

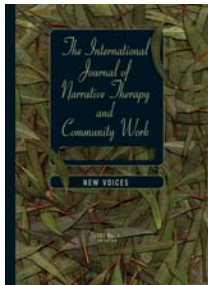


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Narrative couple therapy

This chapter was originally published in Gurman & Jacobson's (2002) Clinical Handbook of Couple Therapy. We were specifically requested by the editors to organise this paper under certain categories. While we would not have chosen these categories, we believe this paper lays out some of the key principles of narrative practice with couples.

We were also asked as part of the initial publishing request to provide a lengthy example of work with one couple. In this paper, and in the other three papers in this section of the book, the examples of work described are with heterosexual couples. This is partly because of the context of the initial requests, and also due to some reluctance on our part as heterosexual therapists to write about the lives and relationships of lesbian and gay couples.

With these provisos in mind, we believe this following paper offers a thorough reflection on our work with couples and gives a glimmer of the complexities involved.

Background

'Narrative therapy', as we (Freedman & Combs 1996) use the term, refers to a growing body of practices and ideas (Freeman, Epston & Lobovits 1997; Monk, Winslade, Crocket & Epston 1997; Morgan 2000; Zimmerman & Dickerson 1996) that stem from the work of Michael White and David Epston. White's early published work (e.g. 1986) was based on ideas that stem from the work of Gregory Bateson (1972). David Epston (1989, 1998), who had encountered the narrative metaphor in studying anthropology, and Cheryl White, 'who had enthusiasm for this analogy from her readings in feminism' (White & Epston 1990, p.xvi) encouraged White to use the 'story analogy' – the notion that meaning is constituted through the stories we tell and hear concerning our lives. In collaboration with Epston, White (White & Epston 1990, 1992) found that the story analogy offered a useful direction for their work.

Therapists who began to use the narrative metaphor in White's and Epston's sense experienced quite a large shift in their worldview. Instead of trying to solve problems, they became interested in collaborating with people to change their lives through enriching the narratives they and others tell concerning their lives. They began to work to bring forth and develop 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1978; Ryle 1990, 1971) or rich, meaningful, multistranded stories of those aspects of people's life narratives that lie outside the influence of problems. It seems that through these alternative stories, people can live out new identities, new possibilities for relationship, and new futures.

This work is more complex than a brief description of the narrative metaphor might suggest. One factor adding to the complexity is that some stories have more staying power than others. In any culture at any given time, certain stories are much more a part of the fabric of day-to-day reality than are others. We are all born into cultural stories, and they shape our perceptions of what is possible. For couples, stories about gender roles and heterosexual dominance, for example, may shape perceptions of what is possible. However, people do not usually think of the stories they are born into as stories. They think of them as 'reality'. Cultural stories have the power to shape our experience of reality.

An important influence on how narrative therapists work with the stories that circulate in people's cultures has been 'poststructuralism', especially as it is expressed in the late work of Michel Foucault (1980, 1985). Foucault was a

French intellectual who studied, among other things, the various ways that people in Western society have been categorized as 'other'. He examined madness (1965), illness (1975), criminality (1977), and sexuality (1985) as concepts around which certain people have been labeled 'insane', 'sick', 'criminal', or 'perverted', and described various ways such people have been separated, oppressed, or enrolled in self-policing on the basis of that labeling.

To Foucault, people have power in a society in direct proportion to their ability to participate in the various discourses that shape that society. Although *The American Heritage Dictionary, Third Edition* gives simply 'verbal expression in speech or writing' as its first definition of 'discourse', scholars like Foucault use the word to refer to the ongoing political/historical/institutional conversations within a society that constitute our notions of what is true and what is possible. Foucault showed how the people whose voices dominated the discussion about what constituted madness, for example, could separate the people *they* saw as mad from 'polite society', sequestering them in madhouses where their voices were cut off from the avenues of power.

Foucault argued that there is an inseparable linkage between knowledge and power. Because the discourses of a society determine what knowledge is held to be true, right, or proper in that society, those who control the discourse control knowledge. At the same time, the dominant knowledge of a given milieu determines who will be able to occupy its powerful positions. We see the discourses of power that Foucault studied as historical, cultural metanarratives – stories that have shaped (and been shaped by) the distribution of power in society.

Society is not necessarily benign, fair, or just. As feminist critics (e.g. Avis 1985; Carter, Papp, Silverstein & Walters 1984; Goldner 1985a, 1985b; Hare-Mustin 1978; Laird 1989; Taggart 1985) of family therapy have reminded us, our cultural institutions constrain us, leading us to see certain possibilities as desirable and blinding us to other possibilities. Laird (1989, p.430) writes that 'sociocultural narratives ... construct the contextual realms of possibility from which individuals and families can select the ingredients and forms for their own narratives'. Some people have readier access to a wider range of sociocultural narratives than others, and some narratives dominate while others are marginalized. Laird (1989, p.431) reminds of this when she writes of '... the politics of storymaking or mythmaking. Clearly there are both obvious and

subtle differences in the power individuals and particular interest groups possess to ensure that particular narratives will prevail in family, group, and national life. Not all stories are equal.'

Socially constructed narratives have real effects. For example, the myth that 'welfare mothers' are engaged in a mini-industry in which they get richer and richer as they make more and more babies has had real effects on already undeserved women and children. It has provided a rationalization that has allowed those in power to cut funds even further. The story about how women can never be too thin which gets retold every time one turns on the TV or stands in a supermarket checkout line surrounded by magazine covers displaying anorexia nervosa as beauty¹, has contributed to a real epidemic of self-starvation. The widely circulated stories in which inner-city males are only interested in drugs, sex, and killing each other support the perverse glorification of certain kinds of misogyny and violence. At the same time, they have served as a rationale for giving up on social policies that might offer inner-city males a real chance at a different way of making it in the world.

Foucault was especially interested in how the 'truth claims' carried in the 'grand abstractions' of reductionist science constitutes a discourse that dehumanizes and objectifies many people. He was interested in finding and circulating marginalized discourses – stories that exist, but are not widely circulated or powerfully endorsed – that might undermine the excessive power of the reductionistic scientific discourse. Foucault (1980) wrote of the 'amazing efficacy of discontinuous, particular, and local criticism' (p.80) in bringing about a 'return of knowledge' or 'an insurrection of subjugated knowledges' (p.84).

Following Foucault, we believe that even in the most marginalized and disempowered of lives, there is always lived experience that lies outside the dominant stories. White, Epston, and other narrative therapists have developed ways of thinking and working that bring forth the 'discontinuous, particular, and local' stories of couples and other social groups, so that people can inhabit and lay claim to the many possibilities for their lives that lie beyond the pale of dominant narratives.

When we use the narrative metaphor and the lens of poststructuralism to orient our work as therapists, we are intensely curious about each new couple we meet. We cherish each couple's stories. We work with the partners in couples in ways that invite them to celebrate their differences and to develop and live out

narratives that they prefer around the particularities of their lives. This valuing of the meaning people make of their own experience over the meaning experts make of that experience has been referred to as the 'interpretive turn' (Bruner 1986). It leads us to de-center our meanings and to experience ourselves as interested people – perhaps with an anthropological or biographical or field researcher's bent – who are skilled at asking questions to bring forth the knowledge and experience carried in the stories of the couples we work with. We work to help people notice the influence of restrictive cultural stories in their lives, and to expand and enrich their own life narratives. We strive to find ways to spread the news of triumphs – to circulate success stories in order to keep them alive and growing. We believe that these success stories in turn contribute to keeping our culture growing and flowing in satisfying ways.

The healthy/well-functioning vs pathological/dysfunctional couple/marriage

'Healthy', 'well-functioning', 'pathological', and 'dysfunctional' are not descriptions we generally use. If we are to think in this language, whether couples are 'well-functioning' or not has to do with whether the stories they are living and in which they construct their identities are ones that they prefer. We think of relationships as being multi-storied. That is, every relationship can be expressed and experienced through a great variety of narratives; many 'true' stories can be told about any experience. Therefore, we do not look for health or pathology or quality of functioning in couples. Instead, we look at the stories that are currently shaping a relationship, and seek to facilitate a collaborative re-authoring process in which more suitable stories can be expressed and experienced.

Similarly, we do not consider the partners in a couple to have essential, core identities with fixed, predictable characteristics. Therefore, we do not look for 'health' or 'pathology' within the members of a couple. Keeping in mind the interpretive turn, we are interested in people's evaluations of what is problematic and preferred, and of how the problems they name affect their lives and relationships. That we are interested in people making their own evaluations does not mean that we think anything goes. We are full participants in the

process of therapy, and we inevitably bring our own opinions and hard-won lived experience (and biases) along with us. For example, we are opposed to (among other things) abuse, coercion, and cruelty. When one of these problems appears to have invaded a relationship, we consider it our responsibility to ask questions that invite each partner to consider the effects of the problem on his/her life, the other partner's life, and their relationship, and to consider the stand he/she wants to take in relation to it.

We seek to create a conversational space in which people can take responsibility for addressing and ameliorating the effects of, for instance, abuse. To us, this means that we must avoid lecturing or imposing rigid rules from a position of moral superiority. Instead, we want to invite people to bring their 'best selves' into a consideration of the ways abuse diminishes their relationship, and an exploration of how they might choose ways of living that keep the abuse out of their relationship.

As narrative therapists, one of our principal intentions is to subvert the dominant practice in our society of measuring ourselves, our relationships, and others by standardized norms. For us, two-dimensional normative scales ('healthy-sick', 'gifted-impaired', etc.) invite therapists and the couples who consult with them into thin descriptions – pallid, reductionist accounts – of their multi-storied lives. These two-dimensional scales pervade contemporary Western culture, and each of them co-exists with a prescriptive story about the right or healthy or successful way to live or to have a relationship. And none of us can measure up to the demands of all these norms; we are too fat or too thin, too driven or too passive, too caring or not caring enough. Our relationships are too rigid or too enmeshed, too focused on sex or not sexy enough, too hot or too cold. Even when we do measure up, it is within the dictates of a thin, two-dimensional story.

Rather than looking for pathology or flawed functioning within couples, we seek to examine problematic cultural stories in collaborative and multi-dimensional ways. We engage in conversations to expose problematic discourses and give couples the opportunity to describe and evaluate the effects of those discourses on their relationship. For example, let us discuss a conversation we had with Ted and Carol. Carol complained that Ted always walked ahead of her, and at malls always led them into the stores he wanted to shop in, not the ones she would prefer. When Carol noticed this pattern, she wondered whether it

meant that she was a slow person or that Ted did not care about her and her preferences. Ted thought that all it meant was that he was a fast walker. As we asked questions to explore the cultural stories that shaped their way of walking, it seemed to all of us that gender socialization had supported Ted in unthinkingly setting the pace and Carol in unthinkingly following along, even though it made her feel like a 'little girl' or a 'puppy dog'. Our conversation allowed Carol and Ted to separate themselves from the problem, notice the effects it had on their lives, and consider what they would prefer for their relationship.

We have worked with couples in which corporate values have played the largest role in creating problems, keeping one member of the couple unavailable and inattentive to what was most important both to him or herself and to the relationship. In the couple we describe later in this chapter, differences in social class contributed to problematic power relations and bred fear and doubt in the relationship. In each instance, the stories about what discourses were negatively influencing their relationship, and about their preferred directions in life, emerged in collaborative conversation with a couple. Our desires in each instance were for the couple to have the last word as to what was preferred, and for the choices to be made within a multi-dimensional domain, not against a two-dimensional yardstick.

