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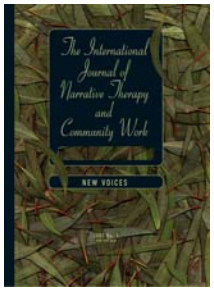

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Children, trauma and subordinate storyline development

by Michael White

In this chapter, Michael White emphasises the importance of subordinate storyline development in consultations with children who have been subject to trauma. This subordinate storyline development provides an alternative territory of identity for children to stand in as they begin to give voice to their experiences of trauma. This affords children a significant degree of immunity from the potential for re-traumatisation in response to therapeutic initiatives to assist them to speak of their experiences of trauma and its consequences. This chapter includes illustrations of the implications of these ideas for consultations with children who have been subject to trauma.

Children are not strangers to trauma. In most societies around the globe the incidence of the abuse of children remains high despite many initiatives undertaken by state and community organisations to address this. And in most parts of the world that are experiencing the calamities associated with war, disease, displacement, and economic turmoil, children remain most acutely vulnerable to life-threatening hardship and trauma. Service providers who work in local child-protection services with the families of refugees, and those who work with people in parts of the world that are ravaged by war and disease, will be acutely aware of the importance of assisting children to recover from the effects of the trauma they have been subject to. And they will also be aware of the importance of doing this in ways that are psychologically and emotionally safe for these children who have experienced so little physical safety in the history of their young lives and, in many circumstances, when the achievement of this physical safety cannot be guaranteed.

The importance of attending to this safety is underscored by the reluctance of many children, who have been through trauma, to speak of their experience of this trauma. While there are numerous theories about this reluctance – for example, that this is due to psychological mechanisms of denial and suppression – it would seem that concerns about retribution should the trauma of abuse be disclosed, and about the potential risk of reliving trauma in the context of giving voice to this, are high on the list of relevant understandings of children's reluctance to speak of their experiences of trauma. This concern about encountering re-traumatisation upon giving expression to experiences of trauma will be a significant focus of the discussion in this paper.

I believe this concern is well-founded, for there is an ever-potential hazard that, in speaking of their experiences of trauma, children will be re-traumatised; that children will become trapped in the immediacy of their experience of the trauma they have lived through; that they will be ensnared in the reliving of this experience. This very outcome can be witnessed in circumstances in which children give voice to their experience of trauma in ways that contribute to a reinforcement of the negative conclusions they hold about their identity and about their lives. This, in turn, is usually associated

with an escalation of a sense of shame, of vulnerability, of hopelessness, of desolation, and of futility. If great care is not taken in building a context in which what might be called 'psychological and emotional safety' is ascertained for the child, then there is a strong chance that the child, in response to encouragement to express their experience of trauma, will find themselves redefined by the trauma they have been subject to.

This assertion is not founded upon 'armchair' observation. Over the years I have met with many children in many contexts who have been re-traumatised through the very efforts that have been undertaken to assist them to address experiences of trauma. And on occasions I have had the excruciating experience of witnessing such re-traumatisation in process when I have not been in a position to influence the shape of the 'healing practices' being administered.

Repositioning

Attention to this aspect of psychological and emotional safety in working with children who have been subject to trauma cannot be too strongly emphasised. How can we ensure that children are not vulnerable to an experience of re-traumatisation in the context of speaking about what they have been through? This question encourages considerations of the 'psychological positioning' of the child in opening space for them to address their experiences of trauma. Another way of stating this: this question leads us to considerations of the territory of identity that the child is standing in as they go about putting expression to their experiences of abuse. If this is a territory of identity that is circumscribed by the trauma that the child has been subject to, then it can be predicted that to simply encourage the child to give expression to their experiences of this trauma will be re-traumatising, and that this will contribute to a renewed sense of vulnerability.

In addressing options for the sort of re-positioning of children that will provide a safe context for them to give expression to their experiences of trauma, narrative practices that enable the identification and rich development of the subordinate storylines of these children's lives can be

employed. As these subordinate storylines are developed, they provide an alternative territory of identity for children to take recourse to in speaking of their experiences of trauma. In this chapter I will focus on options for the development of these subordinate storylines and on how these can establish territories of safety for children who have been subject to trauma.

