

chapter four

**Narrative practice
and the
unpacking of
identity conclusions**

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Daniel*

Daniel, a sad looking boy of eleven years of age, was brought to see me by his parents, Tom and Lucy, who were at their wits' end. They complained that their lives were being destroyed by Daniel. According to them, he was 'bringing trouble down' on their lives in every way imaginable. He had been expelled from two schools, and was now suspended from a third. He was in trouble with the police, with neighbours, with the parents of his peers, and, as well, was creating havoc at home. As I listened to these details, it was clear to me that Lucy and Tom were attributing very sinister motives to Daniel's actions. In fact their account of these events was laced with a range of highly negative conclusions about Daniel's identity, and these were painful for me to hear. Amongst other things, they had concluded that 'he was out to destroy the family', that he was a 'worthless good-for-nothing', 'useless to himself and everyone else', and a 'dead loss when it came to efforts to do anything for him'. Daniel's response to all of this seemed one of studied indifference. He just sat there, neither confirming nor protesting this account of his life and identity. But I had the sense that he felt himself to be at one with these very negative conclusions.

I said that on hearing these details I was developing some appreciation of just how frustrating the situation must be. Tom responded to this, exclaiming: 'And you don't even know the half of it yet!' My response: 'Would it be okay then if I asked some questions that would assist me to more fully understand the effects of all of this trouble on your lives?' Lucy and Tom gave me the go ahead, and before long I was learning that this trouble had painted a highly negative picture of Lucy's identity as a mother, one that had made it very difficult for her to have connections with other mothers around the subject of parenting. On account of this, it had been quite isolating of her. I also learned that this trouble had negatively affected her relationship with Daniel, blocking what she would otherwise have to give to her son. 'What is it like for you that this trouble has so powerfully influenced your picture of yourself as a mother?', I asked Lucy. And, 'How do you feel about the extent to which all this trouble has come between you and Daniel?' In response to these questions, Lucy became quite tearful.

* All names are pseudonyms.

I asked what the tears were all about, and Lucy began to tell me about her deep sadness over what she was missing out on as a mother, and about what she felt cheated of in not knowing her son as she might.

Turning to Tom, I asked about what he would say about the most significant effects of this trouble on his life. He was at first nonplussed by my question. He said that he hardly knew where to start. So I asked him about in which ways this trouble had specifically affected his sense of being Daniel's father. Tom responded that he had never been able to get onto the map in terms of being a father to Daniel – Daniel had never allowed him to assume such a place. 'Is this state of affairs okay with you Tom?', I asked. His response was one of part resignation and part despair: 'Oh, I had my dreams, but what is the point'. I was soon interviewing Tom about these dreams, which we together traced all the way back to the point of Daniel's conception. After a time, I asked: 'So what would you say all of this trouble has done to those dreams'. His emotionally laden response was: 'It has crushed them'.

It was now time to turn to Daniel. 'Would it be okay with you', I asked Tom and Lucy, 'if I now consulted Daniel about the effects of all of this trouble on his life?' 'Go ahead', Lucy said, 'but I doubt that you will get much out of him'. 'Daniel', I said, 'As you have heard, I've just been having a talk with your mum and dad about how all of this trouble has been affecting their lives. Now I would like to ask you some similar questions. Would that be okay?' In response, Daniel shrugged his shoulders. I decided to proceed: 'What has this trouble been talking you into about yourself? What sort of picture has it been painting of you?' Daniel's response to this was to again shrug his shoulders. I said: 'Would it be okay if I was to assume that this shrug meant that it was alright for me to proceed with my questions, and that you will let me know if this isn't the case?' I thought I detected a slight nod. Although I wasn't sure of this, I decided to proceed on this basis of this impression: 'Would it be okay by you if I asked your mum and dad for their thoughts on this?' Another shrug. 'Thanks. I will assume that you are giving me the go ahead, unless you tell me otherwise', I said with some enthusiasm, sensing a degree of collaboration from Daniel.

Upon consulting Lucy and Tom about this question, Lucy said that she thought that this trouble was painting a pretty dismal picture of who Daniel was. Tom elaborated on this, saying that he thought that this trouble was talking

Daniel into the idea that he was ‘a lazy good for nothing’, a ‘waste of time as a person’, and ‘even that he was useless’. These descriptions were the very ones that Tom and Lucy were giving at the outset of our meeting, but they were no longer being collapsed onto Daniel’s personhood. These descriptions had been deprived of their authority to characterise Daniel.

What a journey we had been on! At the outset of the interview Tom and Lucy had shared with me a number of highly negative identity conclusions that they and others held about Daniel, and I had suspected that Daniel was secretly in agreement with this appraisal of who he was and of what his life was about – that he believed that these conclusions spoke of the truth of his identity, that he felt at one with these. Now, thirty or forty minutes later, in this conversation, we were experiencing the development of some shared sense that these conclusions didn’t speak to the totality of who Daniel was, and that he also had an identity that was somehow separate from, and that even contradicted, these negative conclusions. These negative conclusions no longer represented the truth of who he was.

