

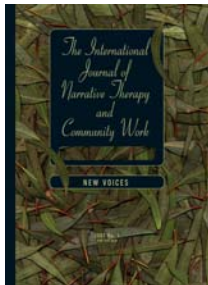


Dulwich Centre
Publications

Dear reader,

Most of the papers that can be downloaded from the Narrative Therapy Library and Bookshop were originally published in the **International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work**. We recommend this peer-reviewed journal to practitioners who wish to stay in touch with the latest ideas and developments in narrative therapy. This journal offers hopeful and creative ideas for counsellors, social workers, teachers, nurses, psychologists, and community workers.

In each issue, practitioners from a range of different countries discuss the ideas and practices that are inspiring them in their work, the dilemmas they are grappling with, and the issues most dear to their hearts. Their writings are easy-to-read while remaining rigorous and thoughtful. The first section of each issue revolves around a particular theme, while the second consists of a collection of practice-based papers on various topics. The journal is produced four times a year. If you wish to stay in touch with the latest developments in narrative practice, we hope you will subscribe and become a part of our community of readers!



To subscribe

If you wish to subscribe to this journal, please contact your local distributor:

North America: Narrative Books (USA) kenwoodtherapycenter@mac.com

UK: Narrative Books (UK) mark@hayward.flyer.co.uk

Australia & elsewhere: Dulwich Centre Publications:
dcp@dulwichcentre.com.au

Ask about current special offers for new subscribers!

Narrative Therapy Library and Bookshop

Back issues of the **International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work** are available for purchase via: www.narrativetherapylibrary.com

This website makes it possible to research, browse, and purchase writings about narrative therapy. It contains an extensive bibliography about narrative therapy and community work which can be searched via author, title, or keyword.

www.narrativetherapylibrary.com

Email: support@narrativetherapylibrary.com

Dulwich Centre website:
www.dulwichcentre.com.au

Copyright

The following material is copyright © Dulwich Centre Publications. Except as permitted under the *Australian Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, communicated, or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior permission. All enquiries should be made to the copyright owner at: Dulwich Centre Publications, Hutt St PO Box 7192, Adelaide, SA, Australia, 5000; email dcp@dulwichcentre.com.au

CHAPTER TWO

Collective documents as a response to collective trauma

Living in the shadow of genocide:

How we respond to hard times

Stories of sustenance from the workers of Ibuka, Rwanda

The following short extract from a much larger collective narrative document (see Denborough, Freedman & White, 2008) conveys the ways in which the workers of Ibuka, the National Genocide Survivors Association in Rwanda, are responding to the continuing effects of genocide in their country.

We have gathered here stories about what sustains us during times of hardship. As we are living in the shadow of genocide we have had to find ways to respond to great hardship. We have included here some of what gives us strength. We hope this document may be of assistance to others.

Tears and then talking

Some of us are sustained by our tears. To cry, to shed tears, to allow them to fall, can make a difference. For some of us there is a tranquillity that comes after tears that can allow us to sleep. After sleep, we may then take time to talk to someone. One person described that, 'When I am sleeping, the tears that I have cried give me strength. When I sleep after I have cried, I am tranquil. There is no noise, only calmness. This way of sustenance came from my mother. Whenever my mother was in pain, she used to allow herself to cry. After her tears had fallen she would go and talk to her friends.' Some of us are sustained by tears and then talking.

New ways of carrying on traditions

There is a tradition in Rwanda that we respect the parents in our families. We see them as capable of everything, and we trust the answers that they give to us. We rely on their advice. Many of us lost our parents in the genocide and so we have to find ways to continue to stay in touch with their advice. One person said, 'When I have hard times, I write. I imagine

that it is my father writing to me, giving me answers. I think these answers are the appropriate ones.’ Some of us are finding new ways to carry on our tradition of seeking and respecting advice from our parents.

These themes, ‘Tears and then talking’ and ‘New ways of carrying on traditions’, convey two of the ways in which genocide survivors in Rwanda are responding to the hard times they continue to face. These themes also trace the history of these forms of response to trauma: they are located in familial and cultural tradition. The document is written in a collective voice and, in this way, speaks not only for the individuals whose stories are conveyed, but in some ways it also speaks for all the workers who contributed to the document, and indeed even more broadly for all those who are living in the shadow of genocide.

This chapter focuses on the use of collective narrative documentation as a response to collective trauma. Often, in our work, we are responding to effects not only of individual trauma, but of collective trauma. This is true in situations of genocide, disaster and military occupation, but it is also true in women’s experience of men’s violence, those experiencing mental health struggles, and so on. The traumatic experience that many individuals face is often shared in some way by a broader collective. And yet those who have been subjected to trauma routinely experience a profound sense of isolation from others. Developing collective methodologies that not only address the effects of trauma but also the effects of this isolation, seems a significant task.

Collective narrative documentation is one such methodology. In the three years we have been teaching about ways of generating collective narrative documents they have been put to use in a wide range of contexts. They have been used to document the skills and knowledges of:

- people experiencing anxiety and depression (Moreland Community Health, 2008),
- workers within an Acid Burns Survivors organisation in Bangladesh (Russell et al., 2005),
- those who have experienced bullying,
- young people in Indigenous Canadian schools in relation to friendship,
- young feminist practitioners in maintaining a feminist consciousness while working in mainstream organisations,

- mothers whose children have been temporarily removed from their care,
- employees of companies who have been experiencing conflict,
- villagers affected by an earthquake in Kashmir,
- women who have experienced grief,
- people seeking supervision,
- women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse,
- workers in East Timor,
- those who have migrated to Canada (Multicultural Seniors Program, 2008).