The assessment of couple functioning and dysfunction

We think about information as being *generated* rather than 'gathered' in therapeutic conversations. In a rather literal way, we believe that we are making ourselves and each other up as we go along. This is a poststructuralist idea. We do not assume that a couple has a particular interactional or relational structure that we can assess. We do not think of people or relationships as having stable, quantifiable identities or 'typical' characteristics, so we do not try to discover or gather information about such characteristics. Instead, we think of people's lives as being multistoried, and we believe that each new telling generates new possibilities for interpretation and action.

Although we avoid the position of making professional, 'expert' assessments, we acknowledge that the role of therapist/interviewer is a powerful one. Each question we ask directs attention to a particular domain and away from many others. We want people to interpret and assess their own experience, but

our questions inevitably shape the inquiry. For this reason, we 'situate' our questions. That is, we describe where they come from and our intentions in asking them so that people can evaluate our bias and decide how to relate to it. We believe that people are in a better position to interpret, make meaning of, and assess their own experience than outsiders are, even outsiders trained to help.

Since we do not subscribe to normative ideas of what constitutes a healthy couple relationship, we would be at a loss about what criteria to use in assessing couples. Instead of assessment, we are interested in hearing detailed, context-specific narratives. As we ask questions to bring forth their stories, we encourage those with whom we work to evaluate problems and their relationship to problems, as well as evaluating the therapy itself.

We ask questions that invite the partners in a couple to do the following:

- assess their current situation,
- name the problems involved,
- evaluate their relationship to those problems,
- take a stand in regard to them,
- tell more satisfying stories of their relationship,
- assess the usefulness of the alternative stories.

We want to know whether the alternative stories speak to people of a more satisfying identity as a couple. In telling the new stories and reflecting on them, people collaborate with us in an ongoing assessment of their new expressions of themselves and their relationship.

Here are some questions we might ask in inviting people's assessments of their situation and of their therapy experience:

- 'What name would you give the problem?'
- 'What is it like to have the experience of the problem?'
- 'What effect does the problem have on your life?'
- 'What effect does the problem have on your relationship with each other?'
- 'What has it talked you into about your partner? What impact has that had?'

- ‘What effect does the problem have on other relationships?’
- ‘How does the problem alter your relationship with yourself?’
- ‘Is this what you want for your relationship? Why or why not?’
- ‘Is this what you want for yourself? Why or why not?’
- ‘Are we talking about what you want to be talking about?’
- ‘Is this conversation useful?’
- ‘How is it useful?’

In telling and living out the many strands of alternative stories, the partners in a couple evaluate many aspects of their lives: their private thoughts, feelings, hopes, and fears; their dyadic interactions; the contributions of each partner’s culture of origin to the couple and to the individual partners; their interrelationship with local institutions and traditions; and more.

Although we bend over backward to avoid ‘expert’, categorical, reductionist assessment, it would be misleading to imply that we make no assessments of any kind. One kind of assessment that we make has to do with which parts of a couple’s story might be shaped by discourses that are invisible to the partners. We ask questions that invite them to unmask the operations of such discourses, and that offer an opportunity to decide where they stand and how they would like their relationship to be in the face of such discourses.

We are particularly interested in bringing forth partners’ evaluations of power relations. This often involves asking questions that invite them to consider the effects of discourses of gender, ethnicity, heterosexual dominance, class, corporate culture, patriarchy, age, or other sociocultural factors on their relationship. We might initiate such a conversation with questions similar to those that follow. We try to have thoughtful interactive conversations, with each question being responsive to the last answer. It is difficult to capture that flavor in a series of hypothetical questions. We would not ask these questions in the beginning of a conversation. They would follow a detailed telling of a set of experiences.

- *Martha, you have just said that fear of humiliation keeps you from wanting to go to social events with Brian. You described his failure to introduce you to people he knows and his talking over you when you try to join in. Is that right?*
- *Brian, what is it like to hear your actions being described that way? Does it fit with how you like to think of yourself?*
- *What or who do you think might have introduced you to this way of acting?*
- *Your father and uncles undoubtedly did not make up this way of being. Where do you think they might have learned it?*
- *Martha, I've noticed that all of these examples are of men. Do you think that this is a coincidence?*
- *Do you think it is a way of acting only to women or to children as well?*
- *What should we call this way of acting?*
- *Brian, what do you think it might be like to be a woman or child experiencing discounting?*
- *Is this what you would want women and children to experience from you? Why not? What would you rather have them know about you?*
- *You have already said, Martha, that this discounting keeps you from wanting to socialize with John. Are there other ways it affects your relationship?*
- *Is this what you want for your relationship? What would you prefer?*
- *We've been talking about a strand of our culture in which women and children are invisible or are considered to be property. It is clear, John, that that does not fit with your thinking, although you have gotten pulled into some ways of acting that go with it. Martha, do you think you've been pulled into some of the actions that go with these ideas as well?*
- *What would you name them?*
- *What's that been like for you?*
- *What has it been like for the relationship, do you think? How would you prefer your relationship to be?*

Because we think that ‘self’, ‘identity’, ‘personhood’, and the like are experiences that emerge and are always changing *in relationship*, we do not know exactly who will be answering when we ask a person to draw a distinction or to evaluate the effect of an action. To make this transparent, we might ask, ‘Is that the problem speaking?’ or ‘Whose values are guiding you in saying that – gay culture’s or straight culture’s?’

In exposing discourses that support problems, individuals and couples can separate themselves from the ways of being that are supported by those discourses, and can identify and recognize preferred perceptions, attitudes, and actions. Although we do not think of strengths or resources as fixed commodities, and we do not administer questionnaires to inventory them, we are very interested to hear the stories of relationships and events that help people to have a sense of choice, agency, purpose, and accomplishment in their life as a couple.

Goal-setting

Our general goal in therapy is to collaborate with people in living out moment-by-moment, choice-by-choice life stories that they prefer, that are more just, and that make their worlds more satisfying. We are more interested in opening up possibilities than we are in closing them down. This makes us wary of ‘goal-setting’ as it is usually defined and practiced. We think that goals, unless they are very tentatively set and rigorously updated, can set single, specific trajectories for people’s lives. This can all too easily close down possibilities. The narrative metaphor biases us toward thinking about possibilities that unfold in living out a story, rather than about goals, which are usually set in advance and pursued more-or-less single-mindedly. Instead of goals, we tend to speak of ‘projects’ or ‘directions in life’.

The process of identifying projects is fluid, shifting as new distinctions are made and as alternative stories unfold. Problems can be thought of as plots and projects as counterplots. Partners in a couple may name joint projects for the relationship, individual projects, or both. For some couples, the collaborative negotiation of shared or complementary directions in life can be a very significant – sometimes even an inspirational – part of the therapy.

The structure of the therapy process

Although we take an active role in structuring the therapy, we ask couples to collaborate with us so that the process will fit their circumstances.

Telling and witnessing

A rhythmic alternation between telling and witnessing characterizes narrative work. We set up a structure early in our work with couples that we come back to over and over again. We ask one member of the couple to tell his or her story while the other listens from a witnessing position. Then we ask the witnesser to reflect on what he or she has heard. Next we switch positions, so that the partner who had been in the witnessing position can tell his or her story.

We initiate this process by making eye contact and speaking primarily with one person at a time, then asking the partner to comment. Sometimes we are more explicit, saying something like this: 'What I would like to do is speak with you, Rubin, for a time, with you, Ellen, listening. After a bit I'll turn to you, Ellen, and ask what thoughts you have been having while Rubin has been talking. Then we'll switch and you, Rubin, will be in the listening position while Ellen and I have a conversation. Would that be OK?'

We use the alternation of telling and witnessing in other ways as well. Sometimes a couple describes something and the therapist reflects. Although the two of us most often work separately, many people know us to be partners in marriage and in parenthood as well as in our work. Heterosexual couples in particular sometimes ask us to work with them as a co-therapy team. When we do this, one of us takes the role of interviewer and the other reflects. Sometimes we include an outsider witness group or reflecting team as part of the structure. In that case, the outsider witness group listens while we interview the couple. Then we have a formal break and the outsider witnesses reflect on what they've heard. In the last part of the interview, the couple responds to the reflections. At times, particularly as part of training or consultation, reflecting teams are composed of therapists. At other times, in response to our raising the possibility, couples agree to our inviting another couple (whose members have insider experience in dealing with a particular problem) to serve as an outsider witness group. Or couples may invite other people who are important in their lives to join in as an outsider witness group.

Length, frequency, and number of meetings

We negotiate the time of each next meeting as we go along, one session at a time. At the end of meetings with couples, we ask whether the conversation has been useful. If it has, we ask how. Then we ask whether they would like to meet again, and if so, when.

We ask couples to make these decisions each time, so that they are at least as active as we are in evaluating what schedule would be most useful. Sometimes, as when they are in the middle of intense conversations, couples want to return very soon. More often, because partners have been hearing each other in new ways and making new distinctions, they are interested in allowing some time to find out what difference these new experiences will make in their lives. We listen as they negotiate with each other about how long their explorations will take. Occasionally, because the partners are not sure how much time would be useful, a couple decides to telephone us for the next appointment.

We generally meet with couples for 60 minutes at a time, but have negotiated longer meeting times for future meetings when we all agreed that we wished there was more time to complete a conversation. How long therapy lasts is highly variable and determined by each couple. Some couples come to deal with a single problem, and therapy may consist of two or three meetings. Others become involved in developing very rich, detailed stories of the partners' lives together. Their therapy may continue for several years. Most are somewhere in-between.

Focusing on new directions in life

We wonder whether simply sitting down for a meeting in a therapy office invites people to re-immense themselves in problematic stories. With this in mind, we structure therapy conversations so as to invite people to continue to explore, describe, and experience directions in life that were unfolding in our previous meetings – new distinctions, positions people have taken about their relationship to problems, and new stories that are developing. Sometimes we read our notes aloud and ask a question such as: 'Can you tell us about new developments that relate to what we were talking about last time?' Sometimes

we begin by wondering whether there have been important thoughts or events that connect to our conversation of the time before.

Another way we structure therapy is through thinking about how to keep stories alive and growing between conversations. We use letters, documents, videotapes, and the like to document and circulate alternative stories. For example, after a therapy interview we may write a letter posing questions that invite the partners to develop an alternative story even farther than they had in the interview, or we may send a document noting the stands they have taken in regard to a problem. We think that the reading of such a document between therapy meetings and the conversations that may follow such a reading can contribute to keeping a story alive and growing.

Medication

Our experience is that ideas about medication are so pervasive that the people who come to us for therapy raise the issue before it ever occurs to us. Medications are rarely a focus of couple therapy. If something about one partner's medication or the condition for which it is being prescribed does seem to be problematic for a couple, we address that problem in the same manner that we address other problems – asking each partner to describe the problem and its effects, identifying 'unique outcomes' (those events that stand outside of and would not be predicted by the problem story) concerning the problem, and developing the stories of those unique outcomes.

