

Using narrative practices with anxiety and depression: Elevating context, joining people, and collecting insider-knowledges

David Newman

David Newman currently works for Relationships Australia in Sydney and is on the teaching faculty of The Dulwich Centre. He can be contacted via david@charingcrossnarrativetherapy.com or c/- Charing Cross Narrative Therapy, PO Box 619, Waverley 2024.

This paper, first delivered as a keynote address at the Reconnexion Annual National Anxiety and Depression Conference in Melbourne, May 2010, explores various narrative practices in responding to anxiety and depression: elevating context and externalising problems, linking people in the work, uncovering local and insider-knowledges, and documenting and archiving these knowledges, including using 'living documents' as collective therapeutic documents.

Keywords: narrative therapy, narrative practice, anxiety, depression, sadness, externalising, externalisation, insider-knowledge, living documents, therapeutic documents

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for offering me the opportunity to speak about a narrative approach to the issues of anxiety and depression. And thank you for the opportunity to hear so many interesting and thought-provoking ways of engaging with these issues today. In speaking about a narrative approach to the problems of anxiety and depression, I will include some examples of recent therapeutic conversations I have had, as well as some examples of more collective therapeutic responses. I will be considering the narrative themes of externalising, documentation, linking people in our work, and insider-knowledges.

LOCATING PROBLEMS AND OBJECTIFYING PROBLEMS NOT PEOPLE

From the outset, narrative approaches have shown a significant sensitivity to where people's problems and concerns are located. Foucault suggested that one way that people become objects rather than people is by the use of *scientific classification* and assigning a classification to and within people (Foucault, as cited in Madigan, 1992). Michael White and David Epston, the originators of what has become known as narrative therapy, questioned locating problems within people, of classifying people, and consequently came to elaborate a practice known as 'externalising' (White, 1988, 2007). Externalising is a practice of objectifying or, in a way, classifying problems rather than people – or, as has been commonly stated, taking into our work the notion that the person, family, or community is not the *problem*, but 'the problem is the problem'.

To give you a flavour of some possible ways to externalise problems like anxiety, depression, panic, worry, or despair, I will offer a few questions. These are questions that can be used to help locate problems as external rather than internal to people and that help classify or objectify problems rather than people:

- When Despair is speaking to you, does it try to present you with an image of your future?
- Does it present these images with certainty or tentatively? What images does it tend to present to you?

- What does Anxiety try to convince you about yourself?
- How compelling is Anxiety's picture of what will go wrong in the future? How do you imagine it manages to present such a compelling picture?
- Do you imagine Despair might be with us as we are speaking now? What effects do you think it is having on our conversation?
- If you could imagine that Depression was offering you a commentary on this conversation, would it be saying something to the effect that this conversation was useful, useless, or somewhere in between? Would you say Depression's commentary is positive, negative, or somewhere in between?

This way of engaging with these problems is a key practice of narrative practice. I thought I might mention briefly some other ways of engaging with these problems that tend to classify or objectify people rather than problems. Jackie Orr, an Associate Professor of Sociology at Syracuse University, has written in particular about the themes of panic and panic attacks. In her book *Panic diaries: A genealogy of panic disorder* (2005), Orr has written on the subject of a cultural history of panic and considers, among many things, the various techniques – professional, popular, and otherwise – that have come to shape the concept of panic. She writes of some of the techniques of interpreting lives she considers in her book:

Survey research, public opinion polls, laboratory experiments, research on mental patients, self tests in popular magazines, atom bomb tests in the deserts, cybernetic models, psychiatric interviews, electric shocks, clinical drug trials, TV talk shows, computerised diagnostics and genetic research composed one partial, compulsive inventory of the arsenal of techniques aimed at producing potentially useful speech from the tremulous mouth of terror.

(2005, p. 8)

As I read about these techniques, the many different contexts that can potentially shape what we have come to name as 'panic' or 'anxiety' stood out to me. So, in my work, this helped me stay alert to uncovering the *contexts* that would shape or grow 'Anxiety'.

WALID AND ANXIETY

When I first met with Walid eight weeks ago, this orientation helped me keep a distance from techniques of interpreting lives that place the problems as internal to people or that are about classification, and deliberately tried to objectify problems rather than people. I was, in a way, classifying the problem as opposed to the person. And, in so doing, I was also elevating the context of Walid's experience. My initial efforts to externalise Anxiety were somewhat unsuccessful, but with the assistance of one of his friends, an externalised picture of Anxiety and an elevation of context was more possible.