In each of these contexts, collective documents have been created which describe the skills and knowledges that people are engaging with to deal with hard times. In many of these contexts, practitioners had originally been working with individuals and then used the methodology of collective narrative documents to link these people's experiences in ways that proved to be powerfully effective. The sorts of skills and knowledges that have been unearthed are as diverse as could be imagined ... one of my favourites has been:

Tea and biscuits¹

Quite simply, there are times in life that call for tea and biscuits. At the first sign of trouble some of us put the kettle on, whether we are cramming for exams, meeting others for study, or seeking comfort in times of shock. I broke my arm once. The chair collapsed and my mum immediately said: 'Let's make a cuppa and a plan'. There's something about a cup of tea that creates a space to breathe and think. We find comfort in warm tea and biscuits.

This chapter describes a collective narrative documentation methodology to assist practitioners move from an individual to a collective approach. It involves working with more than one person, but it can start small. Two or three people are enough to begin with: two or three people who are dealing with similar issues. And they don't all have to be in the same place at the same time. A practitioner can be meeting with one person on Monday, and another on Tuesday, and so on. Or the same process can be used for work with entire communities.

After describing the methodology, this chapter includes a document from workers living under military occupation and discusses in more detail how narrative collective documentation can be used to respond to those who have experienced collective trauma.

Generating material

The first task in the process of collective narrative documentation involves generating enough material to make a document. There are unlimited ways of doing so and many themes that can be included, but I would like to offer a short-cut. I will highlight four questions that we have found to be very helpful in generating rich material in a range of contexts:

- What is the *name* of a special skill, knowledge or value that sustains you or your family through difficult times?
- What is a *story* about this skill, knowledge or value: a story about a time when this made a difference to you or to others?
- What is the *history* of this skill, knowledge or value: how did you learn this? Who did you learn it from?
- Is this skill or value linked in some way to *collective* traditions (familial/ community) and/or cultural traditions? Are there proverbs, sayings, stories, songs, images from your family, community and/or culture with which these skills and knowledges are linked?

We have found that exploring these four themes generates rich material for collective narrative documents. The process starts with a diversity of individuals' skills and values, then locates these in history, and then in collective tradition and culture. As we move through the four themes, the material becomes more richly collective and more clearly linked to cultural contexts.

Generating this material involves three different sets of skills: skills of the spoken word, skills of silence, and skills of the written word. We begin with skills of the spoken word: skills in asking questions. Within the field of narrative practice, there is a considerable emphasis on skills of the spoken word and they are certainly important. And yet, with all the attention that is paid to spoken word skills, sometimes we don't notice the other sorts of skills we use as practitioners.

Skills of silence

For instance, when we're gathering material to create a collective document, we also use what I call 'skills of silence'. Sometimes skills of silence are bundled together and called 'listening'. But skills of silence are much broader than this. They involve active skills in perception, in noticing, in detecting, in sensing, in picking up clues to people's skills and knowledges and what they value in life. They can also involve what could be called the skill of leaving enough time and space for people to reflect, gather their thoughts, or check-in with others – without being interrupted or questioned by the practitioner. In my opinion, skills of silence are beautiful and much underrated.²

Generating material for documents requires using both spoken word skills and skills of silence. Having trained ourselves in skills of silence, we may have noticed some of the ways that those with whom we are working deal with hard times. Or we may have noticed the ways they care for others in their community. We may have detected certain things that they seem to value. We can then use the material that we have learnt from these 'skills of silence' to inform our questions. Sometimes people with very good 'skills of silence' may ask fewer questions but gather very rich material.

Skills of the written word

This process of gathering material also involves skills in the written word. As practitioners, we will be taking notes. But 'taking notes' is a very thin description of what we will be doing. We will actually be translating from the spoken word to the written word. Any act of translation is an intricate process of finding the words to truly convey the sentiment of what is said in one language into the words and rhythm of another language. In these ways, translation is an art. Taking notes of the spoken word also involves a form of translation. In most therapeutic, community work or psychosocial support contexts, there is no way that it is possible to write down everything that is spoken – and we wouldn't want to. Instead we are listening for particular material and endeavouring to translate this onto the written page. This includes listening for 'the particular' and for 'imagery'.

The particular

It is vitally important that the individuals who contribute to a document can recognise some part of their own words and phrases in it. So, when we are taking

notes, we deliberately include the particular phrases, words and vernacular that those who are contributing will recognise.

Imagery / metaphors / word pictures

Collective narrative documents derive some of their effect from the resonance they produce when they are read back to the contributors. An effective document will spark images, pictures, metaphors in the minds of those who hear it. And so, as we are generating material, we listen for imagery and metaphors in the language of those with whom we are working. In some contexts, metaphors and imagery within the spoken word are sometimes overlooked. Some may have been spoken so many times that the imagery becomes stale. It may be necessary to listen particularly carefully, to notice any phrases that are spoken with a stronger sentiment than others, or it may be necessary to listen for imagery that may only be eluded to at first but which can then be drawn out more fully either through questions or in the written word. It may also be possible to try to listen for descriptions that evoke the senses: any words or phrases that evoke smells, sounds, sights or textures are often significant to include.

