency emphasises structures of meeting and narrative practices, and not schemas or models for community life, it brings clarity to what I regard to be our ethical position. It brings clarity to the fact that we do not enter these assignments with an agenda to change or transform anything, with pre-established goals based on taken-for-granted ideals for community life, or with ready-made maps for developmental or healing journeys borrowed from elsewhere.

4. Fourth, this transparency provides clear acknowledgement of the fact that, in stepping into these assignments, we are importing practices and structures into these communities that are not of the history or cultural traditions of these communities, even though some aspects of these practices and structures might strike a chord or two in terms of the conventions of some communities. This acknowledgement plays a part in undermining the possibility that these practices and structures might become, over time, an imposition to communities. This acknowledgement also serves to emphasise our expectation that as the relevant knowledges and skills of the community become more richly known, these practices and structures that we have brought with us into these assignments will give way to other structures and practices that are more resonant with the culture and the traditions of the communities that we meet with.

5. Fifth, this transparency of practice mitigates the very significant potential for the members of our team to lose our way in these assignments. As this is a potential that is ever-present, and as it is one that can be quite threatening of appropriate team-member participation in community assignments, it is deserving of a more extended discussion at this juncture.

**Transparency and the potential to lose our way**

Transparency of practice is also important as a guide to the workers who make up the teams that undertake these community consultations, who assist in the planning of the programs for the gatherings, and who introduce the narrative practices and structures that set the scene for community-wide gatherings. This transparency provides us, as team members, a reference point for our participation in these assignments, and this clarifies the obligation that we have to honour the agenda that has been set. In providing this reference point, this transparency also makes it more possible for team members to find ways of supporting each other to stay on track with what is expected of us; that is, to be present in these assignments with the skills of narrative practice that are deemed relevant to providing a context for the community members to address their concerns and predicaments.

This reference point is important, for there is an ever-present potential for us to lose our way in these assignments. This is a potential that is present in any circumstance under which team members are routinely witnessing many powerful, intimate, and, at times, significantly anguished expressions of other people's lives. For example, in response

to expressions of pain and suffering, there is the potential for team members to become overwhelmed. In response to expressions of despair there is the potential for team members to be captured by a paralysing sense of hopelessness. In response to expressions of trust there is the potential for team members to succumb to the temptation to believe that we can become 'at one' with peoples of other communities. In response to expressions of injustice there is the potential for team members to believe that it is our task to take up issues and to champion certain causes on the behalf of others. In response to expressions of marginalisation, disqualification and disadvantage, there is the potential for team members to feel joined with people of other cultures, races and classes against our own. Although all of these responses are understandable, these are not what is being asked of us by the communities that approach us about these assignments.

In noting this ever-present potential for us to lose our way in these assignments, it is not my intention to challenge or to criticise other traditions of engagement, such as advocacy or community organising. To the contrary, we have admiration for much of what is done in the name of the tradition of advocacy, and strongly respect the achievements of the community organising of recent decades. But these other traditions of engagement spring from different invitations, have different starting conditions, and relate to particular expectations and practices which are distinct from those that inform the community assignments in which we are involved.

Under the terms of the invitations that are extended to us by communities, and according to the terms of understanding that we negotiate with communities in accepting these assignments, these other traditions of engagement can only sidetrack us from what it is that we have agreed to do. That is, to bring to these assignments those practices and structures of narrative practice that have the potential to contribute to the identification, rich description, and the honouring of the knowledges and skills of the community that are relevant to addressing their concerns and predicaments. A transparency of practice, to which I have referred, contributes to circumstances in which team members are able to support each other in monitoring our participation according to the terms of these assignments, and provides us with a clear sense of how to care for and to support each other in this over the course of these assignments.

Addressing this ever-present potential for us to lose our way in the context of these community assignments is not to suggest that any of the broad range of experiences that are to be had by team members be negatively valued. It is not to propose that team members become invulnerable to the expressions of community members' experiences of trauma and marginalisation, or that such invulnerability is in any way desirable. And it is not to suggest that it is in any way helpful or desirable for us to mask our responses to the more intense and intimate expressions of community members. In fact, in all of our community assignments it has clearly been very important to community members to know that these expressions have affected us, and to know how these have affected us. However, in recognising the very significant obligation that we have to be true to what we are being invited to do by these communities, it clearly becomes the responsibility of team members to support each other in acknowledging and in attending to the range of experiences and responses that we can expect to have.

There are a number of ways that team members can assist each other with these experiences. These include:

a) entering into a commitment to talk with each other about these experiences;
b) supporting each other through the vicissitudes of the 'journeys' in life had by fellow team members in the context of these assignments;
c) honouring the purposes, values, beliefs and commitments of team members that provide a foundation for their responsiveness to the stories of community members;
d) formalising team meetings at regular intervals to reflect on how these experiences and purposes might be taken up and expressed in ways that would fit with the terms of the assignment.

As team members, when we are able to embrace this double responsibility to the community and to each other, the potential for us to lose our way is significantly reduced. To assist in embracing this double responsibility, in our work with communities, it is our preference for a team member to be designated 'team adviser'. This has to do with the importance of having a member of our team standing in a position of 'reflexive distance' for the duration of the community assignment. In referring to a position of reflexive distance, I do not mean a position that is disengaged, but one that is at a step back from direct participation in the consultations and in the definitional ceremony structures of the community-wide gatherings. From this position, the team adviser is able to maintain a broad conception of the

assignment, which can be easily lost in the immediacy of the community consultations and through the intensity of involvement in the tellings and retellings of the stories of people's lives of the community-wide gathering phase.

This team adviser is also well placed to bring to the attention of the team members a range of considerations, including those that relate to the development of partnerships between the members of the team and between team members and community members, and those that have to do with the politics of local culture – for example, the power relations of race, culture, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation – that can be inadvertently reproduced by team members in the course of these assignments.[4]

## Doubly listening

These community assignments are often initiated in response to very significant trauma. This may be trauma that is the outcome of loss and of the power relations of local culture that have established conditions of disadvantage, of dispossession, of marginalisation, and of racism. In the consultation phase, it is not uncommon for community members to give powerful expression to the suffering, pain and rage that is the outcome of these conditions. As observed in the preceding section of this paper, many of these expressions will have powerful effects on team members – it is only to be expected that our lives will be significantly touched by the expressions of community members. However, if at the end of these consultations we simply find ourselves feeling joined or aligned with community members in a sense of their suffering, then we are not being true to the terms of the assignment that we have accepted to undertake, to the contract that we have entered into with the community.

Under such circumstances there is also a potential for team members to become overwrought or to take action that is initiated outside of the context of partnership with other team members. If this is a primary outcome of these consultations, then it is possible that team members will inadvertently contribute to the re-traumatising of the lives of community members.

Apart from the role that transparency can play in mitigating this possibility, a determination on behalf of the team members to stay connected to their narrative skills throughout their participation in these assignments is

essential. One of those skills is based in the principle of 'doubly listening'. I will visit this principle here at some length as it is one that:

a) mitigates the potential for team members to lose their way;

b) provides safety for community members in all phases of the community assignment, including in the community-wide gathering phase;

c) plays a significant role in the identification of the valued themes of the community, and of the personal and community narratives that shape the events of the community-wide gathering; and, in so doing,

d) contributes to the identification of the knowledges and skills of the community that are relevant to addressing the community's concerns and predicaments.

### The absent but implicit

The principle of 'doubly listening' is based on the understanding that expressions of life are units of meaning and experience. According to this understanding, expressions of one's experiences of life are founded on one's ability to derive an account of what one has lived through that renders these experiences sensible. This understanding, that it is the interpretation of an experience that is lived through that establishes the conditions of possibility for the expression of this experience, raises questions about how people make sense of experience: 'What are the foundations of this interpretive act?'; 'What are the conditions that make it possible for people to attribute meaning to experiences that have been lived through?'

In responding to such questions it is my assumption that in making something out of what one has gone through, in giving meaning to one's experiences of life, some experiences must be distinguished from other experiences, which have already been described or characterised. According to this assumption, it is this contrasting of some experiences with other experiences through description that provides conditions for the attribution of meaning. By this account there is a duality to all descriptions of experience – all such descriptions are relational. A singular description of experience can be considered to be the visible side of a double description. It is that which is on the other side of singular descriptions of experiences of living – that which is on the other side of what is being distinguished or discerned,

and upon what this discernment depends – that can be referred to as the 'absent but implicit'.

Elsewhere I have described the significance of this assumption in shaping therapist practices of doubly listening, and the relevance of this assumption to therapeutic outcome:

*The engagement with this interest in the absent but implicit requires, and is reinforcing of, a double listening on behalf of the therapist. It is in the context of this double listening that people experience being doubly or multiply heard. This is a context in which people find that there is space for them to express their experience of whatever it is that troubles them. And, as well, it is in this context that they have the opportunity to explore the unstated; that is, whatever it is that this discernment speaks to. In this way, the engagement with this interest in the absent but implicit contributes to therapeutic conversations as double- or multi-storied conversations.* (White 2000b, p.41)

This assumption about the relational nature of all description, and about the significance of the notion of the absent but implicit, is significantly reinforced by the ideas of Gregory Bateson (1980) and Jaques Derrida (1973, 1976, 1978). These ideas provide for a novel 'take' on the idea of the 'unique outcome' as a gateway to the alternative stories of people's lives, a subject that has been extensively written about in the narrative therapy literature.

In order to further clarify these ideas about the absent and implicit and about the principle of doubly listening I have chosen to here provide a summary of some of Derrida's thought, and of what I take to be the therapeutic implications of this. My intention in doing this is not to suggest that these ideas provide a sole or privileged reference to team members in their consultations of community members, or that the practices of inquiry associated with these consultations are directly derived from Derrida's thought. Rather, I believe that some familiarity with Derrida's thought, and with the implications of this, provides team members with reference points which make it possible for them to sustain the practice of doubly listening in circumstances that might otherwise have the effect of separating them from these skills.

Please note, in the following discussion, I will employ terms from Derrida that may be unfamiliar. Some readers may wish to first read the section 'Trauma, pain and distress: special considerations' (pp.38-44) and then return to these considerations of Derrida's ideas.

## The variance of meaning, sign, and the signified

There is a common belief that the words that we employ to 'signify' or to give meaning to experiences of life relate directly to whatever it is that is signified by these words. According to this belief, there is a direct one-to-one correspondence between these words as signs and the world as it is – it is considered that the words that we use to give expression to our experience literally represent what it is that we have 'factually' perceived, heard, and felt.