The referral sheet I received had written on it that Walid had been 'traumatised by teaching'. Walid had recently emigrated from Indonesia and was working as a university lecturer. He had previously taught for twenty years in his homeland. He had recently travelled overseas to teach in Hong Kong and, while there, thought he had what he understood to be a panic attack. During his teaching time there, he 'went blank' and 'couldn't speak'. He described the experience as a 'trauma' and as a result he had lost his confidence, did not want to meet with students, and had stopped teaching altogether. His friend Richard had helped and had taken over his classes back in Sydney. The questions 'What is my problem?' and 'Am I capable of teaching?' plagued him to the extent that little else was on his mind. Whilst speaking with Walid, his difficult experiences were initially named as 'anxiety', 'panic' and the 'going blank thing'

I asked about the history of this panic, of this 'going blank thing'. He mentioned that only a few months after arriving in Australia and into his position, he had received evaluations that he was 'not good at English'. A few months later, he was looking at the student Blackboard online learning site. While he was reading some of the students' posts, he noticed some negative comments about him and, in particular, his English.

During our meeting, I asked Walid about how he had responded to the trauma of the teaching in Hong Kong, in order to help locate some skills he may have been developing in response to this difficulty. I also asked Walid about the effects that the student e-learning site had on him, and he said

that as a consequence he had lost his confidence in his capacity as a teacher. I asked him what the students had said that may have fed Anxiety and had him losing his confidence. I wondered if he had a sense of what the students' intentions were, and what he thought about such intentions.

Walid spoke very briefly about what had been written on the online site. He also said, 'I don't want to speak badly about the students'. At the end of the session, he was still troubled by the question, 'What is my problem?'. It seemed that Anxiety was located within Walid, and was a problem he needed to 'fix'.

JOINING WITH PEOPLE: RICHARD

Often, when problems capture people, I want to see if others who care about them can join in a deliberate way. I asked Walid if anybody he knew not only 'got' what he was going through, but was troubled by it too. He said, 'Yes, my friend Richard', the person who had taken over the teaching of his classes. I wondered if it would be possible for Richard to join us in our next meeting, and Walid agreed to invite him to join us.

When Richard, Walid, and I met one week later, Richard spoke initially about what he valued about Walid as a teacher. I noticed that he had an accent that was not Australian and asked him where he had come from. He had emigrated from Switzerland. I asked him how he had found the transition from teaching in Switzerland to teaching in Sydney, Australia. He said that he found it was a different 'student culture', as he put it. After he spoke about some of the ways that he had dealt with that different student culture, I turned to Walid and asked him what would he say about his experience of this matter of 'student culture'. I enquired, 'Is there a difference between Indonesia and Australia in terms of student culture?' Walid, in a way that was as clear as he had been about anything since we had met, exclaimed: 'Yes!' I asked him to elaborate. He said, 'The students in western culture are direct and somewhat demanding, unlike in Indonesia'. 'Yes', Richard added, 'at times, I think you have found it brutal, Walid'. I asked Walid if that was the case and he smiled and said, 'Yes, it can be brutal'.

Richard then spontaneously spoke about the on-line student Blackboard postings that Walid had briefly mentioned the previous week. I asked Walid if it was okay that we speak about this matter as he had not seemed keen last week. He said it was fine. Richard offered that he was angry with the students. He queried, 'When does a difficulty with an accent become teasing and even bullying?' And he went on to say that in addition to the awful things written about Walid, at one point during the postings, one of the students asked, 'What if Walid sees our comments?', to which another student replied, 'It doesn't matter'. I asked Walid what he thought of such an exchange and he said, 'It was the ultimate disrespect'.

Richard then named the actions of the students as 'bullying' and said that he had been wondering what to do about it. He thought it would be best to speak to the moderator of the online student forum and tell him about the effects of this exchange for Walid, and that really there ought to be a policy developed around such matters. Although I thought it was important to speak of these events in order to elevate the context for the shaping of Anxiety, I was guessing that Richard may be suggesting actions that may not fit for Walid, so I asked him what he thought of Richard's concerns and ideas. He said that he agreed with the concerns and had wondered if there were ways to stop such a thing happening again. However, he said that he didn't want to speak badly about the students and that speaking to the moderator would 'not be my way'.

At the end of the meeting, we came up with a plan. Richard was to delay speaking to the moderator until Walid fully agreed with it. Walid did think it had merit, especially if it meant that it would contribute positively for future academics or even students if such online bullying and put-downs were stopped. Richard and Walid also came up with some ideas for small teaching steps that Walid could proceed with that were less likely to be hijacked by Anxiety. One was to start with a small class of students who were unknown to him, and Richard would be his teaching assistant and join him in the classroom. Richard also shared with Walid some of the skills he had developed in dealing with what he said were the harsher or more brutal aspects of western student culture.