In emphasising this focus, I don't want to be misunderstood on the subject of supporting children to speak about their experiences of trauma. It is clearly important for children to have the opportunity to speak of trauma and its consequences; to be provided with support in putting to words that which has not been spoken. I have consistently found that when children have territories of identity available to them which provide the sort of safety I have been describing, they invariably engage in powerful expressions of their experiences of trauma and its consequences. And these are expressions of the sort that provide an antidote to the sense of shame, hopelessness, desolation, and futility that is invariably reinforced in the context of re-traumatisation.

Subordinate storyline development

The genesis of subordinate storyline development[1] is to be found in children's responses to the trauma they have been subject to. No child is a passive recipient of trauma, regardless of the nature of this trauma. Amongst other things, children take action to minimise their exposure to trauma and to decrease their vulnerability to it by modifying the traumatic episodes they are subject to, or by finding ways of modifying the effects of this trauma on their lives. However, it is rare for children's responses to the traumas of their lives to be acknowledged. It is more common for these responses to go unnoticed, or to be punished, or to be disqualified through ridicule and diminishment within the trauma context.

These responses to trauma and its consequences are founded upon what children give value to; upon what they hold precious in their lives. And these responses reflect knowledges about, and skills in:

a. the preservation of life in life-threatening contexts,

b. finding support in hostile environments,

c. establishing domains of safety in unsafe places,

d. holding onto possibilities for life in circumstances that are discouraging of this,

e. developing nurturing responses to others in situations that are degrading of such responses,

f. finding connection and a sense of affiliation with others in settings that are isolating,

g. refusing to visit trauma on the lives of others in milieus that are encouraging of this reproduction of trauma,

h. healing from the consequences of trauma under conditions that are unfavourable to this,

i. achieving degrees of self-acceptance in atmospheres that are sponsoring of self-rejection,

j. and more.

These knowledges and skills are rarely independently constructed and developed by children who have been subject to trauma. Rather, it is invariably the case that these knowledges and skills have been constructed and developed in partnership with other children and with adults who are also subject to, or who have been subject to, trauma. And, further, this collaboration in the construction and development of these knowledges and skills is usually very significantly shaped by specific familial, community and cultural ethos.

In addressing this subject of children's responses to trauma, and in naming some of the knowledges and skills expressed in these responses, I am not suggesting that trauma is anything but painful for children, that it does not have highly negative consequences for the lives of children who are subject to it, or that this experience of trauma and its consequences does not need to be addressed. And I am not suggesting that for children to hold onto what they

give value to, or to develop knowledges and skills of the sort to which I have referred, is enough to mitigate this pain and these consequences. My intention in drawing attention to the significance of these responses to trauma is to emphasise the fact that the negative consequences of trauma do not represent the whole story of a child's life and identity, and to give an account of some of the 'material' that is ever-available for the sort of subordinate storyline development that constructs alternative territories of identity that can be occupied by children in giving expression to their experience of trauma. These are alternative territories of identity that will make it possible for children to give expression to their experiences of trauma but not be re-traumatised in the process of doing so.

In regard to this appreciation of the fact that the negative consequences of trauma do not represent the whole story of children's lives, it can be helpful to think of memories of trauma that exclude an account of children's responses to trauma as 'half memories'. In the context of this understanding, subordinate storyline development contributes to 'full memory' restoration. I believe this 'full memory' restoration to be critically important in therapeutic consultations with children who have been subject to trauma.

Subordinate storyline development in work with children who have been subject to trauma contributes to the rich description of the child's responses to trauma, and of what these responses reflect in terms of:

1. What children give value to; of what they hold precious – which includes specific beliefs, guiding principles, hopes, dreams, personal integrities, personal ethics, and so on.
2. What children intend for their lives – which includes specific purposes, goals, ambitions, objectives, wishes, quests, pursuits, aspirations, and so on.
3. The knowledges and skills expressed in these responses – which includes the knowledges and skills associated with the points on page 147: a. through to j.
4. The social, relational and cultural genesis of these responses – which includes the contribution of significant figures in the child's history (including peers), specific family legacies that can be honoured, significant

children's literature, edifying cultural myth, ethnic traditions and concepts of spirituality, and so on.