Implicit in this belief is the idea that what we know of the world, that can be re-presented in these signs (words)[5], is derived from our ability to experience life in the present moment. This is a present moment of pristine awareness of the world as it is. This is a present moment split off from and unsullied by any distortions and false perceptions that are the outcome of the biases of history and the fallibility of memory, and of expectations and fantasies about the future. Language, according to this idea, serves as a transparent medium through which we can achieve a spontaneous expression of our immediate experiences of life, through which these experiences of the present moment can be captured and radiated in their vivacity. It is assumed that it is through language that not only the world can be perceived as it is in the immediate present, but by which the inner truth about our very beings can be revealed.

This idea that there is a direct relationship between signs (words) and the signified (the world, life as it 'is') has been radically questioned by many postmodernist and poststructuralist thinkers, amongst them Jacques Derrida. Derrida challenged the myth of 'presence'. In so doing he demonstrated that there is no moment that can be defined as 'now' in which we can find a spontaneous, natural and unstructured expression of our experience of the world. He established that there is no 'now' through which we can have access to a reliable knowledge of things as they 'truly are', and in which our words and what these words signify are at one with each other. Rather than words having a direct one-to-one correspondence with the signified (world), it is Derrida's contention that words are signs that principally function to frame, encase and demarcate. They serve the purpose of dividing and separating one concept from another. According to this contention, words are signs that construct boundaries between specific concepts and what these concepts are not – signs (words) establish borders between privileged meanings and other meanings that are subordinated, and that are excluded[6].

Derrida asserted that we cannot escape this system of signs. According to him, there is no such thing as a sign (word) that is independent of other signs (words), and no foundation upon which to derive a perception of the world that is exterior to this system of signs. There can be no 'unqualified' presence in which the world can be perceived as it 'is', or by which the inner truth about our very beings can be revealed.

For the purposes of clarity, I will here summarise several of Derrida's main points:

a) Words are signs that provide the foundation for us to distinguish between one entity and another which this entity is not. It is the generation of borders through these signs that provides the basis for us to 'discern' our world, to 'discriminate' our experiences. Such discernment and discrimination can be considered a relational achievement, as this is dependent upon determining what an experience is not. On account of this, Derrida asserted that language is 'the play of differences'.

b) It follows that meanings are never anchored to specific signs (words). Rather, the meanings of signs (words) are always tied to and determined by the meaning of other signs (words) which are absent. And the meanings of these other signs (words) which are absent are in turn tied to and determined by the meanings of yet other signs (words) that are present and also absent, and by the meanings of those signs (words) that follow and displace them in 'chains of signifiers'[7].

c) According to this understanding, every sign (word) is part of a chain of signifiers (words), and it is this chain of signifiers (words) that provides the context for the meaning of any one sign (word). The meaning of a sign (word) shifts and changes according to developments in the chain of signifiers (words) of which it is part. Derrida referred to these chains as the 'trace', a term which can be likened to the indentations of footprints, of tracks.

d) Not only is the relationship between the signifier (word) and the signified (world), and between the sign (word) and the meaning, not fixed and direct, but the signified (world) itself is not invariant. First, the signifier (word) will be transformed by the different chains of signifiers (words) in which it is entwined. Second, over time, the signifiers

(words) themselves transmute, and become the signified (the world), in the way that metaphors become familiar to the point that they are taken literally, and eventually assigned the status of 'fact'.[8]

e) The chain of signifiers (words) that Derrida refers to as the trace can be likened to a text, and in the same way that all signs (words) refer to other signs (words) that are absent, all texts can only refer to other texts which are also absent. This conclusion draws attention to the intertextuality of the world. This is an intertextual world that is composed of a network of interconnected and ever proliferating texts that traverse the territories of life.

**Deconstruction**

Derrida applied these conclusions to the analysis of written texts. He demonstrated that through the close reading of texts it is possible to render visible the absent meanings that can be found inscribed within texts in a way that is revealing of 'binary oppositions'. He developed techniques that made possible the recovery of the excluded subordinate terms of these binary oppositions, and demonstrated how these subordinate terms are actually an accomplice of the other. That is, he demonstrated how the meanings of the terms that are privileged in texts are dependent upon and determined by the meanings of subordinate terms which are excluded. He referred to the 'deconstruction of texts', the outcome of which is to locate a marginal text, 'to pry it loose', with the intention 'to reverse the resident hierarchy, only to displace it; to dismantle in order to reconstitute what is always already inscribed' (Derrida, 1976, p.lxxv)

Derrida also sought to expose those ambitious forms of writing that seek to establish taken-for-granted and unquestionable truths. Having demonstrated that language can never be literally literal, he observed that all language is metaphorical. In the deconstruction of texts he aimed to detect the places in which language is used for the purposes of establishing truth claims, and sought to identify the metaphors upon which these claims are based – to detect the places in which the metaphorical nature of the text is covered up, and to reveal the metaphoric basis of all texts. He proposed that this deconstruction was valid for all texts, including scientific, philosophical, political and legal texts. Derrida asserted that the deconstruction of texts makes evident the rhetorical nature of all truth claims[9].

## Deconstruction and community consultations

Although written texts are the focus of Derrida's approach to deconstruction, I have found these ideas relevant to therapeutic conversations with individual, couples, and families, to working with groups, to organisational consultations, and to community assignments. As previously discussed, the community assignments referred to in this paper have been initiated by approaches from representatives of communities which are experiencing a range of vexing difficulties, concerns and predicaments. In describing these difficulties, concerns and predicaments, these community representatives often provide single-storied accounts of the lives of community members. These accounts often represent the territories of life of community members to be lacklustre, and the culture of the community to be in tatters.

Upon responding to these approaches, in our preliminary meetings it is common for community members to express degrees of acceptance of, and resignation in relation to, their difficult circumstances, particularly when these are longstanding. And it is also common for community members to speak powerfully of the consequences of these difficulties, concerns and predicaments. Very significant expressions of pain and distress, often associated with accounts of personal failure, hopelessness and incompetence, as well as despair and fatigue, are usually a feature of this.

It is possible to accept Derrida's proposition about the intertextual nature of the world without losing sight of the broader context that shapes the construction of local texts. These single-storied accounts of life as wholly lacklustre, and that represent the culture of the community to be in tatters, as well as these accounts of personal failure, hopelessness and incompetence, are significantly informed by the power relations and discourses of dominant culture. These are power relations that are subjugating of the knowledges of specific groups of people, and discourses that construct the identity of the members of these groups as spoiled as an outcome of their marginal status, and as an outcome of the circumstances and conditions of life that these people have endured. These are constructions of identity that are dependent upon the subordination of other understandings about the identity of community members, one's that feature the theme of personal agency. This subordinate theme of personal agency is visible in accounts of community members' responses to what they have been through. These are accounts of conscious action that is routinely undertaken by community members to challenge those forces that are demeaning, diminishing, disqualifying and violating of what they give value to in life.

Listening can never be considered a neutral activity, and team members face special responsibilities as they listen to the expressions of community members in the context of these consultations. This is a responsibility for establishing the listening context as one in which these expressions of pain and distress are heard and acknowledged, but not in the way that limits these expressions to the revisiting of trauma through familiar signs. This is also a responsibility to establish the listening context as one in which accounts of failure, hopelessness, incompetence, and despair are heard and acknowledged, but not in a way that contributes further to these thin conclusions about people's identities, or about the identity of their family or their community.

The notion of the 'absent but implicit' can be of considerable assistance to team members in stepping into this special responsibility. It is through structuring conversations that are revealing of the absent but implicit that community members are afforded the opportunity to find words for the expression of the:

a) purposes, values and beliefs that make possible the discernment of frustration;

b) hopes, dreams and visions for the future that make possible the discernment of despair;

c) conceptions of the just world that make possible the discernment of injustice;

d) missions for, and pledges about, life that make possible the discernment of burden;

e) notions of healing that make possible the discernment of woundedness;

f) knowledges of life that are of tradition, of spirituality, and of highly valued cultural wisdoms that make possible the discernment of abandonment and desolation, and so on.

Apart from structuring a listening context that is revealing of the absent but implicit, it is also the responsibility of team members to closely attend to the transformation of signs and meaning as the conversations of these consultations evolve. For example, to any transformation of signs and meaning that construct 'determination' in the place of 'passivity', that construct 'responsibility' in place of a sense of 'paralysis', that construct a 'refusal to co-operate' in the place of 'personal neediness'. These are transformation of signs and meanings that are associated with the discourses of personal agency,

and that have the potential to displace those signs and meanings that are of the discourses of deficit and incompetence, and that are employed in the marginalisation and in the disempowerment of specific communities of people.

In the forgoing discussion I introduced some ideas about the practice of 'doubly listening', outlined some of Derrida's notions that I find pertinent to these practices, and emphasised the relevance of this to the special responsibility that team members have in the structuring of the listening context. In the following points I provide a summary of some of the specific implications of Derrida's thought in regard to team member participation in the consultation phase of community assignments.

a) The idea that words are signs that provide the foundation for people to distinguish between one experience and another, which this experience is not, assists team members to maintain an awareness that all expressions entail specific acts of discrimination. These are acts of discrimination that are achieved through the construction of borders between what is being discerned and that which contrasts with this. It is through this awareness that team members can avoid being mesmerised by specific signs (words) and meanings. This awareness is an antidote to the sort of mesmerisation that contributes to a sense of personal paralysis in response to community members' expressions of profound despair and hopelessness. It is also an antidote to the potential for team members to inadvertently exacerbate the sense of hopelessness and despair of community members. If team members are feeling particularly overwhelmed by community members' expressions of hopelessness and despair, conversations with other team members that are shaped by this awareness that all expressions entail specific acts of discrimination make it possible for us to avoid simply joining with community members in this hopelessness and despair.

b) The idea that meanings are never anchored to specific signs (words), but tied to and determined by the meaning of other signs (words) which are absent, encourages team members to listen for cues that might provide access to those absent but implicit signs (words), and to develop modes of inquiry that might be revealing of these signs (words). The proposition that in every sign (word) there

can be found traces of the other signs (words) which have gone before, and which have been excluded by the privileged sign (word), is significantly orienting of the team members' practices of inquiry in community consultations. For example, in listening to expressions of woundedness, team members might also be listening for cues that would provide a basis for the identification and the exploration of other signs (words) associated with notions that contrast with this – for example, signs (words) associated with notions of healing.

