

**Bringing narrative ideas and practices into
working with a torture survivor.**

***The journey of Melina and Wahid. A story of
co-research and mutual acknowledgment***

Angeliki Karydi

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Introduction

The words of Elie Wiesel “Whenever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion or political views, that place must-at that moment-become the center of the universe” pretty much describes our experience re-searching together with Wahid the story of his life. On the time that the following work was taking place, I was working as Mental health and psychosocial support manager for an International NGO responding to the migration flows in Greece during the “refugee crisis” as it is commonly called. My main responsibility in that context, was to organize and implement the psychosocial activities in a number of camps in Northern Greece but on the same time to technically supervise a team of psychologists, cultural mediators and community outreach officers.

Being limited, due to my role, from providing therapy to our clients myself, I took the opportunity to see how I can “install” the narrative ideas into my practice as a supervisor. During the time my team was handling a lot of difficult cases and with some of them we were stuck on how to proceed, because no approach seemed to be the appropriate one. Even though I was already in the process of discussing some of the cases with a narrative perspective in mind, the opportunity to work on this project came directly from one of our clients. Wahid expressed the will to see and hear how other people overcome similar issues to his and up to that point we came to realize that he wanted his story to be told and the injustice that happened to him to be acknowledged. Except the fact that together with his psychologist, Melina, we thought that this practice would help Wahid, I chose to present his story because of the complexity of working with this client, the ethical issues that we had to face in every step of the way and the effect his story had to everyone involved. Presenting Wahid’s testimony makes me feel that to some extent we can fight against the injustice in this world.

A few words about Wahid..

Wahid is a young man, 28 years of age from Iraq that arrived in Greece 4 months before we met him and applied for asylum. Wahid is a pseudo-name that he chose. It means *alone* in Arabic. He was indeed alone, with no family or friends travelling with him and unwilling in the beginning to have any friendly relationship. In the first session the therapist described him as a man broken into pieces. He was looking at the floor, with no visual contact with the psychologist or the translator. He was wearing a hat that was covering his eyes and he was very nervous, constantly moving his leg.

Since his arrival in Greece, Wahid already tried 3 times to kill himself, so for us (Melina and me) it was a high risk case that needed immediate attention. During the first 2-3 sessions Wahid identified the following problems in his life that he would like to receive support for. He had problems with his sleep as he was sleeping a few hours per day and he had very intense

nightmares. He experienced flashbacks and he was suffering by headaches. The thoughts to kill himself were still there and he was additionally hearing malevolent voices, that he identified as the voices of his captures. He had intense feelings of guilt and shame, he was always stressed and he was afraid of people. He described himself as being emotionally exhausted and that was the reason that he wanted to hurt himself.

A story of trauma

Before I continue I would like to give some more information about Wahid's story of trauma and how all this trauma invaded his life. Wahid allowed us to have only a glimpse of his life that lead to the traumatic events. When in Iraq, he worked for the American army. With the fall of Saddam Hussein and due to the fact that he collaborated with the American army and also that he was a Sunni Muslim, he was persecuted by the Shia group. He had to flee in a number of occasions because he was threatened and even though he was granted asylum, he went back to Iraq. This lead to his arrest by the Shia group some time later. He was detained together with his dear childhood friend, Mohamed, for 28 days. During these 28 days he suffered physical and psychological torture and he was raped daily. *"They beat me, they tortured me, they humiliated me"*. He was also a witness to the torture, rape and murder of his best friend that was killed the day before Wahid was released.

The release

Wahid was coming from a well done family and this was well known to his abusers. One of them contacted his family and asked ransom for his release. His family sold their house and managed to gather the money that was requested, a total amount of 45.000 dollars. This incident together with the fact that his friend was killed created the guilt that Wahid is dealing with today. Wahid chose to share information about all the abuse he suffered only with his mother. His parents were very supportive and they were the ones that pushed Wahid to leave his country once more, in order to stay alive.

The multiple losses that Wahid faced

- The loss of his manhood *"I am less of a man now"* that is connected with the values that are culturally shared of what consists a man in the Iraqi culture
- The loss of his best friend
- The loss of his love *"I was like an alive dead. I didn't want to take her with me in this"* by his choice that is possibly connected also with values, beliefs, dreams etc
- The loss of the family property
- The loss of his life in Iraq and his parents, his constant displacement

Throughout my supervision sessions with Melina and through all the difficult situations we had to go through, a phrase of Michael White was acting as a guiding principle and a constant reminder: *"No-one is a passive recipient of trauma. People always take steps to try to prevent the trauma, and, even if preventing the trauma is clearly impossible, they take steps to try to modify it"*

in some small way or to modify its effects on their lives, or they take steps in efforts to preserve what is precious to them” (White, M. 2004 pp.47) . This notion of non-passivity gave us the floor to explore the acts of resistance in Wahid’s story.

