



Narrative approaches in a domestic violence hotline

by Ryo Lumsden



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Abstract

This paper explores how narrative approaches – externalising, unique-outcomes, re-membering and re-authoring conversations – have been used in work at a domestic violence hotline to assist clients in deconstructing dominant stories and getting in touch with their personal agency. Examples are drawn from experiences in Japan and highlight certain aspects of Japanese culture. However, the focus is on the applicability of narrative techniques to counselling in a single telephone conversation.

Key words: *telephone counselling; domestic violence; hotline; Japan; narrative therapy*

This paper describes lessons in counselling techniques learnt through work in a government-run advice centre for female victims of domestic violence in the greater Tokyo area. The centre's principal activity is to operate a hotline for female victims of domestic abuse. Many of these phone conversations are one-off; it is difficult to arrange a series of interviews with the same client to develop a richer alternative story. Even so, narrative approaches often prove effective in assisting women to assess their situations and get in touch with their life skills, which might enable them to move forward.

Below are four examples of how externalising, unique-outcomes, re-remembering and re-authoring conversations have been used within single telephone conversations to help co-explore with callers their hidden hopes and neglected skills in life, which point towards their preferred identities.

Mami: An externalising and re-remembering conversation

Mami said she was unsure whether her fiancé's behaviour could be called abuse. They had first met at a cosplay event (cosplay is, essentially, socialising while dressed up like anime characters). They started living together with the prospect of marriage, but Mami found her freedom being gradually taken away. First, her fiancé did not let her work outside the home or associate with her friends, saying he wanted to keep her all to himself. Then he discarded her cell phone and gave her a new one with GPS installed. While he was at work, he would constantly call to check where she was. Even if she did not answer, he would track her location with the GPS, and would scold her if she went out by herself. She was no longer permitted to attend any cosplay events; the fiancé would let her put on costumes only when they were alone at home. She had reached a point where she was unable to leave the house on her own out of fear that he would get angry and verbally attack her.

Mami added that she had been abused by her parents, especially her father, and that she felt some similarities between her relationship with her fiancé and that with her father. According to Mami, she had left home as soon as she finished high school to get away from her father's control.

When she mentioned her childhood abuse, I was reminded of Michael White's comment that 'traumatic

abuse perpetrated in a context that our culture defines as protective and supportive ... makes it incredibly more difficult to discern abuse from nurture and exploitation from love' (1995, p. 94). This alerted me to an important risk: if I suggested that what Mami's fiancé was imposing was not love but abuse, that might further confuse Mami in making this critical discernment. Instead, I decided to co-explore, through an externalising conversation, the effects of her extremely restricted life.

I asked, 'I wonder what his putting restrictions on your life is like for you. Is it helpful for you to live your life? Or is it not helpful at all? Or maybe some of each?' Mami replied, 'I'd never had anybody who liked me before, and never had any sexual relationship with anyone, so in that sense I'm happy I'm with someone. At first his jealousy made me happy because I thought that was love. And it makes me glad that my fiancé appreciates my cosplay because my father hated that stuff'.

To further encourage exploration of the effects of her restricted life, I made more externalising enquiries. 'Okay', I said, 'I see there are certain positive aspects of your relationship with your fiancé. At the same time, I wonder if there's any inconvenience caused by this restriction? Does it affect your feelings or self-image in a positive way? I wonder if it helps you to live your life in the way you want'.

Mami's voice became more lively. She stated in an assured voice, 'It makes me feel like I'm being treated like his pet. I don't feel good about myself for not being able to work anymore. I have no freedom at all'. To my question about how she hoped to live her life, she answered, 'I want to feel safe. I want to go to this cute knickknack store to hang out whenever I want. I want to enjoy meeting with my friends at cosplay conventions'.

Our conversation then took a different direction, and Mami started to describe how her father used to terrorise her with verbal abuse. She also told me about leaving her parents' home and finding a job. I became curious about that development in her life, so I made a unique-outcome enquiry: 'Was it easy for you leave home?' Mami replied that it had been frightening not knowing whether she could make her own living. I asked what had enabled her to leave. She said that she thought her life would have been crushed by her father had she stayed longer. I asked how she had gathered the courage to leave. Had there been any other point in her life when she had done something despite strong fear? She said that there had been

nothing she could recall. Finally, I put forth a re-remembering enquiry: 'I wonder who you learnt from to act against fear. Who might be able to say, "I knew Mami could do it?" The person doesn't have to be an actual person – they might be a character in a book or anime you like.'