c) The idea that any sign (word) is part of a chain of signifiers (words), and that it is the chain of signifiers (words) that provides the context for the meaning of any one sign (word), assists team members to avoid becoming fixated by specific signs (words). This is the sort of fixation that is the outcome of the attention of team members becoming tied to signs (words) that are privileged above all others. These privileged signs (words) often take the form of declarations of hopelessness and impotence, and are given the status of final conclusions about worthlessness, and of end meanings about the futility of life. In avoiding this fixation, team members are able to decentre specific signifiers (words), to appreciate the extent to which the conclusions or end meanings associated with these are shaped by an unfolding chain of signifiers (words), and to be alert to the development of yet new meanings and the generation of new signs (words) in the context of these chains of signifiers (words). If it is possible to maintain an appreciation of the fact that such final conclusions and end meanings will never be arrived at, then team members are less likely to find themselves fixated by specific signs (words), and will be more able to think beyond these and to sustain an open inquiry into the lives of community members.

d) Further, the idea that the meaning of the sign (word) itself shifts and changes according to developments in the chain of signifiers (words) of which it is part, alerts team members to the options for the renegotiation of specific meanings that deny community members the experience of personal agency. Through this renegotiation, signs of 'spoiled' and 'damaged' identities that evoke a sense of shame, embarrassment, disgrace, dishonour, humiliation and indignity can become signs of 'bona fide' and 'worthy' identities that evoke a sense of pride, respect,

honour, dignity and integrity[10]. It is in the context of attending to these options for the renegotiation of meanings that signs that construct:

i. inferiority and inadequacy might be newly appreciated as evidence of defiance and non-conformity;

ii. failure might be newly understood to be a reflection of independent mindedness;

iii. damage and disability might be taken to denote special insider knowledges of tyranny that contribute to a uniquely-abled life;

iv. culpability for what one has been through might be newly perceived to be expressions of precious survival skills;

v. dependence might be newly acknowledged as a commitment to the ethic of collaborative action;

vii. neediness might be newly recognised to reflect a special consciousness of injustices, including those associated with the politics of disadvantage;

viii. passivity might be newly appreciated as an unwillingness to visit on the lives of others what has been visited upon one's own life;

ix. weakness might be newly understood to reflect compassion and open mindedness, and so on.

e) An appreciation of the process by which, over time, the signifiers (words) undergo transmutation and become the signified (the world) encourages team members to inquire into the history of any negative conclusions about life and identity that are presented as facts by community members. In this inquiry the metaphorical origins of certain conclusions about identity and about life become visible, as do the historical conditions under which these metaphors came to be taken literally and assigned the status of 'fact'.

f) The idea that a chain of signifiers (words) can be likened to texts that can only refer to other texts that are absent assists team members to maintain an appreciation of the intertextuality of life. In the context of close listening, this awareness contributes to the readiness of team members to identify and to respond to cues that might provide a point of entry to the subordinate accounts of people's lives, and to draw these out in their consultations with community members. In the context of these consultations, the complexity and multiplicity of, and diversity in, the accounts of the lives of community members becomes visible, and the lacklustre, singular and uniform accounts of life that are so often expressed in the preliminary phases of community consultations are displaced. One outcome of team members engaging with modes of inquiry that bring forth this network of interconnected and ever proliferating texts is the expansion of possibilities for community members to experience their lives linked around a range of themes shaped by what they accord value to in their lives.

In this discussion I have sketched out what I take to be some of the implications of Jacques Derrida's ideas for community consultations. These ideas are of assistance to team members in our determination to stay connected to skills of narrative inquiry throughout our participation in community assignments. Community consultations that are guided by this principle of doubly listening are unlikely to contribute to circumstances in which team members become overwhelmed, or in which team members might initiate actions from outside of the context of the partnership that we have with other team members, and that are at variance with the terms of the contracts that the team has negotiated with communities. It is highly likely that these conversations will also be sustaining of the purposes of the team members, and will be reinforcing of the sort of team member action that is in accord with the terms of these contracts.

And, of course, practices of inquiry shaped by these ideas are effective in rendering visible the multi-storied basis of the lives and identities of community members, and, as well, the significant and valued themes around which they are joined to each other in their lives and identities. As these stories and themes are more richly described over the course of the community assignment, the knowledges of life and skills of living reflected in these stories are more openly recognised and embraced by community members.

I will at this juncture provide an example of a community consultation that illustrates a few of the practice implications that we find support and reinforcement for in ideas drawn from the work of Jacques Derrida.

*Dulwich Centre had been approached by a representative of a network of consumers of psychiatric services with a request that we assist in addressing a range of predicaments that these consumers were facing. Some of these predicaments*

were the outcome of general stigma and disadvantage, some the outcome of disqualification and marginalisation in the context of service delivery, some the outcome of a paucity of services, and some the outcome of a consumer representation in mental health policy making that was tokenistic. It was the hope of this representative that we might play a part in structuring a community-wide gathering to address these predicaments, and that this would provide a foundation for the consumers of this network to join together in taking action on these. This approach to our team had been influenced by a conversation between some consumers of psychiatric services and members of another community of people with whom we'd had contact.

Following some preliminary conversations with this representative, we initiated consultations with the members of this community in preparation for the proposed community-wide gathering. As part of my contribution to these preliminary consultations, I was to join a meeting with a group of representatives from consumer-led non-government mental health organisations. This I did in partnership with a colleague who'd developed substantial insider knowledge of mental health issues as a long-standing consumer of psychiatric services. I knew that this meeting would be quite formative of our relationship with the community. I recall that we were quite apprehensive about the outcome of this meeting, for it had been hastily called, and we weren't secure in the sense that we had adequately addressed the expectations about the part that our team might play in the early phases of this initiative, and at the proposed community-wide gathering.

After introductions and some reflection on the potential significance of the proposed gathering, the community representatives began to share stories about the predicaments being faced by the members of their community, and about the effects of these predicaments. These stories strongly featured themes of disenfranchisement, disempowerment, despair, futility and desperation. As these community representatives took us into their stories, their anguish over the predicaments faced by the people they represented was palpable, and we could not but be influenced by this. Along with these powerfully moving stories, the community representatives were also giving voice to a sense of urgency and a degree of anticipation – urgency that something be done quickly to address these predicaments, and anticipation of some action on our behalf that might contribute to the alleviation of the effects of these

predicaments on the lives of community members. In the context of introducing us to their stories, these community representatives were looking for responses from us that would make a difference.

We both realised that the conditions were such that there was the potential for us to feel quite overwhelmed in the context of this meeting – for we felt simultaneously touched by the stories of heartache, significantly influenced by the anguish that was so palpable, weighed down by the expectations about our response, and pressed by the sense of urgency that was so tangible. We both knew that in this circumstance there was the potential for us to lose our way, and to fail the agenda that had been set for the meeting. This realisation gave us cause to renew our commitment to doubly listen in the context of this consultation.

We were now hearing yet further expressions of futility. At this time our listening was oriented by the understanding that these expressions were dependent upon and tied to other signs that provided the conditions for the discernment of futility, signs that were absent but implicit. In the context of this close listening, we became curious about what sort of circumstances were favourable to the development of futility. In listening to the responses to our questions about these circumstances, we heard passing reference to losing touch with a sense of purpose and of justice. We asked some questions about this sense of purpose and justice, and Heather, one of the community representatives, began to speak of some of the events of her life that had dispossessed her of this sense. In response, we asked Heather further questions about the history of this sense of purpose and justice in her life. We particularly wanted to know of any historical experiences that might have been validating of the relevance of this sense of purpose and justice to her existence.

In response to our inquiry, Heather began to tell a story about an event of her life that took place ten years ago. She described a trauma that had contributed to her losing touch with this sense of purpose and justice, and the consequences of this, which included being lost and wandering around the streets aimlessly for days. Heather's eccentric Aunt Mavis had traced her whereabouts, and had given her no choice but to accompany her to her aunt's home. Aunt Mavis was unfazed by Heather's emotional state and general condition, and as soon as they entered her home, she had 'stuck' Heather in a warm 'bath', had given her a cup of tea, had climbed into the bath with her, had lit two cigarettes,

*and had proceeded with: 'Now dearie, you have got to understand that this just wont do. I am going to tell you some things about your life that you will just have to learn to appreciate, things that you have probably just forgotten about. I am also going to tell you about what you mean to me and to lots of other people, and you are just going to have to listen to this, and keep listening to it. I am going to remind you about what is important in life. And we are not getting out of this bath until I have finished, and until you understand some of these things again'. This turned out to be a timely intervention on behalf of Aunt Mavis. The crisis team who had been looking for Heather were called off. And over a period of two weeks, under Aunt Mavis' tutelage, Heather regained her sense of purpose and justice in life, and 'found' herself again.*

*Upon hearing this story, the other community representatives began to share stories about some of the crises in their own lives that had dispossessed them of a sense of purpose and justice, and about turns of events that had been restorative of this sense. We had gained permission from these representatives to note some of the stories that reflected this theme of a shared sense of purpose and justice. This theme, and the associated stories, was taken into the program for the proposed community-wide gathering.*

*Subsequently, at the gathering, this theme was introduced and spoken to by some of the community representatives via a retelling of some of the stories that we had recorded during our meeting. These representatives then invited other community members to speak about their connection to this sense of purpose and justice, and about what this had provided a basis for in their own lives.*

*As the meeting with these community representatives unfolded across the day, we had remained alert in our efforts to identify the absent but implicit signs that had provided the conditions for the discernment of many of the experiences that these community representatives were giving expression to, including those of futility, despair and desperation. Our doubly listening contributed to a context for the telling of extraordinary stories about the history of the purposes of these community representatives, about knowledges of life that were to a degree shared by other members of their community, and about the living skills that these community representatives were employing in their own lives and in their work with others of their community. These themes, and others that were defined in consultations with other community members, were taken up into the program for the*

*community-wide gathering. This program provided the structure for an event in which community members had the opportunity to express difficult experiences of life in ways that were challenging of many of the negative identity conclusions previously formed in the context of these experiences. This program also provided a foundation for community members to join together to address many of the predicaments they had been facing.*

There is nothing about this proposal for double storied conversations that limits opportunities for community members to express experiences that are troublesome, painful and distressing. To the contrary, it is in the context of these double or multi-storied conversations that community members find the opportunity and the freedom to speak of what they have often had little previous opportunity to speak of. As the absent but implicit is identified and richly described in these conversations, community members usually find themselves standing more firmly in some of the other territories of their lives. As an outcome of this they are less restricted to exclusive occupation of the territories of life that feature difficult and painful experiences, and negative constructions of personal and community identity. In the circumstances of having other territories of life and identity in which to stand, it becomes more possible for people to visit and give full voice to troublesome, distressing, and traumatising experiences without the risk of re-traumatisation and its consequences.

