

# Some reflections on the use of the journey metaphor in working with young women who have experienced sexual abuse

by  
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*In this short piece, the author offers reflections on a group she facilitated with young women who have experienced sexual abuse. This group was shaped by the use of a metaphor of a journey, by externalising conversations, and by the use of artistic expression.*

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## History of the group

In my work with girls and young women who have experienced sexual abuse within their own families, I often hear from them stories permeated with secrecy, shame, sadness and isolation. It has long been my intention to facilitate a group with these young women, with the aim of building up connections and a small community. It has been my hope that such a group would have conversations through which they will find ways to reclaim their life from the negative influence of sexual abuse.

I became very interested in narrative practice in 2001 and I came upon the work of Lisa McPhie and Chris Chaffey (1998) 'The journey of a lifetime: Group work with young women who have experienced sexual assault'. I was very inspired by their work, especially their metaphor of a journey, and their use of a map as the program flyer in which the topics of conversations were situated as different terrains. Their work inspired me to facilitate a similar group with five young women, aged from 14 to 18, with whom I was then working on an individual basis. They were all referred by the social workers of the child protective services of the Social Welfare Department, Hong Kong, for therapy in relation to their experience of having been sexually abused by someone in their family.

## The use of the journey metaphor

Artwork has a long history in my work with children and young people. I like artwork myself and I also like introducing artwork to the young people who come to consult me. I find that artwork provides a good vehicle for many young people to express their thoughts and ideas, and it also provides a rich context for subsequent conversations. In borrowing McPhie and Chaffey's journey metaphor, I wondered how I could blend this with artwork in this group, especially in the beginning stage when the young women would probably feel anxious and not know how to tell their stories with people who were unfamiliar.

When the journey metaphor was introduced to the group, it was well received and liked by the group members. I then introduced a whole range of art materials and the journey metaphor inspired much creativity in the group. The members took on the metaphor and likened the group meetings to making a trip together on a bus, with them being the passengers and I the bus driver steering the wheel. They made use of the various art materials provided and decided to make a map with different stopping places which stood for different topics of conversations. They also created an artistic version of our travelling bus, on which we put our photos!

In the map-making process, the group discussed and searched for symbols and metaphors to represent the different topics for conversation. These included:

- a dumping ground in which we would put down the burden of secrecy;
- a swamp in which we would talk about ways of getting free from the quicksand of self-blame;
- a big hand that represented conversations about breaking free from the tight clutch of guilt and shame;
- a candle that represented hope against fear; and,
- a place full of flowers that represented the 'wonderland', the end stop where they would find new abilities and skills and gain new knowledge about themselves. This was also the place that represented the destination in their trip of resistance against the negative effects of sexual abuse. While all the group members had different ideas about what this would look like for them, it was a common hope that they would reach this 'wonderland'.

In hindsight, this collective artwork activity of map-making was an important group activity that helped put the members' anxiety at ease, build up group solidarity, and lay the foundation for the externalising conversations that were to take place in our subsequent meetings on such issues as secrecy, shame, self-blame, guilt and fear.

In our initial meeting, I offered the group a choice of either making the map to its completion before we started other conversations, or making it along the way while talking about different issues. All the group members unanimously opted to complete the map first and this process took a few meetings.

After completing the map, I organised a small reflecting team which was made up of three colleagues from a different district who were to facilitate a similar group in the future and wanted to get some ideas from us. In the reflecting team's retelling, one colleague shared that she was touched by the cohesiveness of the group, as well as the spirit of warmth and trust demonstrated by the group members in the process of making the map and in their accompanying conversations. This colleague said that witnessing this made her think about how she could work with her future group members towards building a cohesive and trustful group context. It was interesting to hear one group member's response, during the group's retelling of the reflecting team's retelling, that making the map and having conversations around it provided a safe ground for her to check out her fellow group members and also allowed her to test the waters by sharing a little of

her experience and story. Her choice to create the map first rather than delving into conversations on the various topics was echoed by other members in nods and laughs. This decision, she said, was her way to postpone telling her story, which was very scary for her. Now, having tested the waters, she felt ready to board the bus and embark on the journey. The group then spontaneously made the joint decision that they were not to delay their trip any longer. It was time to get on the bus and start talking about the issues from the next meeting onwards.

Another interesting aspect of the journey metaphor is that it became a commonly shared language among the group members and threaded through the conversations in different meetings. For example, one member talked about how hard this journey had been for her and how the clutch of guilt and shame was stopping her from moving forward. Still, she decided that she had been able to move two points forward compared to where she started at the beginning of the group. Another member found that she had already successfully travelled through most places, but that there was still one difficult spot to pass through before she could reach her wonderland. In reflecting upon what she had gained and achieved in the trip so far, she was confident that she would reach her wonderland eventually.

It seems that the journey metaphor, together with the externalising conversations on issues such as shame, self-blame, guilt and fear, provided a context and the necessary space for these young women to more easily take note of their achievements in standing up to the effects of sexual abuse. It also seemed to put what they had been through in perspective. Rather than seeing themselves as overpowered by the experience of sexual abuse, totally helpless and hopeless, in using the journey metaphor, these young women could more easily make distinctions between the current place they were at and the initial place from which they had started. This perspective also seemed to give them the ground to more readily recognise their achievements, even if these achievements were very small steps. Moreover, the journey metaphor continued to provide the basis for conversations after the group ended and in the subsequent individual meetings I had with some of the group members.

The journey metaphor also has a lot of resonance for me as a group facilitator. It provides me with perspective and makes it possible for me to stay hopeful. It keeps me from yielding unknowingly to despair which frequently comes as a result of hearing these young women's stories of

pain and anguish. It constantly reminds me that I am travelling with these young women through difficult territories; and thus hardships, setbacks or occasions when we get lost or go off track are to be expected. Actually, one of the challenges in doing this group work with the young women was the occurrence of crises of one kind or another to the group members. For example, one member was tricked by self-harm to hurt herself and was sent to hospital, and another fell prey to voices and the clutch of guilt as the date of court hearing when she had to testify against her father drew near. The journey metaphor has made it possible for me to stay on track and not to give in to frustration, despair or self-doubt. At times of setbacks, when influenced by the journey metaphor, the most important thing for me and the group members becomes how to get back on course and keep going. Together we continue to make the trip to explore new territories and to travel to where these young women prefer to be.

## Note

1. Delphine Yau Cheuk-wai is a Chinese therapist who was trained as a clinical psychologist in Hong Kong. She is now working in one of the clinical psychology units of the Social Welfare Department in Hong Kong. She works with children and families, many struggling with issues of poverty, unemployment, addiction, violence, abuse, and mental health problems. Delphine can be contacted c/o: [delphineyau@cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:delphineyau@cuhk.edu.hk)

## Reference

- McPhie, L. & Chaffey, C. 1998: 'The journey of a lifetime: Group work with young women who have experienced sexual assault.' *Gecko: a journal of deconstruction and narrative ideas in therapeutic practice*, Vol.1. Republished in: *Extending Narrative Therapy*, 1999, Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.

## Further reading

- White, M. 2002: 'Journey metaphors.' *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, No.4.

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