Until that point, Mami had not seemed to find much significance in her action of leaving her parents' house. However, on hearing my re-remembering enquiry, her voice perked up. She said, 'There's this character I like in some anime. I followed the show during high school. That character would cheer for me for what I did'. I then made a landscape of identity enquiry: 'What did you like about that character?' Mami explained, 'She's very strong. She does whatever she wants'. I said, 'So this character would understand why you could act despite strong fear, and she'd be happy for you that you got away from your parents' house?' Mami confirmed this.

I felt that Mami's preferred identity had begun to surface and asked another re-remembering question. 'I wonder', I said, 'what that character would have to say about your situation with your fiancé?' Mami answered immediately. 'She'd tell him, "Mami doesn't only belong to you. Don't take away her freedom. Let her do what she likes"'. After articulating how the character would view her situation, Mami said to me in a firm voice, 'My thoughts are clearer now. Thank you'.

As our phone conversation was ending, I wanted to assist Mami to identify some trajectory, however thin, for the near future. I asked whether recalling that anime character might assist her to determine a course of action. 'Yes', she replied, and we said goodbye.

During our conversation, Mami never used the term 'abuse' to describe her fiancé's restrictions. At the outset, she mentioned similarities between her relationship with her father and that with her fiancé, and that her father was abusive. But she gently and indirectly declined my invitation to explore this. Perhaps this was because she perceived her relationship with her father as abusive, so she might have felt that drawing similarities between the two relationships could have resulted in judging her fiancé to be abusive, which in turn might have left no space to express the positive aspects of that relationship.

Sue Mann's reflections have helped me gain a clearer perspective on such matters: 'Acknowledging confusion around the question of love can offer an entry point to conversations that bring forward what is valued by the women' (2004, p. 13). As I consider those words,

it seems that by providing space to describe both positive and negative aspects of Mami's restricted life, her 'confusion around the question of love' was acknowledged. Perhaps articulating how she hoped to live assisted Mami to step further away from that confusion and to examine whether her restricted life would truly accord value to her hopes.

Moreover, whatever Mami's real reasons for declining to explore similarities between her relationship with her father and that with her fiancé, I sought to maintain a decentred but influential position so she could feel free to choose what to discuss. I also wanted to take care that I did not inadvertently put myself in a position of power in the name of consultation, to avoid reproducing a situation similar to her father's dominating of Mami's life in the name of love.

Akari: Tracing steps to a unique outcome

According to Akari, since they married, her husband had become so verbally abusive that she felt deceived and trapped. He constantly put her down. Moreover, she had begun sensing that her social circle had been gradually tightened. Not only did her husband not want Akari to socialise with friends, but he would get especially jealous when she tried to visit her parents. Whenever she mentioned going to see them, he would say, 'How about my dinner? Wives don't normally neglect the care of their husbands'. Or, 'You're married now, so it's *joshiki* that you belong to this family, not to your parents. You have no need to see your family members unless it's an emergency'.

Joshiki, usually translated as 'common sense', is very often used with an implication of commonly accepted social etiquette. Saying 'so-and-so lacks *joshiki*' is frequently used to criticise someone who behaves outside social norms or society's expectations.

Akari, pressured by her husband, eventually stopped visiting her worried family members. In recent months, the only time she saw her parents was when her father became ill and was hospitalised.

To help Akari assess whether she fully accepted her husband's *joshiki*, I encouraged her to verbalise some feelings surrounding the situation: 'He says once you are married, you belong to your husband's family. I wonder if you feel like you're treated as part of his family then?' Akari replied, 'Not at all. My staying is for

his family's own convenience'. Yet she added, 'Because I graduated from art school, not a regular university, I wonder if I don't really know *joshiki*. So whenever he tells me I lack *joshiki*, it makes me think maybe he's right'. Then I asked, 'So, with that in mind, would you suggest to your friend not to visit her own parents once she's married because it's *joshiki*?' Akari gave a definitive no.