The role of the therapist

Epston (1999, pp.141-142) writes:

I chose to orient myself around the co-research metaphor both because of its beguiling familiarity and because it radically departed from conventional clinical practice. It brought together the very respectable notion of research with the rather odd idea of the co-production of knowledge by sufferers and therapist ... This has led, and continually leads, to practices to discover a "knowing" in such a fashion that all parties to it could make good use of it. Such knowledges are fiercely and unashamedly pragmatic.

We join Epston in thinking of our work as co-research.

In order to engage in co-research, the therapeutic relationship is extremely important. As co-researchers, we have more questions than answers about therapeutic relationships. The following are some questions we (Freedman & Combs, 2000) ask ourselves so that we can adjust our participation in relationships with couples as therapy goes along:

- Whose voice is being privileged in this relationship? What is the effect of that on the relationship and the work?
- Is anyone showing signs of being closed down, not able to fully enter into the work? If so, what power relations/discourses are contributing to the closing down?
- What are we doing to foster collaboration? Among whom? What is the effect of that collaboration?
- Is this relationship opening up or closing down the experience of agency?
- Does this relationship take into account other relevant people, communities, and cultures? Are we considering the effects of the ripples of this relationship?
- Am I asking whether and how the work is useful, and tailoring it in line with the response?

White (2000) describes a therapist's role in this work as de-centered, but influential. We participate not as representatives of professional knowledge, not as authorities on what constitutes a normal or healthy relationship, but as people with skills in facilitating a co-research project.

We ask questions to help expose gaps or contradictions in the problematic stories that bring couples to therapy and to open space for and thickly describe alternatives. We work to keep the conversation focused and relevant. We facilitate people's ongoing evaluation of the process by asking how the conversation is going for them and responding to their answers. At times, we reflect and offer alternative directions for our conversations.

We work to create a collaborative context. We situate our ideas in our own experience and make our intentions transparent. We encourage couples to ask questions about our questions and comments. When therapy goes well (and

sometimes even when it does not), we all change. We acknowledge to couples how our work and lives are enriched through meeting with them.

Techniques of couple therapy

Listening

When we meet people for the first time, we want to understand the meaning of their stories for *them*. This means turning our backs on 'expert' filters: not listening for chief complaints; not 'gathering' the pertinent-to-us-as-experts bits of diagnostic information interspersed in their stories; not hearing their anecdotes as matrices within which resources are embedded; not listening for surface hints about what the core problem 'really' is; and not comparing the selves they portray in their stories to normative standards.

In the beginning, we ask about non-problematic aspects of the lives of each partner and of their relationship. We are interested in getting to know the members of a couple as people, and in making sure that the problem does not trick us into mistaking them for it. Unless people insist on moving quickly into talking about problems, we spend a while listening to stories about their preferences and pleasures. At some point in this process, people do usually begin to spontaneously tell problem-tinged stories.

As we listen to their stories of the problem, we try to put ourselves in the shoes of the people we work with. We do not assume that we understand the meaning their experience holds for them. We listen and ask. Connecting with people's experience from their perspective orients us to the specific realities that shape, and are shaped by, their personal narratives. This sort of understanding requires that we listen with focused attention, patience, and curiosity while building a relationship of mutual respect and trust.

Deconstructive listening

When we listen 'deconstructively' to people's stories, our listening is guided by the belief that those stories have many possible meanings. The meaning we as listeners make is, more often than not, at least a little different

from the meaning that a speaker has intended. We seek to capitalize on this by valuing the gaps we notice in our understanding and asking people to fill in details, or by listening for ambiguities in meaning and then asking people about those ambiguities.

As people tell their stories, we reflect at intervals our sense of what they are saying and to ask whether the meaning we are making fits with their intended meaning. Even though our intention is to understand people's realities from something very close to their point of view, their realities inevitably begin to shift, at least a little, as they expand their narrative in response to our re-tellings and questions. Our very presence makes their world different. Throughout this process, we endeavour to listen with a thoughtfulness about what new constructions are emerging. We wonder aloud whether they are useful or desirable. We strive to co-create a process in which people experience choice rather than 'settled certainties' (J. Bruner, 1986) with regard to the realities that they inhabit.

Deconstructive questioning

Michael White (1991) defines deconstruction actively and politically:

According to my rather loose definition, deconstruction has to do with procedures that subvert taken-for-granted realities and practices: those so-called 'truths' that are split off from the conditions and the context of their production; those disembodied ways of speaking that hide their biases and prejudices; and those familiar practices of self and of relationship that are subjugating of person's lives. (p.27)

The medical model and other discourses of modern power can lead people to a sense of themselves as 'docile bodies' (Foucault 1977), subject to knowledge and procedures in which they have no active voice. There are subjugating stories of gender, race, class, age, sexual orientation, and religion (to name a few) which are so prevalent and entrenched in our culture that we can get caught up in them without realizing it. We believe it is our responsibility as therapists to cultivate a growing awareness of the dominant (and dominating) stories in our society, and to develop ways of collaboratively examining the effects of those stories when we sense them at work in the lives and relationships of the people who consult with us.

Hare-Mustin (1994) has used the metaphor of a 'mirrored room' to talk about how the only ideas that can come up in therapy are the ideas that the people involved bring into the therapy room:

The therapy room is like a room lined with mirrors. It reflects back only what is voiced within it ... If the therapist and family are unaware of marginalized discourses, such as those associated with members of subordinate gender, race, and class groups, those discourses remain outside the mirrored room. (p.22)

This notion implies that we therapists must continually reflect on the discourses that shape our perceptions of what is possible, both for ourselves and for the people we work with. Such reflection puts us in the position to ask deconstructive questions – questions whose aim is to examine problems in detail and expose discourses that support them.

Externalizing conversations

White (1987, 1988/9, 1989; see also Epston 1993) has introduced the idea that the person is not the problem, but the problem is the problem. 'Externalization' is a practice supported by the belief that a problem is something operating on or having an impact on or pervading a person's life, something separate and different from the person.

We believe that listening with the belief that problems are separate from people has a powerful deconstructive effect. It biases us to interact differently with people than we would if we saw them as intrinsically problematic. It creates a different receiving context for people's stories; one in which we can work to understand their problems without seeing the people themselves as problematic or pathological. In this kind of context, people's stories almost always become less restrictive.

We can expose dominant discourses by asking externalizing questions about contextual influences on the problem. What 'feeds' the problem? What 'starves' it? Who benefits from it? In what settings might the problematic attitude be useful? Which people would proudly advocate for the problem? What groups of people would definitely be opposed to it and its intentions? Questions

such as these invite people to consider how the entire context of their lives affects the problem and vice versa.

As Reiss (1985, p.257) indicates, a family's construction of reality requires support from outside the family: 'Indeed, the family is sustained by, and contributes to, the constructions of the community in which it lives'. Many power imbalances in couples are coached and supported by power imbalances in the larger culture; imbalances that are supported by the dominant stories about class, gender, sexual orientation, race, and so on.

As problems are externalized, it becomes established that, rather than *being* the problem, the person or couple has a *relationship* with the problem. Both members of a couple have the opportunity to describe their relationships with problems in a variety of ways. One of the consequences of an externalizing conversation is that it becomes clear that both partners have relationships with the problems they name.

In externalizing conversations, we are particularly interested to hear descriptions of the effects of problems. Asking about the effects of a problem on both members of a couple, their lives, and their relationships can be particularly helpful. It helps keep the identity of the problem separate from either partner. It mobilizes the members of the couple to join together in opposing the effects of the problem. This is particularly helpful in situations in which the problem has kept them apart. People can stop thinking about themselves or their relationships as inherently problematic, and instead can consider their relationships with problems and whether they want to revise them.

Naming the problem and the project

When people name a problem, they begin the process of externalization. Naming a problem can also be a way of examining a problem and thinking differently about it. It can be poetic and compelling.

We recently saw a young heterosexual couple. The man described the problem as waking him in the middle of the night with a gun to his head. When we asked him to name the problem (which he had been referring to as 'anxiety attacks'), he called it 'the thief' because it was trying to steal his sleep. His partner, who had been scornful of the fear and difficulty sleeping until this point,

could easily relate to the terror of a burglary in the dark of night. She began to appreciate her partner's bravery in facing it alone. She suggested that he wake her so that she could help.

As we ask people to evaluate their relationship to problems, we often begin to hear what they would prefer. We are especially interested in hearing about preferred directions in life. We listen for words in people's descriptions that might serve as good names for projects. We ask questions inviting them to name projects. These questions can be quite direct. For example, let's say a couple has named 'blaming' as a problem. They are recounting an incident in which they could have gotten caught up in blaming, but did not. Julie tells how she finished a major project at work, let Fran know it was finally done, and described a way she would like to celebrate. Fran did not arrange the dinner Julie would have liked that night and did not even come home until late in the evening. In the past, 'blaming' would have convinced Julie that Fran did not really care about the relationship. This time Julie was able to escape 'blaming', ask Fran what her intention was, and believe Fran's answer. In such an instance, we might ask Julie whether asking about Fran's intention instead of assuming she knew it reflected a preferred direction in life – one that blaming could have kept her from seeing. If Julie agreed, we could ask whether this direction represented a project that the couple was interested in. If they were, we could ask what name they would give the project.

Some problems and projects are shared by partners of a couple. Others are of concern to one partner, but not to the other. Witnessing each other's stories and hearing the problems and projects that shape them may be very important to a couple, even though the partners do not have a shared focus.

As the partners in a couple name problems and projects, we keep track of them. The explicit and direct discussion of projects and their contrast to problems can be a vital part of therapy. Such discussion brings forth and thickens the counterplots to problematic stories. It heightens the meaning that is made of particular experiences. Without an identified counterplot, experiences that lie outside the problem story may go unnoticed or seem trivial. With a counterplot, people can perceive shape and meaning in their non-problematic experiences. For example, once the partners in a couple have agreed on 'listening more with our hopes and less with our fears' as a shared project, any conversation they have can be plotted into the narrative of how hopes and fears influence their listening.

Until such a project is explicitly discussed and agreed upon, conversations may be given many different meanings or no meaning at all.

We keep projects present in the therapy through short names or phrases like 'growing intimacy', 'having a voice', or 'standing against violence'. These names often shift as the therapy progresses, and it is a therapist's job to keep up with the couple's changes in language and conceptualization. We seek personal, evocative, and poetic names for problems and projects. Throughout therapy, we ask questions that invite people to shape their perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and actions into stories according to the plots and counterplots they identify as meaningful for their lives.

Unique outcomes

Our entryway for inviting people to tell and live new stories is through 'unique outcomes'. A unique outcome, as noted earlier, is any event that would not have been predicted in light of a problem-saturated story. A unique outcome may be a plan, action, feeling, statement, desire, dream, thought, belief, ability, or commitment (Morgan 2000). Unique outcomes constitute openings that, through questions and reflective discussion, can be developed into new stories.

Sometimes couples offer unique outcomes quite directly. For example, someone describing a problem may say, 'It's not always like that', and go on to describe a unique outcome. It is not unusual, as couples become involved in the re-authoring process, for them to save up new unique outcomes to tell their therapist. At other times, unique outcomes are so buried in people's descriptions of their problematic stories that it is important to listen very carefully if we are not to miss them. For example, if one partner says, 'Once in a while I get through to him, but usually ...' and then proceeds to tell a problematic story, if we are listening closely, we can be curious about the 'once in a while' part, just as we would be curious about the answers to direct unique outcome questions.