This process of generating material involves skills in the spoken word, skills of silence, and skills of translation from the spoken to the written word. Luckily, whether we gather the material for a collective document in one meeting, or over weeks or months, does not matter. Some of the most sparkling projects relating to collective documentation involve the work of narrative therapists who have gathered material from their work with individuals or families over months or even years and then found ways to link the skills, knowledges and stories of people together – in the form of booklets, websites and collective documents (Epston, Morris & Maisel, 1995; Ingram & Perlesz, 2004; Madigan & Epston, 1995; Moreland Community Health, 2008). Other community projects in which we have been involved have required that collective documents be developed overnight. The timeframe depends upon the context. The significant thing is to find ways of gathering enough material about people's skills and knowledges to then make a document that will be resonant for them.

Making a document

Many different types of written documents can be made within narrative practice (White & Epston, 1990): from poems, to lists, to certificates, to therapeutic

letters, and I recommend experimenting with all of these. The sort of document I wish to focus on here is a *collective* document: one which weaves together the skills and knowledges of a number of people who are dealing with certain hardships or difficulties.

In order to describe the production of a collective narrative document, it is probably easiest to include one here and then discuss it.

Dealing with life under occupation: The special skills and knowledges that sustain the workers of Nablus³

This document describes what sustains the workers in Nablus, Palestine, in dealing with life under occupation. It is hoped that this document can be shared with others who are living under military rule, both in Palestine and in other parts of the world.

Looking to the future

During difficult times, some of us here have learnt ways of looking to the future. We hold onto the knowledge that this will not last forever. For me, this skill has a history that can be traced back to my grandmother. She was someone who always used to ask me to think about my future, to make plans, dreams and preparations. She made the future come alive to me. When the Israeli military invaded Nablus and occupied the city, we had to remain in our house for many, many days. My grandmother died during this time. Not only were we dealing with the gunfire all around us, but we could not remove my grandmother's body. It lay in the same house with us and this was profoundly distressing to us all. We had to find our way through. Somehow I found the strength to carry her body, to move it from the room we were in. We worked hard to speak with each other of different things so that we could endure this time together. We held our belief in prayers. And we carried on my grandmother's legacy. This will not last forever. We looked to the future. Now, whenever there are difficult times, whenever I face troubles, I look to the future, to tomorrow. The present may hold suffering but, as my grandmother would say, we must make plans, dreams and preparations.

Mothers' love for our children

As women, we have seen many bad things and our families have suffered. We do everything we can to protect our children. Our mothers were the same. They poured their love into us, and we pour our love into future generations. Our care for our children is like a project for our lives. We seek to make our children special. And, if ever their lives are in danger, we do all we can to make them safe. My small daughter, two years old, was drowning in a pool of water recently. Although I cannot swim, I managed to bring her to safety. Mothers' love for our children is a powerful force. It is powerful all over Palestine.

To study, to learn and to be independent

Our independence means a lot to us. This is true for the Palestinian people and also for us as individuals. My father used to take me with him to his work so that I wouldn't stay in the street and throw stones. He owned a store that sold cars and I watched him as he worked. I started to learn about having a career. My father taught me the importance of independence and of achieving things in life. When I was sixteen, my father went to Mecca and I opened a shop without him. I began studying and working at the same time. Now I have graduated and I have a job. I have my independence. This is my way of responding to difficult times, to do all I can to make a good life. My father taught me this.

To be together

During the invasion some years ago, we were locked in our home. There was shooting at the building next to ours. There was fire from helicopters and from tanks. We thought it was aimed at our building. We gathered three families together in one room. We tried in this room to search for our safety. Windows were shattering all around us, there was glass blowing into the room. We placed four children under the bed. We were terrified. When the shooting first began, we talked together about religious beliefs, we read from the Koran. At that time, I thought to myself, 'We will die all together or we will live all together'. I was the oldest brother. When I felt my strength was fading, I knew this would affect all the others. I called upon my skills, my prayers and patience. I showed the others my power.

If I showed bravery, I knew others would see it and feel it. Finally, I could begin to see hope for the future. In more recent times, when there have been difficulties, I have remembered 'we will die all together or we will live all together'. This philosophy means a lot to me and to others. There is an old Arabic song with these lyrics. In these times, we must be together.

Laughter and skills of humour

All of our cries, all of our tears, are related to the occupation, to checkpoints and to soldiers. But we have skills to make fun of serious situations. There is a proverb in Arabic that says the very worst things in life are those we laugh about. We have many stories about this. I remember times when we would face the checkpoints with laughter. The soldiers did not like this. Once when I was laughing they took me out of our car. It was raining and water was gathering in a puddle. They made me stand there and then I found a rock to sit on. I didn't show that I was angry or sad. I kept my humour with me. We have to take care with this and choose the times and places. But we have skills in making humour in difficult times. This is linked to Arabic history. We know stories of ways in which figures of the past have used imagination and invented stories to get out of certain situations. We also know certain families who are well known for their humour. We expect members of these families to make us laugh. I remember seeing signs that people have placed on the donkeys that they use to travel between villages when the soldiers have blocked the roads. The signs indicate that these donkeys have been turned into taxis! We rescue ourselves and each other through humour.

