



Explorations of the absent but implicit

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The author describes her exploration of practices working with the absent but implicit, particularly in therapy with couples and families. She includes questions that may be helpful in naming the absent but implicit and describes how these conversations can support a context in which exploring discourses that support problems becomes especially relevant. Jill Freedman can be reached c/o Evanston Family Therapy Center, Evanston, IL U.S.A., narrativetherapy@sbcglobal.net

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In the last years of his life Michael White was very interested in an idea called 'the absent but implicit' that drew on his reading of Gregory Bateson (1980) and Jacques Derrida (1978). We can describe the absent but implicit as the idea that we make meaning of any experience by contrasting it with some other experience or set of experiences. We make meaning through operations in which we say (or think, or sense) 'this is different from that.' A single interpretation of any experience is a representation that we can see only because of a background of other, contrasting, experience. A story about a problem takes shape in contrast to some non-problematic experience (White 2000, 2003, 2011, Carey, Walther & Russell, 2009).

And it is not only that these experiences are non-problematic; the background experiences for problems often have to do with what people treasure or cherish. If we listen closely as people describe their problems, using what Michael (White, 2003) has called 'double listening' (listening for the ground as well as the figure) we can hear implications of the preferred, valued experiences that are the contrasting background for the present problematic and less valued experiences. These *implicit* experiences are a rich source of material for preferred stories. Michael has listed some possible meanings that we might understand to be implicit in people's discernments, and I have organised them in the following table:

The discernment of:	Is made possible by:
Frustration	Specific purposes, values, and beliefs
Despair	Particular hopes, dreams, and visions for the future
Injustice	Specific conceptions of the just world
Burden	Particular missions for and pledges about life
Woundedness	Specific notions of healing
Abandonment and desolation	Particular knowledges of life that are of tradition, of spirituality, and of highly valued cultural wisdoms
And so on . . .	

Adapted from: White, M. (2003). Narrative practice and community assignments. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*. (2) pp. 17-55

Each of the concepts implied by the right-hand column is much more than a concept. Each concept reflects lived experiences. Each concept reflects a history. Whether or not they relate to particular past events or to plans,

hopes, and intentions, they still reflect experience. And unpacking these into experientially vivid stories is a part of the work.

Thinking about the absent but implicit encourages a mindset in which therapists engage in double listening, so that as we hear problems we keep an awareness that they are discerned through a contrast with something else. This awareness makes it possible to recognise openings to subordinated experiences of what people long for or give value to in their lives and to invite people to re-vivify the stories of those experiences. The notion of the absent but implicit, once we integrate it into our practice, is a gateway into that realm of experience where people's most cherished hopes, aspirations, and commitments live and breathe. As one person put it, 'When I have a problem I usually go over it again and again and again. I think problem, problem, problem. These questions get me to think instead of what is important to me that has been violated. This is so much more helpful than problem, problem, problem. It's a whole different path.'

Much of Michael's work with the absent but implicit focused on trauma (White, 2003, 2006) and invited us to recognise pain as testimony and distress as a tribute. He considered ongoing psychological pain in response to trauma as a testimony to the importance of what is held precious and violated. He contrasted these ideas with the notion that psychological pain and emotional distress are the natural outcome of trauma and should be released. He wrote that this 'naturalistic' account leaves much to chance and risks re-traumatisation. An interview based instead on the absent but implicit can lead to a very different kind of conversation, one in which people describe what they treasure.

I have found the practices of double listening and thinking about the absent but implicit particularly relevant in working with couples and families. If we begin therapy with a lengthy exploration only focusing on the problem, even using externalised language, often people become immersed in the problem and this affects their experience of therapy. Family members or partners may feel blamed and we might set a tone of conflict or tension that is difficult to undo. Sometimes people do not want to return because they feel that these kinds of conversations just make things worse. If, instead, we engage in double listening--listening for those small cues that might lead us to the absent but implicit--even though we are asking about the problem, we are simultaneously wondering about what people give value to. We are interested in hearing a meaningful description

of the problem and at the same time listening for cues and wondering about what that problem contrasts with or exists in the face of. Through this kind of double listening we enter more quickly into the realm of what is precious, treasured, and perhaps even sacred, even as we engage in unpacking problems. Therapy becomes a place where family members witness what each other treasure. This sets a very different tone.