In regard to this fourth point, as previously stated, the knowledges and skills expressed in children's responses to trauma are rarely independently constructed and developed by these children, but are developed in partnership with others, as is what children hold precious and what they intend for their lives. When the social, relational and cultural genesis of these knowledges and skills, and of what children hold precious, and of what they intend for their lives, is revealed in the context of subordinate story-line development, there are opportunities for children to experience the stories of their lives linked anew with the stories of the lives of others. Many of these others are significant figures in the child's history, and as the contribution of these figures becomes more visible, new opportunities are presented for these children to connect/reconnect with their relational/social/community networks. This can be in part facilitated by supporting children in the identification of, and in the explicit acknowledgement of, the contribution of these figures. Such acknowledgement can take many forms, including in the form of letters and certificates of recognition co-developed/co-written by children and their counsellors/community workers, and in the form of honouring ceremonies for these figures planned by children in collaboration with these counsellors/community workers.

The accounts of what children hold precious, and of what they intend for their lives that are featured in subordinate storyline development can be thought of as concepts about life and about identity. The extent to which children have formed these concepts is dependent upon the stage and state of the child's development, and even for older children these concepts are rarely fully formed. In consultations that contribute to subordinate storyline development for children, these concepts are not usually 'discovered' completely formed, but are further developed in the context of therapeutic conversations in which the counsellor/community worker is a conversational partner. It is my understanding that such conceptual development is critical to the establishment of children's ability to intervene in shaping their own lives and of their ability to influence their relationships with others (Vygotsky 1986).

I have reiterated the point that, in rendering more visible the sources of children's responses to trauma, subordinate storyline development provides a safe place for children to stand in the context of giving voice to the trauma they have been subject to, and to the consequences of this trauma. But this is not all. This subordinate storyline development also provides a foundation for action for children to proceed with their lives. As these subordinate storylines become more richly known and experienced, it becomes more possible for children to take initiatives that are in harmony with what they give value to, with what they intend for their lives, and that are shaped by the knowleges and skills that are of their own histories. It also becomes more possible for them to further develop their connections with those who are significant to them, and with valued aspects of culture and history.

In focussing on the subject of subordinate storyline development in this paper, there is a risk that I will be understood to be suggesting that the conversations of narrative therapy are revealing of an alternative story that is the 'true' or 'authentic' story. However, this is not the case. To the contrary, I understand life to be multi-storied, and all of the alternative stories of life to be cultural, relational and historical in origin; these stories are all possible constructions of the events and experiences of life. And in subordinate storyline development, I am aware that there are often opportunities for people to experience being positioned simultaneously in more than one field of existence, in more than one territory of identity.

Personal agency

In rendering more visible children's responses to trauma according to the terms that I have defined here, subordinate storyline development restores children's sense of personal agency. This is a sense of self that is associated with the perception that one is able to have some effect on the shape of one's own life; a sense that one is able to intervene in one's own life as an agent of what one gives value to and as an agent of one's own intentions, and a sense that the world is at least minimally responsive to the fact of one's existence.

The restoration and/or development of this sense of personal agency in work with children who have been subject to trauma is of critical importance. The restoration and/or development of this sense of personal agency provides an antidote to the sort of highly disabling conclusions about one's identity that feature perceptions that one is a passive recipient of life's forces. Such perceptions are highly influential in the development of conclusions that one is 'damaged' and 'messed up' on account of what one has been through, and to the development of the pervasive and profoundly immobilising phenomena of 'vulnerability' and 'fragility'.

The contribution that subordinate storyline development might make as an antidote to these negative identity conclusions that children have often derived is of critical importance, particularly in these contemporary times in which the discourses of victimhood have become so influential in the construction of the identities of people who have been subject to trauma. These discourses have become prominent in the professional and the popular psychologies, and not only promote the construction of disabled identities, but also shape relationship practices that are diminishing and marginalising of people who have been through significant trauma. In the context of these relationship practices, people who have been subject to significant trauma become the 'other'. It is in the context of these relationship practices that their identity is constructed as 'spoiled'.