This opened the door for our work together to become more collaborative. ‘Daniel, what is it like for you to be talked into such negative things about yourself?’ This time Daniel was shrugless in his response. He glanced at his parents, and, taking this as a cue, I asked them: ‘What do you think it is like for Daniel to be talked into such negative ideas about who he is?’ In response, Tom said, ‘I guess that it makes him lonely – and miserable too’. ‘I reckon that he is secretly sad about this’, said Lucy, ‘because I am sure that the wet patches that I sometimes see on his pillow in the mornings are from tears’. I looked at Daniel, wondering whether or not he would confirm this. Suddenly I saw a tear surfacing in the corner of his eye. We all saw it. Daniel turned his head aside, his tear evaporators working overtime. When he looked back the tear had vanished. But things were never the same after this tear. There was a way forward. The existence of this tear was a signal that Daniel had taken a position on the trouble that everyone else had taken a position on. Now, for what seemed like the first time, there was an opportunity for the members of this family to be joined together, with me, in their efforts to break their lives from what had become such a terrible predicament.

Unpacking negative identity conclusions

Externalising conversations, like the one I have just described, represent just one possibility of many in a range of narrative practices. They are by no means a requirement of narrative therapy and, in fact, externalising conversations are very often absent in my own work with the people who consult me. But they can be very helpful in the unpacking of some of the very negative identity conclusions that people bring with them into therapy.

I am sure that you, the reader, have some familiarity with conclusions of this sort - for example, conclusions that one is 'hopeless', 'a failure', 'incompetent', 'unworthy', 'hateful', 'inadequate', and so on. Perhaps you have had some first-hand experiences of such identity conclusions at some time in your own life, even if this has only been to momentarily entertain a sense of failure to be a real therapist when things haven't been working out quite in the way that you hoped they would! This wouldn't surprise me. After all, the sense of personal failure has never been more freely available to us, and has never been more willingly dispensed as it is in these contemporary times. When these negative identity conclusions are more enduring, people experience them to be quite capturing of their lives. Such conclusions are often found to be paralysing of action in regard to the predicaments of people's lives, and can contribute to a strong sense of one's life being held in suspense, of one's life being frozen in time.

Often when describing and demonstrating the utility of externalising conversations, I have illustrated the extent to which these conversations can contribute to the unpacking of people's negative identity conclusions – which I often refer to as thin conclusions (after Geertz's thin description [1973]). In fact, I believe that one of the primary achievements of externalising conversations is this unpacking of the thin conclusions that people have about their own and about each other's identity. In this activity, these conclusions are deprived of the truth status that has been assigned to them – these conclusions cease to carry the authority that they did. I believe that this outcome is readily apparent in the externalising conversation that I had with Daniel and his parents. Perhaps another brief example will serve to further demonstrate the utility of these conversations in depriving these thin conclusions of their truth status:

Jane was referred to me with a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder. The psychiatry resident, Sarah, who made the referral, was hoping that

there was something more that could be done to assist Jane to interrupt the cycle of admissions to hospital. This was a cycle that was fuelled by episodes of cutting, by suicide gestures, and by depression. Early in my conversation with Jane and Sarah, I discovered that Jane believed herself to be a hateful person, and that she hated herself on account of this. In response, and with Jane's permission, I began to interview her and Sarah about the influence of self-hate in her life. This interview was shaped by questions like:

- *What is this self-hate talking you into about yourself?*
- *What seeds is it planting in your mind about who you are?*
- *How does it have you treating your own body?*
- *Does it invite you to nurture your body, or does it require you to reject your body?*
- *Does it have you treating your body with compassion, or does it encourage you to take a hierarchical and disciplinary approach to your body?*
- *What does it want for your connections with other people?*
- *Does this self-hate set itself up as an authority on other people's motives towards you?*
- *How does it do this, and how does this affect your relationships with others?*
- *Would it be okay if I asked some questions to get the low down on how self-hate speaks, and on the forces that support self-hate?*

These and other questions took us into an extended externalising conversation that had the effect of depriving hatefulness of the truth status it had for so long maintained. This first step in our work together was profoundly significant in its contribution to Jane eventually breaking free of the cycle of hospital admissions, to the discovery of her passion for justice, and to her wider engagement with life.

In summary, in here describing and illustrating the utility of externalising conversations, I have given an account of the extent to which these provide a mechanism for the unpacking of negative and disabling identity conclusions. But this isn't all that I have emphasised when the subject is externalising conversations.