In this context, it was no longer as easy for Walid to understand the Anxiety as an internal individual problem, and more possible to understand it as a problem of:

- different student cultures
- online student forum policies
- disrespectful actions from the students.

Walid still was challenged by Anxiety, and wanted to develop ways to have it ease away from his life, but he was no longer classified or objectified by it.

CONTEXTUALISING 'ANXIETY'

I would like to briefly comment on what made it more possible to bring out the context that had gone into shaping the Anxiety. One of the ways I understood what happened in the meeting with Walid and Richard was the creation of 'moral space', as feminist philosopher Hilde Lindemann Nelson has put it. She writes that moral space might 'take the form of a circle of friends who have [similar] experiences ... and who can validate ... feelings and perspectives...', and that moral space can be found 'as they argue, disagree, tell supporting anecdotes, and reflect on their lives' (Lindemann Nelson, 1996, pp. 98–99). I believe Richard's presence as a friend provided the 'moral space' to assist in highlighting the context of the Anxiety, brought it into a moral realm, and therefore shaped the direction of the action to be taken to respond to the Anxiety.

Specific questions we can use that help elevate context include:

- Have there been certain ideas you have seen around you that might have fed Anxiety?
- Are there experiences you have had that may have built this anxiety?
- What effect did the different student cultures have on the Anxiety?

Not being classified by a problem or having it located within someone brings certain possibilities, including no longer being defined by the problem. One of those possibilities is that it is easier for people to notice that they have knowledges and skills in living – that people aren't, for instance, just Anxiety, Panic, Sadness, or Depression. I will share

a story about Ed and the knowledge he had been developing around his experience of what could be called Depression, but which he called Sadness and Heartbreak. First, however, I will say a little about the concept of knowledge.

CONSIDERATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND INSIDER-KNOWLEDGES

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz used the term 'local knowledge' to refer to those knowledges that can get sidelined or trivialised in attempts to build global theories or professional knowledge (Geertz, 1983). Michel Foucault also referred to 'local popular' or 'indigenous' knowledges, as summarised by Michael White and David Epston:

those 'regional' knowledges that are currently in circulation but are denied or deprived of the space in which they could be adequately performed. These are knowledges that survive only at the margins of society and are lowly ranked – considered insufficient and exiled from the legitimate domain of the formal knowledges and the accepted sciences. They are the 'native knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity' (Foucault, 1980). (White & Epston, 1990, p. 26)

Michael White and David Epston took up such ideas in explorations in their work and tended to use the term 'insider-knowledges' (Epston, 1999; Epston and White, 1990/1992). David Epston has recently drawn on the writings of the philosopher Michael Polanyi to refer to insider-knowledges as 'tacit knowledges' that demonstrate that we 'all know more than we can tell' (D. Epston, personal communication, October, 2009).

So, when meeting with people, I try to be aware of such an invitation offered by David Epston for the position that we take as therapists: 'Can those who suffer and those who care for them be conceived of as not merely "passive recipients" of our knowledges but creators and users of their own "knowledges", albeit of a very different kind?' (D. Epston, personal communication, October, 2009). I try to 'rescue', hold up, or make more

visible those knowledges that are created and used by the individuals, families, and communities we meet with in our work as they go about the business of life.

ED AND SADNESS

I first met with seventy-five year-old Ed, five weeks ago. He was referred to the relationship counselling service where I work by the local mental health Aged Care Assessment Team. They, and he, were concerned how he was going to get through day to day with what they referred to as Depression, and what Ed called 'Sadness' or 'Heartbreak' pressing in at him in such an intense way.

Within moments of speaking with Ed, he became convulsed with sobbing. He explained that his ex-wife, with whom he had kept a friendship for the last eighteen years since they separated, had recently 'met someone'. The Sadness bore down heavily on Ed and was bringing all sorts of effects to him: a renewed sense of regret about how he had acted during the marriage, regular tears, and a sense of having had stolen from him what he had mostly been able to remember over the years – any sense whatsoever of 'being a worthwhile human being'. Toward the end of our meeting, I asked Ed, 'Who would never lose sight of what they love about you?', and he was able to nominate three people. Ed conceded that it would be a very good idea to see if these three people might be willing to refute what the Sadness was trying to take away from him: his very belief in his worthwhileness as a human being.