*In the context of our meeting with these community representatives, our attention to the absent but implicit did not limit their expressions of despair, hardship, and injustice. To the contrary, upon identifying the absent but implicit in this way, the community representatives seemed more free to give fuller expression to these experiences. I believe that this was an outcome of the fact that signs associated with these experiences were no longer so totally defining of the identities of these community representatives, and of the identity of their community. As well, in the process of rendering visible the absent but implicit, there was some transformation of the signs for these experiences, and, as well, some transmutation in the experiences themselves. For example what was expressed as frustration at the inability of community members to find a way forward became a strong determination to call the attention of the wider community to their predicament.*

## Trauma, pain and distress: special considerations

For many of the community representatives who have invited us to join them in community initiatives, the desire to address significant trauma and its aftermath is high on the agenda. This includes trauma that is the outcome of tragic loss and of the power relations of local culture that have established conditions of disadvantage, of dispossession, and of marginalisation. In speaking of the aftermath of such trauma, these community representatives usually inform us that many of the difficulties experienced in their communities are expressions of ongoing pain and distress in relation to trauma, for which there appear to be few avenues of relief. In view of the priority so often accorded to this issue by community representatives, I believe that the subject of ongoing pain and distress, and ideas about how these experiences might be appropriately addressed in the context of community assignments, warrants special consideration in this paper.

Conclusions about what might be appropriate ways of addressing such pain and distress are always shaped by how such experiences are thought about. For example, there is the commonly held and highly influential idea that this is a psychological pain and an emotional distress that is the 'natural' outcome of social trauma in much the same way that physical pain is the natural outcome of physical trauma. This idea is usually coupled with a conception of this psychological pain and emotional distress as substances – the presence of which can be measured in quantitative terms – that are stored under pressure in a psychological or an emotional system in much the same way that fluid is compressed in an hydraulic system or that steam builds a head of pressure in a steam engine. The idea that psychological pain and emotional distress is the natural outcome of trauma, and the conception of this pain and distress as substances held under pressure, leads to the conclusion that the 'healing' task is to bring about a discharge of these substances. In common parlance there is an abundance of cathartic metaphors that vividly represent this task – 'getting things out', 'releasing feelings', 'discharging pain', 'letting off steam', and so on.

Apart from prioritising the 'discharge' or 'release' of pain and distress, these practices often encourage people to revisit the trauma in memory, and even to return to the material site that was associated with the traumatic experience. I am sure that readers will be aware of the potential hazards of some of the therapeutic practices that are founded on these simple conclusions about the healing task. Apart from anything else, these practices leave much to chance, and there is the very real risk that they will be re-traumatising of people. These practices can contribute to a sense of confinement, of being trapped again in territories of life that give rise to pain and distress, and can be sponsoring of a never ending search for yet more forums in which this pain and distress might be expressed. As well, these practices often have the effect of reinforcing people's feelings of helplessness and of the very negative identity conclusions that were imposed on them in the original experience of trauma. At times, in the culture of therapy and in popular culture, people's resistance to these practices are invalidated by interpretations that represent this as a form of 'denial' or 'flight' that will undoubtedly impair their personal development, perhaps even permanently arresting it. This so-called denial or flight is usually considered to be a roadblock to the 'natural' route the healing process might otherwise take.

Apart from these potential hazards, this focus on naturalistic understandings of pain and distress, and the cathartic practices associated with these understandings, invariably lead to extraordinary simplifications of significant complexities in people's experiences of life, and, as well, to a thin grasp of the consequences of therapeutic conversations. I believe that such outcomes can be routinely expected whenever metaphors about life and identity are employed to the point that they are considered factual – in this case, to the point to which these cathartic metaphors, and these metaphors that construct experiences of life in hydraulic and steam engine terms, are taken to be literally true.

In regard to the consequences of therapeutic conversations, all such conversations are constructing of people's identities, and therapeutic practices based on these naturalistic understandings and the prioritising of catharsis can contribute to the construction of a significantly fragile or vulnerable sense of self. When this happens, people frequently embrace an understanding that they have been personally damaged or messed up by the trauma they have been subject to, and are left with a very keen sense that their person is ever susceptible to being trespassed upon in ways that they will be hard-pressed to defend themselves against. This is a construction of self that closes down options for people to take action in regard to their predicaments in life, and is diminishing of their general sense of knowing how to proceed with their lives.

In this critique of naturalistic understandings of pain and distress as an outcome of trauma, it is not my intention to diminish an appreciation of the importance of establishing contexts in which people are able to speak of what they haven't had the opportunity to speak of, and to put into expression some of the very significant experiences that have been shaping of their lives, including those that have been highly traumatic. But such a critique does make way for the acknowledgement of many of the complexities and particularities of people's experiences of trauma, and their expressions of this experience. It also makes way for attention to be focussed on the responsibility that therapists have in the shaping of therapeutic conversations that will contribute to constructions of a more 'robust', distributed, and abled sense of self that will displace the 'fragile', isolated, and disabled sense of self. This is a development of a sense of self that people find more honouring of their lives, one that brings forth an awareness of personal agency that opens options for people to take action in regard to their predicaments in life. This is a development of sense of self in which people are more strongly aware of their links to the lives of others around significant and valued themes, and one in which people's general sense of knowing how to proceed in life is enhanced.

These observations about the constructions of pain and distress, and about the potential consequences of therapeutic inquiry are just as relevant to the community consultations of community assignments. The construction of people's sense of self in these consultations is a critical consideration. As team members, we can have conversations with community members in which they give powerful expression to their experiences of pain and distress as an outcome of trauma, and at the end of these conversations these people can feel highly vulnerable and defenceless, and can be left with a fragile, isolated and disabled sense of themselves. Alternatively, we can have other conversations with these very same community members in which they give equally powerful expression to this pain and distress, and yet at the end of these conversations these people can feel relatively resilient, and find themselves stepping into a more robust, joined, and abled sense of themselves.

The following points represent just a few alternative understandings of psychological pain and emotional distress that open possibilities for community consultations to contribute to the development of more robust conceptions of self. These understandings are partly informed by the notion of the absent but implicit, and are as relevant to traditional therapeutic contexts as they are to the consultation phase of community assignments. These points also sponsor an inquiry that will be more recognising of some of the complexities that are obscured by naturalistic understandings of pain and distress and by the popular understanding of the catharsis injunction. In order to consider these possibilities for community consultations, it is important to question the 'necessary' link between trauma and psychological pain and emotional distress. This is to question the idea that this is a psychological pain and an emotional distress that is the 'natural' outcome of social trauma in much the same way that physical pain is the natural outcome of physical trauma.

## Pain as testimony

Ongoing psychological pain in response to trauma in the history of people's lives might be considered a testimony to the significance of what it was that the person held precious that was violated through the experience of trauma. This can include people's understandings about:

a)  cherished purposes for one's life;

b)  prized values and beliefs around acceptance, justice and fairness;

c)  treasured aspirations, hopes and dreams;

d)  moral visions about how things might be in the world;

e)  significant pledges, vows and commitments about ways of being in life, etc.

If psychological pain can be considered to be a testimony to such purposes, values, beliefs, aspirations, hopes, dreams, moral visions, and commitments, then the experienced intensity of this pain can be considered to be a reflection of the degree to which these intentional states were held precious by persons. In the context of therapeutic conversations, these intentional state understandings can be identified, resurrected and become richly known. As well, it is within these conversations that people have the opportunity to experience being at one with a range of positive identity conclusions that displace many negative 'truths' of identity that they have been recruited into as an outcome of the traumas they have been subject to.

*Jennifer, a community member, talked openly of her desperation over what she described as 'unrelenting emotional pain'. She linked this to some 'shattering events' that had taken place in her extended family, events that she had partly foreseen but that she had felt powerless to alter. As she described these events and their effect on her life, she reflected on what she perceived to be her helplessness and personal inadequacy.*

*As I listened to Jennifer's story I found opportunity to ask about what she understood to be the implications of this helplessness and personal inadequacy. I was particularly interested to know what this might keep her from. In response to my inquiry, Jennifer said that this 'would make it impossible to connect to any vision of what life might be about'. In asking Jennifer what came to mind when referring to 'any vision of what life might be about', she began to tell me a story about her maternal grandmother, now long deceased, who had been 'visionary', and who had been 'the rock of the family'. This opened the door to a rich conversation in which Jennifer began to link some of the stories of her life with the stories of her maternal grandmother's life around precious themes. As our conversation evolved, Jennifer also began to share stories of her community in which these precious themes featured.*

*Jennifer's stories, and the description of the precious themes around which the lives of many family members and community members were linked, significantly shaped the program for the community-wide gathering phase of our community assignment. In the context of this community-wide gathering, and in the company of several other community members, Jennifer introduced these themes and retold some of the stories of our consultation. She then invited other community members to share stories of their own lives that were resonant with these themes. One outcome of Jennifer participating in this way in the consultation and gathering phases of the community assignment was a very significant lessening of her felt experience of psychological pain, and the dissolution of the sense of helplessness and personal inadequacy.*

**Distress as tribute**

Day-to-day emotional distress in response to trauma in people's histories might be considered a tribute to their ability to maintain a constant relationship with all of those purposes, values, beliefs, aspirations, hopes, dreams, visions and commitments held precious – to their refusal to relinquish or to be separated from that which was so powerfully disrespected and demeaned in the context of trauma, from that which they continue to revere.

If such emotional distress can be considered to be a tribute to people's determination to maintain a constant relationship with that which was powerfully disrespected and demeaned in the context of trauma, then the experienced intensity of this distress can be considered to be a reflection of the degree to which the person has continued to revere and maintain a relationship with what it is that they hold precious. In the context of therapeutic conversations, acknowledgement of people's refusal to relinquish what was so powerfully disrespected, and explorations of their skills in maintaining a relationship with these intentional states, can be very significantly elevating of their sense of who they are, and of what their lives are about.