To help her further the deconstruction of *joshiki*, I said, 'So would you say that not visiting your parents is your husband's *joshiki* but not yours? Besides, I wonder if what you and I see as normal are the same?' Akari responded, 'Well, everyone's "what's normal" is different'.

Then, as if she'd had a sudden realisation, Akari stated emphatically, 'He uses *joshiki* to control me!' That statement prompted me to invite her into an externalising conversation. I asked, 'when you hear him say *joshiki*, what effect does it have on your feelings? Does it help your self-confidence? Or help you enjoy life?' She described how her husband's use of *joshiki* affected her life in many negative ways. It made it difficult to enjoy spending time with friends. Also, it made Akari doubt her judgement as a person, which in turn prevented her from returning to her parents' home for good, even though she wished to end her marriage.

I asked whether recognising the effect of her husband's *joshiki* might help Akari cope with her husband's demands, or help her stay at her parents' place to have space away from her husband. She replied, 'No. Each time he insists on *joshiki*, my power goes out of me'.

So far, Akari's dominant story seemed to be that her husband's deployment of the concept of *joshiki* had complete power over her. I was sharing her feeling of despair, but curious about her recent visit to see her parents. I said, 'I see. It makes it very hard for you to leave home when your husband brings up *joshiki*. But I wonder how you were able to visit your father at the hospital recently?' Akari did not appear to have attributed significance to that event. She said, 'That was a family emergency, so I went'. I wondered whether this might have been a unique outcome. I enquired, 'I still don't really understand how you could do that. Was it easy for you to leave your husband because it was an emergency? He didn't make much complaint?' Akari replied, 'Oh yes, he did! He didn't want me to go. He even said, "It's not like your father is dying"'. At this, I wanted to help render visible the skills Akari had used to keep her husband's interference at bay. I said, 'It sounds like he tried to stop you as usual.

But how did you get away from his objection?'

Akari responded, 'This time when he tried to stop me, I said, "My father's ill. I must go"'. But Akari continued, 'I doubt if I could do the same for myself as I did for my father'.

I wanted to further co-explore the steps and hidden intentions Akari had relied on to escape her husband's *joshiki*. Making a landscape of consciousness enquiry, I said, 'I wonder what was in your mind when you were rejecting your husband's interference. What enabled you to say no to him when he was so persistent?' Akari answered, 'I knew I had to see my father. I was determined not to let my husband get in my way. You see, after he realised he couldn't stop me, he tried to come with me. But I said flat out, "This is my father. *I must go alone*". Then Akari stopped, and said, 'Oh...', as if she was thinking.

I sensed that she had come to some realisation about how she had used some hidden skills and intentions. I summarised her counter-story, in which she had been able to retain her power against her husband's *joshiki*, and asked whether my understanding was correct. She confirmed that it was. Finally, I made a suggestion: 'Do you think that bearing in mind how you were determined to see your father might assist you to go to your parents' house, without listening to your husband's *joshiki*?' 'Yes', she replied, 'I think so'.

Michael White asked, 'Is the therapy room a context for the confirmation of the known and familiar, or is it a context for arriving at what might be possible to know?' (2011, p. 43). If I had merely given Akari praise, that might have inadvertently added to her feeling of isolation. I sensed this when she almost dismissed the idea that there was any significance to the hospital visit. That event, for her, was in the sphere of 'known and familiar'. In contrast, co-researching Akari's steps and her hidden intentions for this seemingly insignificant event appeared to help her reach an alternative story to counter the dominance of *joshiki*.

Sato: Deconstructing motherhood and reconstructing personhood

Sato had divorced her abusive husband two years previously. She said that she had a job to support her life with her two children, which was becoming more stable. 'But', she added, 'I feel like maybe it's my fault and I should go back to my husband'.

She continued, 'Because I didn't want him to get further into debt, I decided on my own how much money we should spend, and my husband would get angry, calling me abnormal. He would slap me and pull my hair. My parents assured me that I was not crazy, but I still wonder if I'm really not normal'.

I told Sato that however she had handled their financial situation, no-one has a right to inflict violence on her or anyone. I asked whether what she was feeling might be called guilt, and she replied 'yes'. I suggested that we co-explore what thoughts were making her feel guilty and telling her to go back to her husband. She accepted my invitation.