Songs for the journey

Sometimes we may sing in difficult situations. When all the roads are closed the only way out is through the mountains. We have to get out of our cars and walk. Sometimes this is very tiring. Crossing the hills on foot can be exhausting. One day, I saw a young man carrying a large bag. He was singing a song in a very loud voice. I asked him why and he explained, 'There is something inside of me. If I do not express it I will explode'. He said that he learnt this skill from a movie. He had seen that mountain climbers sometimes sing together in difficult times. I have

always remembered him and how having a song for the journey can make the journey easier.

Honouring the friends who we have lost

Many of us have lost our dearest friends and we do all we can to honour them. Sometimes we honour them with our tears. There are rivers of tears flowing through this land. When we cry for our friends it is like our hearts are moving. There are even times when it is as if the stones are crying with us. Our tears respect those who have been lost. My best friend was killed and I do everything that I can to honour him and our friendship. I spoke with my other friends and we remembered the good times, the happy times that we spent together in the past. I told them it's okay to cry but that we can also remember the good times we shared. When I am with them, I can remember my friend. But when I am alone, I find it too painful to think of him. It is too painful to look at his photograph and I avoid his house. The reason it's so hard to think of him is because our friendship was so strong, so significant to me, to both of us. He was a part of me and I was a part of him. If I had not known him, I would be a different person. So much of me is also about him. Some of us feel that we cannot be happy, cannot swim or laugh, because our friends have died. As if to be happy would be a betrayal. Others of us find some relief to know that our lost friends are in peace and happiness with God. And time itself can make a difference. If it was me who had died, I am not sure how my friend would have coped. Perhaps he would have continued to do the things that we used to do together. Or perhaps he would have stopped doing all that we did. Perhaps he would have stopped visiting the road on which I lived. I am not sure. It is different for everyone. But I know he would be doing all he could to honour our friendship – to continue the legacy of our friendship. We were the finest of friends and I learnt so much about friendship from him. If we lose a friend like that, we cannot simply get on with life. Life can never be the same. We do all we can to honour the friends we have lost.

Missing and longing

Sometimes we long to be somewhere different, some place free of tanks and checkpoints. In living a life under occupation, we develop strong skills in longing and in dreams.

Adapting

We have learnt to deal with so much. We have had no choice. I remember one time recently, I woke up and saw that a tank had parked itself right outside my window. Then I simply went back to sleep. We are used to extraordinary things happening here. So we have developed extraordinary skills in adapting.

This document is double-storied. Its subject matter involves profoundly difficult circumstances, grief and sorrow. And yet, at the same time, it richly conveys the skills and knowledges of the workers in Nablus in ways that highlight, acknowledge and celebrate the significance of these. The aim of these documents is to collectively convey a range of hard-won skills and knowledges, in parallel with a rich acknowledgement of the circumstances in which these have been hard-won.⁴

This particular document was generated during a workshop that took place in Nablus and was conducted across translation between English and Arabic.⁵ Participants broke into groups of three to discuss the following questions:

- What is the *name* of a special skill, knowledge or value that sustains you or your family through difficult times?
- What is a *story* about this skill, knowledge or value – a story about a time when this made a difference to you or to others?
- What is the *history* of this skill, knowledge or value – how did you learn this? Who did they learn it from?
- Is this skill or value linked in some way to *collective* traditions (familial/ community) and/or cultural traditions? Are there proverbs, sayings, stories, songs, images from your family, community and/or culture with which these skills and knowledges are linked?

When participants returned to the large group, everyone had a chance to re-tell what they had just discussed in their groups of three. This was translated (from Arabic to English) and I took notes that were then written up into the document.⁶ On the next day of the workshop, this document was read back to the participants who agreed that it was an accurate and vivid description of their special skills and knowledges. A number of participants also indicated that they wished to add further stories which were then included.

In reading the final document, I hope it is possible to see how it includes material that was generated in relation to each of the key questions or themes. It includes the *names* of special skills, *stories* associated with these skills, *histories* of how these were learnt, and their *links to collective* and cultural traditions

I will now briefly discuss the various aspects of the document.

Introductory paragraph

The document begins with an introductory paragraph. This introduction is in a collective voice and it frames the document as making a contribution to others. ‘It is hoped that this document can be shared with others who are living under military rule, both here and in other parts of the world.’

The entire document has been generated with two audiences in mind: firstly, those who contributed to it, and secondly, others living in similar situations. When writing these collective documents, it is therefore necessary to consider how the first draft can be written in a way that will be powerfully resonant to those who contributed to it (with enough particular detail that it becomes claimed as ‘their own’) and yet also understandable and resonant to others in similar situations who were not present as the material was generated.

A blend of individual and collective voice

Throughout the document there is a blend of ‘collective voice’ (such as ‘some of us’, ‘we’, and so on), and ‘individual voice’ (‘I’). Most themes begin in the collective voice. They then turn to the individual voice as particular stories are told, before returning to the collective voice to round off the theme.

Themes

Each of the skills/themes identified by group members is given a heading. Some of these particular ways of responding to the hardship may be shared by many different participants in the group/community, while others may be only relevant to one or two participants. Ideally, each theme includes the name of the theme, a story of an example of how it has contributed to sustenance, the history of how this theme came to be relevant in this person’s or group’s life, and then an explanation of its link to a broader collective (familial/community) and cultural history.