Re-authoring conversations

I have also drawn attention to the part that these externalising conversations play in opening space for yet other conversations, ones that contribute to the generation of more positive identity conclusions. And more than this, these other conversations, that at times I refer to as 're-authoring conversations' (for example, see White 1992, 1995), also contribute to the identification of and to the exploration of the very knowledges of life and practices of living that are associated with these positive identity conclusions. It is in this way that these re-authoring conversations (that externalising conversations often make way for) contribute to the thick or rich description of people's lives and of their relationships. This thick or rich description of lives and relationships is generative of a wide range of possibilities for action in the world that were not previously visible. It is in these re-authoring conversations that people step into other experiences of their identity. These re-authoring conversations are actually shaping of, or constituting of, life and identity. To illustrate this point, I will return briefly to the story of Daniel.

Our externalising conversation made way for the expression of alternative identity claims on behalf of all family members. These claims contradicted those associated with the problem-saturated story of their lives. These identity claims were implicit in Lucy's distress about what the trouble had been talking her into about herself as a mother, and in her lament about the extent to which trouble was interfering in what she would otherwise have to express in her relationship with Daniel. Alternative claims about who Tom was as a man and a potential father were implicit in his expressions of despair over his crushed dreams. And alternative identity claims about Daniel were present in Lucy and Tom's account of what the trouble had been talking everyone into about his character, and, as well, in his extraordinary tear.

In subsequent conversations, all of the dreams, hopes, purposes, values and commitments that were expressed in these alternative identity claims were drawn out. Amongst other things, the history of Tom's dreams about fatherhood were traced further back to a pledge he had made with himself at the age of fourteen during some very tough times, a pledge that he had never previously spoken of to Lucy or to Daniel. This was a pledge not to do to any future son of his what was being done to him by his own father. Lucy had the opportunity to speak of the connection between the mothering of Daniel and some of the

significant purposes and values of her life, and to identify those figures of her history that she was linked to in these. She also provided an account of the initiatives that she had taken in her relationship with Daniel that were a reflection of these purposes and values, which were powerfully acknowledged in the context of our conversations. Daniel, with assistance from Lucy and Tom, began to put words to his tear. These included a previously unacknowledged longing for 'friendship' with his parents and others.

As our conversations evolved, the knowledges of life and practices of living associated with these dreams, pledges, purposes, values and longings were richly described. This provided options for all family members to take initiatives in their relationships with each other, initiatives that hadn't previously been available to them. As an outcome of this, trouble ceased to be a significant presence in the lives of these three people.

In summary, I have emphasised and illustrated the potential of externalising conversations to (a) assist people to break from negative identity conclusions, and to (b) pave the way for the introduction of other conversations which contribute to the exploration of and generation of more positive identity conclusions. These positive identity conclusions are not stand-alone phenomena. They are associated with specific knowledges of life and practices of living. On many occasions, upon initial inquiry, these other knowledges and practices are only evident in very thin traces. However, it is my understanding that these knowledges and practices have the potential to significantly shape other ways of being in the world, and other ways of thinking about life. Therefore, if these knowledges and practices can become more richly described throughout the process of therapeutic conversations, then previously unimagined possibilities for action become available to the people who consult us.

I believe the rich description of these other knowledges and practices to be a vital consideration. For the purposes of emphasising this, I will mention the work that I do with men who are referred to me for perpetrating abuse. Amongst other things, the focus of initial conversations is on opening space for these men to take some preliminary steps in assuming responsibility for the abuses that they have perpetrated, and on the development of some understanding of the short-term and potential long-term effects of these abuses on the lives of others. These initial conversations also focus on the deconstruction of the identity conclusions that shape a sense of male supremacy and entitlement, and on the ways of being

in life and thinking about life that are associated with these conclusions. But this is not the end of the story – in fact, it is barely the beginning.

I don't have the assumption that providing these men with an opportunity to challenge these 'truths' about identity, and the ways of being in and thinking about life, that are associated with these truths, is sufficient. I do not hold an assumption that this makes it possible for these men to spontaneously step into more understanding and non-abusive ways of life that are the product of some 'intrinsic' knowledge. Rather, what I understand to be crucially important at this time is to assist these men to engage in extended explorations of other knowledges of life and practices of living that are associated with some of the new identity claims that these men arrive at in these conversations. In this way the particularities of other territories of these men's lives are drawn out, and they finally have another place to stand that is outside of those familiar territories which feature abusive ways of being. I believe that it is only with these more extended explorations of other knowledges and practices of living that a significant and enduring sense of personal responsibility can be embraced.

Naturalistic accounts of life and identity

I hope that I have succeeded in introducing a couple of the key aspects of externalising conversations: how they can assist people to break from negative identity conclusions and how they can open space for further re-authoring conversations which involve the rich description of other knowledges of life and practices of living. I now wish to devote some space to clarifying some misunderstandings which commonly occur in relation to these conversations.