The only problem with the idea of absent but implicit is that Michael didn't live long enough to fully describe how he actually applied this idea in therapy. We did see it in his work, but in his writing we only get glimpses of the practices involved.¹

Here are a few words that David Epston (2009) wrote about Michael White's work:

Have you ever watched a videotape of Michael's, mesmerized, like I have, and all of a sudden realized that the conversation had passed over some sort of bridge between despair and renewed hope and you wondered if you had lost consciousness for a split second because you hadn't noticed that happening? Has the coin of the explicit 'heads' been turned over to reveal the 'implicit' tails so quickly that, like me, you swear it was some sort of magic? (p.73)

Michael swore it wasn't magic, but skills we all could develop. But maybe it was this seemingly effortless quality, this nearly invisible shift from talking about problems to suddenly being engaged in rich development of preferred stories that gave many of us the idea that we could simply flip the problem and talk about its opposite.

Flipping works sometimes.

I recall working with a heterosexual couple in which the woman felt betrayed when she discovered her partner had concealed from her that his business was failing. He had spent down the little bit of savings they had without her consent or knowledge, trying to save the business, and had given her no indication that their financial status had changed. She said that her distress was not about the money but was about the broken trust and the fear that distrust would now always color their relationship. She said that had her partner consulted her she might have thought they should spend their savings too. What she was unhappy about was that she was not consulted, and she felt that her partner had, in effect, lied to her.

Trying to practice double listening, the words 'broken trust' stood out for me and seemed to capture the

problem. I said, 'Trust must be really important to you,' and we entered into a conversation about the importance of trust, both to the woman and to her partner, and how their relationship had been built on it. There was a history of trust between them that they had each contributed to and that they counted on. He deeply regretted having broken that trust. But that break began to look different viewed from a fuller history of their relationship. Our conversation about trust expanded to include sharing good times and bad, faith and forgiveness. It was a very moving and transformative conversation.

Experiences such as this one led me to think we could simply 'flip' a problem description to find the absent but implicit.

COLLABORATING WITH PEOPLE TO NAME THE ABSENT BUT IMPLICIT

Not too much later Bianca came to see me. I've had a long relationship of infrequent consultations with her. She likes to consult during hard times until she feels back on track. This time she began by telling me she was not happy. Nothing in her life seemed to bring her joy.

Since she talked about being unhappy, I began to ask her about happiness, and we spent the hour making lists of activities that Bianca associated with happiness.

When she came to see me the next time I asked, as I usually do, if she would like me to read aloud the notes from the meeting before.

There was a long pause and then Bianca said, 'Jill, that last time we met was the most unhelpful conversation I've ever had with you. I just don't care that much about being happy. I mean, it's nice, but it's not the most important thing.'

I'll be forever grateful for Bianca's honesty. It started us on a struggling, groping kind of exploration that culminated in Bianca's realisation that *service* is vital for her. Without it, she does not have a sense of wellbeing. Bianca works as a firefighter. She had moved from what she described as directly serving people (as a firefighter in active duty) to being an administrator at a desk job. At the start, she welcomed this change. It brought her more money, more safety, and much more regular hours. But she realised as we talked that as she became a more competent administrator for the fire department, the satisfaction had drained from her life in

a way that the activities on our 'happiness' list—singing in a choir; listening to music, going for walks—was unlikely to impact. The realisation that I gained from our conversation was that even though in the hands of Michael White it sometimes looked like magic that happened in an instant; for me, anyway, identifying the absent but implicit would be an exploratory process. When I simply assumed that what was absent but implicit in the problem of unhappiness was happiness, it didn't work. This kind of reasoning by direct opposite does not always resonate with what people give value to.