Storylines

In order to create documents that are richly resonant and that also engage the listener, it is important for a number of different storylines to run throughout it. The document is not a list, or categorisation of skills; it is a richly-storied document. Within almost every theme, there is a storyline and these storylines provide enough information to spark the interest and imagination of the reader.

Diversity

Significantly, these documents are crafted in a way that leaves space for diversity of experience. They do not assume that all members experience the same suffering or utilise the same forms of sustenance. The reader may engage with some themes more than others. There is room to enter into the text in a variety of ways. Phrases such as ‘some of us’, and ‘sometimes’ leave room for the reader to identify with a particular theme, or not to. Through these forms of collective documentation, it is important that people experience a sense of commonalities *and* simultaneously become more aware of differences. As these documents take as their starting point acknowledging a diversity of individuals’ skills and knowledges and then draw links to history, culture and collective tradition, diversity is enhanced, experiences are not homogenised.

Considerations of language

Throughout the document there are particular descriptions that are recognisable to the individuals who contributed them. Significantly, it contains vivid descriptions of certain images. For instance:

- ‘Windows were shattering all around us, there was glass blowing into the room.’
- ‘It was raining and water was gathering in a puddle.’
- ‘There are rivers of tears flowing through this land.’
- ‘There are even times when it as if the stones are crying with us.’
- ‘... a tank had parked itself right outside my window’.

There are also lyrical descriptions:

- 'skills in longing and in dreams',
- 'we honour them with our tears'.

When people listen to a collective narrative document, the hope is that these particular expressions will, in turn, spark other images, pictures, and metaphors that are associated with stories of sustenance and dignity.

Checking and rechecking

Creating the initial draft of the document involves skills of the written word including editing, and this process is not usually done collectively. Because of this, once a draft of the document has been created it is very important that it is then checked carefully with all those who contributed to it. The contributors always have the opportunity to make any changes or additions before moving onto the next part of the process. Checking out with the community members if the document fits for them is vital as we are not interested in simply imposing our version of a documentation of their skills and knowledge upon them. Finalising the document may therefore involve receiving feedback on a number of different drafts!

Diversity of collective documents

While practitioners have appreciated that this 'template' for generating narrative collective documents is extremely helpful in getting them started, it is important to note that this is only one form of collective narrative documentation. As Sue Mitchell describes, it is vital that the style of document fits with the community whose words are being represented within it:

I had become concerned that the documenting of people's stories in one particular way was having a homogenising effect, making the particularities of people in different parts of the world, the unique and varied ways of expression, invisible. I was eager to explore ways of writing group documents that were more closely connected to the group with whom I was in conversation. While in East Timor, I learned that people were uncomfortable having their story written in first person, even collective first person. Speaking about self, including collective self, was not a familiar or desirable practice. People were, however, familiar with

speaking about others in complimentary ways. I rewrote the document, as suggested by the group of counsellors, from the perspective of Ku Ku, a folklore character. Ku Ku, in some parts of East Timor, is the story teller of the village and also helps out with disputes. In the document, Ku Ku tells the story of the team; what they have to manage, and how. The experience reminded me, yet again, of the diversity of ways of being and the importance of 'assume nothing'.

Oral ritual – seeking 'communitas'

Once the document is finalised, the process can move from the written word to an oral ritual. There is an opportunity for a ceremonial re-telling (Myerhoff, 1982; White, 1999) of the document to those who contributed to it. These ceremonies look and sound very different depending on the cultural context. They have ranged from formal ritual re-tellings in the board rooms of organisations to ceremonies in remote Indigenous communities in Australia under trees or by the beach⁷.

Whatever the context, people are in some way gathered together and the document is shared with them. It may be read aloud by the practitioner or by certain representatives of the group, and its recital generally occurs with dignity, significance, rhythm, and a certain sense of ceremony. All these elements can make a difference to how the document is received. It can be quite something to hear one's own words and phrases spoken back to you in a collective voice. It is an experience of being joined with others around your own skills and knowledges of dealing with perhaps some of the hardest experiences in life.

In these rituals the written text becomes an oral text. I have found Ursula Le Guin's writings about oral text extremely relevant:

People used to be aware that the written word was the visible sign of an audible sign, and they read aloud – they put their breath into it. Apparently if the Romans saw somebody sitting reading silently to themselves they nudged each other and sniggered ... So long as literacy was guarded by a male elite as their empowering privilege, most people knew text as event ... Yet we call the art of language, language as an art, 'writing' ... Literature literally means letters, the alphabet. The oral text, verbal art as event, as performance, has been devalued as primitive, a 'lower' form, discarded ... Why have we abandoned and despised the interesting things that happen when the word behaves like music and the author is not just 'a writer' but the player of the instrument of language?' (Le Guin, 1986, pp.180–184)

These ceremonial re-tellings of collective documents, in which ‘breath’ is put into the text can be significant occasions.⁸ When a collective participates in a spoken performance of their words, their skills and knowledges of dealing with hard times, this can generate a significant sense of ‘*communitas*’. This word was used by Victor Turner (1969; 1979) to describe a sense of shared unity among individuals, who are going through the same experience.⁹

Through the oral recitation of collective documents, a shared sense of unity is generated. It is a particular type of *communitas*, for it involves not only an acknowledgement of shared suffering, but also an acknowledgement of shared skills, knowledges, values and histories of endurance and sustenance.