*Jane, a community member, was significantly distressed. This distress, which she experienced as a daily occurrence, seemed to erupt 'without rhyme or reason', and made it virtually impossible for her to proceed with her life. Jane understood that this distress had its origins in some significantly traumatic events of her history, but didn't understand why she wasn't able to come to terms with these and why the distress wasn't being at all eroded by the passage of time. She felt perpetually annoyed at herself, had concluded that she was entirely incompetent, and that she would always be so.*

*I asked Jane to say more about what she was annoyed about in herself. She responded that she was annoyed with herself because, try as she might, she just couldn't get her life right, and just didn't seem to be able to 'let go'. 'To let go of what?', 'Do you mean to let go of something important to you?', 'Or perhaps something else?' I asked. Jane was initially surprised by these questions, and struggled in her efforts to respond to them. But before long she began to describe some of the purposes and values that had been important to her life as a young woman. In the context of our conversation about these purposes and values, Jane's mood visibly changed. After a time our conversation turned to an exploration of how it was that she had managed to maintain a daily relationship with these purposes and values, and how it was that she hadn't allowed herself to get separated from them despite all of the forces that were encouraging her to 'let go' of them.*

*Later, Jane began to speak of how it was purposes and values like these that were being forsaken in her community, and of how she understood this to be threatening of the very fabric of this community. Jane took this understanding into the community-wide gathering stage of the community assignment, and successfully invited community members to join her in stitching together the stories of their histories around these shared purposes and values. Jane went on to play a significant role in the remaking of the fabric of her community, and, although she became more appreciative of what her episodes of distress signified, she was relieved to find these rapidly diminishing in frequency and intensity.*

**Pain and distress as proclamation of response**

If ongoing psychological pain can be considered a testimony to the significance of what it was that the person held precious that was violated through the experience of trauma, and if emotional distress can be considered a tribute to their ability to maintain a constant relationship with what was so powerfully disrespected and demeaned in the context of trauma, exploring the specifics of this testimony and tribute can provide a basis for identifying people's responses to the trauma they have been subject to. People respond to the crises of their lives, even when these crises are the outcome of trauma under circumstances in which they are relatively powerless to escape the context or to bring about a cessation of whatever it is that they are being subject to. Even small children who are being subject to abuse respond in ways to modify what it is that they are being subject to. These acts of redress that are shaped by people's intentional states are rarely recognised and acknowledged, and therefore rarely appreciated and held with reverence by the people who initiate them.

When the specifics of what psychological pain and emotional distress might be a testimony or tribute to are defined, this can provide a basis for explorations of the extent to which this pain and distress is also a proclamation of people's responses to the traumas that they have been subject to. In context of therapeutic conversations, what it is that a person held precious and has continued to revere can become known, and this provides the basis for an inquiry into how this shaped their responses to what they were being put through. This sort of inquiry is one that emphasises actions taken that reflect the exercise of personal agency according to specific intentional states.

*During my consultation with a single parent family in preparation for a community assignment, the attention of family members turned to Jack, a young man of seventeen years of age, who had grudgingly agreed to be present. Family members had been concerned about his state of mind for some considerable time, and all considered him a suicide risk. This family was of a community that had experienced a number of youth suicides over the past two years, and considered the threat of Jack following suit to be 'too real'. Initially Jack rebuked the members of his family over their speculation about him as a suicide risk, but after being confronted by a couple of his siblings, he acknowledged that he had been 'just playing with ideas of suicide'. In response to my interest in the reasons for this, Jack said that he was 'messed up', that he felt 'paralysed' most of the time, and that there was no hope for his future.*

*Jack's siblings asserted that he just felt this way on account of some of the really bad times that he had been through at the hands of his uncle. He responded that it was worse for his mother and his brothers and sisters than it was for him. When I asked Jack what it was like to witness what they were put though by this abusive man, he said 'Just too painful'. I invited family members to reflect on what this said to them about Jack's esteem for them, and to share any memories they might have of Jack's responses to what he witnessed them being put through, responses that might be echoing of this esteem.*

*Suddenly I was hearing stories of Jack's efforts to distract his uncle from the negative attention that he was visiting on Jack's mother and siblings, and about his efforts to modify his uncle's actions at these times. These were extraordinary stories of Jack's response to the abuses he witnessed the members of his family being subject to, about the knowledges and skills that he had developed and employed against this tyranny. These were stories that contradicted Jack's conclusion that he was messed up, and that challenged his sense of inability to respond to the world.*

*During my second consultation with this family, it was clear to me that Jack was beginning to identify with these accounts of his actions, and to experience a stronger sense of personal agency. He decided that he could cease playing with ideas of suicide. At the subsequent community-wide gathering, Jack made a significant contribution through his conversations with other young people who had also been subject to significant trauma, and who had witnessed the abuse of their loved ones.*

## Expressions of pain and distress as movement

The idea that psychological pain and emotional distress are substances held under pressure, and representations of the healing task in terms of popular understandings of the catharsis metaphor, are associated with time-honoured dualisms in which things called emotions, behaviours and cognitions are juxtaposed – for example, feeling/meaning, affect/cognition, emotion/thought, construct/action, thought/action, meaning/emotion, affective/instrumental, and so on. It is in the questioning of these dualisms that construct such 'components' of emotion, behaviour and cognitions that it becomes possible for us to entertain the idea that all expressions of life are units of meaning and experience, and that these expressions are shaping or constituting of life. Put another way, expressions of life can be considered movements in life – it is through people's expressions of life that they are transported. It is in the context of this movement through expression that people become other than who they were.

When expressions of psychological pain and emotional distress are taken into the sort of dualistic understandings discussed above, these movements in life take the form of a series of stalled initiatives, of 'fits and starts'. In these circumstances, the potential for these movements to have significant and enduring shaping effects on people's lives is mostly lost, and it is very likely that people will continue to experience their lives to be frozen in time. However, when expressions of psychological pain and emotional distress can be understood as units of experience and meaning that are shaping or constituting of life, the door is open to an inquiry that is identifying of and richly describing of where these expressions are taking people to in their movement through life. It is through such inquiry that the transporting aspects of these expressions can be acknowledged, and that what otherwise might be a series of fits and starts are taken into themes that have enduring effects. It is through these circumstances that people derive a sense of their lives unfolding according to preferred directions, which is an antidote to the experience of being frozen in time.

*Ashley, a community member, talked about her prevailing sense of desperation that her life was not going anywhere. She felt 'totally frozen' in time, and that nothing that she could do seemed to have any effect on her state. Ashley said that she had come to understand some of the circumstances of life growing up in her community that were directly responsible for this sense of being frozen, but that this understanding had made no difference whatsoever – it did not in any way contribute to options for her to proceed in life. She was always bursting into tears at the smallest instigation, and this invariably left her feeling exhausted. Ashley had come to see these 'episodes' in negative terms, describing them as 'setbacks'.*

*As Ashley began to describe these episodes of tearfulness, she began to cry. In response to this development, she said, 'See, there I go again, I'm just hopeless'. Instead of turning away from these tears, I asked Ashley if it would be okay for us to have a conversation that might contribute to a wider understanding of them. She gave her assent, and I began to ask some gentle questions about them:*

- *'If we were to think of these tears as little capsules that were thought-filled, what thoughts are you aware of at this time that might not be available to you at other times?';*

- *'If these tears contained other pictures or perspectives on your life, on what your life might be about, are you experiencing anything that might provide us with a clue to these?';*

- *'If this flow of tears is reflective of a different attitude towards your own life and to yourself, not one that is so rejecting, what sense do you have of what this attitude might be?';*

- *'If these tears are in part a reaching out to the world, and an opening of your world to others, what's your guess about the nature of the connections they might build?';*

- *'If we were to think of these tears as potentially transporting of you to another place in life, somewhere away from that familiar desperation, where might this place be?'.*

*It was in the context of conversations shaped by these questions that Ashley's sense of being frozen in life began to melt away, and that she began to develop a sense of the ways in which her life was unfolding through her expressions. Her 'episodes' were no longer a source of consternation to her, but were experienced as movements in life. Ashley subsequently spoke of this in one of the forums of a community-wide gathering, and in so doing played a part in providing a foundation for other community members to differently orient to their expressions of sorrow that had been considered problematic.*

## Psychological pain and distress as elements of a legacy

Psychological pain and emotional distress might be understood to be elements of a legacy expressed by people who, in the face of the non-responsiveness of the world around them, remain resolute in their determination that the trauma that they and others have gone through will not be for nothing – that things must change on account of what they have gone through. According to this understanding, despite the absence of a wider acknowledgement that things must change, these people are sentinels who will not let this matter drop, and who have remained on-guard against forces that would be diminishing of their experiences, and that would be reproducing of trauma in the lives of others.

This understanding contributes to a context in which the legacy that is represented in expressions of psychological pain and emotional distress can be significantly honoured and joined with by others. It can also contribute to a context that is acknowledging of the way in which people rely upon their insider experience of trauma in recognising the consequences of this in the lives of others, and in responding to others with a compassion that touches their lives, and that evokes a sense of solidarity with them.

*As part of the consultations in the initial phase of a community assignment with a group of consumers of psychiatric services, I was meeting with Henry.*

*Henry had a day-to-day struggle with 'psychic pain' that he found disabling. This condition had remained unchanged despite the 'understanding, support and encouragement' he had initially experienced from the community psychiatric clinic that he had attended over the past five years. He'd had countless consultations with the workers of this clinic, most of them focussing on the political terror that he'd been subject to in his country of origin, and with the idea of assisting him to 'work through' and to 'resolve' this.*

*Although Henry was clearly appreciative of the efforts of these workers, he saw that they were now openly frustrated with his 'lack of progress', and were exhorting him to 'stop wallowing' in his misery and 'to get on with life'. And although he could understand these responses to his predicament, nonetheless these were contributing to a growing sense of alienation in relation to the clinic workers, and to 'deeper feelings of isolation'.*

*Henry felt desolate. He had reached the conclusion that he was permanently damaged and messed up on account of what he had been through, and had no hope that his life would ever change. However, as I listened to his lament about his life's situation, it was clear to me that he was not simply resigned to his current circumstances. For one thing, in this lament I could hear powerful expressions of dissatisfaction with the unresponsiveness of the wider world, not just to his own predicament, but also to the predicaments of others. This provided a foundation for me to ask questions about why, in the face of this unresponsiveness, he had not become simply resigned to his current circumstances. And why was it that he was continuing to hold out for a more responsive world? These questions opened new avenues of conversations in which Henry gave voice to his determination that things would just have to change in the wider world, and that he was not going to let the matter go – there were 'things that people needed to understand' and until enough voices were 'joined against the victimisation and exploitation of others' he wasn't going to budge.*

*In my second consultation interview with Henry, this account of the world's unresponsiveness to injustice, of his determination to bear witness to tyranny, and of how this linked him to some traditions of solidarity of the community that he grew up in, grew richer. And for the first time he was linking all of this to what he had earlier referred to as his psychic pain. The community-wide gathering phase of this community assignment provided further opportunity for Henry to bear witness, for the wider acknowledgement of the significance of his stand, and for others to join him in the planning of local action in relation to some of the injustices that they perceived in their immediate worlds. Although Henry continued to have some episodes of psychic pain, this was no longer disabling of him, or isolating of him from others.*

## Discussion

It is through a questioning of naturalistic understandings of trauma and its consequences in people's lives that space is opened for the appreciation of the complexities of people's response to trauma. I have provided an account of several alternative non-naturalistic understandings of psychological pain and day-to-day emotional distress as:

a) a testimony to those intentional states held precious by people;

b) a tribute to people's maintenance of a relationship with those intentional states that they continue to revere;

c) a proclamation of people's acts of redress in response to the traumas they have been subject to;

d) expressions that are movements in life that shape opportunities for people to become other than who they were;

e) elements of a legacy expressed by people who, in the face of the non-responsiveness of the world around them, remain resolute in their determination that the trauma that they and others have gone through will not be for nothing.