One misunderstanding concerns the idea that the positive identity claims that are richly described in this work are somehow representative of the 'truth' of the identity of the persons concerned – the development of these positive identity claims is regularly taken into modern humanist understandings of life. This misunderstanding persists despite the care that I have taken, in what I have written and taught about narrative practices, to emphasise the historical and cultural basis of all identity claims.

Another misunderstanding concerns the alternative knowledges and practices of living that are identified in re-authoring conversations. These are

often taken to be the 'true' knowledges and the 'genuine' or 'authentic' practices of life, that are considered to be 'intrinsic' or 'unconscious' in nature. However, I have never considered this to be the case. Rather, I have always assumed these knowledges and practices, that shape other ways of going about life, to be the products of history and culture. They have been constructed in and developed in the contexts of the many institutions of culture, including the institution of the family – be that family of origin, family of imposition, or family of choice.

It is in the context of these misunderstandings that narrative practices are portrayed as 'liberatory' practices that are considered to be freeing of people to live a life that is more accurately a reflection of their 'true nature', of their 'essential humanness', and of their 'authenticity'. I believe that this humanist take on narrative therapy is quite understandable, because, in contemporary western culture, humanist discourses have become pervasive in the shaping of our taken-for-granted understandings of most expressions of life. These understandings provide naturalistic accounts of life and identity. In them, identity is taken to be the product of nature, of human nature; a nature made up of 'essences' or 'elements' that are to be 'found' at the centre of who one is. According to this take on life and identity, the problems that people experience are the outcome of forces that are oppressive of, repressive of, or distorting of the essences or elements of human nature. The solution to people's problems that is proposed by these naturalistic notions is to identify, to challenge, and to throw off these oppressive, repressive and distorting forces so that people might have the opportunity to become more truly who they really are, so that they might be free to live a life that is a more accurate reflection of their human nature. According to this version of things, although people's problems can be understood in historical terms – that problems develop over time in the course of people's lives – the account of the solution is on the outside of history. It is a naturalistic account.

Deconstructing naturalistic accounts of life and identity

Now, what is this thing 'human nature'? One thing that is clear is that it hasn't always existed. Another thing that is clear is that, in the history of the concept of human nature, it has not always been the same thing – what are considered to be the primary essences and elements of human nature change from era to era. Here

I will briefly review how human nature has been cast in contemporary western culture. For the purposes of this article, in this review I will restrict my focus to those accounts of human nature that emphasise essences or elements that are considered to be personal properties, and that are routinely referred to as 'resources' and 'strengths'.

If I was to ask you, the readers of this paper, whether or not you possessed any personal properties like strengths and resources, it is my guess that a great many of you would respond in the affirmative: 'Why, of course I have these things'. And if I was to ask you whether these personal properties are relevant to your identity, it is my guess that many of you would again respond in the affirmative: 'Of course. But isn't this true for everyone? These are the building blocks of people's identity'. The existence of these elements or essences of a 'self' that we call strengths and resources is now mostly a taken-for-granted fact. But these essentialist ideas about identity are relatively novel ideas, not just in the history of the world's cultures, but also novel in the history of western culture.

Perhaps some cultural comparison might illustrate this point about the novelty of these ideas in the history of the world's cultures:

I am sitting with a group of elders from several Indigenous Australian communities in the Western Desert area of Australia. I am there with a couple of Aboriginal people with whom I regularly work in partnership, and we are discussing, through an interpreter, an assignment we have been invited to step into by these elders. This assignment has to do with addressing some very significant and pressing predicaments and concerns about developments within their communities, all of which relate to the effects of the invasion and occupation of their country by Europeans over two hundred years ago. In this discussion, I learn about many of the initiatives that have already been taken by these elders to address these predicaments and concerns. They had engaged in these initiatives in circumstances that were highly discouraging them.

I am in awe of these initiatives, and would like to find a way of acknowledging this. My efforts to find ways of acknowledging this awe are shaped by my knowledge of the fact that traditional Aboriginal culture is non-essentialist in its understandings of life and identity. This knowledge is important, for what do you think would be the outcome of me reflecting on what these initiatives said to me about the personal strengths and resources of these elders? Probably, under the circumstances, this would be met with silence in the

context of our campfire meeting. However, if there had already been the development of some trust in our connections, I predict that the response of these elders might have been a not-so-polite version of:

*Why don't you keep that Euro-centred psychological claptrap to yourself?
Do you have to colonise our understandings of life as well as everything else.
When you understand us in these ways you disrespect our ancestors, who are
walking beside us and holding our hands, and who make this work possible.
And you are disqualifying the Dreaming.*

So, although I am sure that most of us unquestioningly affirm the presence of these elements or essences and consider them to be universal phenomena, the possession of personal strengths and resources is not a general global phenomenon. The peoples of many other cultures still do not understand their lives in these ways. Apart from this, these essences and elements of human nature haven't been around for all that long even in mainstream western culture.