When we next met, Ed spoke about those matters the three people would never lose sight of about him. One of those was Ed's passionate way of engaging with his life in general and his interests in particular. And here Ed added, 'I know it is a little bit funny to say this, but I like trains, especially steam trains'. Ed then spoke about a time during the last week that he had gone to his local train station, a favoured place for him to visit, and had had a conversation with a woman he had just met at an adjacent park. She had her children with her. I asked Ed about the conversation they had together. He said that he had used some of the social skills his friends had reminded him he possessed, but he 'had to admit [he] had really

enjoyed the conversation with the woman'. I asked him what his thoughts were about why he had enjoyed this conversation quite so much. He paused, his chin trembled, his face went red, and he said through sobs, 'Because it makes me feel like I'm worthwhile'. I asked about the tears: 'What do you think of these tears, Ed? What would you say about them? Is it possible to say whether they are good tears, bad tears, or in-between tears?' Ed responded through his sobs, 'It is a good sadness; they are like tears of joy'.

And then Ed went on to tell me, 'I was thinking of this talking with people, while out walking. I read recently that talking like this is done more in country life. We hardly ever do it in the city.'

I asked: 'Is there anything else you could say about what moves you with this talking with strangers, this talking when you are out walking?'

Ed paused again. And, through more tears, he said, 'It's about kindness'.

I asked, 'These acts of kindness, these snippets of kindness, are they sustaining for you while such a heavy Sadness is around?'

Ed replied, 'Yes, it's contact with people, it makes me feel good about life; grateful. I heard someone say it's good to be grateful, it's like prayer for the religious. When I wake in the morning, I wiggle my finger – as I've got a bit of arthritis – and I ask myself, "What am I grateful for?" I think about what I am grateful for and I start the day. It gives me a lift.'

I was very interested in what Ed was saying as examples of insider or local knowledges. Briefly put, these could be titled 'talking with strangers' and 'gratitude'. But there could certainly be more to say about the details of such knowledges. In our work, we can do our best to stop such insider-knowledges from floating away from our conversations, and from the lives of the people we are meeting with. We can do our best to rescue such knowledges. One way of doing that is to use the written word and I will now turn to that aspect of narrative practice.

USING THE WRITTEN WORD TO GROW GENERATIVE STORIES AND GENERATING ARCHIVES OF COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE

My understanding of David Epston's work is that he suggests that a task for us as workers is to

collect such insider-knowledges in our work, in order to gather together local knowledge (Epston, 2000). So a key narrative practice is collecting and archiving such local or insider-knowledges using the written word. In a way, even if we are working with just one person at a time in our work, we can be like community workers, finding ways to link people around an ever-expanding archive of local or insider-knowledges that are scattered throughout our conversations with people and their mental health concerns.

When I first met with Sarah, halfway through last year, she spoke of feeling 'incredibly anxious', and that she was 'constantly on a high level of anxiety'. She said she was scared of the world in general, that everything made her worried, and that she did not wish to watch the news, as everything that she heard was so negative that it scared her. Over the eleven meetings we had, we spoke about the context of the Worries and Anxiety, about the effects of Worries and Anxiety in her life and about her understanding of the workings of Worry and Anxiety. For instance, Anxiety would 'say' to her things like 'You can't distract yourself enough', 'I will jump on you when you've got nothing else to focus on', and 'You don't know how you are going to feel tomorrow'.

I was interested in Sarah's knowledge around Anxiety and Worry. I showed Sarah the knowledge about Anxiety that I had collected with others that I had met. These are knowledges, captured in the written word as 'living documents', as faithful as possible to people's own phrases and their local language, and offered by them to share with others who may be struggling with similar concerns (for more on this approach, see Newman, 2008). I will show you just some of what I showed Sarah:

Doing just one thing

Sometimes anxiety encourages me to freeze up. If I do just one thing, often just a small thing (such as the other day sending CDs to people, or calling people I have lost contact with), then it seems to unsettle anxiety.

Reading it as needing to connect

It's best to speak about the anxiety rather than let it do what it usually does: work behind the scenes. If anxiety is around, I now read this as 'I should connect with others right now'.

Together, Sarah and I read these Anxiety knowledges and she spoke about her own knowledge of Anxiety. Here are just two pieces of knowledge Sarah came up with that I translated into the written word and are now available to others I meet with who are contending with Anxiety:

Let them know what can be helpful

I have found having someone you trust around, so that you can tell them about it, is useful. And I let them know what they can do to be useful; I say things like, 'I just need you to listen', 'Can you say something positive?' and so on. I found that the simple act of having told someone is helpful.