Another aspect of my work with Bianca stands out for me. We focused on activities more than on what she gives value to. The stories of happiness were thin. Perhaps if I had asked questions to thicken them we would have come to 'service.' But I didn't think of that at the time.

After I heard Bianca's reflection I began to explore this complex kind of double listening with other people. The concept of double listening continued to be very important. But instead of listening for 'opposites' I began to listen for places I could ask questions that might lead me to understand the background that made people discern their current experience as problematic. I learned that what formed the background was not necessarily the opposite. I also learned that the sense of meaningfulness and renewed hope that characterised Michael's work with the absent but implicit was most often present in my work when my questions began with exploring what people give value to. That is, I learned to enter these preferred stories through the landscape of consciousness or identity, rather than the way we first learned to enter unique outcomes through the landscape of action.

ENGAGING WITH THE ABSENT BUT IMPLICIT THROUGH THE LANDSCAPE OF IDENTITY OR CONSCIOUSNESS

Michael and David (White & Epston, 1990) following Jerome Bruner (1986) wrote about how stories unfold in 'dual landscapes'—the landscape of action and the landscape of consciousness or identity. In the landscape of action we plot sequences of events through time. In the landscape of consciousness or identity, we plot the meanings, intentions, commitments, beliefs, values, and the like that relate to experience in the landscape of action. In narrative practice we ask questions that invite answers that weave between these two landscapes. When we identify a unique outcome or an experience that would not be predicted by the problematic story, we first ask questions in the landscape of action, only later asking

people to reflect on meaning through the landscape of consciousness or identity.

In asking about the absent but implicit I have developed the practice of beginning with an exploration of something people hold precious in contrast to the problem. I ask questions to explore what people give value to and hold precious and how this relates to their identity and then ask questions about actions people have taken to enact these preferred values. Once people have spoken of what they give value to and how they have enacted these values in the past, they are more likely to continue enacting these values in the present. This is a different pathway than those offered by unique outcomes that begin with an experience in the landscape of action and then include the landscape of consciousness or identity.

ASKING QUESTIONS TO ENGAGE WITH THE ABSENT BUT IMPLICIT

Additionally, it became clear to me that the conversations were much richer and resonated more when I asked questions so that we could discover together what was absent but implicit, instead of assuming that I knew. Although this felt like new territory, Michael had previously given examples of this kind of questioning:

'That which is absent but implicit in the discernment of despair might be identified through the introduction of questions like 'You said that you could no longer continue on. Would it be okay with you if I asked some questions about your sense of what you had been continuing on with up to this point? Or perhaps about what it was that you had been depending on to see you through up to now?'; 'You said that you have given up. Could I ask some questions about what it is you are giving up on? Or perhaps about what it is that you are getting separated from, or losing touch with, that had been important to you?'; or 'You said that you can't see a future for yourself any more? Would it be okay for me to ask you about what possibilities you had seen for your future? And how, at least to a point, this has been sustaining of your life up to this time? Or perhaps about what it was that had made it possible for you, until recently, to keep this future in sight?'" (White, 2000, p. 38)

As illustrated above, I learned that it was best to ask these questions tentatively so that people would feel free to talk

about what was significant to them, rather than going along with a hypothesis I might suggest through a question.

Here is some of the transcript of one of those conversations:

Maria, the mother of the family I would like to tell you about, had initiated therapy because of worry about her 15-year-old son, Kevin. Kevin's father had died when Kevin was three. 11 years later, which was about a year before Maria initiated family therapy, Maria remarried, thinking that this would also be good for Kevin. But in the first year after the marriage things had not developed as she had hoped they would. Kevin spent most of his time alone in his room. Although she realised this wasn't so unusual for a teenager, it was quite different for Kevin than just the year before. Maria thought he felt alone in this new family. Kevin didn't seem open or comfortable with Paul, his step-father, and his grades, which had never before been a cause for worry, had been going down in the year since Paul and Maria married.

Maria, Paul and Kevin were present for the conversation as well as Kevin's sister Kayla, who had been away at college, but happened to be available for this conversation. Maria began by talking about her worries concerning Kevin. Then, Kevin, with some urging from his mother, agreed that he was feeling shaken up, detached, adrift, and unhappy after Maria married.