It is in the context of conversations shaped by such understandings that people derive a robust, joined, and abled sense of their identities. In fact, these conversations can build a foundation for people to experience themselves to be uniquely-abled on account of the difficult and traumatic experiences that they have been through, rather than uniquely-disabled. And further, these conversations contribute to a significant reduction in felt experiences of psychological pain, and of emotional distress.

It is in the context of inquiry informed by understandings such as these that people find safe places in which to stand in the territory of memory – at first islands, then archipelagos, and then continents – that provide them with platforms for speaking of what hasn't been spoken about, for putting into more significant expression their experiences of trauma. It is through the development of these safe places in which to stand in memory that it becomes possible for people to bring their experiences of trauma into the storylines of their lives, and to allocate these to history as events with beginnings and endings. And it is in the context of inquiry informed by understandings such as these that people are provided with a foundation for knowing how to proceed with their lives.

## Further narrative practices

In emphasising the significance of this principle of doubly listening in this paper, and in explicating some of the special considerations that this principle is highly relevant to, it has not been my intention to suggest that this is the only principle that is taken into these community assignments by team members. These team members are familiar with a range of narrative practices, including those that provide a context for community members to identify many of the unique outcomes of their lives, and to assist them to load these with significance. Team members are well acquainted with the practices associated with re-authoring conversations that assist people to richly describe many of the alternative stories of their lives. They are also conversant with practices that are effective in drawing out the knowledges of life and skills of living expressed in these stories, and in assisting people to develop a strong familiarity with these knowledges and skills.

These and other narrative practices contribute to the identification of valued and significant themes (usually characterised by shared purposes, values, beliefs, dreams, hopes, visions, and commitments to specific ways of being in life) that are relevant to the whole community. The rich description of these themes sponsors the accumulation of a stock of personal and community narratives that are associated with them. It is these themes and these narratives that are taken up into the program that shapes the community-wide gathering phases of these assignments, and that have a profound effect on the course of these gatherings. These themes and narratives provide community members with a platform:

a) to speak of what it is difficult to speak of in ways that significantly decrease the risk of exacerbating pain and distress;

b) to address many experiences of their lives that could not otherwise be addressed without significant risk of evoking a sense of hopelessness and despair;

c) for the application of the community members' knowledges and skills to their shared concerns and predicaments;

d) for the further development of these skills and knowledges; and

e) upon which to develop a range of proposals about future community action and about the further development of community structures of partnership and solidarity.

Before considering how these themes are engaged with in community-wide gatherings, it seems relevant to consider the principle of partnership that informs our work with communities.

# PART FOUR

# Partnership

We endeavour to apply the principle of partnership to all phases of our work with communities. There is much that could be said about the development of partnerships between the members of our team, and between these team members and community members. I will only review a little of this here.

It is our preference for at least 50% of the team to be composed of people with some insider knowledge of the sort of concerns and predicaments being experienced by the members of the communities that approach us about these assignments. At times some of the team members have been drawn from these communities. In these circumstances we have instituted a skills-focussed training phase ahead of, and running in tandem with, the consultation phase of these assignments. In this training phase, community members become familiar with a range of narrative practices that we have found relevant to community assignments, and especially with the 'outsider-witness' practices that are featured in the definitional ceremony structures of the community-wide gathering phase.

The consultations of community members are usually undertaken by pairs of team members in which one of these has some degree of insider knowledge of the sort of concerns and predicaments experienced by the community, and of the culture of the community. In these circumstances, after the meeting with community members, the team member with this insider knowledge can be interviewed by the other team member. This interview focuses on what this team member with insider knowledge experienced and heard in the context of the consultation. It is invariably the case that through the retellings of the meetings with community members that are set off by these interviews, team members become acquainted with themes not fully grasped in the consultation itself, and with meanings not fully appreciated at the time of these consultations. The retellings set off by these interviews can also contribute to deeper understandings of the links between these themes and meanings on the one hand, and, on the other, cultural traditions and notions of spirituality that are unique to these communities.

The rich descriptions of these themes and meanings that is achieved in these retellings make a very significant contribution to team members' understandings of:

a) the concerns and predicaments of the community;

b) what might be culturally appropriate and culturally sensitive forms of addressing these concerns and predicaments; and of

c) the preparations required ahead of the community-wide gathering phase of these community assignments.

In the performance of all formal responsibilities (for example, in initiating the community consultations, in deliberations over the shape of these community assignments, and in addressing the community members in the community-wide gathering phase of these assignments) we are represented to community members by those of our team who are uniquely placed to do so on account of insider knowledge of the community's concerns and predicaments. When the community is of a distinct culture, it is those team members who are of this culture who represent us to community members. For example, in working with Aboriginal Australian communities we are represented to the community members by the Aboriginal Australian members of our team.

In the context of our team meetings, these partnerships between team members also provide a basis for fertile conversations about culturally and community sensitive and appropriate team participation[11]. This aspect of these partnerships is highly valued by all team members as, amongst other things, this facilitates:

a) the ongoing review of the fit between developments in these assignments and the culturally significant hopes and expectations of community members;

b) opportunities for addressing a range of quandaries and dilemmas that are often had by team members who, in the context of these assignments, gain a keener sense of the privilege that we live with and take for granted in our daily lives;

c) reflection on the concerns had at times by some team members about the relevance of what we might have to offer to disenfranchised and marginalised communities of people;

d) discussion of specific hesitations, apprehensions and uncertainties experienced by team members that are aroused as we are invited to step into other territories of life, many of which constitute different worlds of race, culture, ethnicity and class.

In regard to partnerships between team members and community members, priority is given to the development of these from the outset of these assignments. In the first place, these partnerships are built in the context of our meetings with the community representatives. At this time considerable attention is given to the theme of the team's accountability to the community. Amongst other things, decisions are made about how the progress of the community assignment might be monitored, about what would be the appropriate avenues for addressing issues raised by particular developments, and about how questions and concerns about such developments might be expressed by community members.

These decisions are shaped by protocol that is considered relevant and valid by the community, with precedence given to those aspects of protocol that are culturally informed. Apart from the development of these more formal structures of partnership, as these assignments unfold the more informal partnerships between team members and community members become increasingly broad-based. The feedback that is offered in the context of these informal partnerships brings further clarity to team members about which aspects of these assignments are working for the community members and which are not, and this plays a very significant part in the shaping of the different phases of these community assignments.

*It is our preference for at least 50% of the team to be composed of people with some insider knowledge of the sort of concerns and predicaments being experienced by the members of the communities that approach us about these assignments. At times some of the team members have been drawn from these communities.*

# PART FIVE

# The community-wide gathering

The key themes that are identified in the community consultation phase of the assignment, along with the narratives that have been recorded, are worked into a draft of a program[12] for a community-wide gathering that is to be held over a period of days – usually somewhere between two and five in duration. The draft of this program is then taken back to the community members for discussion. The feedback from this discussion, which usually includes requests for amendments and corrections, is then taken up in the preparation of the final draft of the program, which is sent out to the members of the community ahead of the gathering.

I will discuss here the structure of these gatherings in some detail in order to provide some sense of how events unfold. Before I do so, it is relevant to note that there are many other considerations that are highly significant to the outcome of these gatherings that will not be fully discussed in this paper. These include considerations about:

a) physical location (it is our preference that these gatherings be residential and that they be held away from the community at an appropriate campsite – this reduces the impact, on the participation of community members, of the usual day-to-day stresses experienced in the community);

b) the general circumstances that might best contribute to a presence of mind in participants for the duration of the gathering (it is our preference that these gatherings be alcohol-free);

c) the sort of child care facilities that would be likely to free parents and older siblings to more fully participate in the program; and about

d) a range of practical considerations regarding transport, accommodation and catering, including dietary requirements (the special requirements of community

members are catered to, and, in every way possible, efforts are made to establish a context of care for all community members for the duration of these assignments).

**Opening ceremony**

The gathering begins with a carefully planned welcome and opening ceremony. This is a ceremony that is honouring of community relevant protocol, and it is directed by appointed representatives/leaders of the community. In many cases, but not in all, these are the senior and generally respected members of the community. These representatives often speak of the circumstances that have prompted the calling together of the community, to the purposes that have inspired this, and to their hopes for the gathering. They also formally introduce the team members, who are usually already known to many people of the community, and provide some account of the history of the team's engagement in the assignment. These representatives then review the program, and outline the plans for the structuring of the gathering. At this time, further explanation of the team's role in the gathering is given, and team members respond to community members' questions about this.

This is often followed by the presentation of messages of hope and solidarity from other communities. Sometimes these messages are from communities that we have previously joined with over similar assignments. There are a range of options for conveying these messages of hope and solidarity, including those supported by the use of technical aides like audio and video equipment, and slide projectors. These messages of hope and solidarity have significant effects on the shape of these gatherings. They are usually highly acknowledging of the community's concerns and predicaments, and contribute to a sense of communities

being joined not just in relation to these concerns and predicaments, but also in relation to specific values, beliefs and hopes.

At the close of the opening ceremony, community members have an opportunity to respond to the welcome, to the proposals for the structure of the gathering, and to the messages of hope and solidarity.

## Definitional ceremony

The scene is then set for the development of the telling and retelling of the stories of people's lives that characterise the community-wide gathering phases of these assignments. These tellings and retellings are generated in the context of the 'definitional ceremony' structures (following Barbara Myerhoff 1982, 1986) around which these gatherings are built. These definitional ceremony structures provide for exponential developments in the thick development of the themes held precious by community members, and of the narratives associated with these. In the context of this development, the knowledges of life and skills of living of community members become more visible, more richly known, and are powerfully honoured.

I have elsewhere described the relevance and application of definitional ceremony structures to therapeutic practice (White 1995b, 1997, 2000a), with a special focus on what I refer to as 'outsider-witness retellings', and will not reproduce this in detail here. However, I have provided some notes on outsider-witness practices in an appendix to this paper.