Sometimes we notice events that, given the problematic story, we would not have predicted: partners who believe they have communication problems eloquently describing the problem, or one partner showing up on time to meet the other for therapy even though the problematic story is one of irresponsibility.

Most often, openings develop 'spontaneously' in ways like those we have been describing, as we listen deconstructively and ask couples about the effects of

problems on their lives and relationships. If openings do not develop spontaneously, we can inquire more directly about their existence. When we are working with an externalized problem, a straightforward way of looking for openings is to ask about the influence of one or both partners on the life of the problem. That is, we ask questions such as these: 'Has there ever been a time when the problem tried to get the upper hand, but you were able to resist its influence?' or 'Have you ever been able to escape the problem for even a few minutes?' or 'Is the problem *always* with you?' When questions of this sort follow a detailed inquiry into the effects of the problem on the person or couple, people can usually find instances in which they were able to elude the problem's influence. Each such instance is a potential opening onto an alternative life narrative.

Developing stories from unique outcomes

Once we have agreed upon a preferred opening that seems relevant and interesting to one or both partners of a couple, we invite them to develop it into an alternative story. We do not have a formula to follow in this process, but we do keep in mind that stories involve events organized by plot through time in particular contexts, and that they usually include more than one person. A big part of what lets new stories make a difference in people's lives is that, in telling them to other people, a performance of meaning occurs. We work to make the therapy conversation a ritual space in which the performance of meaning can occur. Ideally, people relive the events as they tell them. We can facilitate this by asking questions to develop a story rich in detail and meaning.

White (White & Epston 1990), following Bruner (1986), speaks of the 'dual landscapes' of *action* and *consciousness* (or, in his more recent work, *identity*). He suggests that the stories constituting people's lives unfold in both these landscapes, and that it can be helpful for therapists to inquire about both. Let us look first at the landscape of action.

The landscape of action includes *detail* in *multiple modalities* involving the viewpoints of *multiple characters* in a particular *scene or setting*. It also includes the action itself. What happened, in what sequence, involving which characters?

Let us take the very simple example of Jack and Lisa at an initial therapy appointment, saying that their relationship has been deteriorating for years and

that this is the first time they have sought out therapy. We might wonder whether simply deciding and following through to come to therapy is a unique outcome. The following are some questions we might ask:

- *Who actually made the suggestion that you come to therapy?*
- *What was the look on Jack's face when you suggested it? Did the look change as you talked more?*
- *Jack, what did you think when Lisa first made the suggestion? How did that change for you as you talked?*
- *Were there conversations or interactions between the two of you that prompted you to bring this up, Lisa? Was there something Jack said?*
- *Jack, do you remember that? What were you thinking that got you to say that?*
- *Who would be most pleased that you have taken this step? What would they say about it?*

In the landscape of action, we are interested in constructing an 'agentive self' with people. That is, we ask questions with an eye to enhancing those aspects of the emerging story that support 'personal agency' (Adams-Westcott, Dafforn, & Sterne 1993). The very act of re-authoring requires and demonstrates personal agency, and most people experience that in this work. We go a step further in making personal agency apparent by asking, in a variety of ways, how people have accomplished what they have.

In the example above, we might ask the following questions for this purpose:

- *Given the hopelessness you described, Lisa, what did you draw on in deciding to do something in the face of it?*
- *Were you preparing somehow to take this step? What went into that preparation?*
- *Jack, do you think that Lisa knew that you would be willing to come? How did you get past the hopelessness to agree on doing something so foreign?*

We think about the *shape* of a story as it comes forth: What happened before the unique outcome? How smoothly did things unfold? Were there false starts involved? What did this particular episode lead to? In this regard, we are especially interested to know whether there is a ‘turning point’, a place where the story changes for the good. Although ‘turning point’ is not a fitting metaphor for everyone in every situation, when it is, it distinguishes a significant event that we can plot in time. We believe it is useful to focus special attention on this sort of event, bringing forth even more shape and detail, perhaps even treating it as a story within a story.

No matter how vivid a story is in the landscape of action, if it is to have *meaning*, it must also be developed in the landscape of identity. By ‘the landscape of identity’, we refer to that imaginary territory in which people plot the meanings, desires, intentions, beliefs, commitments, motivations, values, and the like that relate to their experience in the landscape of action. In other words, in the landscape of identity, people reflect on the implications of experiences storied in the landscape of action.

In order to explore the landscape of identity, we ask what we (Freedman & Combs 1993) call ‘meaning questions’. These are questions that invite people to step back from the landscape of action and reflect on the wishes, motivations, values, beliefs, learning, implications, and so forth that lead to and flow from the actions they have recounted. For example, we may ask:

- *What do you think it says about your relationship that you agreed to come together to therapy?*
- *Does it characterize the way the two of you do things to have secret hope in the face of hopelessness?*

In co-authoring stories, we move between the landscape of action and the landscape of identity, weaving the two back and forth again and again.

Time: Developing a 'history of the present' and extending the story into the future

White & Epston (1990) writes:

Social scientists became interested in the text analogy following observations that, although a piece of behavior occurs in time in such a way that it no longer exists in the present by the time it is attended to, the meaning that is inscribed into the behavior survives across time ... In striving to make sense of life, persons face the task of arranging their experiences of events in sequences across time in such a way as to arrive at a coherent account of themselves and the world around them. (p.9)

In rendering such accounts, once a preferred event has been identified, we want to link that event to other preferred events across time; so that their meanings survive, and so that the events and their meanings can thicken a person's or couple's narrative in preferred ways. Therefore, once a preferred event is identified and storied, we ask questions to link it to other past events and develop the story of those events. Here are some examples of questions that might identify such events:

- *When you think back, what events come to mind that you might be building on that reflect other times when you could have been pulled apart, but that you came together as a couple?*
- *If we were to interview friends who have known you throughout your relationship, who might have predicted that the two of you would have been able to accomplish this? What memories might they share with us that would have led them to predict this?*

We can also ask how the emerging new story influences a person's ideas about the future. As people free more and more of their pasts from the grip of problem-dominated stories, they are able to envision, expect, and plan toward less problematic futures. We might ask:

- *We have just been talking about an accomplishment and several events in the past that paved the way for this accomplishment. If you think of these events as creating a kind of direction in your lives, what do you think will be the next step?*

- *You have learned some things about each other that have changed your view of each other and of the relationship. If you keep this new view in your hearts, how do you think the future might be different?*

Reflecting

Including time and space for reflection in therapy promotes experience of experience, and it is through the experience of reflecting on our experience that we make meaning of it. While the practice of reflection may occur even when we do not formally encourage it, such ‘natural’ reflection does not necessarily focus on the preferred experiences or new narratives that are developing in therapeutic conversations.

In our discussion of ‘telling and witnessing’, we have outlined possible reflecting structures: one partner reflecting on the other’s story, the therapist reflecting, and a reflecting team or outsider witness group reflecting. In this section, we describe how we focus reflecting conversations.

Stories need listeners as well as tellers. It is through the interpersonal, societal practice of telling and re-telling of stories that they take on enough substance to change people’s lives. When we ask one partner to witness the other’s story, we hope that he or she will hear it in a new way. We invite reflections so that each partner can give voice to what he or she witnesses. We ask general questions such as the following:

- *What was it like to hear what Brad was saying?*
- *What thoughts were you having while Linda was talking?*

And we ask questions that more directly invite people to respond to unique outcomes and preferred directions that they might have heard in our conversation with their partners. The following are examples:

- *Were you surprised when Raoul described you as taking the time to let others know you care?*
- *What did it mean to you to hear Chantal say how important the relationship is to her?*

We then make space for the original teller to respond to his or her partner's reflections.

Whenever possible, we use reflecting teams made up of therapists (Andersen 1987), or outsider-witness groups (White 1997) made up of people asked to participate because of some type of insider knowledge to increase the audience for tellings and re-tellings. For example, if we are working with a couple struggling with infertility, we might ask other couples who have been through infertility struggles to join the group, with the couple's permission. When we have a reflecting team or an outsider-witness group we structure it in a very particular way that includes four parts (Cohen, Combs, DeLaurenti, DeLaurenti, Freedman, Larimer & Shulman 1998; White 1995).

In the first part, the therapist interviews the couple while the outsider-witness group observes the interview from behind a one-way mirror (or at a bit of a distance). In the second part, the group switches places with the couple and the therapist. The couple and therapist listen as the group members have a conversation, raising questions and commenting about what they have watched. In the third part, the couple and therapist switch back to their original places, and the couple responds to the reflections as the group observes. In the fourth part, everyone meets together for the purpose of deconstructing the interview or making it transparent. The therapist and outsider-witness group members respond to questions anyone has about their questions, purposes, and the directions they pursued in the interview.

In the second part of the interview, if an outsider-witness group or a reflecting team with little experience is reflecting, the therapist may ask questions drawing out team members, keeping the focus on what moved team members and on possible preferred directions that emerged during the interview. We ask team members to situate their reflections in their own experience, to acknowledge the trust the members of the couple are showing in opening their lives to the presence of others, and to comment on the difference being part of the conversation makes to their own lives.

Documenting and circulating new stories

Because we believe that the new stories that emerge in therapy become transformative as they are enacted outside the therapy room, we are interested in

documenting and circulating the new stories (White & Epston 1990). We take notes in therapy that document new stories as they develop. We often refer back to these notes and read them aloud. When couples take stands or achieve new things or reach turning points, we may create a document or certificate together that formalizes this newly distinguished event in their story. We often make videotapes for their library in which they reflect on how far they have come. We may make tapes or documents about what they have learned that can be used by others facing similar problems (White & Epston 1990). Through this kind of exchange, couples can band together with others in virtual leagues.

We sometimes write letters between therapy meetings. In these letters, we reflect on unique outcomes and ask questions that we have not asked in the therapy conversation. We hope that this will thicken and extend the knowledge that has begun to emerge there. We sometimes generate formal documents that list important elements of new narratives (Freedman & Combs 1997). To encourage the circulation of this knowledge, we invite people to share these documents with other people in their lives.

Curative factors in couple therapy/mechanisms of change

We believe that we all live our lives through stories – the stories we tell and the stories others tell about us. Those stories carry the meaning of our lives; they organize the way we experience our relationships, our identities, and the possibilities our lives hold. We think that people's experience of the meaning of their lives and relationships changes through changes in their life narratives. As their narratives change, what they do and what they perceive change as well. We facilitate this process by asking questions to highlight unstoried events, to encourage meaning making around those events, and then to tie the meaning to actions and contexts.

People's life narratives are condensations and abstractions – they contain only a small portion of the events and circumstances of their lives. Of the countless events that occur each day, only a few are storied and given meaning. When couples come to therapy, their accounts of their relationships are generally problematic and limited. This has to do, at least in part, with larger cultural stories or discourses, which support particular sets of stories and meanings and not others.

We approach therapy as an experiential process through which people reclaim, relive, and make meaning of stories that add new substance and possibilities to their lives. In our work with couples, it is also a process in which partners witness each other storying alternative events.