An encouragement thing

It has been important to me to remember ways I have been self-reliant, so I don't build up a picture of being totally needy. I have tried to build up a picture of self-reliance. It has been helpful also to take little steps, to avoid steps that are too big. For me, this included travelling shorter distances. These things are like encouragement things, it's important to remember the good stuff.

In my work, these 'living documents' can be ever-growing as I share them with people who are responding to similar themes. I find it one of the most sustaining and enriching practices for me. I also think we can find ways to take such efforts to externalise problems, to link people, to build archives of insider-knowledge, and to contribute more to a sense of collective experience into community-based projects.

Collective documenting of stories makes many things possible. I would like to mention three things in particular:

- They can have people feeling more connected to others in their difficult experiences and therefore less isolated.
- They can make it more possible for people to use the knowledges that they use and create when problems try to rob people of such knowledge as they can be referred to during tough times.
- They can be shown to others, and others can re-tell what it meant to them to hear such documents, therefore enlarging and giving richer meaning to the original story, the original knowledges.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

In this presentation, I have briefly covered the narrative practices of externalising, of linking people in our work, uncovering local and insider-knowledges, of documenting and archiving these knowledges, and how to put such practices to use with the problems of Anxiety and Depression. Externalising and practices of linking people assisted Walid in locating the context for the Anxiety he was experiencing, and took it away from an internalised problem that was 'his' to 'work on'. Notions of insider or local knowledge assisted Ed to locate some of his delicate expressions and knowledges of easing Sadness and Heartbreak away from his life. Practices of the written word and documentation assisted Sarah to get clearer about some of her knowledges in shrinking Anxiety and are enabling Sarah to make a contribution to others who are struggling with Anxiety.

I would like to acknowledge Walid, Ed, and Sarah for generously offering permission for me to share their stories with you here today in the hope that this would assist others.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge very helpful comments from David Denborough and David Epston on an earlier draft. I also wish to acknowledge the editing work of Mark Trudinger which added more to the paper.

REFERENCES

- Epston, D. (1999). Co-research: The making of an alternative knowledge. *Narrative therapy and community work: A conference collection* (pp. 137–157). Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- Epston, D. (2000). *The history of the Archives of Resistance – Anti-anorexia/Anti-bulimia*. Retrieved from <http://www.narrativeapproaches.com/antianorexia%20folder/history.htm>
- Epston, D., & White, M. (1992). Consulting your consultants: The documentation of alternative knowledges. In D. Epston & M. White, *Experience, contradiction, narrative and imagination: Selected papers of David Epston and Michael White, 1989–1991* (pp. 11–26). Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications. (Reprinted from *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, 1990, (4), 25–35)
- Madigan, S. (1992). The application of Michel Foucault's philosophy in the problem externalizing discourse of Michael White. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 14(3), 265–279. doi:10.1046/j..1992.00458.x
- Geertz, C. (1983). *Local knowledge: Further essays in interpretive anthropology*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Lindemann Nelson, H. (1996). Sophie doesn't: Families and counterstories of self-trust. *Hypatia*, 11(1), 91–104.
- Newman, D. (2008). 'Rescuing the said from the saying of it': Living documentation in narrative therapy. *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (3), 24–34.
- Orr, J. (2005). *Panic diaries: A genealogy of panic disorder*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- White, M. (1988). The externalizing of the problem and the re-authoring of lives and relationships. *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, (Summer), 3–21.
- White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.

10TH INTERNATIONAL NARRATIVE THERAPY AND COMMUNITY WORK CONFERENCE

Brazil 13th-15th July 2011

Call for presentations now open

The 10th International Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference is to be held in Salvador, Brazil 13th-15th July 2011. Over the last ten years, Dulwich Centre has held International Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conferences in Australia, USA, UK, Mexico, China and Norway. In 2011, Salvador will host a gathering of narrative therapists and community workers from around the globe! Many Brazilian practitioners are now engaging with narrative ideas in unique ways and we are so looking forward to this event.

We are now accepting expressions of interest in presenting at this upcoming 10th International Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference. If you are interested in presenting your work at this conference, we will now welcome receiving a proposal from you!

For more information write to us c/o dulwich@dulwichcentre.com.au

We are accepting proposals in Portuguese, English and Spanish. If you would like to know more about the thinking that informs our conferences, you may be interested to read the paper 'Conceptualising conferences as community gatherings' (www.dulwichcentre.com.au/conferences-as-community-gatherings.pdf).