Regarding victims of domestic violence like Sato, at my workplace I often hear the description that the victim is 'under the control' of the abuser. I do not completely reject this idea, which is a simple way to understand the structure of an abusive relationship. However, it seems that explaining a situation in this way may pathologise the client. As Michael White wrote, 'pathologising subtracts from personal agency and it has the effect of privileging the expert knowledges and disqualifying the knowledgeable of those persons who seek our help' (2011, p. 64).

With this in mind, I made an externalising enquiry: 'I wonder what thoughts are telling you to go back?' Sato replied, 'I don't know if I can raise my children well alone, so maybe it's better to be with my husband'. She added, 'He told me when we were getting divorced, "You are not a good mother. Without me, the kids will turn out to be prostitutes"'.

Sato also said, 'I have friends who want to help me. I told one of them that maybe I should go back to my husband, but she said, "please don't"'. I got the impression that Sato was unsure about agreeing with her friend. So I said, 'May I provide you with a general structure of spousal abuse? And could you please let me know if anything you hear has relevance?' Sato consented, and I summarised from my workplace guidebook: within an abusive relationship, one party attempts to assert dominance over the other party through the use of physical or psychological violence; verbal abuse is frequently used to attack the character of the other party, trying to erase power and confidence from her.

Then I invited Sato to a deconstructing conversation. I said, 'Many people who've suffered verbal abuse have said to me they were constantly told, "you're not normal" or "normally wives don't do that". Often, it's

very difficult to dismiss these verbal attacks because we wonder if we are normal. And, especially as mothers, a lot of us already doubt whether we're good enough parents, so it makes us feel even less certain whether we're normal mothers'.

Sato agreed that her husband had regularly told her that she hadn't been an adequate caretaker of the children, and that being called 'abnormal' by him had made her question her abilities as a human being.

To further co-explore through a deconstructing conversation, I mentioned that verbal attacks are often directed at somewhere the other person feels particularly vulnerable or something important that the person wants to protect. 'For example, if it's important for someone to be a good wife, a perpetrator might use that against her, saying something like, "you're not a kind wife for doing that"'.

Unexpectedly, Sato spoke up in a strong voice. 'That's what my husband did! He attacked what's important to me. He knows I really care about my children. That's why he used to tell me, "You don't know how to take proper care of children. You can't possibly raise the kids without me"'.

I made another externalising enquiry. 'So, are these the thoughts that are telling you to go back to your husband? Do you agree with these thoughts?' Sato responded firmly: 'No! But I almost believed them, because he was attacking what I was trying very hard at. It got me thinking I was not a capable mother, so I should go back'.

As the tactics and goals of the verbal abuse were rendered more visible, Sato seemed to get in touch with what she held precious in life. She seemed to start regaining a sense of personhood. I asked whether our conversation might have been useful for her. She said, 'Yes, it's a little clearer to me now why I wanted to go back. Thank you. The thing is, when my friend told me not to go back, I just thought, "You don't understand me"'.

I took Sato's final comment as confirmation that had I merely told her at the outset that she had been under her husband's control, that would have been more likely to pathologise her and subtract from her personal agency (White, 2011, p. 64). Also, it probably would have put me in a position of authority and prevented us from exploring what she held precious in life, and her expert knowledge of how her husband would undermine it through abuse.

Kumiko: Deconstructing responsibility

Kumiko told me she had started experiencing after-effects when she left an abusive partner. She explained that she and her partner had lived together for years and she had dedicated herself to supporting the business he had been running. Throughout this time, she had experienced severe verbal abuse. Although she had moved out of their home a few times, on each occasion she continued working at her partner's office and eventually returned to live with him. This time, however, not only had she moved out of their home, but some months later she completely withdrew from her partner's business.

When Kumiko described the after-effects of the severe verbal abuse, I wanted to be careful to avoid retraumatisation. I was especially concerned because this was a telephone conversation and I would have been unable to assist in person. With regard to trauma debriefing, Sue Mitchell wrote, 'I consider that providing only one session without follow-up may leave people highly vulnerable' (2006, p. 104). Thus, instead of enquiring about the after-effects of the verbal abuse, I invited Kumiko to an externalising question to co-explore the thoughts that were pressing her down even after she had left the abusive relationship. She accepted my invitation.