In regard to service provision, when workers are encouraged to place their sole focus on the trauma that children have been subject to, and on the consequences of this trauma, they become vulnerable to the reproduction of these discourses of victimhood in their therapeutic work. In this circumstance, there is a risk that counsellors/community workers will further diminish children's sense of personal agency and, as well, inadvertently reinforce a passive-recipient identity status for these children. This central and exclusive focus on trauma and its consequences obscures the extent to which identity is constructed in language and in the context of relational practices. And it obscures the extent to which it is identity that is very much at stake in work with children who have been subject to abuse.

This is an important matter, for the contemporary discourses of victimhood have serious consequences for child development, and can

contribute very significantly to the long-term establishment of a sense of 'emptiness' and 'desolation' in life. These contemporary discourses of victimhood also have serious consequences for the therapeutic relationship in work with children. Although many therapists/community workers have an awareness of the conditions that can contribute to the development of 'learned helplessness' in the people who seek their help, this term is far too mild a description of the potential devastation that these discourses of victimhood can wreak in young people's lives.

I believe that the modern and popular interpretation of the concept of catharsis has played a significant role in obscuring the play of these discourses of victimhood. This interpretation of this concept is associated with the idea that human action is founded upon an emotional/psychological system that works according to the principles of hydraulic and steam-engine technology; for example, that emotions are held under pressure within this system like a head of steam is held under pressure in a steam engine, and that the 'discharge' or 'release' of this pressure through the appropriate 'valve' will culminate in the desired outcome. According to this concept, the pain of trauma is held under pressure in the emotional/psychological system, and the discharge of this pain via an appropriate avenue will be a panacea in regard to the effects of this trauma. Under the sway of this interpretation of the concept of catharsis, counsellors often encourage people to give expression to their experiences of trauma without engaging with considerations about the safety of doing so; without a foundation for contemplating the potential for this to be re-traumatising for people, for understanding how this might be constructing of people's identity, and without a foundation for grasping the critical importance of the resurrection and/or development of a sense of personal agency for the people who are consulting them.

Identification of children's responses to trauma

I have referred to the part that the rich description of children's responses to trauma can play in subordinate storyline development, with specific reference to:

a. what children give value to,

b. what children intend for their lives,

c. the knowledges and skills expressed in these responses, and to

d. the social, relational and cultural genesis of these responses.

This begs the question: 'How can these responses be identified?' There are many avenues of therapeutic inquiry that render visible and richly describe children's responses to trauma. I will now draw out three of these avenues of therapeutic inquiry:

- identifying the absent but implicit,
- reflecting on problem-solving activity, and
- direct observation of spontaneous interaction.

I will also provide descriptions of therapeutic consultations with children which are based on each of these avenues of inquiry.

Identifying the absent but implicit

The notion of the 'absent but implicit' is associated with the idea that, in order to express one's experiences of life, one must distinguish this experience from what it is not. By this account, every expression can be considered to be founded upon its contrast, which I refer to as the 'absent but implicit'. I have drawn significantly from the work of Jaques Derrida (1973, 1976, 1978) in this understanding, which I have discussed at some length elsewhere (White 2000, 2003). For many years I have found this notion to be of service in the genesis of the subordinate storylines of people's lives. Amongst other possibilities, the notion of the absent but implicit provides opportunities for ongoing psychological pain in response to trauma to be considered a testimony to the significance of what it was that the person held precious that was violated through the experience of trauma. (See box: 'The Absent but Implicit' on the following page)

The Absent but Implicit

To clarify the implications of this understanding, I will here reproduce part of a discussion from 'Narrative Practice and Community Assignments' (White 2003, pp.39-43). This discussion presents alternative perspectives on psychological pain and emotional distress that are derived from the notion of the 'absent but implicit'.

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.