I began an externalising conversation about 'isolation and feelings of being adrift.' Kevin confirmed that he felt isolated and a bit adrift. Maria joined in and reassured Kevin about her strong love and connection to him. The following transcript begins right after Maria has told Kevin she loves him and feels connected to him.

Kevin: You don't understand!

Jill: I'm not sure I understand either. You talked about isolation and feelings of being adrift. Can you tell me more about this so we do understand?

Kevin: I'm glad my mom has someone. I know she thinks I have to form a relationship with him, but that's her business, not mine. I don't want more connections with them. I have my own friends.

Jill: Okay, I'm a little confused. We were talking about isolation...

Kevin: I don't feel so connected to them, but I don't want to really.

Jill: Maybe I misunderstood. You used the words 'shaken up, detached, adrift, and very unhappy.' Somehow we went from there to isolation. Is something else more important?

Kevin: Well, all of those are true. But my mom acts like I'm still five, and she can say 'I love you' and everything is alright.

Jill: So when your mom started talking to you about your connection with her, you think she wanted to make everything alright?

Kevin: Exactly. And that worked when I was five, but that doesn't make everything better any more. That's not it.

Jill: That makes me wonder what 'it' is. I hear that connection with your mom and Paul will not make everything better. But it sounds like something is going on that has to do with feelings of detachment, unhappiness, and being adrift.

Kevin: Yeah.

Jill: I'm still thinking about how you said, 'That's not it' and wondering what 'it' is... Is there something that you don't go along with or want to question or something you are protesting that contributes to these feelings of detachment, unhappiness, and being adrift?

Kevin: Yes!

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Kevin went on to explain that he had been brought up Jewish. His father was Jewish and his mother had converted to Judaism when she married his father. He said that he spent years studying Hebrew and had had a bar mitzvah. He believed that this was important to his mom. His dad had died way before that and his mom had been the one to set up Hebrew school and keep the Jewish holidays so he thought it was important to her too. He said that Paul is Catholic and that he and Maria married in the Catholic Church, which Kevin described as 'really weird.' But even weirder, he explained, was that his mom was reclaiming her Protestant roots. She had initiated what Kevin called 'this really weird plan' of the family going to a different church each weekend.

Maria smiled as Kevin described her plan and said that the bar mitzvah was great, but that it all comes to the same thing. She added that they could all go to temple

together once a month if that would make Kevin feel better.

Kevin buried his face in his hands and shook his head.

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Jill: Then you're not going along with this plan of alternating places of worship?

Kevin: No, I'm not.

Jill: In not going along, what are you hoping to communicate?

Kevin: I don't know about communicating.

Jill: Okay... Maybe this is what I mean... In not going along with this plan are you going along with something else?

Kevin: Yes, I am.

Jill: Can you say what you are going along with?

Kevin: Umm...

Jill: It sounds like even though it's not in words yet, you have something you are going along with or subscribing to... or maybe standing for or caring about. Is that right?

Kevin: Yes, it is.

Jill: Can you say something about what it is or what you're standing for?

Kevin: I'm standing for... I'm a Jew. That is important to me. It doesn't just change every week.

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This was an opening for Kevin to talk about the significance of his Jewish experience and identity. I then asked questions to invite him to describe how he had enacted these aspects of his identity. He talked about a family trip to Israel and how at home he felt there. He talked about his friends from a Jewish summer camp. And he talked about how the family used to have special Friday night dinners to celebrate Shabbos. These experiences all gave him a sense of belonging, being part of something. The family no longer did these things. After hearing some of these stories, Kayla, his sister, reflected.

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Kayla: I think for Mom it's all about spirituality and there are lots of ways to express spirituality. I agree with her that it's all the same in terms of spirituality. I don't think the idea of going to different churches is so weird. Okay, maybe a little weird! But Kevin has always been more Jewish than me. For Kevin, it's about tradition.

Kevin: It's about being Jewish!