In response to my initial externalising enquiry, Kumiko first explained that during her years with her partner, people around her – her friends and her children too – kept telling her to leave, and through all this time she had felt that she was failing them because she had been unable to leave. Moreover, now that Kumiko had finally ended the relationship, one concerned friend had commented that Kumiko still looked the same – tired and confused – even though two months had passed since the separation. That comment had added to Kumiko's distress, since she said it implied that the friend did not recognise the progress Kumiko thought she had finally made by ending the relationship with her partner.

Kumiko's expression of distress brought on by feelings of 'failing others' reminded me of Angel Yuen's caution (in Yuen & White, 2007) about asking 'what makes it difficult for women to leave [since] even this implies what the women should do – that they should leave ... such thinking can contribute to further blame and guilt for women who are usually doing all they can to get by' (2007, p. 9). Instead of reinforcing this line of questioning, I wanted to honour Kumiko's efforts in facing the difficulties that had previously prevented her

from leaving. I asked an externalising question: 'I wonder what were the things that had prevented your previous attempts to leave your partner, which some of your friends couldn't recognise?'

Kumiko first explained that she had not wanted to be irresponsible by leaving her position at her partner's office: 'My partner would constantly blame me when things didn't go the way he wanted, especially with his business. He'd tell me how incompetent and useless I am. Sometimes he'd stop saying a word to me and go off to another woman. Each of the few times I moved out during those years, I ended up moving back. And even when I wasn't living with him, I was helping his business. My partner used to say, "There's no turning back for you now. If you don't do your job, it'll cause great inconvenience to the customers who trust us. Are you that irresponsible?" So I felt bad, and couldn't leave him or his business, even though I had special skills that would let me find another job easily.'

Kumiko then explained more about her relationship with her partner. 'He'd yell at little things, and I became very caught up with thinking about how to please him so I wouldn't anger him. And although he blew up violently, he became very calm afterwards. I wanted to feel his calmness, so that's another reason I kept going back to him. I also wanted to think that I was the woman he'd always come back to.'

I said, 'Sounds like there were very complicated factors you faced in the relationship, which some of your friends couldn't understand?' Kumiko confirmed this. I then wanted to co-explore the assumptions held by some people that she could have easily left the relationship and that she should easily recover from the pain and suffering caused by the years of abuse. Therefore, I invited Kumiko to become a witness to her own experience. I said, 'Having lived through your experience, knowing there are various difficult problems you faced and are still facing, what would you say to a woman who had gone through a similar experience and said, "I'm finally out of the relationship but I'm still suffering and people tell me I'm making little progress?"'

After a short pause, Kumiko replied: 'I guess I'd tell her, "you did the best you could and you've done well. It must be very painful what you're going through now. It's a process of detoxification, so this pain won't last forever. And when the pain becomes too much for you, you can talk to me. I'm here to listen."' I wanted Kumiko to listen to her own insider knowledge, which had just surfaced. I took the opportunity to repeat her

statement, asking whether my understanding was correct. She said, 'Yes, and I wish I could think like this about myself!' I agreed with her that we often have a hard time being objective about, and being kind to, ourselves. Yet I still suggested that having this understanding about other women in a similar situation might assist her. 'Maybe', she said, with a little laugh.

The preceding paragraph illustrates a type of question I sometimes pose to callers who say they are suffering after-effects of abuse, in order to help them assess their situations using their own insider knowledge. I do not ask about the trauma itself, but rather ask an externalising question, such as 'What are the things that are pressing you down?' This can encourage callers to explore important issues other than the after-effects of abuse. Very often, the caller starts to explain that not only does she feel affected by trauma, but she also feels inadequate for not recovering at the speed others expect. Once there occurs, in this manner, a separation between the trauma itself and the burden of the expectations of others, I invite the caller to witness her own situation by eliciting her understanding of and empathy for another woman in a similar situation. My sense is that through this process, the caller gets in touch with her insider knowledge of her own suffering. Since all this typically happens in a one-time phone conversation, I am uncertain how much substantial effect this type of enquiry may have. Nonetheless, the approach I have described seems to call forth a deconstruction of self-blame for not meeting the expectations of others, and therefore provides some relief, though it may only be for the moment.