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 what that was so powerfully disrespected and demeaned in the context of trauma, from what it was that 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.

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 by 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 the 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.

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.

Deanne

Deanne, ten years of age, had been referred to me with an explicit request that I assist her to express her experiences of very significant trauma that she'd been subject to. Various efforts to achieve this had already been undertaken in three different counselling contexts, but the outcome of these efforts had been largely negative. In response to these efforts, Deanne had become highly distressed, then regressed and, following each instance, had felt quite unstable for a period of weeks.

At the outset of my meetings with Deanne I made it clear that I had no expectations in regard to her speaking about the trauma that she'd been put through, but enquired as to whether it would be okay to ask her a few questions about the distress that she'd been managing. This was okay by Deanne, so I initiated an inquiry into what it might be that was precious to her that had been hurt by the abuse she'd experienced, suggesting that the intensity of this distress might correspond with the strength to which she held whatever it was precious in her life; with perhaps the degree of passion that she felt for what she gave value to in her life. In response to these questions, Deanne began to talk about her sense of the unfairness of what she'd been through, and this led to a conversation about specific principles of fairness that had always been important to her. Before long I was hearing stories about some of the initiatives of Deanne's life that were a reflection of these principles, including one about action that she'd recently been taking in solidarity with another girl at school who'd also been through hard times and who was the subject of peer abuse.

In our second meeting, amongst other things, we embarked upon explorations of the history of these principles of fairness in Deanne's life. It was in these explorations that Deanne for the first time established a link between her voice on these principles of fairness, and one of her favourite books – Pippi Longstocking (Lindgren 1950). In our third meeting we did some shared reading of the passages of Pippi Longstocking that Deanne was most drawn to, and in which these principles were expressed. This meeting culminated with me assisting Deanne to write a letter to Astrid Lingren, Pippi Longstocking's creator, which acknowledged this author's contribution to Deanne's sense of fairness. Deanne clearly experienced joy in this task.

For our fourth meeting, with Deanne's approval, I invited some other young people to join as outsider witnesses[2]. These were young people who'd consulted me about trauma in the past, and who'd volunteered to join me in my work with other young people who might be following in their footsteps. The powerfully resonant re-tellings of Deanne's story by these outsider witnesses had a very positive effect on Deanne's conclusions about her own identity.

In our fifth meeting, at which these outsider witnesses were again present, I found opportunity to consult Deanne about her thoughts on whether her principles of fairness had played a role in her survival of the trauma that she'd been through. Her response was in the affirmative, and led to a conversation about the ways in which these principles had shaped her responses to this trauma. As these responses were drawn out Deanne began to speak openly of the specific details of this trauma and, although this was an emotional time for her, there was not a hint that she was encountering any re-traumatisation or regression as an outcome of this. Again, the re-tellings of the outsider witnesses were powerfully resonant for Deanne – this time the focus of these re-tellings was placed on Deanne's experience of trauma, its consequences, and on her response to this.

At our sixth meeting I learned that Deanne had not experienced any destabilising effects from giving such direct expression to her experience of abuse. Rather, she experienced her life proceeding in unexpectedly positive ways. This emboldened her to put more words to what she'd previously been unable to speak of and, as one outcome of so doing, Deanne found that this

didn't upset her in the way that she'd predicted it would. To Deanne, this was, of itself, a valued learning, and a significantly positive reflection on her personal development.

Upon reviewing, with Deanne, the contribution of the re-tellings of outsider witnesses, it became quite clear that these had played a highly significant role in the acknowledgement of the trauma, its consequences, and of Deanne's response to this trauma. It also became quite clear that these re-tellings played a significant role in the restoration of and further development of her sense of personal agency.

Reflecting on problem-solving activity

Problem-solving activity can provide a fertile context for rendering visible what it is that children give value to, what they intend for their lives, and the knowledges of life and skills of living that are important to them. In witnessing children engaging in such activity, counsellors/community workers can note children's responses to the task to be solved and their responses to each other as they go about addressing the task. Following this, these children can be interviewed about these responses, and about their further reflections on the experience of the problem-solving activity.