One of us recently had an experience with someone in therapy that illustrates the way lives change when narratives change. Rhonda, a 42-year-old woman, had been sued for malpractice some 15 years previously. Although the suit was settled out of court, there was considerable publicity and scandal. After that lawsuit, Rhonda's experience at first was that she felt devastated. As time passed, she felt numb. Her life was on hold. Although she did not find her relationship with Greg to be satisfying, she stayed in it. She stayed in her job. Life went on, but she did not. She missed the years during which she could have made the choice to have children.

After 13 years, she started therapy and began to reclaim her life. She began to consider her career and whether she would like to interview for other jobs. She ended the relationship with Greg and became involved in what she described as the best relationship of her life; with Jeff.

One day Jeff said, 'I can't believe you stayed in that relationship with Greg for so long. Why did you do it?' Rhonda said that she did not know, and they became involved in talking about other things. Two days later, Jeff apologized profusely to Rhonda, saying that he had been really thoughtless in asking that question about Greg. He had somehow forgotten about the whole lawsuit and how it had put her life on hold. Rhonda burst into gales of laughter and told him that she had forgotten too!

She, of course, knew that it had happened, but it was no longer the central story of her life. Other stories had been told, retold, witnessed, documented, and, more importantly, re-experienced. The thicker version of Rhonda's narrative supported new actions and possibilities: a new relationship, new ways of thinking about work, and many smaller changes. The way Rhonda experienced her life had changed through a re-storying of events. Her immersion in the alternative stories supported new relationships and other possibilities.

Another way of describing our ideas about change is to say that in successful therapy new meanings are performed. 'Performance of meaning' is a concept that narrative therapists have borrowed from poststructural anthropology, particularly from the work of Barbara Myerhoff (1982, 1986),

who gave numerous examples of how, instead of being an innate quality, meaning arises through performance. Unless a story is told and re-told; circulated, written down, acted out, sung, etc., it has no lasting meaning. In the light of this notion, the new strands of story that emerge in response to our questions must be circulated and put into action before they can become meaningful.

When Jeff apologized to Rhonda for his memory lapse, he was performing meaning around the lapse. When Rhonda realized that she too had lost track of those 13 painful years, she added another layer of meaning to Jeff's. Rhonda's re-telling of the incident in therapy was a big performance of meaning, and in that performance, her new, joyous relationship with Jeff became appreciably more real and memorable.

We believe that change occurs through the performance of meaning that takes place in waves of telling and re-telling such as these.

Treatment applicability

For us, the most important aspect of narrative therapy is the worldview. Narrative practices flow from a narrative/poststructuralist worldview. Once we begin to see problems as separate from people and to situate problems in socio-cultural discourses, we no longer see people in ways that support making traditional, expert, individual diagnoses. Once we enter into ideas that support collaboration, we no longer experience ourselves as the possessors of expert knowledge about what would be most helpful to people. Instead, we begin to appreciate the insider knowledge that people acquire through struggling with particular problems in particular contexts. The narrative worldview leads to a shift in perception. We do not stand outside our work and assess it by scientific criteria. Instead, we ask people in an ongoing way whether the therapy is helpful and how it is helpful.

If a member of a couple wonders whether medication might be helpful, or requests a formal assessment of a particular problem, we talk about it and, if the couple chooses, we make a referral to someone who might collaboratively facilitate a decision about medication, diagnosis, or the like. We do not consider medication or testing a part of narrative therapy, but we support people in exploring whatever kind of approach they think might be helpful.

We have found that the narrative approach has general applicability. Although the length, intensity, and specific outcome of therapy vary from problem to problem and from context to context, the approach is as effective for couples seeking pre-marital counseling as it is for couples struggling to reclaim their relationship from violence and abuse.

However, our experience is that some couples prefer a different kind of therapy relationship than we offer. Some people are seeking instruction or expert advice. Others are more interested in exploring their past histories to 'find out' why they are in the situations they find themselves in. We ask people regularly how the therapy is going for them, and we are open and willing to refer couples if they are seeking a different kind of therapy relationship.

At the same time, we have discovered that most couples coming to therapy are not as concerned about how the therapy relationship is structured as they are about whether their relationship improves. Because popular notions of therapy include descriptions such as 'getting to the root of the problem', they may initially use words that would seem to indicate a preference for a different kind of therapy relationship. With further conversation, we have found that most couples are simply interested in improving their relationships.

Case illustration

Since one of us (JF) was the therapist working with Mark and Victoria, we have written this section primarily in her voice, from her point of view. Throughout the description of the therapy we have also offered commentary in italics to help readers relate the clinical illustration to the first part of this chapter.

Victoria was referred by a colleague of mine who was her neighbor. On the phone, she told me that she and her husband had been experiencing problems for some time and that they couldn't work them out on their own.

We usually begin therapy with a new couple by getting to know each member before we get to know the problem. Otherwise, the problem might color our view

of them and keep us from seeing possibilities for them outside of the problem. We hope that starting this way helps people feel free to talk about aspects of their relationship and experience that they like, not just those that are problematic.

Since I had spoken with Victoria on the phone, I began the meeting by talking with Mark. He told me that he was 41 years old and that he lived in a small city in Wisconsin, about an hour and a half away, where he held a job as a supervisor in a manufacturing plant. He had an 18-year-old daughter by a previous marriage, whom he did not see as often as he would like. She seemed to initiate visits only when she wanted money. Mark had been divorced for 13 years and married to Victoria for 8. He enjoyed playing cards, riding a motorcycle, and doing projects around his house.

Victoria told me that she was 40 years old, an artist, and a professor in a fine arts program. She loved going to galleries, seeing films and traveling. For the last three years, because of her work teaching, she had lived separately from Mark, who had to stay in Wisconsin for his work. Before Victoria found her teaching post, the couple had lived together in Wisconsin.

The tone of this early part of the interview was highly interactive. Jill did not listen to what Mark and Victoria said as bits of 'information' that she could use to form an assessment. Instead, she was interested in getting to know them as people. She also wanted to present herself as a person, rather than as a representative of professional expertise. She hoped this would contribute to reducing the hierarchy and establishing a collaborative relationship.

After hearing a bit from the couple, I asked whether they would like to ask me any questions.

Jill's intention in asking was to undermine the hierarchy a bit and to create an opportunity for transparency. We want couples to know that we will welcome their questions throughout therapy.

Mark had no questions right then, but Victoria was interested in knowing what I liked to read. We talked a few minutes about books and authors.

We are interested in creating a context in which people's stories can be spoken and heard. In our experience, by the time couples get to therapy, the interweaving stories of their problems tend to follow a well-rehearsed choreography. Blame and defensiveness often overshadow any hopes and constructive intentions either party has for the relationship. We want to facilitate something different from the outset. For that purpose, during much of the therapy (this varies for different couples) we speak to one person at a time, with the other partner in the position of witnessing his or her story. As we have previously described, at particular points we turn to the partner and ask for reflections. Sometimes we explain the structure, saying something like this: 'I am going to talk with Mark for a few minutes and ask you to just listen. After we talk for a bit, you'll get a chance to respond to what you've heard. Then we'll switch and I'll talk with you for a while. Will that be OK?' If either partner seems dubious or uncertain about this idea, we will explain that when one person describes an irksome or scary difficulty, the other often feels put on the spot to point out mistakes or counter with a different description. Rather than really listening to the partner's story, the listener composes a rebuttal while the partner is talking. We would like to offer a context where people can really hear their partners, knowing that each person will have an opportunity to tell his or her story and have it heard.

Once we know a bit about each partner, we want to hear and understand the couple's stories of what is problematic. We collaborate with the couple in naming the problem or problems and ask questions to begin deconstructing those problems. We also listen for openings to new, preferred stories.

Jill began a discussion of the problem with Mark because of her awareness that women often bear responsibility for the wellbeing of relationships. Since Victoria had made the appointment and was most active in the early conversation, Jill wanted to offer Mark the possibility of taking active responsibility for the well-being of the relationship.

I moved into a witnessing structure casually, simply speaking directly to Mark and making eye contact primarily with him while Victoria listened. I asked Mark to tell me about what brought the couple to therapy. He spoke rather hesitantly about 'things deteriorating': Victoria was coming home to Wisconsin less, and he was coming to Chicago more; she was always wanting to talk, and

he was quiet; she was curious and motivated, and he was trying to be more active and enthusiastic but feeling as if he never quite made it. I wondered what the effects of these differences were. (*'Differences' was the name Jill heard Mark using for what was problematic.*) In our ensuing discussion he created a list of effects: frustration, anger, and defensiveness, which got him to 'clam up'.

When I asked Victoria what she was thinking while Mark talked (*notice the beginning of the telling and reflecting rhythm*), she said that she had been unhappy for a couple of years, but she hadn't realized that he had been too. In response to my questions inviting her evaluation, she said that this was good to realize because at least they were together in their experience.

Later in the conversation, Victoria said that she felt as if she had been marking time. She declared that she wanted someone to go forward with her to share knowledge and challenge her – somebody who knew things she did not and could open doors for her. She ended by stating, 'This relationship has been the safe harbor, but I want a shift to rockier waters'.

In Mark's reflections, he said that he could understand how Victoria valued excitement. He said that he valued it too. What was important for him was to share both exciting and quiet times with someone else, and to be with someone who enjoyed the same things he did. When I asked how much of that he already got from this relationship, he said 50-60%. He wondered whether it might help their relationship if, instead of relying on each other, they each found friends to join them in activities that did not interest the other.

Victoria broke into the conversation and wailed, 'What can we be intimate about, then?'

As the conversation continued, they tentatively agreed on naming the problems 'distance' and 'frustration'. (*In this instance, Mark and Victoria named shared problems. In other situations, each partner may name a different problem. We do not want people to name shared problems unless that fits their experience.*) Over the remainder of the first interview, and during the second, we mapped the effects of distance and frustration.

For Victoria, although she had not experienced herself as looking for other men, the distance and frustration had contributed to what she called 'two and a half relationships' with other men. The half relationship involved frequent meetings and conversations, but was not sexual, as the other two had been. Distance had given her room to see Mark in a different, less favorable light and

to have more independent dreams. Seeing him in this new light led her to decide that she did not respect some things about him: he did not have 'enough' education, he did not discuss things enough, and reading was a chore for him. Seeing Mark in this way created turmoil for Victoria. She could no longer see the relationship fitting with her larger goals, and she worried that Mark was no longer getting enough from it either.

Mark also agreed that distance and frustration had led Victoria to become involved in other relationships and contributed to their relationship 'breaking down'. When we unpacked what Mark meant by the relationship 'breaking down', we came up with this list:

- mistrust and anger,
- impatience and sometimes disgust on Victoria's part when they were together,
- Mark's experience of not being able to do anything right.

The effects of distance and frustration were taking a toll on Mark's and Victoria's relationships with themselves. Victoria felt horrible both about the pain she was causing Mark and about how she was not always being honest with herself. Mark found himself more and more involved with self-degradation.

Once we had unpacked some of the effects of distance and frustration, I asked about the partners' evaluation of these effects. I wondered whether they wanted to continue in their current relationship with the effects. I asked questions about each effect, such as: 'What is it like to be subjected to self-degradation? Is turmoil something that you want for your life. Why or why not?'