Now that Kumiko had seemed to gain some space away from her self-blame for not recovering more quickly, she raised another issue: 'I know I'm not going back to him anymore, but can't help thinking that maybe I should've been stronger and should've stayed in the relationship to make it work. And I could've tried harder to help the business.' I became curious about her use of the expressions that she should have been 'stronger' and tried 'harder', so I asked, 'Did breaking away from your partner and his business make you wonder if you are not being a responsible person?' Kumiko quickly replied that this was correct. In order to assist her to deconstruct the perception of responsibility, I asked, 'If your daughter were in a similar situation where her boyfriend was abusive and blamed everything on her, would you tell her that she should be more responsible and take care of the business?'

Kumiko expressed clear disagreement. 'Oh, no! I'd tell her to drop the work and leave.' I then asked a question

about what was absent but implicit in this response: 'Why wouldn't it be okay if she stayed?' Kumiko answered, 'Because he's just using her. He doesn't appreciate her at all'. In order to further encourage Kumiko in the deconstruction of responsibility, I made another enquiry: 'How about her relationship with her boyfriend? Would you tell her to try harder to stay?' Kumiko again expressed clear disagreement. Then I asked another absent-but-implicit question: 'What do you see wrong in that relationship? What kind of relationship would you like your daughter to have, or would you like to have for yourself?' Kumiko replied, 'It's important to have an equal relationship with my partner. Also, it's important that we help each other when one of us is in need. My partner didn't show the slightest concern about me when I was sick'.

I wanted to render even more visible what Kumiko held precious in her life, so I put forth another absent-but-implicit enquiry: 'You said earlier that although you keep having thoughts that you should go back to your partner, you know you are not going back. I wonder what differences you've noticed between your life now and your life before you left him. How do you hope to live your life?' Kumiko answered, 'Now I can exercise my own will and I have freedom, which is really important. Now I can eat what I want. And the people at my new workplace appreciate me'.

Our phone conversation was coming to an end. Kumiko, having verbalised what she accorded value to, stated, 'When I thought about my hopes for life, it reassured me that I've done the right thing by leaving him. I know my emotions will start to sway again, but for now, I'm feeling less burdened'.

Through domestic abuse hotline phone conversations like this, I have found that inviting a caller to imagine a situation just like her own, but replacing herself with a loved one – her child or friend – can often assist the caller to discern whether what is happening to her can be called abuse. Also, encouraging the caller to imagine someone else going through similar suffering is often helpful in the caller's deconstruction of the normalising judgements she is facing. Moreover, I find it important that I try to create space for the caller to educate me about her predicament, as much as allowed by the circumstance of a single time-limited phone conversation, before making an invitation to step aside and witness her own experience. When I do this, I try to keep in mind Yael Gershoni's words: 'After I have listened and heard some clues ... I then start to enquire as to their meaning. I think this would make a difference to the people consulting me. It's as if I offer

a little more permission for people to speak without interruption' (2006, p. 137). This process appears to provide relief to the caller's distress, however small and temporary such relief may be.

Some concluding comments

The conversations described above are cases in which I was able to use narrative approaches. However, there are many occasions when I cannot use narrative techniques per se, but can only listen and empathise as, in Ron Findlay's words, a 'therapist with narrative attitude' (2012, p. 2). When that is the case, I try to keep in mind the need to listen 'de-constructively to people's stories' (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 277). This makes it possible for me to make small comments: I might say, 'Sounds like your children know that you're not wrong in this,' which can call forth a sense of

validation, which the caller might signal by saying, 'Yes, my children do support me'.

This paper has described how narrative approaches can be used even during a single telephone conversation. It has tried to show, in the context of a domestic abuse hotline, how externalising, unique outcome, re-membling and re-authoring conversations can help callers evaluate their situations and discern a desired course of action. In particular, it has illustrated how encouraging even a one-time caller to imagine another person in the same situation might help her deconstruct the normalising judgements she is up against and draw out her insider knowledge about how to cope.

Speaking personally, I constantly feel honoured by the invitations these women offer me to share their life stories, and I am grateful for the kindness they show me even amid their severe distress.

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