Imbrahim, Amir, and Alex

I was meeting with Imbrahim, Amir, and Alex, who had migrated from their countries of origin as refugees. They had been referred to me on account of concerns about their generally withdrawn status, and about the extent to which they had continued to maintain silence in regard to the very significant trauma that they had been subject to over an extended period ahead of their migration.

We'd taken a walk together in a nearby park. On account of a recent storm, the small creek in this park had been turned into a torrent. The three boys determined that this would have to be traversed, and set about figuring

out how this might be done – the creek was not deep and could not have swept them away, but there was a very real risk that they could have fallen in and become wet through. With the aid of various props that they found in the park, in a spirit of challenge and adventure, and with each other's support, eventually all three had succeeded in crossing to and fro without getting wet.

Afterwards we sat and talked about what had gone into the task that had ensured its success. Imbrahim, Amir and Alex's reflections on this, along with their verbal utterances that had accompanied the adventure itself, provided me with a foundation to interview them about what they held precious, and about their intentional understandings of their actions. I will include here a small sample of the sort of questions that shaped this interview:

Questions of Imbrahim

Imbrahim, you said that at one point you'd been scared for Alex, more scared for him than you'd been for yourself. And you also said that this was about 'looking out for others'.

- What did this 'looking out for others' make possible for you in the creek adventure?
- What is your guess about what this did for Amir and Alex?
- How did you feel about making this contribution?
- What does this say about what is important to you?
- Can you tell me some other stories of your life that reflect this ability to 'look out for others'?

Questions of Amir

Amir, I heard you say something about how at one point you worried that it couldn't be done, but that you kept on because you knew how good it would feel when you did get to the other side.

- What is a good name for how you keep trying to get to the other side when things are difficult or scary?

- How did this play a part in the creek adventure working out like it did?
- How did you feel about playing this part?
- I understand that it was about 'keeping on trying' and 'knowing that things will be better' when you get to the other side. Would you say something about what you have learned in your life about getting through things that are difficult?
- Can you tell me some stories about your life that reflect these learnings about getting through things that are difficult?

Questions of Alex

Alex, you said that you set a goal for yourself, and that you were not going to give up on this goal, no matter what. What is a good name for this capacity to hold onto goals that are important to you, and to see these through?

- How did this affect what you did in the creek adventure?
- What was it like for you to find yourself holding onto this goal in the way that you did?
- What does this say about what you want for your life?
- Can you tell me some stories about your life that are examples of you refusing to let go of your goals, and that are examples of standing for what you want in life?

I had several more meetings with Imbrahim, Amir, and Alex, and these provided the opportunity for me to enquire into the relational/social/cultural histories of what these young men held precious, of their intentional understandings of their actions, and of the knowledges and skills that were richly described in our conversations. One outcome of the conversations that were generated by this line of inquiry was that Imbrahim, Amir, and Alex realised that the stories of their lives were linked to valued stories of their cultural history in ways that they could rejoice in.

When I sensed that subordinate storyline development was such that it afforded alternative and relatively secure territories of identity for these young men to occupy, I began to consult them about whether what they held precious and what they intended for their lives, along with these various capacities, knowledges and skills, had played part in them getting through the trauma they'd experienced. The response was a unanimous 'yes'. In the context of providing an account of this, these three young men gave vivid detail to their experiences of trauma. I encouraged them to reflect on what it was like for them to be giving voice to the hard things they'd been through, and learned that this was the first time that they'd been able to speak of this without feeling 'absolutely terrible' afterward.

My latter meetings with Imbrahim, Amir, and Alex were structured around outsider-witness practices. In these meetings they took turns for each other in the development of re-tellings of the trauma they'd each been through, of the consequences of this, and of their responses to this trauma. These re-tellings were highly significant in the acknowledgement of the trauma and its consequences, and of their responses to this trauma. And, as with Deanne, for each boy these re-tellings played a significant role in the restoration and further development of their sense of personal agency.

Direct observation of spontaneous interaction

Direct observation of the spontaneous interaction of children who have been subject to trauma can provide clues about points of entry for subordinate storyline development.