When the documented words link to history and to the contributions of ancestry, examples of which are found in both the Rwandan and Nablus documents, then these spoken ceremonies perform a collective intergenerational honouring which can be extremely meaningful. This provides a sense of the transmission of legacy from one generation to another. In the process, these collective documents and rituals can provide each individual with a sense of ‘a shared life, a sense of historical continuity, [and] a community of memory’ (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985, p.105).

Because the shared history that is generated, acknowledged, and performed, describes not only suffering but also what the group gives value to (in terms of how they sustain themselves and others)¹⁰, this process evokes an honouring of a multi-textured history. In some way, this allows for a relationship of grace to this history. It becomes possible to lament, grieve and honour aspects of history all at once. The following description from Bellah et al. (1985) seems appropriate:

So encircled by love and suffering shared, we are no longer in the ‘giving-getting’ mode. We know ourselves as social selves, parents and children, members of a people, inheritors of a history and a culture that we must nurture through memory and hope. (p.138)

Documenting history and enabling double-storied memory

As a record of history, double-storied collective documents play a deliberate role. Far too often, collective histories of trauma are forgotten. When they are remembered, commonly it is only the story of trauma or injustice that is retold. The responses, the bravery, the acts of care for others, the defiance of those who were brutalised remains silent. The prophetic words of the former slave William Prescott describe this phenomenon:

They will remember that we were sold but they won't remember that we were strong. They will remember that we were bought, but not that we were brave. (quoted in Hunt, 2007, p.22)

Collective narrative documents can stand as a different form of historical testimony. Importantly, these are double-storied testimonies of history – testimonies of survival and trauma at once. Documenting and performing these double-storied accounts can also contribute to collective memory in significant ways. Jerome Bruner (1990) described the ways in which memory is inscribed in narrative form:

... the typical form of framing experience (and our memory of it) is in narrative form, and ... what does *not* get structured narratively suffers loss in memory.¹¹ (p.56)

Furthermore, Michael White (2004) described the significance for individuals to develop 'full memories' of trauma which include the individual's responses to traumatic experience, rather than 'half memories' of trauma which story only the traumatic events and their effects.

This is as true for collectives and communities as it is for individuals. Within communities that have been affected by great hardship, there may be few opportunities to collectively remember responses to trauma, both current responses and those in the past. The process outlined in this chapter of collective documentation and oral ritual, can provide a forum for the production and documentation of 'social' memory of resistance and sustenance (see the work of Halbwachs, 1992; Fentress & Wickham, 1992; and Popular Memory Group, 1998).

Significantly, it can also contribute to restoring memory of local healing practices and knowledge. Within any collective (family, friendship network, neighbourhood or cultural community) there exist local practices and knowledge of healing. These are brought to light through the process of narrative collective documentation. What's more, these practices and knowledges become storied: they are placed into storylines that link them to history and to culture. Placing local practices and local knowledge at the foreground of responding to trauma is significant because it serves 'to restore the cultural memory of healing in a community' (Dawes & Honwana, 1998, p.10). In turn, this can act as an antidote to the imposition of outsider healing knowledges.

This imposition of outsider healing knowledges has been powerfully critiqued by many writers (Arulampalam, Perera, de Mel, White, & Denborough, 2006; Christopher, 1999, 2001; Pupavac, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2006; Tamasese, 2002a, 2002b; Waldegrave, 1998), Vanessa Pupavac has coined the term ‘therapeutic governance’ (2001) to describe the ways in which psychosocial and therapeutic programs inadvertently impose certain understandings of life, trauma and healing. Pupavac’s work has particularly focused on the psychosocial approaches of international (western) aid organisations: ‘In this internationalisation and professionalization of adversity, indigenous coping strategies are thus not merely demeaned and disempowered. The community itself is pathologized as dysfunctional and politically delegitimized’ (2002a, p.493).

Developing methodologies that seek to strengthen and richly story *local* healing knowledges and that avoid the imposition of therapeutic governance, seems critical. It is hoped that narrative collective documentation can play its part in this process.

Creating a context for contribution

Convening a ceremonial re-telling of the document is not the end of the process. After the reading or performance of the text, it is then time to create a context in which the words from this one collective can make a contribution to others. Creating contexts that enable contribution requires another set of skills. Just as we need to hone our skills in the spoken word, skills of silence, skills of translating from the oral to the written, and skills of the written word, there are also skills involved in enabling contributions.

First of all, we must identify who it is that the collective document could make a contribution to. Often, this is to those who are struggling or dealing with similar issues. The two groups may never physically meet. We may be working with a few individuals who are struggling with a particular issue, say overcoming the effects of abuse, or addiction issues, or youth homelessness. We may generate a collective document from their words and then send this via email to other colleagues who we know work in a similar area. They could share the document with those with whom they work, and then messages could be sent back and forth between the different groups.¹²

Once a collective document has been generated, there are many possible ways of enabling contributions. For example, the document from Nablus was placed on a website and made available to other Palestinian workers as well as being

shared with Palestinians living in different parts of the world. Documents have been exchanged between women's groups in New Zealand and Australia about the ways they have been reclaiming their lives from the effects of abuse. And so on. The process can either be a short term one, involving a simple exchange of one document and one set of responses. Or it can develop into a continuing project in which various groups who are dealing with similar issues can continually make contributions to each other. In the following chapter, a longer-term process is discussed in detail through the story of two Aboriginal Australian communities who exchanged a series of collective documents and messages about the ways in which they have been responding to considerable hardship (Denborough et al., 2006).