The possession of personal properties has been a growing general phenomenon of western culture for several centuries, one that received a considerable boost with the development of the modern liberal theory that provides much of the foundation of the western democratic state. Modern liberal theory enshrines the individual's right to the ownership of private property, and to the exclusive use of and disposal of anything that might be gleaned from this property. An individual may cultivate his/her property to improve one's assets, or mine it in order to capitalise on one's resources. Along with the individual's possession of land that was legitimated in modern liberal theory, was an associated sense of the individual possession of their own identity as a property. It was understood that the self was a manifestation of an internal property, held by individuals, and that this was what gave individuals the ability to use their external property to improve its assets or to garner its resources. This idea of self as a manifestation of specific properties served to legitimate the individual's possession of the fruits of their labour.

In understanding identity as constituted by properties that are owned by individuals, people came to possess themselves. In this possession of the self, it became possible for one to cultivate one's properties to improve one's assets, to mine one's properties in order to capitalise on one's resources, and so on. These

days we experience encouragement from every direction to take possession of ourselves, to engage in the internal farming of our lives through self-cultivation, and to take up internal mining enterprises that have us digging deep to get in touch with our personal resources, and to excavate these resources so that they might be brought to the surface, put into circulation and capitalised on.

I would like to emphasise that in here speaking of the humanist re-interpretation of narrative practices as I have, and of the development of identity as personal property in which can be found elements and essences of a self that are frequently referred to as strengths and resources, it is not my purpose to suggest that these are 'wrong', 'bad' or 'unhelpful' ideas. In speaking of these notions about human nature as I have, it is not my intention to be dishonouring of any ideas held precious by whomever might be reading this article. And in unpacking these humanist understandings in the way that I have, it is not my intention to discredit the many significant achievements of humanism. Further, in speaking of these naturalistic or essentialist understandings of life and identity in the way that I have, I am not suggesting that we can totally free ourselves from, or even that we should attempt to avoid in everyday life, trafficking in these understandings when the cultural context of our lives is contemporary western culture. Rather, it has been my purpose to emphasise the fact that:

- a) these essentialist or naturalistic ideas that today shape our taken-for-granted understandings of life and identity came to the centre stage of western culture in relatively recent history,
- b) human nature has not always been what it now is considered to be, and whatever it is considered to be is always a product of history and culture,
- c) we have not always had identities that are our personal property, nor have we always possessed these essences and elements that are usually referred to as strengths and resources, and that
- d) in taking an opportunity to deconstruct these naturalistic accounts of identity and life, we don't have to be so tied to the unquestioned reproduction of them in our lives and in our work with others.

In this article, I have restricted my focus to the deconstruction of naturalistic accounts of identity that are taken to be personal property. However,

because there are so many naturalistic accounts of identity available to us today that we didn't have in recent history, there seems to be unlimited scope for the deconstruction of the 'things' of modern identity, even the things of relationship identity. For example, take 'relationship dynamics'. None of us have had these things for very long. Relationship dynamics are a development of recent history, and they have become increasingly popular over the past three decades. In fact, this is so much the case that there can now be no question about the general success of relationship dynamics. These days more and more people are having them, and I wouldn't be surprised if many of the readers of this paper have experienced the development of these in their own relationships.

However, despite the success of relationship dynamics, we can ask the question: 'Is it a good idea to have relationship dynamics?' In raising this question, I am not suggesting that people didn't used to have troubles in their relationships, and even misery, prior to the onset of relationship dynamics in the 1960s. And I am not taking a general position for or against the construct of relationship dynamics. But in raising this question we have the opportunity to address other questions¹.

- At what point did these ideas about relationship dynamics come to centre stage in our understandings of relationship?
- What were the historical circumstances that gave rise to these?
- To what use have these ideas been put?
- What did these ideas make possible?
- And what are the limitations and hazards associated with this notion of relationship dynamics?

We could ask the same questions about psychological needs, although they have been around a little longer. We first started having these things in the late 1920s and early 1930s. But it's been in the past four decades that psychological needs have really taken off – the recent historical landscape is dotted with huge outbreaks of these things. These days everybody routinely experiences psychological needs, and understands much of what they do in relation to them.