The dominating nature of the trauma and an alternative way of working

Shortly after the first sessions that Wahid had with Melina, we realized that the more problem focused way we chose to intervene up to that point, was not having the effects that we wished to. Regardless to say that no member of the team was trained appropriately to work with torture survivors or had any training around narrative therapy. Up to that point Wahid was continuously narrating in a very detailed manner all the abuse he suffered; causing high discomfort to both the therapist and the translator and on the same time there was no progress in the therapeutic intervention. Every discussion with Wahid was around the sexual abuse and the killing of his best friend. It seemed that he wanted his story to be told and witnessed and what he’s been through acknowledged in a protective and supportive environment. We had to find a way to express his experience of the trauma without him being defined by it. The fear that he would be re-traumatized by his constant narration of his story was there but we still had the chance to listen to signs of what continued to be important and valuable to him and expressions that could show us his response to trauma. Even though Wahid’s request was to find solutions to his problems that were causing him *“fear and tiredness”*, because at that moment were very intense, we realized during our supervision sessions that our aim should be to find ways to establish a sense of identity that was destroyed by the trauma that he is been through, in Wahid’s words *“I don’t know if I can come back to how I was” “I’m less of a man now”*, instead of focusing on the complaints themselves. After all torture aims more to break down the identity of a person, to isolate him from others, to destroy self –respect and to demoralize people’s experience of the world. *“For those who have survived abuse, this is an important understanding, one that undermines the sense of culpability and of shame that is so disabling” (White, 1995 p.90)*

Although that up to this point Wahid had identified ways to feel better and stay safe this was not enough. We were seeking throughout his story to find ways of resistance, to acknowledge them and strengthen them and through questions to identify his responses to trauma we hoped to identify his values and skills and knowledge and from there to have a rich story development. We considered that because these responses were not recognized this contributed to Wahid isolation and his wish to be alone, to the development of shame, and to the destruction of a sense of identity (White, 2004). On the same time we had to find a way to minimize Wahid’s discomfort and distress while narrating his story. We were trying to create or invigorate a feeling of safety and trust that seemed very important at that point. Melina and Wahid found a way of him informing her that he is diving into his memories and getting lost there. They used the swimming pool metaphor

Guided by the knowledge that usually people that have been through significant trauma, feel like the lost control of their lives, we paid particular attention that in every step of our work with him we should always try to focus on giving him back control over his life. Torture itself is based on an unequal balance of power so we tried to be very transparent and careful throughout the process in order not to create more power driven relationships. This was achieved by trying to be as less guiding as possible, to be in a more decentered position in the therapeutic work and to ask his permission in every step of the way. We were trying to acknowledge Wahid's value and dignity and to reduce the shame and guilt that he was facing. And I use the word trying because the therapist is not trained in narrative therapy and thus it was difficult for her in the beginning to change her own personal way of working.

Since the feeling of shame was much connected with his sexual abuse and the well established notions around masculinity that existed in his culture we tried as a consequence to de-construct some of these ideas. One of Wahid's value, even though not so richly described was the offering of help to others, and so during the sessions Melina was trying to enable conversations about his contribution to the lives of others. All of the above was possible through double listening that in this case had a different form. It was a combined effort through close collaboration of 2 therapists, Melina and me.

The breakthrough

Half way through the therapeutic sessions Wahid was still tormented by nightmares and he still had problems with his sleep but they seemed to be reducing in frequency and intensity. The voices were not so "loud" and he didn't have thoughts of killing or hurting himself. He also managed to have a friend with whom they shared an apartment.

During one of those sessions, Wahid started the discussion by saying how much ashamed he feels because he doesn't have food and he is asking for help. This led up to him remembering an event in his life, his parents telling him that he should give food to others but he should not ask for food himself. This led to another story of him remembering that while in Iraq and before his arrest he was helping a family by giving them money for food and how by helping he was feeling joy, enjoyment and relief. By scaffolding we manage to identify 2 beliefs of Wahid: "Men keep their words" and "We have to provide help to people". The alternative stories came forward and we tried to thicken them. Working with a shorter version of the Re-authoring map, Wahid managed to identify 2 more times in his recent past that he provided help to people and he kept his word but unfortunately we were not successful at that time to project these 2 beliefs in the future.