Kayla: That's a tie to Dad.

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Kevin nodded & became teary.

From this conversation it seemed that what was absent but implicit in the problems that the family brought was the importance of Kevin's connection to Judaism and to his father. Once stories about this were told and retold, the family incorporated ways to support Kevin's Judaism and honor his connection to his father. Kevin had wanted to go to a Jewish summer program but the family had planned on taking a vacation that would make the timing not work. After our conversation they changed the vacation so he could go. They also facilitated his going to temple regularly. In later conversations we talked about how to include ways of honoring his father in the family.

It is important to note here that even though we begin our conversations in the landscape of identity, when things go well they lead to action. People enact these preferred values. We never explicitly worked with either Kevin's relationship with Paul or schoolwork but both got better.

I'd like to point out that if early on I had alighted on the word 'disconnection' and simply flipped it, asking about the importance of connection, this probably would not have engaged Kevin. Even though we ultimately focused on connection to Judaism and to his father, I don't think the concept of connection early in the conversation would have served as an entry point for Kevin. For him to find the words that led to what was absent but implicit, it was important to explore what felt wrong or was missing.

I have come upon some questions that are often helpful in the process of working with the absent but implicit:

- What does this say about what you treasure?
- If this problem is a protest against something, what

would you say that that something is?

- Has something important been violated? Can you put what has been violated into words?
- Could we say that your naming this as problematic means that you don't go along with it? In not going along with it are you standing for something else?
- I'm getting the impression as you speak of this that there is something you miss. Is that right? Can you put that into words?
- Why is it important that you speak of this in front of your partner (or family)?

THE ABSENT BUT IMPLICIT BETWEEN PEOPLE

This last question - Why is this important to say in front of your partner or family - I learned from my colleague in Tel Aviv, Yael Gershoni (2010). She has engaged in an exploration similar to the one I've described, and noticed that when, in the midst of their describing problems, she asked one member of a couple, 'Why is this important to say in front of your partner?' the person usually acknowledges that both of them have lived experience of a different way things can be. Further, sometimes the person describes how their declaration of distress shows that they care. Sometimes this is not the first answer to the question 'Why is this important to say in front of your partner?' but with a little persistence the conversation often moves in the direction of the absent but implicit. Although the answer to any of the other questions above may lead to a conversation about what is absent but implicit in relationships, this question invites an exploration of what is absent but implicit between people, rather than in just one person's experience.

I've found that pairing the last two questions can be particularly helpful in this regard. For example, saying, 'I'm getting the impression as you speak of this that there is something you miss. Is that right? Why is it important that you speak of this in front of your partner (or family)?' can support thinking about what is absent but implicit in a relationship. Although in individual therapy, we can help people name what is absent but implicit in the relationships they speak of, in couples or family therapy, when other members of the relationship witness this naming, the effects are often more far-reaching.

ENGAGING WITH THE ABSENT BUT IMPLICIT MAY CREATE A CONTEXT FOR EXPOSING DISCOURSES

The absent but implicit is also useful in another way.

Part of the worldview that differentiates narrative therapy from most of the traditional family therapies is that the problem is seen as separate from the person and supported by sociocultural discourses. Part of our practice is to expose these discourses, giving people an opportunity to decide how they want to respond to them, rather than being subject to them. However, I've often found that I'm more interested in talking about gender and power inequities than are the people who've come to see me. They more often want to talk about specific disagreements. They want to solve the problem, rather than think about broader issues. Of course, this isn't always the case. At times when I've introduced conversations about racism or poverty, people have been tremendously relieved that in our work there is room to acknowledge the living conditions that they know impact them every day. But there are other situations in which operations of modern power are not as obvious and people are not so enthusiastic to explore them.