Early in this process, Mark suggested that some background information might be helpful. He told me that when he and Victoria married, they vowed to give each other room to grow and promised to help each other. He had reminded himself of this when Victoria first became interested in another man. For him, the problem was not other relationships per se, but the fact that he felt pushed away while they were going on. Mistrust and anger were problematic, he said, because he would like Victoria and himself to be easy with each other and to be friends again. He could be OK with the amount of time apart if he felt respected, appreciated, cared about, and connected. He did not want disgust and self-degradation to influence his life and relationship. In fact, Mark took a firm stand

against disgust and self-degradation, saying that he would like to be together with Victoria, but not if that meant he also had to live with disgust and self-degradation.

When her turn came, Victoria said that the lack of respect she experienced in relation to Mark was not something that she wanted. It created turmoil in her life, and what she wanted instead was to be at peace in the relationship. She did not want peace at any cost. She wanted to step out and be bigger in what she did and what she dreamed. She thought that some of the impatience had to do with not knowing how to step out. As she considered it more, she realized that the impatience did not really serve her well. She thought that there was room to include Mark in her dreams and she realized that impatience stood in the way of that. She said that she would like to talk with Mark about how he might be included in her dreams.

I made note of her wish and of Mark's 50-60% satisfaction. They were potential unique outcomes that I wanted to come back to and ask more about, but first I asked about lack of respect and how it influenced Victoria's experience of Mark. She had mentioned 'things about him' (not having a college education, not discussing things as much as she would like, and finding reading a chore) as contributing to the lack of respect. I asked what those things meant to her, and Victoria said: 'The first thing that came to mind was that he is not very intelligent, but I know he is intelligent'. When I asked how she knew he was intelligent, she described how Mark had advised her in setting up her studio and creating a marketing plan for her work. He did not simply encourage her; he had challenged her in ways that had been quite helpful. She credited him with much of the success she had experienced in the business aspect of her work. She appreciated how intelligently he helped her map out a plan. He did not make assumptions, was very deliberate in setting things in order, and came up with creative ideas.

In the following conversation, Jill asked questions that helped Victoria unmask some of the discourses that tricked her into a problematic view of Mark.

I wondered, given everything she had just said, how Victoria could have been tricked into doubting Mark's intelligence. She thought it odd as well. When I asked who might think that not having a college education, not discussing

things, and not enjoying reading indicated a lack of intelligence, she began to wonder about how teaching in a university had influenced her. We talked about different values in the university and in what Victoria called 'the everyday world'. She said that this discussion really clarified some things for her. When she and Mark first got together, she was not part of the university. She was an artist barely making it in a little town in Wisconsin. And in her situation there, she had not experienced the same feelings about Mark's education and reading habits.

When I turned to him, Mark agreed that things had been different when Victoria lived in Wisconsin. He added that the feelings of disgust seemed to be most apparent after going to the movies. Victoria and her Chicago friends had a way of discussing movies that was not meaningful to Mark. He did not understand why discussing movies seemed so important to Victoria. He now wondered if this discussion thing was part of the university environment. (*Mark was now tracing the feelings of disgust to 'the university environment', not to himself or Victoria.*)

Victoria nodded in agreement, but added that she enjoyed the process of critique. Just as she was beginning to declare that she did not want the university dictating her perceptions, Mark interrupted.

'You know I'm going to college', he said. I learned that, at Victoria's suggestion, he had decided to pursue labor studies. What Victoria did not know until now was that he was enjoying it. 'I like being opened up and seeing new things and meeting new people', he said.

When I asked Victoria what it was like to hear about Mark's experience, she said that she felt better just knowing about it. She also appreciated the way he was standing up for himself. 'It is pretty intelligent!' she said.

I asked whether Mark's going to college meant that he, too, would take on university values. Mark said that he preferred to have his own values. Victoria agreed, saying that his approach to school was one she could respect.

In the first two meetings, Jill asked questions that helped Victoria and Mark name and map the effects of some of the problems that were undermining their relationship. Victoria and Mark evaluated the problems and stated their preferences for how to relate to the problems. Jill's questions helped Mark and Victoria expose the role that social class (in the form of 'university values')

played in shaping the meanings they had made about some of their differences. Several unique outcomes – things that would not be predicted by the problematic story – had come to light, but Jill, Mark, and Victoria had not yet developed a story to support any of these.

At our third meeting, because colleagues were visiting from out of town, we were able to have a reflecting team. When I asked Victoria and Mark, they were open to the experience and also gave permission to make a videotape that they could keep to review later.

After Victoria and Mark had been introduced to the team members, I approached the conversation with curiosity about whether any of the unique outcomes I had previously noted had captured their imaginations. I started the interview by reading my notes aloud, reviewing our conversations, and asking how things had gone since we last met.

Victoria said that she had been thinking about dreams since the last meeting. She had mentioned her dreams the last time and wondered how Mark would fit into them, but what she had realized since our conversation was that she did not know what his dreams were. She wanted to hear his dreams.

Mark was reluctant to talk about his dreams. When I asked questions to unpack his reluctance, he named fear and insecurity as problems, saying they kept him from being able to hold his own in what he called ‘these kinds of discussions that Victoria always wants to have’. As we talked more, he said that he just did not have the dreams of huge accomplishment and artistic achievement that Victoria did. Instead, he looked forward to each weekend when he would do something like make shelves for the family room. After he described the differences a bit more, I referred back to our conversation about the difference in university values and everyday values. I wondered whether this was another example of that difference. He thought it was. I asked what he thought the difference talked him into. ‘Insecurity’, he said. ‘Defensiveness’.

Just as I was about to ask questions about the effects of fear, insecurity, and defensiveness, Mark told me that things are not always that way. He began to describe an experience he had at fantasy baseball camp. I had never heard of fantasy baseball camp, so I asked him to tell me about it. He explained that fantasy baseball camp was a place where, for a fee, ordinary guys could spend a week playing baseball with major league players in a major league stadium.

Victoria had accompanied Mark on his week in the big leagues. She described seeing his skin glow and his eyes shine as he savored playing and trying to accomplish something. They spent the greater part of the hour reliving detailed stories of that time, in which fear and insecurity could have stopped him, but instead he triumphed. For Victoria, remembering these experiences was ‘fantastic’. I asked when else she had appreciated and enjoyed Mark the way she did at fantasy baseball camp. She told me about a camping trip they had gone on with his daughter, early in their relationship. Everything had gone wrong. Victoria found herself burrowing miserably into the tent, shrinking from the rain and mud puddles outside, and wishing she were anywhere but there. Then Mark began dancing and singing in the rain with Emily, his daughter. He kept calling out to Victoria until she joined them. This was now her most treasured memory of camping.

I asked whether it was more important for Mark to stay in touch with this version of himself or for Victoria to be in touch with it. It turned out that it was important for both of them. For Victoria, it meant that she could take Mark to a cocktail party or a movie with her colleagues without worrying that he would have nothing to contribute. It helped her see how he could fit in; it even reminded her of times in the past when he had already fit in. She described two incidents that the ‘university values’ (*classism-tinged*) perception of Mark had kept her from remembering. For Mark, the ‘fantasy baseball camp’ version of himself meant he could ‘keep on keeping on’ instead of getting bogged down in insecurity.

When we switched places, the team members reflected on different aspects of the conversation. Here I summarize only the comments that Mark and Victoria chose to respond to. One team member noted that Mark said he did not know how to talk about his dreams, yet he brought up fantasy baseball camp. She couldn’t imagine a more vivid way to talk about dreams. Another member wondered how someone who only had small dreams was able to make such a grand dream – fantasy baseball camp – come true. A third comment had to do with singing and dancing in the rain. The team member who commented wondered if that event had to do with Mark’s not allowing his dreams to get rained out.

Mark and Victoria were moved by the comments of the reflecting team. They came back into the room and told more stories about fantasy baseball camp

and how Mark had decided to go there. If 'university values' was the problem, I wondered, would 'dreams' have something to do with a project they could pursue in the face of that problem? They said it would, and named the project 'living our dreams'.

Victoria thought back again to the camping experience and realized that Mark had actively coaxed her out of the tent so that she could join in. She thought she had not yet done as much to pave the way for him. Victoria ended by saying that it was more usual for her to be the center of attention. The team had talked about Mark for the most part. She wondered if this was a sign that he was coming forward and growing. 'That would certainly have to do with my dream', she said.

In this interview, Mark and Victoria named a project. They began developing an alternative story and a 'history of the present'. Fortuitously, this new story had a reflecting audience of several people, and it was documented on videotape.

The 'fantasy baseball camp' interview seemed to be a turning point in the relationship. Victoria opened the fourth meeting by talking about the 'new Mark' who now clearly cared about the relationship. She described him as being more inquisitive and outgoing.

When I turned to Mark, he said that he experienced himself as a better listener. He thought that others around him noticed the change as well. They almost had to have noticed, because he had been speaking his thoughts aloud. He was surprised to discover that sharing his thoughts made him feel better. He said that these changes were possible because he realized he had something to say and to contribute. As we developed the story of this realization, Mark began to wonder whether the reflecting team had helped him reach it. He spoke about how moving it was to feel appreciated by strangers who heard him talking about his life. Through their eyes, he had a greater appreciation of himself. Just realizing that he could make a contribution made him more aware of what went on around him. He now knew that he had abilities to do lots of things.

We have heard this kind of response to a reflecting team many times. These responses inspire us to work in teams whenever we can.

After drawing Mark out about the meaning of the new events, I turned to Victoria who had been witnessing the elaboration of the new story. When I asked her what stood out in my conversation with Mark, she said that she always knew Mark had this in him. While he was speaking, she kept remembering examples of his enthusiasm for doing new things. She thought they had been stuck for a long time on a plateau, but now they were climbing the next mountain.

The usefulness of the reflecting position stands out here. In hearing Mark speak to Jill, Victoria reviewed the past, remembering other times that fit her view of 'the new Mark'. As Mark heard Victoria proclaim their progress as a couple, it couldn't help taking on substance. The stories of the new Mark became more real, more solid, and more memorable. Jill now asked some questions with the intention of helping the new stories continue to grow.

Mark said that it would support his reclaimed view of himself to associate with people more, whether Victoria was there or not. He was learning that he was a stronger person, but even for a strong person, being alone can foster insecurity.

I referred back to the beginning of the conversation and said to Victoria that she had named the changes we were discussing 'the new Mark'. I did not want to discount Mark's changes, but I did notice that at least some of what she was calling 'new' had strong roots in the past. I asked whether the new Mark had something to do with 'the new Victoria' or 'the new relationship'.

Victoria nodded and said that she had changed the way she was looking at things, and that doing so made for different possibilities in their relationship. She was now seeing beyond university values.

I wondered if during the times Victoria was in Chicago teaching, surrounded by the academic community, university values might take over again and persuade her that Mark did not fit her dreams. Victoria could see how that might be possible, so she decided to make more of an effort to include Mark in her life in the city – both in terms of inviting friends and colleagues to be with them when he was there, and talking more with him about her activities and interests at the university. Part of living their dreams for Victoria had to do with including Mark more in her life.

Mark thought he could go along with Victoria's vision, but he warned that

it would be important for her to be more part of his life in Wisconsin as well.

Between meetings, during a weekend in Wisconsin, Victoria asked Mark to read a short story she had written. Writing was not her usual medium for art, so she thought that she might be more open to Mark's ideas than she would have been with much of her art. He returned the short story to her by fax, two days after she left, having corrected the grammar.