On the same time Wahid spoke about Justice. He wanted to see justice existing in the world mentioning that "*no person deserves to face this violence*" Unfortunately the importance of the

last 2 sentences was not recognized and acknowledged and the connection with action in the recent past was not made possible.

In one of those sessions and during a rich description of this torture and in our attempt to identify his acts of resistance, Melina asked him: "*...and how did you survived all of these days?*"

Although it was not easy in the beginning, Wahid listed a number of ways that kept him alive during his captivity, all of which were attributed to his best friend:

- Humor
- The thought that since we die we will make fun of death
- What kept his friend alive was the thought that his son was alive
- The fact that they were together

By focusing in this discussion, Wahid let a small window in his story where we identified one act of resistance-very thinly described, that was attributed to him and was not connected with his friend. During the torture Wahid was either staying silent or asking to be killed. Unfortunately that act of resistance was left unrecognized at that point and it didn't receive the special attention it needed.

Throughout Wahid's narration more gaps were identified in his problem saturated story that could go unnoticed if Melina and me didn't share the responsibility of double listening.

The Definitional ceremony

Trying to find ways to respond to Wahid's need for his story and the injustice happened to him to be acknowledged and to find witnesses to them we consider that maybe a definitional ceremony would best meet this goal. After all "definitional ceremonies deal with the problems of invisibility and marginality; they are strategies that provide opportunities for being seen and in one's terms, garnering witnesses to one's worth, vitality and being (Myerhoff, 1986 in Hernandez, 2008)

I explained the process and the notion behind definitional ceremonies and the practice of outsider witnesses to Melina and she was enthusiastic with the idea. She consider that maybe through this way Wahid would find more witnesses to his story and maybe it would also support him in his request to identify ways to respond to what happened to him. Maybe it would be beneficial for him to listen to the impact that his story had to other people and the recently identified value, although very thinly described, of helping others would become stronger. It is well known that because outsider witnesses speak about how they have been moved by what they have heard, the person at the centre of the ceremony can experience making a contribution

to the lives of the outsider witnesses (Denborough, 2008). And perhaps, if lucky, he would hear other people's stories as well that could help him identify alternative ways of responding to his problems. The last was an idea shared by Wahid himself. The fact that he wasn't ready yet to share his experiences with other people gave us the idea to use as outsider witnesses the group of my colleagues that were participating in the presentation of the final paper of the narrative training course. At that point we thought that we could organize the definitional ceremony through a letter that Wahid would prepare and I would present in the group. The witnessing could take place through letters sent to Wahid by the participants. We understand that this would be beneficial for Melina as well since she was not sure she would manage handling the whole process, due to lack of experience but on the same time we would lose the benefit of Wahid actually listening to the voices of the people responding to his letter and the face to face reflections of the outside witnesses. Real time translation would also be a problem.

Wahid was very keen with the idea since the beginning. We invited him to narrate his story in a letter in a way that facilitates a double story telling (telling). We translated his letter in English and it was then shared with a group of outsider witnesses who were invited to respond back by a letter to Wahid's story. They were instructed to focus on what Wahid's gives value in life, of what is of value to him (the re-telling of the telling). Wahid received 7 letters in response to his letter that were presented to him gradually. We decided that small steps would be a safer option, for both Melina and Wahid. Even though difficult, the discussion over the responses (the telling of the re-telling) tried to follow as much as possible the questions map of the outsider witness.

Wahid was given the choice to share only what he felt like sharing from his story and up to the point that he felt comfortable with. Although, as he said, he was not a person very used to write, he wrote the letter by himself, in one day. He was very eager for his story to be shared because it was very important to him if through this letter a lot of people could be helped. Writing the letter made him feel relieved even though it was not easy for him to write it. He admitted it helped him remember also good times in his life

The 'map' of outsider-witness (White, 2002 in Russell & Carey, 2004)

We tried to follow the below map of outside witness by Michael White as much as possible in order to inform the responses of both the witnesses and Wahid's.

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?” And more specifically for Wahid: What did Walid’s story suggested to you about him as a person? What did it say to you that might be important to him?

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 did?”

Wahid’s letter

Wahid’s letter was translated in English and is presented here in full form as it was written.