I've found that if our conversations in the therapy room focus on the absent but implicit, family members then go back into the world with a richer understanding of each other's intentions, hopes, dreams, and commitments. Then when families have difficulties living out these stories, even though they believe in the intentions, hopes, dreams and commitments, it is often because what they personally give value to has come in conflict with dominant cultural values. This conflict sets the stage for discussions about cultural norms and discourses that are experience-near—meaningful and relevant to the day-to-day life of the family—in a way that they would not be if they were not related to the tension between intentions, hopes, and dreams and limiting discourses that are threatening to make them absent again. That is, trying to live in accordance with values and discovering that dominant cultural values get in the way makes people more interested in thinking about those dominant cultural values. These conversations are not about abstract ideas, but about specific, tangible experiences couples and families have that are pulling them away from what they find precious and would rather be building their lives around.

To illustrate these ideas I will describe my work with a heterosexual couple. Rhonda and Franklin came to therapy because of conflict about how to raise their children. Franklin was critical about Rhonda's parenting. Rhonda said that Franklin's work as a corporate executive kept him from being home much, leaving her to do all the work, but he still wanted that work done the way he would do it, according to his specifications. For example, Rhonda puts their children to bed before

Franklin gets home from work most days. But one day, a week or two before our conversation, Rhonda went to a school committee meeting and asked Franklin to get the kids ready for bed. When Rhonda came home, Franklin was scathing in his disapproval of their five-year-old son for expecting help in locating his pajamas and turning down his bed. He instructed Rhonda to stop helping in this way so that their son could develop independence. 'He's never there,' Rhonda told me. 'He treats me like I'm an employee, only in worse tones than he would use at work.' After listening to Rhonda's description of the problem, I turned to Franklin and asked what he thought it might be like to have Rhonda's experience. Here is a bit of a transcript of the subsequent conversation in which I am listening for cues to the absent but implicit and trying to ask questions so that we can talk about it.

Meeting 1:

Franklin: I know that Rhonda should be able to make her own decisions about how she interacts with the kids. I'm just so disappointed about this stage of life. I'm tired and I don't like myself much. I'm disappointed in myself and in life.

(I am wondering about how Franklin discerns disappointment.)

Jill: I wonder about this disappointment. Would you say it is a way of questioning the shape your life has taken or would you describe it a different way?

Franklin: I think questioning would be better than what I'm doing. I started out questioning it. But now, I'm just being mean about my disappointment.

Jill: When you were questioning it, what exactly were you questioning?

Franklin: Working so hard, I'm never home. The way life is divided up ... never enough time.

(You could probably sense my probing for the absent but implicit in my previous questions. This next question gets more explicit.)

Jill: Does your questioning those things mean you have a vision of something else?

Franklin: Yeah. A vision of what life could be like.

Jill: Can you tell me about that vision?

Franklin described everyone being home together, having much more family time, and he and Rhonda sharing in parenting. I then turned to Rhonda and interviewed her about what she had heard.

Jill: What is it like to hear this?

Rhonda: I'm not sure. I'd like that too, but it's so far from what we have.

Jill (to Franklin): I'm wondering about what this vision speaks to. Does it say something about what is important to you in life?

We had a heartfelt, moving conversation about the kind of life Franklin thought would really be worth living. Franklin said that he had always wanted to be a high school teacher and that if he had followed that path, maybe now they would have the kind of family life that fit with his vision. Rhonda related stories of what Franklin had stood for when they met, how she thought he was going to teach high school, and how she too had a different vision of what their family life would be. As the interview was nearing an end, I wondered if the vision could help them do something different with their current life.

Meeting 2:

When Franklin and Rhonda came back for our second meeting they looked different. They were talking quietly and smiling at each other in the waiting room. This was quite a contrast with the first time, when I found Franklin talking on his cell phone and Rhonda paging through a magazine. They told me that they had stayed up late into the night talking after our first conversation and had decided that Franklin would quit his (high-paying corporate) job. He would pursue his goal of teaching high school. I wondered aloud about whether there were experiences they had had - either individually or as a couple - that supported this new vision of life. Besides their early conversations when they first met, they also talked about the pleasure Franklin took in teaching Sunday School and what it was like for them as a family to go on camping trips. They each took part in telling these and other stories that showed how some of their life already related to what they were hoping for. Rhonda also described how Franklin had begun asking her about her parenting decisions and supporting and appreciating them, instead of criticising them. Franklin talked about the research he had begun about how to qualify to teach high school. They left holding hands and beaming.