### *Stage one – the telling*

The program for the gathering is built around the unifying themes that were identified in the consultations, and the narratives associated with these themes. At the outset of each morning and afternoon session, the community members and team members meet in a large circle. Here, appointed members of the community, often with the close support of a team member, introduce the themes that have been selected for the session, and relate some of the personal and community narratives that reflect this theme, and that were collected in the community consultation phase. At this time, usually with the assistance of active but non-intrusive inquiry on behalf of a team member, it is common for these community members to embroider upon some of these narratives.

### *Stage two – the retelling*

In introducing the second stage, the community members who have spoken to the theme/s invite the rest of the community to break into smaller groups for the purposes of engaging in conversations in which they might link the stories of their own lives to these themes. This is an invitation that is also expressed in the written program for the gathering, the terms of which are informed by cultural considerations. At times this invitation is represented by a series of questions, shaped by the relevant themes and narratives, that the small groups might be interested in addressing. These small group conversations usually extend over a period of one to two hours.

One or two team members, ideally in partnership with a community member, join each of the small groups as outsider-witnesses to the conversations of these groups. The participation of these team members is negotiated at the outset of the small group conversations. These negotiations centre on what aspects of the conversations might be recorded by the team members, and which of these might be taken back to the large circle in the form of a retelling. These negotiations also centre on the mode of recording – usually permission to make notes is granted – and on the nature and level of active participation of the team members in the conversations that are to be had.

Ahead of these negotiations the team members usually describe some of the options for their participation in the small group conversations. These options include engaging in narrative practices that will:

a) ensure that space is opened for all community members to have a say;

b) sponsor a rich description of the stories told in these small group discussions;

c) assist group members in the linking of these stories to the shared themes that are to be addressed in these conversations[13]; and

d) encourage an accounting of the knowledges of life and skills of living expressed in these themes and narratives.

By this account, the team members have a dual role in these small group conversations – one as outsider witnesses to the expressions of group members, and another that engages them in active inquiry.

### Stage three – the retelling of the retelling

At a time that seems appropriate to step into the third stage of the definitional ceremony, team members again consult community members about what is acceptable to them regarding the outsider-witness retellings that are about to take place in the community-wide forum. There may be aspects of the small group conversation that community members do not want to be shared in the large circle, and there may be aspects of this conversation that these members are only happy about sharing with the large circle on the understanding that anonymity will be preserved.

The large circle is then reconvened, and the team members form into an outsider-witness group (in the context of these gathering, this outsider-witness group is usually termed the 'listening group'). They do this by sitting together in an arc of the large circle, or at the centre of this circle, depending on the preferences of community members. In their role as outsider witnesses, team members engage each other in retellings of what it was that they heard and experienced in the small group conversations. These retellings contribute very significantly to the rich description of specific aspects of the stories of community members, to the linking of these stories to shared themes, and to the recognition of the knowledges of life and skills of living that were expressed in the small group conversations.

In these retellings, emphasis is given to describing those knowledges and skills that seem particularly relevant to addressing the concerns and the predicaments of the community. I would like to emphasise that these retellings of the outsider-witness group are not chance retellings – they are not 'any old retellings'. Rather they are skilful retellings that are shaped by the tradition of acknowledgement that characterises outsider-witness responses in the context of definitional ceremony (see appendix).

### Stage four – the retelling of the retelling of the retelling

After a period of time (usually around thirty minutes), team members step back from the retelling of the stories of the small group conversations, and again join the large circle. Community members are then invited to reflect on what they have heard in this retelling, and to speak of the experiences had in response to this. Appointed team members usually play a part in facilitating this through active but non-intrusive inquiry. Invariably this retelling of the retelling of the

listening group is characterised by the expression of significant realisations on behalf of community members. These are positive realisations about personal, community, and cultural identity, about shared purposes and values, and about the possession of knowledges of life and skills of living that are of their community and of their personal histories. At this time it is not at all uncommon for us to hear exclamations like 'We didn't realise what we knew!' It is also not at all uncommon for community members to experience degrees of awe in regard to their possession of these knowledges and skills, many of which were not previously visible to them even as thin traces.

As the conversation in the large circle evolves, many of these knowledges and skills are yet more richly described. In response to this, community members begin to engage each other in speculation about how these might be more fully taken up in efforts to address their shared concerns and predicaments. As the gathering develops over the course of these morning and afternoon sessions, community members increasingly take this speculation into specific proposals for community action.

## Documentation

As a standard condition of any assignment, we recognise the requirement to contribute to some documentation that provides a record of the initiative. This is a documentation that, first and foremost, prioritises the stories of community members, and that:

a)  includes details of the unfolding of events of the community-wide gathering;
b)  provides a record of the contributions made, by community members, to the community's narrative resources;
c)  details the stock of knowledges of life and skills of living of the community that are relevant to addressing the concerns and predicaments at issue, and that have become more visible in the context of the community assignment;
d)  records proposals for future action in regard to these concerns and predicaments; and
e)  includes specific information about outcomes of this initiative.

The communities that have contracted us to join them in these assignments have, subsequent to the community-

wide gatherings, found this documentation to be invaluable. It has been a source of strong acknowledgement of the stories of these communities and of the significance of the lives of community members, and has provided a wellspring of confirmation of the knowledges and skills held in these communities. This documentation has also provided a foundation for community action in relation to shared concerns and predicaments, and has been a source of sustenance for the treasured purposes, hopes and dreams of community members. Copies of this documentation are then made available to the community members who participated in the gathering.

This documentation supplies a ready reference to valued conclusions about the identity of the community and its members. It also provides a foundation for the generation of proposals to address the community's concerns and predicaments, and for action on these proposals. And apart from this, it provides the basis of broader acknowledgement. This documentation is often read by other community members who may not have been present, and by family members, friends, and acquaintances who are not of the community. The responses of these other people are invariably highly affirming, and this constitutes a further retelling for the community members who attended the gathering.

In some circumstances, community members are keen for this documentation to be made more widely and generally available to others beyond their community. When this is the case, the circulation of this documentation generates specific interest from other discrete communities, and general interest from the wider community. This interest has the effect of further linking the lives of community members with the lives of others around shared themes and purposes. Further, as the feedback from this often features accounts of how others have felt touched and inspired by what is recorded in the documentation, this can be quite transformative in its effects on community members.

At subsequent meetings with community members, in the context of follow-up, it has become our practice to take back to the community, recordings (written, and at times audiotaped or videotaped) of the responses of people from other communities to the stories and the accounts of the knowledges and skills represented in the documentation. This forms yet another retelling that also has significantly positive effects on the community members' sense of existence.

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# Discussion

In this paper I have described some of our explorations of the relevance of narrative practices to working with communities which are facing various concerns and predicaments. These explorations have been undertaken in the context of community assignments that have been initiated in response to approaches from communities. In describing these explorations I have highlighted the assumptions that have oriented our participation in these initiatives and some of the principles of narrative practice that we have found to be of particular importance in them. As well, I have presented some special considerations in regard to addressing the psychological pain and emotional distress that is the outcome of trauma, discussed the priority given to the development of partnership between the members of our team and between team members and community members, and have provided an account of the structure of the community-wide gathering phase of these assignments.

The approach to working with communities that is described in this paper is based on narrative practices and structures developed in work with individuals, couples, families and groups, and are not of the culture of any community that we have worked with. In this sense, these practices and structures are 'artificial'. Amongst other things, these serve to render visible the knowledges of life and practices of living that are unique to the communities we work with, and that are relevant to addressing their predicaments and concerns. It is always our expectation that the practices and structures that we bring to these community assignments will give way to practices and structures that are more in harmony with these knowledges and skills. However, on some occasions communities have, in the pursuit of their goals, chosen to further the employment of some of the narrative practices and structures that we have introduced, albeit in modified form.

What I have written here should not be taken to represent the totality of these assignments. There is a great deal more that could be said about dimensions that are not accounted for here. This could include details about the attention that is given to safety for community members, to the establishment of quiet places where people can take time out if in need of space, and to providing designated support people who will be available to any community members who might be feeling overwhelmed or who might just want a friendly debrief or supportive chat with someone during the course of the meetings.

These dimensions of community assignments not accounted for here would also include information about the team members' routine expression of some of the less formal narrative practices that are also associated with the absolute priority that is given to the stories of community members. For example, it has become routine in our assignments for one of our team members[14] to bring, into verse, many of the powerful and beautiful words, phrases, sentiments, and thoughts expressed during the gathering phase. With the collaboration of those community members interested, this team member puts this verse to music. These songs are then sung by the community in the large circles at the commencement of subsequent morning and afternoon sessions. This community singing is often a highlight of the gathering, and contributes very significantly to the spirit of the occasion. At the end of the community-wide gathering phase of these assignments, all community members are issued with recordings of these songs.

As I reflect on what I have written, I realise that I could well have included a wider account of some of the complexities encountered in the course of these assignments, and of our many learnings that have been garnered as a consequence of some of the unexpected events that we have met along the way. As well, these community assignments have deeply touched all of our lives – they have had extraordinary life-shaping effects for all of us – and I am aware that this aspect of our experiences of these assignments has not been represented here. But that was not a part of my intentions for this paper. Perhaps a further paper on the complexities, learnings, and personal experiences associated with community assignments would make a good companion piece for this.

For now, it is my hope that I have described in sufficient detail some of the key considerations and aspects of these community assignments so that readers have a sense of how these proceed.

## Notes

1. Tim Agius, Maria Bamford, Anne Bourne, Stephanie Buckle, Shane Burgess, Maggie Carey, Jo Courtney, David Denborough, Sue Edwards, Bill Gaston, Jen Hamer, Iain Henderson, Chris Higgisson, Peter Hollams, Ula Horwitz, Rosie Howson, Ian Law, Laurie Lever, Mercedes Martinez, Ralf Matters, Chris McLean, Barry Mortimer, Jack O'Conner, Mary Pekin, Pam Price, Amy Ralfs, Claire Ralfs, Shona Russell, Virginia Slattery, Robyn Sirr, Vanessa Swan, Jo Taylor, Robyn Thomas, Sue Todd, Jussey Verco, David Vermeeren, Elizabeth Ward, Genna Ward, Cheryl White, Michael White, Wendy Willow, Winsome Willow, Barbara Wingard.

2. Here I am not referring to the general health and physical wellbeing of community members, or to the quality of health service provision in communities. Rather, I am using the term 'healthy community' in the sense that it is often metaphorically employed to describe the condition of the 'the body' of the community, like its 'emotional health', or its 'psychological health'.