Before the incident

Hello! I come from Iraq and I was born on November 4, 1988. I have graduated from the Arabian Gulf Academy for Maritime Studies as I wanted to become a maritime officer. However, because of the Iraqi war in 2003, which led to the fall of the then deceased Saddam Houssein, I continued my studies but at the same I was working at my brother’s-in-law business company.

Later I started working under the command of the USA army and I was living a very happy life, despite the difficulties that I faced for being a Sunni Muslim in Shia dominated districts. Even if my name was indicating that I was Sunni. Yet, I overcame this difficult situation and also I had a friend. His name was Mohamed. This person was something more than a brother to me as we were friend since childhood. He was helping me a lot as I was helping him too. He was working also with me at the USA army base and my life was happy and I could surmount any obstacle in my way. Always with the help of my brother and friend Mohamed.

In addition, I am the closest person to my parents, my mother and father. Also I am very proud as I was helping my parents to make ends meet. I was also helping another poor family in need by giving them some money every month. In fact I was trying to help the both morally and financially.

While I was helping them, I was feeling fulfilled, courageous, driven and it helped me feel always happy. What is more, it gave me strength, because helping other people makes us human and it was bringing me closer to this sentiment. Because I love very much the goodness in all people no matter what their religion or cult is.

As a person, I am very stubborn, something that I learned from my father. What is more, when I was returning home and I was troubled by something, I was laughing with my father, my mother and my siblings and I did not let them to understand that something bothers me from work or in general. As my parents smile was making me happy and helping me to forget everything. Another thing about my character was that I was getting really upset with certain things in my life without caring about what other people might say. This was the best part of my character. Additionally, I was afraid of no one and I respected everybody.

The incident

Mohamed and I were abducted as soon as we returned from Finland. They kept us for 25 days but for me it was like 28 years. I confronted torture, humiliation and swears towards me, my friend and my parents. But what actually humiliated me the most and offended me as a man was the fact that I was being raped. That, actually hurt me a lot and every time that I recall it I do not know what happens to me. I cry a lot and I am burning on the inside. These are not the only things happened to me during my captivity. My friend was killed, whom was more than a brother to me.

I don't know what to say anymore. Yet, every time I remember the incident, I can't help but wonder, why me? Why I was forced to experience something like that because it cannot be forgotten.

After the incident

After the incident, my parents sold the house in their attempt to rescue me and themselves at the same time. Then, we travelled to North Iraq and our life got worse. And all these because of me. For me, a lot of things changed about my life. I lost my brother and friend, Mohamed, I lost my love and every time that the incident comes to my mind, I collapse and psychologically I feel tired. As I fear everyone around me.

The thing that helped me cope was, first of all, Mohamed's mother who was calling me and we were talking on the phone, reassuring me that this was meant to happen and she was trying to comfort me. The greatest help though, was my parents, my mother and father, who lost everything for my safety. However, some of the things that happened to me during the incident can't be forgotten and

when I am thinking about them I get tired and I feel much pain. So I asked help from a psychologist and we had had some sessions which helped a lot. I was not abandoned and when I go to our sessions and talk about what have inside, I feel relieved and peaceful.

Many times, I wake up frightened and scared because while I am asleep, I am having nightmares and really disturbing dreams. Even if I don't sleep much but only for a few hours. So, I want your help because I wish to overcome these difficulties and forget about everything. But I won't forget my childhood friend, and friend of my life, Mohamed.

Thank you very much

The "Witnessing" and Walid's response

Shortly after my request, 7 people responded to Wahid's letter. The process of reading the responses to Wahid and receiving his responses to the letters he received, was not in the beginning easy for both Melina and Wahid. Melina felt uncomfortable with the process, making changes along the way in the structure of the discussion. She felt like she had to follow the flow of the conversation and not to be too structured. They focused on one letter in the first session, taking careful and small steps to make sure that both felt comfortable with the whole process. Even though Wahid recognized and appreciated a lot of the points from the first witness's letter it was not very easy for him to respond to all the questions asked, especially the ones involving imageries.

The main points that were pointed out by the outsider witnesses had to do with the importance that Wahid was paying to receive help and support from his loved ones and the power of remembering his friend and his life back in Iraq. One of the witnesses wrote *"To fight in life and in death. I am moved about what you say about your friend. Even if he died you don't forget him. And this for me is a fight that you won. It seems to me that it is important to you not to allow death to take away the memories of your friend. I believe it is an act of resistance to all the injustices towards you and towards the people that live in war and violence"*.