Limitations and hazards of naturalistic accounts of life and identity

In the following discussion I will draw out what I understand to be some of the limitations and hazards associated with naturalistic accounts of life and identity within the context of therapeutic conversations. But before doing so, I want to acknowledge some of the many valuable contributions of humanism in both the micro- and macro-contexts of life. For example, the idea that one's identity is one's own property, in which can be discovered certain essences or elements of human nature, has been put to work in ways that are challenging of acts of domination and exploitation. For a person to claim to own one's voice can be a powerful strategy in the face of the imposition, by others, of authoritative and negative accounts of one's identity. In this strategy, one truth claim, that is deeply historical and cultural, is employed in acts that are challenging of and refusing of other truth claims that are being imposed by others. And there is a great wealth of examples of the ways in which humanist and liberation philosophies have been put to extraordinary uses within the context of significant social movements.

So then, why, if I can acknowledge many humanist achievements, am I interested in deconstructing popular identity claims that are based on naturalistic accounts of life? This is principally because I believe that in the specific context of therapeutic conversations there are a number of limitations and hazards associated with these naturalistic accounts, and that these invariably outweigh the possibilities associated with these notions. I believe that when alternative identity claims, along with their associated knowledges of life and practices of living, are understood to be representative of people's human nature, options within therapeutic conversations are significantly limited. One foremost concern that I have in regard to this is that if people's preferred identity conclusions are assigned a naturalistic status, and if therapeutic conversations are cast as libratory, this will very significantly reduce the options for therapists to take responsibility for what it is that is being constructed in the name of therapy. And more than this. If the outcome of these conversations is understood to be an expression of human nature or of that which is authentically true about people's lives, it becomes very difficult for therapists to embrace any ethical responsibility for the real effects of their conversations with the people who consult them. Another concern, that

I have already addressed in this article, has to do with the extent to which these naturalistic accounts close options for the rich description of the knowledges of life and the skills of living that are associated with the preferred identity conclusions that are generated in therapeutic conversations.

I will here briefly review just some of the other limitations and hazards that I believe naturalistic accounts of life pose in the context of therapeutic conversations:

1. First, in reading human expression as a surface manifestation of certain elements and essences that are of one's own nature, these naturalistic understandings tie us firmly to the reproduction of the cherished 'single-voiced' individualities that are a hallmark of western culture – these are the encapsulated and relatively isolated individualities that I am sure readers will be familiar with. In reproducing these single-voiced individualities, these naturalistic accounts of life and identity can shut the door on opportunities for people to engage with more multi-voiced experiences of identity. These are experiences in which the voices of some of the significant figures of one's life become more present when it comes to matters of one's identity (see White 1997).
2. Second, these naturalistic accounts of identity construct powerful global or universal norms about life, norms that emphasise notions of 'wholeness', of 'self-possession' and of 'self-containment'. In reproducing these global norms within the context of therapeutic conversations, therapists are implicated as agents in the operations of modern forms of social control. These are forms of social control that are based on the normalising judgement of people's lives. This normalising judgement encourages people to further their efforts in the policing of their own lives in order to close the gap between where they stand in the various continuums of health and development and these culturally constructed norms.
3. Third, these naturalistic accounts of life and identity are intimately related to the modern phenomenon of the production of weaknesses and deficits, and of the disorders and the pathologies. For example, those discourses that contribute to an understanding of identity by evoking elements and essences of a human nature, like strengths and resources, are at one with the discourses that contribute to an understanding of identity by evoking the idea of

weaknesses and deficits – people would not understand their difficulties in life as expressions of weaknesses and deficits if there were no strengths and resources. And therapists would not understand people's expressions in terms of pathologies and disorders if it wasn't for the contrasts provided by naturalistic accounts of life.

4. Fourth, there is the potential for naturalistic accounts of identity to shape understandings that are marginalising of others: 'We managed to get through what others don't survive on account of our personal strengths and resources'. In marginalising others in this way, these naturalistic accounts obscure the contexts of people's lives, including the politics of their experience. This includes conditions of disadvantage that deprive people of the opportunities and material conditions that would make it possible for them to 'get through'. These naturalistic accounts can also be considered to be marginalising on the basis that they obscure the contribution of the 'other' to whatever it is that is taken to be one's preferred identity conclusions, and to the development of one's knowledges and skills of living.
5. Fifth, naturalistic accounts of people's significant achievements encourage wonder and can be discouraging of curiosity. In the context of therapeutic conversations, such wonder invariably provides a fullstop to wider explorations, whereas curiosity brings with it opportunities for more extended conversations that contribute to an appreciation of complexity. As well, when wonder shapes a therapist's responses to the preferred developments of people's lives, in efforts to acknowledge these developments s/he is vulnerable to reproducing the modern practices of applause that feature judgement – 'giving affirmations', 'pointing out positives', 'providing reinforcements', and varieties of 'congratulatory responses'. This closes the door on options for practices of acknowledgement that feature significant retellings of the stories of people's lives, which are much more effective in contributing to the rich description of their identities.