Meeting 3:

The third time I saw Franklin and Rhonda they looked different again. This time Rhonda began the conversation talking about the cost of sending three children to private schools, the house she loved that was expensive both in terms of the mortgage and upkeep and their position and friendships in the community where they lived. Franklin nodded with his head bent.

Franklin: It would be irresponsible of me to quit my job. We talked about it. It would be irresponsible to throw my success away. But I'm miserable. We are already fighting again. I know it's my fault. I just hate this life.

Jill: So let me pick up on some of the words you used. Two that stood out for me were 'responsibility' and 'success.'

We then began a deconstructing conversation addressing some of these questions:

Whose ideas of responsibility and success are we talking about?

Where did you learn these ideas of responsibility and success?

What are the effects of these ideas? Is this what you want for your family?

Does what you are saying mean that all high school teachers are irresponsible?

How did you decide how responsibilities would be divided with you, Rhonda, being a stay-at-home mom and you, Franklin, being a more-than-fulltime executive?

Franklin and Rhonda became engrossed in these questions because they had experienced their relevance.

This conversation established that Rhonda and Franklin were living in a very affluent suburb where there were expectations and pressure to live in particular ways. They speculated about how there might be different expectations and less pressure if they lived somewhere else. They also talked about how they had split up responsibilities when they had their first child, but now that all three children were in school, they might look again at that decision.

I want to underline that in my experience people are much more interested in having a deconstructing

conversation and really thinking about the context that supports problems when they've experienced social pressures pulling them away from something they want. They experience these conversations as relevant and experience-near, rather than theoretical.

No new decisions came out of this meeting, but it was an important conversation. The problems, which they initially had named as disappointment and meanness, now were perceived as pressure and expectations from the context they lived in.

In our next meeting we talked about gender arrangements they had been socialised to fulfill, but had not really noticed the effects of. This too was an experience-near conversation.

The things we talked about in these last two therapy meetings had been at play since long before I met Rhonda and Franklin. But it was not until we spoke of what had been absent but implicit and they tried to shift their life, that these subjects became pressing for them.

Over the next few weeks Rhonda and Franklin decided to stay living right where they were, but to send their children to their town's excellent public schools. With their children there, they would be much more likely to meet other parents with a broader definition of success. Even more important, Franklin started working to make his lifelong dream of being a high school teacher come true, and they both committed to building a shared family life. Rhonda was thinking about work outside of home that might be fulfilling and would take some of the financial pressure off Franklin. They were determined to show their children a different version of family life. They knew it wouldn't be easy but they believed it would be possible to create a life that would be more fitting for them. They were well on their way to creating this life when I last saw them.

CONCLUSIONS

The practice of double listening and asking questions to explore the absent but implicit can add much richness to our therapy conversations. 'Flipping' the problem often leads to a different, less fitting conversation than collaborative exploration. It can also center the therapist's ideas, rather than the person's. Asking questions to explore what people give value to in contrast to problems offers us a different pathway into developing preferred stories. These questions help us enter in the

landscape of consciousness or identity, so that much earlier in the work, we are engaged in conversations about what people stand for and hold precious. This can create a very rich and meaningful atmosphere for therapy conversations. And although we enter preferred stories through talking about what people give value to, this work is not just about meaning-making. It supports people taking action in accordance with their values.

In work with couples and families we can invite conversations about what is absent but implicit in their relationships. These conversations often create a context that makes it apparent how power relations and socio-cultural discourses are operating and how they contribute to pulling people away from a life they would prefer. With this realisation people welcome conversations about the political context. Both of these effects of conversations about the absent but implicit—supporting conversations about what people hold as precious and exposing how power relations and discourses stand in the way of preferred stories—contribute to meaningful and useful therapy conversations.

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NOTE

I. Carey, Walther, & Russell (2009) specified some of the practices Michael used in their absent but implicit map. I hope to join them here in further specifying practices.

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