The skills recognized were his skills to fight, and to continue progressing in his life, to keep on his dreams for work and study. His values regarding caring for others and especially the most weak, of valuing family and friendship were acknowledged. His ability to continue fighting to keep his friend's memory alive and to honour their relationship was distinguished by the majority of the witnesses.

Another respondent wrote: *"Wahid ...gave me the impression that he is a person that cares about the others and especially for the most weak, like the poor family that he took care of. I have the image of a person that values family and friendship. He gave me the impression that for him Mohamed was family. And also I think he has a skill. A skill that I found very helpful and important!"*

The skill to keep the sense of Mohamed present in his life every day. He doesn't allow time, nor difficulties to blur the memory of Mohamed and take him away from him. He is fighting to keep with him Mohamed, to honour their relationship, to honour the contribution of Mohamed in Wahid's life."

The reflections of the outsider witnesses created a lot of realizations to Wahid. He felt safe and that he was not alone, and he was surprised to see that people understand him and understand what is important to him. He came to the realization that people's stories can affect other people and this way they can arrive to a truth about their life.

One of the ideas that he came back to was the importance of offering to others that he tracked back again to his own life through memories connected with family values, like the value of being grateful. He recognized people in his life that helped him when most needed. He came to realize that even though death and loss are unpredictable and this causes fear, this is knowledge that he acquired that could be helpful for him in the future. He felt he is blessed for having such a relationship with his friend and moved from his stand that he had to forget his friend in order for the pain to go away and to be able to move on. This brought back nice memories of his life with Mohamed. He felt that the memory of his friend was difficult for him to carry sometimes but on the same time it was a soothing thought for him. He realized that his friendship was unique and unusual and he felt sorry to lose it but on the same time at least it was something he had at some point in his life and he recognized ways he uses to honour his friend's memory. He thought that sometimes difficulties even if not well received can be useful and he took strength from the fact that sometimes people that face difficulties still have the need to help others.

He also felt good that his story helped people see outside of their own micro-worlds, as one of the respondents commented and understand what is happening in the world.

The challenges

As I mentioned in the beginning my role was only to supervise and support the therapist in this trip. I could identify the gaps of the problematic story; identify glimpses of values and responses to trauma but still the therapist run the session, using the approach and techniques that she deemed appropriate.

Even though the importance of externalizing and naming the problem was very much understood, it was not something that we succeeded to do. The whole concept of using externalizing language and having externalizing conversations was not something the therapist was used to and didn't feel comfortable in practicing extensively. Using a translator didn't support in this direction also, since the externalizing language should also be translated the same way in Arabic. Melina had also a double role to perform: to focus on Wahid and on the same time to keep an eye of controlling the messages and the way they are transmitted by the

translator, ensuring on the same time that the translator is not being traumatized by the problem saturated story.

The main challenge though was the effect of the problematic story to the therapist and the translators and their personal involvement. For some of them to support Wahid became a mission and some were traumatized by the continuous narration of his story, having similar experiences themselves. For some of us his story touched personal values and beliefs as it was connected with our personal ideas about justice.

For me working with Wahid posed an extra dilemma and some ethical considerations. Working with torture survivors, with people escaping from war and violence, what is more efficient? Supporting an individual at a time, or speak out with a loud voice, make the society aware of what we have created and change the system that we, as communities, operate in? This is my constant personal struggle.

Closure

Because of this work a number of people were challenged. There was a struggle in some of us to remain as neutral as possible, aware of when our personal beliefs and expectations were taking the lead in our work with Wahid. There were no limitations in the support or in our willingness to support Wahid and this led in a number of "de-briefing" sessions with everyone involved. It is difficult to stay neutral when you face injustice and more difficult not to shout against this injustice. The fact that torture knocked for the first time our doors made some of us feel that all the terrible things that we were listening to all these years were true and maybe feel that the work that we were doing and the support we were providing was probably not enough. A caring bubble was nevertheless created around Wahid that continues to be there until today.

I can not describe the next steps with Wahid, nor can I guess, since I am not involved in his therapy anymore. I know that he continues to face challenges in his life, that makes him go back and front with his therapy but I know that some important steps have been made. And I know that even for a short while I manage to give an insight of a different way of conducting therapy that was beneficial for everyone involved. And this makes me happy.

Acknowledgment

This work would never be possible without the hard work and open mind of Melina and without the tremendous support of a team of dedicated translators. And more than this I want to thank Wahid, that he trusted us with his story and he allowed us to walk this pathway with him.

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