I have here outlined some of the limitations and hazards associated with naturalistic accounts of the significant developments of people's lives. It is my contention that therapeutic conversations shaped by these accounts powerfully restrict what otherwise might be rich conversations – conversations that attend

to the multi-faceted and multi-storied character of all expressions of living. In so doing, many of the alternative territories of people's lives are left unexplored.

Unpacking naturalistic accounts of life and identity

If these naturalistic accounts dead end what otherwise might be rich conversations that attend to the multi-faceted character of all expressions of life, what options are available to therapists when presented with such accounts? One option is to initiate conversations that might be unpacking of these accounts. Just as externalising conversations can unpack people's negative truths of identity, identity conclusions that have been assigned a positive truth status can be taken into conversations that are unpacking of them.

Although processes that are unpacking of naturalistic accounts of identity are not dishonouring or diminishing of treasured understandings, this proposal often presents us with a significant personal challenge. The proposal to unpack our own preferred identity claims can be experienced as an invitation to step onto and to disturb hallowed ground, and at times it is refused on this basis. Facing this challenge can be difficult. It is one that we are often inclined to turn away from and to avoid. The desire to stay comfortable with our familiar and taken-for-granted understandings of life and identity is strong, and it often seems an easier option to proceed to unpack other people's identity conclusions when these are not the one's that we personally favour, and to preserve our own favoured notions by refusing to question these, and by refusing to submit these to conversations that are unpacking of them. But I believe that the refusal of this challenge and the maintenance of this personal comfort can be at a considerable cost – it can contribute to a life lived thinly.

In the context of therapeutic conversations, a decision not to introduce the option of unpacking naturalistic accounts of identity can be very significantly limiting. It can shut the door on a range of opportunities for us to engage the people who consult us in conversations that will contribute to the rich description of their lives and identities. This will exclude a range of potentially exciting explorations of other territories of people's lives, joy-filled engagements with new vistas and horizons of identity, and the sort of delight that is the outcome of

experiencing the unexpected in therapeutic conversations. For it is in the unpacking of these naturalistic accounts of identity that we find so much more than we could have expected to find. Apart from this consideration I believe that a decision not to explore this option will lead to our own lives and our own work being thinly experienced.

Unpacking resilience

I am now sitting with Helen. Her agenda for our conversation is to explore yet more possibilities for addressing the effects of the abuses she had been subject to in her childhood and as a young woman. She considered that she had already managed, with the help of others, to turn back much of this, but wanted to go yet further in what she referred to as the reclaiming of her life. In the early part of our conversation I asked Helen for her understanding of what it was that had seen her through what she had been put through, and of what it was that had contributed to her success in turning back many of the effects of these abuses in the way that she had. In response, Helen said that she thought it was her 'resilience' that had made it possible for her to achieve this. I inquired about the history of Helen's awareness of this resilience, about the first naming of it for herself, and about what this discovery had meant to her.

Helen's responses to my questions put me in touch with the profound significance that she attributed to the discovery of the resilience that she had possessed and expressed through the history of her life. This constituted a highly valued identity conclusion. However, as I began to reflect on my understanding of the significance of this discovery, she said: 'But resilience is not enough. If it was, it wouldn't be necessary for me to be meeting with you now'. I suggested that further explorations of this resilience might provide her with some more avenues for addressing the effects of the abuses she had been through, and requested Helen's permission to ask some questions about this. Helen said that this would be fine. Here I will give just a small sample of these questions. I did not ask these in a barrage-like fashion. Instead, these questions were shaped by and sensitively attuned to Helen's responses.

The first set of questions encouraged Helen to richly describe the ways of being and thinking that resilience is an emblem for:

- When this resilience is most present for you, how does it affect what you do?
- How does it shape how you are in life?
- What does it make possible in your relationships with others?
- How does it assist you to go forward in your life?
- How does it affect what you are thinking at these times?

The second set of questions engaged Helen in richly describing her relationship with resilience:

- Do you know how you have been able to maintain a connection with this resilience through all that you have been through?
- Have there been times in your life at which you could have been dispossessed of this connection?
- What steps did you take to maintain this connection?

The third set of questions provided an opportunity for Helen to richly describe what it was that had been sustaining of her resilience:

- Do you have any thoughts about what it was that was sustaining of this resilience over all these years?
- For example, did you bring some hopes to this resilience?
- Could you say a little about what sort of hopes were sustaining of this resilience?
- Do you know how it was that you were not just resigned to what you had been served up in life?
- How did you get introduced to the idea that life could be different for you?

The fourth set of questions engaged Helen in richly describing her discernment of injustice:

- At what point did you first become conscious of the fact that what you were being put through was not okay? Do you know how you achieved this consciousness?
- What is it that this says about your position on justice and injustice?

- Would it be okay for me to ask you some questions about how this position on justice has been expressed in your history?