James, Emily and Beth

In my first meeting with James (11 years), Emily (8 years), and Beth (7 years), siblings who had been through very significant abuse and neglect in their young lives, on several occasions I witnessed James engaging in the care-taking of his sisters. This care-taking was evident in several ways, including in the patience that he expressed in assisting Emily and Beth to clarify what they thought about some relatively simple subjects that I consulted them about.

This observation provided a foundation for a therapeutic inquiry in which, amongst other things, I encouraged James, Emily and Beth to:

a. name these care-taking skills,
b. describe the know-how that was expressed in these skills,
c. define the contribution of these skills to Emily's life and Beth's life,
d. speculate about what the possession of these skills might make possible for James in the future of his own life,
e. reflect on what these skills might say about what is most important to James,
f. trace the history of the development of these skills in James' life, and to
g. identify figures of James' history who might have valued and appreciated these skills, and who might be implicated in his development of these skills.

As it turned out that James' teacher from his third grade was a figure who was implicated in the development of his care-taking skills, she was invited to our third, fourth, and fifth meetings. In the role of outsider witness, this teacher played a very significant part in the rich development of a sub-ordinate storyline of James' life, in the acknowledgement of the trauma that James (as well as Emily and Beth) had been subject to, and in the restoration and further development of his sense of personal agency.

Emily's and Beth's responsiveness to James' care-taking did not go unnoticed. This provided the foundation for explorations that were focussed on how they had been able to open themselves to the concern and support of others, and on their skills in connecting with others.

When the time seemed right, I began to enquire about whether these skills had had a part to play in providing a foundation for these children to get through the hard times they'd experienced. At this point, all three children became quite animated in giving accounts of how they had used these skills to survive the abuse and neglect that had been visited upon them. These were dramatic and vivid accounts, which included specific details of what they had been subject to, which they had mostly never previously spoken of. Over

several more meetings it was clear that James, Emily and Beth now had a foundation for giving voice to their experiences of abuse and neglect in ways that were not accompanied by a risk that they would be defined by this abuse and neglect, in ways that were not accompanied by a risk that they could be re-traumatised in this.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have emphasised the importance of subordinate storyline development in consultations with children who have been subject to trauma. This subordinate storyline development provides an alternative territory of identity for children to stand in as they begin to give voice to their experiences of trauma. This affords children a significant degree of immunity from the potential for re-traumatisation in response to therapeutic initiatives to assist them to speak of their experiences of trauma and its consequences. I have also provided some illustrations of the implications of these ideas for consultations with children who have been subject to trauma. In a future paper on this subject I intend to illustrate the relevance of these considerations to younger children.

In emphasising these considerations of safety, it is not my intention to sponsor avoidance, on behalf of counsellors and community workers, of the facts of the trauma that children have been subject to. And in my own work with people who have been subject to trauma, I have not sought to attenuate their expressions of trauma and its consequences. I have not been timid in opening space for people to speak of what they have not had the opportunity to speak of, to put words to what has been unmentionable. This has been so for my meetings with people who have been subject to a range of abuses, including political torture, and for people struggling with trauma that is the outcome of a range of social calamities, including disease epidemics. However, I have taken care to do what is within my understandings and skills to establish contexts in which people can give full voice to their experiences of trauma in ways that enable them to wrest their lives from the prospective longer term consequences of this trauma. And I have never accepted that any person need be re-traumatised in the context of assisting them to address what they have been through.

Notes

1. I will refer to 'subordinate storyline' development when describing the further development of some of the alternative stories of children's lives that are to be found in thin traces, in the shadows of the dominant stories of their lives. This description seems apt, as it is not by chance that these storylines are relatively invisible at the outset of therapeutic conversations. These storylines have been subordinated in the context of the politics of disqualification, diminishment, ridicule and marginalisation.
2. Outsider-witness participation is a regular feature of my consultations. For an account of the scaffolding of outsider-witness participation in therapeutic practice, and of the tradition of acknowledgement that shapes the re-tellings of outsider witnesses, see White 2004a & 2004b.

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