3. In all of the communities that we have worked with, these knowledges, here termed 'erudite' and 'local' or 'popular', have been subjugated in the context of the operations of power of the wider community. I have borrowed these terms from the work of Michel Foucault (1980), and will here visit one of my earlier discussions of his description of the subjugated knowledges, taken from the book *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (White & Epston, 1990):

   *(Foucault) ... proposes two classes of subjugated knowledges. One class is constituted by those previously established or 'erudite' knowledges that have been written out of the record by the revision of history achieved through the ascendance of a more global and unitary knowledge. According to Foucault, these erudite knowledges have been buried, hidden, and disguised 'in a functional coherence of formal systematisations' that is designed to 'mask the ruptural effects of conflict and struggle'. These knowledges can be resurrected only by careful and meticulous scholarship, and in this resurrection, the history of struggle again becomes visible and unitary truth claims challenged.*

   *The second class of subjugated knowledges are those which Foucault refers to as 'local popular' or 'indigenous' knowledges: those regional 'knowledges' that are currently in circulation but are denied or deprived the space in which they could be adequately performed. These are knowledges that survive only at the margins of society and that are lowly ranked – considered insufficient and exiled from the legitimate domain of the formal knowledges and accepted sciences. They are the 'naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity' (Foucault, 1980).*

4. Cheryl White, of Dulwich Centre Publications, has been available to play this community adviser role in many of our assignments.

5. The term 'sign' and the term 'signified' as they are employed by Derrida may be unfamiliar to readers. Because of this, throughout this discussion of the absent but implicit, when referring to the sign and the signified I will include 'word' and 'world' in parentheses.

6. As the principle function of a sign (word) is the creation of borders between what is of this sign and what is of other signs, it follows that the meanings of particular signs that are privileged in any text are dependent upon the meanings of other signs that have been subordinated and excluded from this text.

7. According to Derrida (1978), language is the play of differences which are generated by signifiers which are, of themselves, the product of these differences. He coined the term differ-ance to describe this phenomenon, in which the meaning of a chain of signifiers is endlessly deferred.

8. For example, it is possible to trace the history of the employment of metaphors associated with the discourses of private property and commerce in the understanding of identity in western culture. In this development, it was imagined that identity could be likened to private property that might be 'possessed' or 'owned' by individuals, and in which certain 'assets' could be recognised, 'cultivated' and 'realised' (as in farming enterprises), and in which certain 'resources' might be discovered and brought to the surface to be 'capitalised on' (as in mining enterprises). In contemporary times such metaphors have become familiar to the point that they have been assigned the status of fact – it is now everywhere taken for granted that personal assets and resources, and deficits and weaknesses, actually exist, and that these are owned by individuals.

9. This is not to propose that there is no reality, that there is not an actual world out there, and that things don't really happen to people's lives. Rather, this commitment to the deconstruction of truth claims is associated with the understanding that whatever the world might be, there cannot be a conception of it that stands outside language, and that, because of this, all such conceptions have their origins in metaphor, and are products of history and culture. According to this understanding, it is these conceptions through which the world is rendered sensible to us, through which we express our experiences of the world, and through which we give shape to our existence. It is through these conceptions that our lives are constituted.

10. This is not a proposal for therapist initiated 'reframing' of people's experiences of their lives. Rather, it is inspired by the idea that the meaning of any one sign changes according to developments in the chain of signifiers of which it is part. In the context of community consultations, it is the team members' task to be alert to any expressions that suggest a redevelopment of the established meanings that are associated with particular signs.

11. I would like to acknowledge the contributions of Tim Agius and Barbara Wingard to our first explorations of the relevance of narrative practices in working with communities. The foundation of these first explorations was Tim's unwavering vision of a community-wide gathering that would provide a healing context for Aboriginal families of South Australia that had lost a member through death in jail or prison. The spirit and wisdom that Tim and Barbara then brought to this initiative and so willingly shared with the members of our team sustained us in so many ways:

a) through the many questions that we had about our ability to provide what was being expected of us;

b) through our many apprehensions about the relevance of narrative practices to the issues experienced by, and to the agenda of, the people of this community;

c) through our many uncertainties about how we might practically proceed with this assignment;

d) and through our many hesitations that were a reflection of some of the quandaries that we had over what was our place in joining with Aboriginal people in addressing the phenomenon of family-member death in custody when this phenomenon is so directly linked to more than two hundred years of invasion and occupation of Australia by non-indigenous peoples.

12. Examples of these themes that make up the programs for these gatherings can be found in 'Reclaiming our stories, reclaiming our lives' (1995), 'Speaking out and being heard' (1995), 'Living positive lives' (2000), 'These are not ordinary lives' (forthcoming), and on the Dulwich Centre website www.dulwichcentre.com.au (see notes on the Narrandera report).

13. In this way, team members can play an important part in maintaining some focus on the themes that have been chosen for the session – in fact, this is a responsibility that has usually been assigned to team members, by community members, ahead of these gatherings. It is possible for community members to renegotiate the themes proposed in the gathering program, but it is important that such a decision not be autonomous, as the complexities introduced by these groups simultaneously addressing different themes could be difficult to manage in these community contexts. If the members of these small groups wish to address alternative themes, they can be provided with options to take this up in the wider forum.

14. David Denborough, of Dulwich Centre Publications, is our resident song writer. See 'Community song writing and narrative practice' (Denborough 2002) for an account of this contribution to our community assignments.

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# APPENDIX

# Notes on Definitional Ceremony
# and Outsider-witness responses

## Definitional ceremony

1. The definitional ceremony metaphor structures the therapeutic arena as a context for the rich description of people's lives, identities and relationships. This metaphor structures rituals that are acknowledging of and 'regrading' of people's lives, in contrast to many of the common rituals of modern culture that are judging of and 'degrading' of lives. I have drawn the definitional ceremony metaphor from the work of Barbara Myerhoff (1982, 1986), a cultural anthropologist, and have developed therapeutic applications of this metaphor.

2. The structuring of the therapeutic arena according to the definitional ceremony metaphor is linked to a poststructuralist or non-structuralist account of identity. According to this account, the fashioning of identity is:
   a) a public and social achievement, not a private and individual achievement,
   b) shaped by historical and cultural forces, rather than by the forces of nature, however nature might be conceived of, and
   c) dependent upon deriving a sense of authenticity that is an outcome of social processes that are acknowledging of one's preferred claims about one's identity and about one's history, rather than being the outcome of the identification, through introspection, of the essences or elements of the 'self', and of the expression of these essences, however this self might be conceived of.

3. In this therapeutic arena, people are provided with the option of telling/performing the stories of their lives before an audience of outsider witnesses. The outsider witnesses respond to these tellings with retellings of certain aspects of what has been heard. These retellings are shaped by specific traditions of acknowledgement.

4. Definitional ceremony structures are usually constituted of multi-layered tellings and retellings of the stories of people's lives.
   a) Tellings (undertaken by those whose lives are at the centre of the ceremony).
   b) Retellings of tellings (first retelling – usually undertaken by the outsider witnesses).
   c) Retellings of retellings (second retelling – usually undertaken by those whose lives are at the centre of the ceremony).
   d) Retellings of retellings of retellings (third retelling – usually undertaken by the outsider witnesses, or by a secondary group of outsider witnesses).
   e) And so on.

5. A disruption of dialogue across the interfaces of these tellings and retellings is a characteristic of definitional ceremony. When the outsider witnesses are in the audience position, they are strictly in that position. When the people whose lives are at the centre of definitional ceremony are in the audience position, they are strictly in that position.

6. Through these tellings and retellings, many of the alternative themes or counterplots of people's lives are thickened, and the stories of their lives become linked through these themes, and through the values, purposes, and commitments expressed in them.

7. The retellings of definitional ceremony structures are authenticating of people's preferred claims about their lives and their identities, and have the effect of pushing forward the counterplots of people's lives – they contribute to options for action in people's lives that would not otherwise be available to them.

8. The responses of the outsider witnesses are not shaped by contemporary practices of applause (giving affirmations, pointing out positives, congratulatory responses, and so on) – or, for that matter, any of the common and routine practices of judgement (negative or positive judgement). Also, it is not the place of outsider witnesses to give opinions or to make declarations about other people's lives, to hold up their own lives and actions as examples to others, or to introduce moral stories or homilies under the guise of a retelling. And these responses do not constitute serial monologues. Rather, outsider witnesses engage each other in conversations about what was heard, and about their responses to what was heard – outsider witnesses routinely interview each other about their responses, and in so doing link and build upon each other's contributions.

9. Definitional ceremony is 'moving' of all participants in that it contributes to options for them to be become other than who they were. This is about being moved in the sense of being transported, in the sense of being elsewhere in life on account of this participation.

## Outsider-witness responses

Here I present four categories of response that can be considered by listening-group members as they prepare themselves for an outsider-witness retelling. These can also be of assistance to therapists as they get ready to interview outsider witnesses when this group is not composed of professional counsellors who are familiar with the tradition of acknowledgement that characterises definitional ceremony. These categories of response are not exclusive, but provide an example of how the contribution of outsider witnesses might be structured within the terms of this tradition of acknowledgement. The retellings of the outsider witnesses do not constitute an account of the whole of the content of what is heard by them, but centre on those aspects of the tellings that most significantly engage their fascination.

### Categories of response

#### 1. *Identifying the expression*
As you listen to the stories of the lives of the people who are at the centre of the definitional ceremony, which expressions caught your attention or captured your imagination? Which ones struck a chord for you?

#### 2. *Describing the image*
What images of people's lives, of their identities, and of the world more generally, did these expressions evoke? What did these expressions suggest to you about these people's purposes, values, beliefs, hopes, dreams and commitments?

#### 3. *Embodying responses*
What is it about your own life/work that accounts for why these expressions caught your attention or struck a chord for you? Do you have a sense of which aspects of your own experiences of life resonated with these expressions, and with the images evoked by these expressions?

#### 4. *Acknowledging Transport*
How have you been moved on account of being present to witness these expressions of life? Where has this experience taken you to, that you would not otherwise have arrived at, if you hadn't been present as an audience to this conversation? In what way have you become other than who you were on account of witnessing these expressions, and on account of responding to these stories in the way that you have?

### Note

The sample questions that I have provided here are for illustration purposes. They give an account of how outsider-witness responses might be organised in order to reproduce the class of acknowledgement that is characteristic of definitional ceremony. Many other questions can be constructed around each of these categories of outsider-witness response.

For further discussion of these practices, see 'Reflecting team-work as definitional ceremony revisited' in White, M. *Reflections on Narrative Practice* (2000), 'Definitional ceremony' in White, M. *Narratives of Therapists' Lives* (1997), and 'Reflecting team-work as definitional ceremony' in White, M. *Re-authoring Lives: Interviews and essays* (1995). These texts are available from Dulwich Centre Publications.

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