Other mediums of documentation

While in this chapter I have emphasised the written and spoken word as mediums for documentation and re-tellings, when I first experimented with collective narrative documentation, the mediums that I found most helpful were video and song.

In the early 1990s, I was working within a maximum security prison when I was first introduced to narrative ideas. A welfare worker in the prison handed me a newsletter that Cheryl White and Maggie Carey had put together ('Some thoughts about men's ways of being', 1992). This newsletter was about masculinity and men's ways of being and it was some of the most helpful writing I had read to explain why we as men do such hurtful and destructive things, and how we might go about changing this (see McLean, Carey & White, 1996). Prisons are degrading institutions and they are not easy places in which to work. I had been trained as a social worker but when I asked people in the prison direct questions about their lives and history, it didn't work very well, particularly coming from a young white man from an upper middle-class background. I remember one time I responded to one of the men in the prison with a 'therapeutic' tone of voice and his reply was: 'Mate, if I wanted sympathy I'd look in the dictionary between shit and syphilis'. I thought that was pretty clear feedback! I received a lot of other feedback while working in that prison and it was extremely helpful (Denborough, 1996). It told me that this wasn't the place for a therapeutic orientation, or empathic tone, and that, if I wanted to be useful to those with whom I was working, then something else was going to be required.

The other work in which I was involved at that time was with young men in schools trying to prevent violence against women, children and other men (Denborough, 1995). We were meeting with groups of young men who had been causing teachers considerable grief. If we asked these young men therapeutic questions, or questions about their own individual lives in front of their mates, we'd have been met by silence or ridicule. I knew this not only from the responses of the young men, but also from my own experiences of schooling. Within masculine culture in Australian high schools, to speak openly of any individual experience that is precious to you in front of groups of other young men is to risk abuse. And yet, if we were going to try to address issues of gender and violence, we had to find collective ways of doing so. Another way of working was clearly required.

What we soon discovered was that the men in prison were very keen to talk with the young men in schools. These men who were locked up had messed up their lives. They'd often caused significant harm to people who loved them. And they wanted to make a contribution wherever they possibly could. As it turned out, the young men in schools were very keen to talk with the men in prison. Those who had been in the most strife in schools could easily picture their life moving towards prisons. The men in prison and the young men in schools, however, weren't too keen on speaking as individuals. This would be too intimidating. But they were interested in speaking group to group. As workers, our role became to take messages and to facilitate conversations between these two groups even though they never met.

We would set up a conversation in the prison around certain themes and document the sparkling parts of these conversations: the skills, values, the hopes and the stories associated with these. We would document these stories and fragments of conversation in as many ways as we could via video and song. And then we would take these videos and songs into schools to spark conversations. The young men would then be very keen to send messages and sometimes songs back to those in prisons.

These messages that we were sending back and forth were not random. They were messages about skills and knowledge in dealing with tough times. They were stories about how men were trying to live differently, in nonviolent ways, even when the prison in which they were living was violent and degrading. And they were stories from young men about trying to 'be themselves' rather than 'being cool and tough' as they called it (Denborough, 1996). In the process, the men in prison began to experience that they were making a contribution to the lives of the young men. And the young men began to feel as if their stories and hopes were making a contribution to the lives of older men who were incarcerated.

Alongside the written word, the spoken word, video and song, there is no limit to the different mediums that can be used within narrative collective documentation.¹³

Summary

This chapter has introduced a methodology that enables practitioners to link the stories of individuals. Collective narrative documents provide a forum for the acknowledgement and strengthening of skills and knowledges relevant to responding to trauma or other difficulties of life. It is a methodology that can be used by practitioners who are working with individuals, couples, families, groups, and/or entire communities.

Significantly, developing forms of collective narrative documentation can allow ‘conversations’ and ‘contributions’ to take place between groups of people who never meet in person. This allows workers to step into a different role of enabling various groups to contribute to each other. In my experience, this can bring a sense of freedom and possibility to our work.

Further considerations when using collective documentation in contexts of conflict

‘The wide spread problem of collective traumatization and “*loss of communality*” following disasters is best approached through community level interventions.’ (Somasundaram, 2007)

Working in ways that regenerate communality is sometimes particularly complex when communities have been affected by significant conflict, particularly armed conflict. There are two considerations that I wish to mention here.

Thickening stories of heroism

In some contexts of collective hardship, particularly situations of armed conflict, concepts of heroism are vital in sustaining resistance. And

yet, discourses of heroism can make it far more difficult for people to speak about difficulties or hardships they are experiencing and, as a result, they may become increasingly isolated in these experiences. At the same time, if a local cultural expectation is established of individual heroism then, when people fail to live up to this ideal, this can bring shame and confusion (Lapsley, 2002; D. Somasundaram, personal communication, March 2nd, 2008). Considerations of gender are also often relevant. In some contexts, concepts of male individual heroism or valour leave little room for acknowledgement of fear without an accompanying sense of failure. At the same time, women's accounts of heroism are often overlooked, unrecognised and undocumented.