Victoria recounted this incident during the fifth therapy meeting. She hadn't talked with Mark about her reaction to his corrections, because it seemed so closely related to what they were working on in therapy that she thought it best to wait. I asked her if her reaction would be different, depending on whether it came from university values or from living their dreams. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and said that yes, it was different. I asked her which reaction she preferred. She chose the one that came from including Mark in her dreams. *(Note the change in language from 'living their dreams' to 'including Mark more in her dreams'. We find that people name their problems and projects fluidly. It is important for therapists to flow along with them.)* If she kept that desire in her heart, the corrections meant that he was interested in what she did and had found a way he could contribute comfortably. I asked if there might have been other times when Mark's response to Victoria's art would have had different meaning if she had focused on her desire to include Mark in her dreams. She told three stories of incidents that now looked different. One of them had to do with a show of her work. Mark walked through the gallery with her, naming his thoughts about what the models had been for each piece. Victoria now saw that Mark was naming her inspirations and finding connections between their life and her work. University values had created an expectation of a more intellectual critique, which had kept her from seeing Mark's loving intentions at the time.

When I asked Mark what it was like to hear what Victoria saw when she followed the desire to include him in her dreams, he said it was a tremendous relief. In the past, he had felt tested when she asked him to look at her work or even to talk about a movie. He thought there was a right answer that she knew and he did not. This difference put them on unequal footing, as though she was the tester and he the student. The effect of this experience was that he felt cornered. Knowing that he did not know the right answer, his first response was to give no answer, this inevitably led to frustration for Victoria, which in turn

increased his feeling of being trapped. I asked him what was different now. He said that if Victoria suspended the university values in favor of including him in her dreams, then there would not be a right answer; anything he said would mean that he was participating in her life.

Victoria agreed and said that she felt hopeful.

Mark said that this turn of events would lessen his fear. He said he already was feeling less frightened at work, and described an incident in which he stood up for himself because he was tired of being pushed around.

For Victoria, the incident at work showed that Mark was trusting his intelligence and his intuition. She saw him showing increased confidence, and she thought that as this continued it would help her know how much he had to contribute. She said that she was proud and happy that Mark was examining his life and taking some stands. She was distressed by the tester–student analogy. I asked whether she could understand where it came from. She could, and was wondering if she had invested more of herself in university values than in art. She preferred art and thought that keeping Mark more present in her art and life would help keep the balance the way she wanted it.

In this interview, power relations and class discourses were exposed in a very down-to-earth and relevant way. The metaphors of unequal footing and the tester–student relationship emerged from the conversation and contributed to the deconstruction of university values. These ideas were not introduced by Jill, but Victoria and Mark had not made these distinctions until Jill asked questions to locate their problems in the discourses of their local cultures. Through this deconstruction, Victoria and Mark were able to see possibilities that they could not see before. These possibilities offered new choices and paved the way for them to re-author their relationship, instead of allowing class differences to write its story.

At the sixth meeting, Mark and Victoria both described important ways that the relationship had moved forward. The two had talked more collaboratively about Victoria's work. They agreed that they had truly exchanged opinions. They had negotiated resolutions to disagreements without anger. Mark had brought a more positive attitude about himself to this, less influenced by fear and self-degradation. The new attitude allowed him to put his opinions forward

strongly, without fear, and to listen non-defensively to Victoria's responses. He also had initiated some of their conversations, which was a new role for him. Victoria had put a whole different attitude and way of listening into practice – one that was more open and not predicated on her assumed greater knowledge in a tester–student relationship. Through reflecting on these interactions, Mark recognized that Victoria was not invested in controlling the relationship. Knowing this, he could participate with lightheartedness. For both of them, these conversations were providing more comfort about talking together. This comfort was not a new thing, but an old way of being that had slipped away from them. Near the end of the sixth meeting, in response to my questions, Victoria and Mark told some stories about past times, early in the relationship, when they had experienced the kind of comfort that they were now reclaiming.

They agreed that they were hopeful and said that it felt as though they were getting to know each other all over again. For Victoria, the next step would be to connect more emotionally and have more intimacy.

The sixth interview served to thicken Mark and Victoria's story, adding distinctions and events that contributed to an alternative narrative. The stories of past times enriched and revived the history of the present, and Jill's final questions about next steps invited Victoria to extend the story into the near future.

Mark started the seventh meeting by saying that he was angry about Victoria's other relationships. I said that I was pulled in two different directions. The first was to respond to the anger about the relationships, but I was also intrigued by how Mark had taken the step of initiating a subject for therapy. This was something new, and I wondered whether it was a step away from fear and toward something Mark preferred. I asked Mark which of those two directions he thought was most important to address.

Here, Jill was expanding possibilities while leaving the power of choice in Mark's hands.

Mark answered, 'I guess both'. He went on to explain that although he had known about the relationships while they were occurring he had not

expressed anger about them until the past weekend. Talking about anger, he said, was a step away from fear. It had been important for him to discover that talking – even about anger – helped a lot. He could be mad, express it, and maybe let go of it, and he and Victoria could stay connected.

Victoria agreed, saying that these steps were both good and scary.

I asked whether they wanted to talk more about the relationships, and both Victoria and Mark said they did not. Victoria said that the other relationships had to do with how disconnected she and Mark were. In this work, they were choosing each other again. Given this choice, there would not be other relationships.

Mark nodded. Their eyes locked.

After a pause, Victoria said that they had been spending their weekends together, but not in isolation. As a couple, they had socialized quite a bit with other people. It seemed that they were joining their lives back together.

In my prelude to the next question, I voiced a thought: ‘So you are joining your lives back together ...’ Victoria interrupted, ‘Except in the areas of sexuality and sensuality’. She went on to explain that some months before I met them she had called a halt during sex with Mark because she felt it had no spirituality or intimacy. Mark experienced this as a rejection, and had completely removed himself sexually, believing that this was what Victoria wanted. Now there was no touching at all – no holding hands, no hugging, nothing.

I wondered if Mark’s putting fear aside to voice his anger about the other relationships had something to do with Victoria bringing up their sexual relationship now, or whether it had to do with something else.

Victoria said that it had to do with joining their lives back together.

I asked if that phrase – ‘joining their lives back together’ – was a project they were working on with me.

They both nodded. Victoria said that joining their lives back together was a huge part of living their dreams. Mark agreed.

Victoria said that she was interested in having a sexual relationship with Mark, but also scared because so much was going well and she did not know whether this would go well.

Although I was interested in finding out about the fear, the hour was nearly over, so I did not ask about it. Instead, I wrote it down with a question mark beside it in my notes.

Mark suggested that he would be most comfortable if they approached sex as an exploration, and said that if they were going to take it on he wanted ongoing feedback.

We talked about how Victoria had been the one wanting feedback about her work, and I wondered whether they had learned anything in the process of finding a way to talk together about Mark's responses to art that might be helpful here. They agreed that assumptions and thinking there was one right way could mean trouble, and that keeping talking would make them be connected.

I asked Mark if it was important to talk more about the other relationships Victoria had been involved in the next time we met. He said that hearing that she wanted to be sexually involved with him was the important thing.

Although I expected that we would be talking about sex at the eighth meeting, Victoria and Mark talked about talking. After the seventh meeting, Mark had told Victoria how painful her sexual and romantic intimacy with other people had been for him. They told me about some of the details of the conversation. I asked them about its meaning and effects. For Mark, the conversation meant that there was growing honesty between them. For Victoria, it meant that and more. She felt that Mark had opened his experience to her so clearly that she could feel it. She said that she was happy that he had been talking more, but this was a whole different step. Mark said that Victoria had contributed to this different kind of conversation by talking more calmly and with less animosity. She said that what had changed her behavior was that she was really trying to listen to what Mark was saying. She expected this would make it possible to feel Mark's feelings as well as her own the next time she had the possibility of being with another man. But now that she and Mark were talking together, that possibility seemed very remote.

For Mark, Victoria's reaction to their conversation was quite startling. Even as he found himself initiating the conversation about her other lovers, he thought it was a mistake; surely Victoria would either think he was wrong or decide he was whining. Instead, she seemed fascinated. She told him that she just wanted to be in on what he was thinking and feeling. She said that she wanted that in all of their discussions. Mark had thought that new ideas were the only things worth contributing, and he often did not have big, shiny new ideas. He felt the fear evaporate as Victoria reiterated the importance of being included in his thoughts and feelings.

I asked Mark and Victoria about whether they each had experienced friendships in which they had felt free to say what they were thinking and feeling. Both had. Mark told about breakfasts with a roommate he had before meeting Victoria. They would sit at the kitchen table, newspapers propped in front of them, and say whatever came to mind. Mark had often been surprised when Louis referred to things he said and seemed to be affected by them. Reviewing that relationship helped Mark appreciate that he did not have to create something new to say to have something to offer. Victoria told about her best friend, Sally, whom she talked with almost every day in person or on the phone. That relationship reminded her of how precious it could be to share the details of another's life. She recognized how far away that type of sharing is from a university critique.

I wondered if we were talking about intimacy.

An important part of a therapist's job is to ask questions to slow things down, develop detail, and reflect on meaning. In Jill's report, she has omitted many of the careful, detailed questions she asked to bring forth the rich story that Mark and Victoria were telling. I (GC) hope that readers, upon reflection, can appreciate how things might have turned out quite differently without Jill's questions.

Mark and Victoria came to the ninth meeting talking about how good things had felt lately. They agreed that they were 'on the same side of the table'. They described how they were interacting together more and enjoying it. They told me that Mark had been looking at Victoria with tenderness, and Victoria had been open to that. Victoria said that she thought Mark was opening himself to her as he never had before. Mark thought that he had been just as open before, but this time Victoria was recognizing it. To Mark, that meant that she was trying and that she cared. Mark said that it was easier for him to be open because Victoria had been relaxed, approachable, and receptive. For the first time in a long time, she had told him that she loved him.

There had been more affection, including hugging each other and holding hands in public. For Mark, that meant there was more effort. For Victoria, the hugging and holding hands were outward acknowledgments of the changes under way in their relationship.

They said that the most momentous thing that they had done was make love. They were both glad to have taken that step and both thought that the most important thing was just that they did it. It signified their renewed commitment and growing love. Victoria reiterated that they had a new connection that she did not want to discount, but she felt that the lovemaking was an old routine. She felt disappointment that she hadn't taken a more active role in changing the routine. She saw that she could have added playfulness and wished that she had. She wanted to be able to communicate about their lovemaking both in and out of bed. I wondered whether anything they had learned about communicating would be helpful. 'To say what is in our hearts', she said. Mark agreed.

Once a new story begins to take on life and momentum, therapy conversations tend to be a bit looser. Without prompting, people often talk in more detail about new developments. Problems are mentioned less and less. With Mark and Victoria, Jill was still active in asking questions to draw out detail, complexity, and meaning, but there was more spontaneous talk, and the old problems were not in control of what was being said and felt.