In my experience, generating collective documents about how people are responding to hard times, the skills involved in this, and the histories of these skills, can provide some space to move in relation to thickening stories of heroism. The sorts of accounts that are generated in this process are in no way emphasising passive victimhood (Lamb, 1995, 1999b; Kitzinger, 1993). In fact, in some ways they are 'heroic' in that people are joined in storylines of courage, care and sustenance. But these are *collective* storylines, not individual, and they locate values in culture and collective history. Significantly, at the same time, the accounts generated in this process are not single-storied accounts of valour. They include implicit and explicit acknowledgement of profound suffering. In doing so, they allow for a sense of shared sorrow and therefore have the capacity to dissolve the isolation that can so often accompany single-storied heroic accounts.

Beyond individual disclosure

In contexts of significant conflict it is often not possible for individuals to speak openly about their own individual experiences of trauma. In fact, to do so could put them at risk of reprisal. It is therefore our responsibility as practitioners to develop methods by which communality can be regenerated, experiences of 'communitas' performed, cultural memories of healing restored, and reconnection to intergenerational history made possible, without people having to speak of their individual experience.

Collective documents can be used for these purposes. The words and experiences of people who *are* in a position to speak about what they have been through can be shared with those who are not. And forums can be created for the sharing of collective skills and knowledges in dealing with hard times, without anyone knowing which individuals contributed to particular themes. Different mediums such as radio and community song (see chapter eight) can also fulfill this purpose. While great care is sometimes required in engaging in contexts of significant conflict, individual disclosure is not required in order to generate narrative collective documents, nor to address many of the effects of collective trauma.

If you are working in contexts of significant conflict and are interested in the development of narrative collective documentation, we would be very interested to hear from you.

Notes

1. Not only are ‘cups of tea’ significant to some individuals, families and communities as a way of enduring hardship, but Radhika Santhanam drew my attention to Ernest Hunter’s (2007) descriptions of the relevance of ‘tea ceremonies’ in working in remote Aboriginal communities.
2. I must here declare my personal bias about skills of the spoken word. I didn’t speak like other people speak until I was four-and-a-half. For four-and-a-half years (or even a little longer depending upon which family member I ask), I lived a very contented life speaking my own language which only my mother could translate. For some reason, this has led me to think that skills in the spoken word are overrated. Practitioners sometimes believe that, unless they can generate the most highly-tuned skills in the spoken word, they will not be able to use narrative practices, but this is not the case. In fact, in various contexts, those with whom we are working may not easily convey their experience through the spoken word and therefore we may be required to find other mediums of expression and communication. Those practitioners for whom the spoken word is not their preferred medium may therefore find their abilities in other mediums invaluable in these contexts. Language is more than words. Silences, gestures, postures, pauses, tears, and touch, are all vitally relevant to our practice.
3. An Arabic translation of this document is available. If you would like to receive a copy please contact Dulwich Centre Foundation.
4. These collective narrative documents are always double-storied, but how these storylines are represented varies considerably. Sometimes the document explicitly describes the hardship and its effects and then explores the ways in which people are responding to this hardship, and the skills and knowledges involved in these responses. In other documents, there is less explicit description of suffering. In these situations, storylines of hardship may be implicit rather than explicit (see White, 2000). Even when a document explicitly focus only on the skills and knowledges that a

community is using to deal with hard times, the experience of hardship is implicit in every theme. An acknowledgement of suffering is always written into the text whether in explicit or more subtle ways.

5. This workshop was entitled 'Narrative approaches to working with children' and was hosted by Medecins Du Monde in Nablus on 21 and 22 June 2006. The organiser of the workshop was Bassam Marshoud. This training was offered by Angel Yuen, David Denborough and Cheryl White under the auspices of Dulwich Centre. The collective document was created by David Denborough.
6. This is one of many possible methods to generate rich material for these sorts of documents. In other contexts we ask participants to interview each other and take their own notes which are then woven together. Or, in community contexts, conversations might take place in groups. The possibilities are endless. What is common in each circumstance is that we seek information relating to each of the four themes: name of what sustains, story, history, link to collective.
7. Different forms of ceremony are discussed in chapter three.
8. In some circumstances, the generation and oral performance of these collective written documents can become a part of literacy 'education'. Freire & Macebo (1987) have described how literacy practice involves 'reading the word and reading the world'. We are very interested in further explorations as to how this process of generating and performing collective narrative documents can contribute to engaging or re-engaging those who have been marginalised from mainstream education.
9. Victor Turner preferred the Latin word 'communitas' to 'community' (1969, p.96). He observed experiences of 'communitas' in 'the workshop, village, lecture-room, theatre, almost anywhere' and described these experiences as essentially 'an unmediated relationship between historical, idiosyncratic, concrete individuals' (1979, p.42). Significantly, he emphasised that experiences of communitas preserve 'individual distinctiveness – it is neither regression to infancy, nor it is emotional, nor it is 'merging' in fantasy' (1979, p.42). We have become interested in noticing the differing forms of 'communitas' that are generated in the work that we do. We are particularly interested in how experiences of communitas do not merge identities: 'the gifts of each person are alive to the full, along with those of every other person. Communitas liberates individuals from conformity to general norms' (Salamone, 2004, p.98). We are also interested in how experiences of communitas do not depend on "'in-group versus out-group" opposition' (Salamone, 2004, p.98).
10. David Epston refers to storylines of 'suffering' and 'un-suffering'. This is another way of conceptualising the double-storied texture of these conversations and documentation.
11. In this quote, Bruner referenced the work of Jean Mandler (1984).
12. More information about the types of messages that are sent back and forth is offered in chapter three.
13. See chapter eight for discussion about the use of other mediums within collective narrative practice.