Victoria came into the 10th meeting glowing. A week before, she had awakened in the middle of the night with severe nausea and intestinal cramping. She had called Mark, and he had jumped out of bed and driven to Chicago. A number of things were remarkable about this event, starting with Victoria's making the call. When she woke up uncomfortable and frightened, she immediately called Mark; in the past she would probably have called Sally and then they might have called a doctor or gone straight to the emergency room without even letting Mark know. The way Victoria immediately reached for the phone to dial Mark showed what a central position he now had in her life. It spoke clearly of the trust and confidence she felt for him and for their relationship. Upon answering the call, Mark was immediately reassuring and emotionally available. He offered to call a doctor or to help in any other way, all the while dressing for the ride. He never once even mentioned his commitments for the next day.

This incident was clearly meaningful for both Mark and Victoria. Jill chose to ask lots of questions to develop an ever thicker, more meaningful experience of the incident for both partners. In reflecting on this choice, we can see that it

might have been useful to slow down the conversation and make sure that Jill wasn't being overly influenced by the discourse privileging couples' relationships over other kinds of relationship – especially since Mark had suggested earlier that perhaps he and Victoria should rely on people outside the relationship for some particular interests and activities. We are not separate from our culture, and we can never be aware of all the discourses that it might be helpful to deconstruct – but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't keep trying.

I reminded the partners that when they first came to see me they had named the problems they were struggling with 'distance' and 'frustration'. I wondered what this event showed about how far they had come. 'This was just the opposite!' Victoria said.

In fact, the incident meant so much to Victoria that she took another step forward emotionally. The following weekend in Wisconsin, with Mark, she went for motorcycle rides, picked apples at an orchard, and went to a birthday bash for a relative at Mark's mother's house. She could participate wholeheartedly in these events because she felt more open and trusting. She wanted to do things so that Mark could have his dreams. Before, she would have brought work with her to Wisconsin and would have spent at least part of the time holed up with it. This time, she found a way to get her work done before going.

Until Victoria described her intentions for the past weekend, Mark had not recognized the significance of the events. He had thought she just had more time. Now that he heard what the weekend had meant for Victoria, he felt less peripheral and more important in her life. For him, feeling this way was like a door opening to their future. Seeing the door made him more willing to plan their future together.

Thinking back again to our first meeting, I reminded them that Mark had said then that he got about 50-60% of what he wanted from the relationship. I wondered what they would each say now. They both said that they were at 80-85% and named the following as making the difference:

- their new way of talking,
- trust,
- each letting the other in to his or her,
- touching each other again.

What I probably would have asked if there had been more time at the 10th meeting was what Victoria and Mark could do in relation to the 15-20% of what they wanted that they were not yet getting in the relationship. They seemed to have brought the answer with them to the 11th meeting. They came in clearly focused on the 15-20%. Victoria talked about sadness and anger that had been stirred up by their sexual relationship. Mark talked about frustration and anger. Victoria said that she wanted Mark to take more authority and responsibility. Mark said that when he did, she backed away. Victoria said that there was just no context for sex. She thought things would go better if he were to stroke her hair and call her beautiful and look into her eyes as they moved into sex. Mark said, 'Why don't you just give me a script?'

As mutual blame began to take over the conversation, I asked if it would be alright if I slowed things down.

Aspects of the old, problematic story were beginning begun to influence Mark and Victoria again. This is not at all uncommon. Jill became more active in shaping the conversation, moving back into a more deliberate pattern of speaking at length with one partner before asking the other to reflect on what he or she had just heard.

After hearing a bit more of a description of their current problems, I asked whether Mark or Victoria could remember sexual experiences with each other that they felt good about. They could, but were surprised to learn that they remembered different experiences. Mark described experiences in which 'things went smoothly', he felt in charge, Victoria seemed receptive and excited throughout, and they both had orgasms. Victoria described experiences in which she felt beautiful and light.

I asked Victoria about this a bit more, and she said that probably the biggest factor for her in how well sex went was how attractive she felt. If she felt fat and sloppy, it put a damper on her participation. When she felt beautiful, which was a struggle, she could really be involved sexually. I wondered if she thought that her ideas about sex had to do with how she was brought up as a girl and a woman. She nodded and said she thought that men did worry about how they looked, but not nearly as much as women, and probably not during sex. I asked where she thought the idea of having to look a certain way came from.

'Everywhere', she said. 'Films, books, ads even ...' I asked if the images in films, books, and ads were real, and she said that they were in that they were based on real people. I mentioned that I had once worked with a woman who was a professional model. I asked whether Victoria was interested in what the model had told me about magazine covers and the like. When Victoria said she was, I told her the model had said that the people in ads were a very small percentage of real people who were being photographed at a particular age that would not last. Those people had been freshly made up and positioned in a particular way to create a particular impression. Furthermore, the final image was often airbrushed to 'improve' it even more.

Readers may see Jill as imposing her own knowledge here. To us, it is important that Jill asked Victoria if she wanted to hear her, and it is even more important that Jill was passing along local knowledge from a particular person, not disembodied expert advice.

I wondered what effect the contrived images had on Victoria. 'I'm always comparing myself', she said. 'Not favorably'. I asked if those images talked her into anything about her worth. She said that sexually she did not have much. I wondered if it really fit with her (sexually or any other way) to have her worth depend on matching an image, while leaving the expression of love, passion, creativity, playfulness, and connection out of the picture. She thought, of course, that it was not right. She said that love, passion, creativity, playfulness, and connection were not left out, but dependent on her feeling attractive, which had to do with what Mark said and did.

Then I asked if she thought that a more loving connection could happen between people who were equal or people who were not equal. She thought it would be more likely between equals. If what Mark said and did determined how she felt, I wondered whether they could be on equal ground. She thought not, and found it disturbing that it was set up that way for her. I wondered, given the films, books, and ads that she mentioned, how many women could really not be affected by that kind of objectification. The answer 'not many' made sense to Victoria.

I asked Mark what it was like to listen to Victoria's conversation with me. He found it disturbing. He had always thought that Victoria was beautiful and

did not know that she had such questions about it. This whole thing felt overwhelming.

This is a clear example of how we work to deconstruct dominant discourses. Jill's many questions opened space for Victoria to notice some of the ways that dominant stories about what constitutes beauty had seduced her and shaped her perceptions and beliefs. The power inequality between men and women around these discourses was also unmasked. Jill soon asked many similar questions to unpack the ways that Mark had been enrolled in patriarchal practices of power without realizing it.

In response to my questions about what he had learned while growing up as a boy and man about his role in a sexual relationship, Mark talked about the idea of conquest. Not having a sexual relationship with his wife for months had been humiliating to him as a man. I told him that I understood that it was common usage to say 'my wife', but said that to me it made Victoria sound more like a possession than a person. He could understand why it felt that way to me. I wondered whether the idea of a partner as a possession fit with conquest. He could see that it did, but hastened to add that of course he knew Victoria was a person. I agreed with him and wondered whether when it came to sex, the ideas of women as possessions and conquests that still circulate in the world had steered him away from his knowledge that Victoria was a person. He did not know.

We then began talking about what effects the idea that sex is conquest might have on him and on his relationship with Victoria. Mark thought the idea could put a lot of pressure on him to make sex happen. It could influence him to focus on quantity instead of quality. It could keep him from noticing his partner and what the experience was like for her. In some ways it would not matter what she did, as long as she was subservient. I wondered what he thought it would be like to be a woman in this kind of relationship. 'Like a prisoner', he said. 'Maybe if she were into S&M it would be great, but ...'

I talked about some of the ways everyday American culture gives men invitations to get caught up in this kind of thinking. Mark agreed that, without realizing it, he could have taken on some aspects of these ideas. He thought that this probably explained why he did not talk more before and during sex.

As she listened to my conversation with Mark, Victoria was able to look

beyond the sadness and anger. She said that even though scrutinizing herself for attractiveness often got in the way, she and Mark had at times experienced profound connection and mutuality in sex. She described a particular experience, and on hearing her description Mark agreed it had been wonderful. They both remembered the communication and sense of partnership that were there. They agreed that their memories of this experience were a much better image of an intimate, sexual experience than any glamorized movie scene ever could be. I wondered how Victoria and Mark could keep the glamorized movie scenes out of their sex life. They thought that by paying attention to each other and communicating, they could be in charge of their sex life as partners. They agreed that they wanted to be in charge, instead of having unreal images and unjust ideas rule the sexual aspects of their relationship.

I saw Mark and Victoria three more times. They took the conversation about their sexual relationship very much to heart and felt a tremendous freedom to talk together about their feelings for each other and to try out new things in their ongoing sexual relationship. In the 12th and 13th meetings, they reflected on their unfolding sexual relationship. They told me how they had read poetry to each other in bed. Victoria was absolutely delighted with Mark's willingness to try new things. Mark was learning about himself and Victoria through these experiences. Victoria discovered that once she stopped worrying about how she looked and started noticing Mark, she became a very sexy woman! They both realized that fear had kept them comparing their relationship to an unreal standard. Now that the fear was gone, they both could see different possibilities for their sexual relationship. Victoria discovered that with the fear out of the way, it was easy to accept affection and be open. She wondered if Mark had actually offered more all along than she had known. Mark did not know. He said that although things were quite wonderful, he was struggling to have a voice without being authoritarian. We talked about the moments that he felt most able to do that, and resurrected some of the ideas from the last meeting that helped make that possible.

In the 12th meeting Victoria and Mark made a commitment to step out of what they were now seeing as the self-imposed limitations of their sexual relationship. Outside those bounds, they found laughter, safety, and good feelings, which they reported on at length in the 13th meeting. They agreed to talk with each other about the things they would be comfortable doing as well as

those they would not be comfortable doing. They said they would find ways to 'try on' each other's desires.

Non-problematic narratives were clearly flowing again. Jill continued to ask questions to thicken the new stories as they emerged and did not have to be as active in structuring the interview. She could sit back and enjoy being part of this joyous conversation.

The 14th and last meeting was a time of looking back over what the couple had learned and accomplished. What stood out for Mark was that he did not have to be a leader, and not having to lead meant he could participate more. He thought he finally understood what Victoria meant by 'sharing dreams'. It did not have to do with creating grand plans. It had to do with being open about what was in his heart and mind. Victoria said that the biggest change for her had to do with realizing that she did not need someone who would open doors for her. She and Mark could go through them together.

Reflections on the work

In reviewing my notes, I am again grateful to Victoria and Mark for opening their lives to me and, through this writing, to all of us. The work with them did raise a number of dilemmas for me, some unique to their relationship and some common to work with many heterosexual couples. Because we shared both gender and social class, I was likely to understand and privilege Victoria's stories and understandings more than Mark's. Since I am a part of the dominant culture, there are many potentially limiting discourses that might have escaped my awareness. Reviewing my notes also reminded me of the power I wield in my role of questioner. Although questions are a tremendously valuable tool for collaboration, they still give the questioner power to propose conversational domains. With Mark and Victoria, I asked about the dilemmas of social class difference quite a bit before I asked about gender. I did not plan that sequence, but I am aware that I could have picked up on other strands of conversation that would have led us into considerations of gender sooner or of something else entirely. I was aware that I could have fallen into judgments of either Victoria for engaging in sexual relationships with people other

than Mark or of Mark for being caught up in dominant ideas concerning men's sexuality as conquest. We think that either of these sets of judgements would have limited the usefulness of the therapy.

We hope that we have told the story of my work with Mark and Victoria with enough of the right kind of detail to give readers a feel for how we think and act in negotiating this terrain.

Note

1. We are not referring only to the full-blown diagnostic entity.