In response to these questions, Helen developed a rich description of the social skills and of the very knowledges and practices of life that were associated with this notion of resilience; of the skills or know-how that she had developed and put to work in maintaining her relationship with her resilience; of the hopes that had been sustaining of this resilience, and of how she had been introduced to these hopes; and of her position on justice and of the multiplicity of ways that she had taken this up in her own life and on behalf of others. I will provide here a brief example of just one of the avenues of inquiry that were opened by these questions.

In response to questions about how it was that Helen had been introduced to these hopes that her life might be different, she found herself thinking about her class teacher in her second year at high school – Mrs Murphy. Helen had been going through a particularly hard time, and, on account of this, her attention to school work had been minimal and her concentration in class had been poor. To Helen's surprise, Mrs Murphy hadn't been critical of her over this. Instead, she had been highly considerate and patient, and had been quick to show interest in any constructive contributions from Helen – in fact, Mrs Murphy seemed more interested in these contributions than she was in the performance of the top pupils. As Helen was reflecting on these events of her history, she reached a conclusion that Mrs Murphy must have had suspicions about what she was going through. She also had a stronger realisation about the efforts Mrs Murphy had made to befriend her.

This account of events in Helen's second year of high school opened options for conversations about what it was that Mrs Murphy had appreciated about Helen that others were oblivious to, and about how this recognition and acknowledgement may have contributed to Helen getting through what she had. It also opened options for conversations about what Mrs Murphy's actions reflected about the purposes and values that had been important to her in her career as a teacher, and about whether or not Helen's responses to these actions would have been confirming or disconfirming of these purposes and values. As Helen decided that her responses would have been confirming, I encouraged her to speculate about what it might have been like for Mrs Murphy to experience this from her as a young woman of fourteen years of age. The outcome of this

very touching and quite emotional conversation was that Helen was able to bring forth Mrs Murphy's presence in her life at times of duress. At these times she now had options for summoning Mrs Murphy's voice on matters of her identity, and this was effective in displacing the voices of those who had perpetrated abuses on her life. When Helen was ready, we located Mrs Murphy, who had retired from teaching, She remembered Helen and was enthusiastic to meet her again and to join our conversations. These conversations were glorious, but that is another story.

Here, I have introduced some of the categories of questions and a brief account of one of the conversations that contributed to a relatively thorough-going unpacking of Helen's resilience. It was through this inquiry and conversations like these that Helen achieved her goal of turning back what she had referred to as the 'remnants' of the effects of the abuses of her life. Helen was right. As she had said: 'Resilience isn't enough'. But resilience unpacked was.

A naturalistic account of resilience as a personal property was not enough, but when resilience was seen as an emblem for a range of alternative identity conclusions as well as knowledges about life and skills of living, when the histories of these were more richly described, and when this inquiry encouraged a significant re-engagement with certain figures of her history, many new options for action became available to Helen. These were options that enabled her to turn back the effects of the abuses of her life.

Finally, I will turn to a story that is illustrative of the possibilities that become available to us, as therapists, in the further development of our practices when we have the opportunity to engage in conversations that are unpacking of naturalistic accounts of our work.

Unpacking intuition

Joe, a therapist from a local agency, decided to consult me for supervision. This decision was made in response to a frustration that he was experiencing in his work. In many of his consultations, things just were not working out in the way that he hoped they would. He wanted to be rid of this sense of frustration, and to have a better time of his work. 'Was this frustration a constant presence?', I asked. 'Mostly' he said, 'although there have been the occasional times when I

have been free of it'. I wanted to know how he would account for these times, but Joe found it difficult to define the particularities of this. Eventually he concluded that at these times things seemed to come together for him in almost a fortuitous way, and, if this related to anything that he was doing, it was probably on those occasions that his 'intuitiveness' was present. I inquired about this sense of being intuitive, and discovered that although Joe experienced this to be a highly-prized quality, it was one that was simply too elusive to be relied upon in his day-to-day work.

I wanted to know how things went in Joe's conversations with people when this intuition was present. I heard that at these times he was able to respond in ways in which people 'felt deeply heard and touched', and that these responses seemed to provide a turning point for the people who were consulting him. This was what Joe wanted to experience more of in his work. I asked him if it would be okay for me to ask some questions about his intuition that might be challenging of this notion, but not disrespectful of it. I made it clear that I understood that intuition was something that he treasured, that he may decide not to risk asking questions of it, and that it would be fine should he decide to leave this untouched. I also said that although these questions of intuition were not necessary in order for us to proceed in our work together, the unpacking of this could well be an option that might provide a solution to the frustration that he was having such a difficult time with.

Joe decided to take a chance on this, and invited me to ask some questions of his intuition. So I asked him to catch me up on the circumstances of a recent consultation in which this intuition was featured. He talked about a family that had been consulting him over recent weeks. I interviewed Joe about his experience of intuition in his work with this family, and about his understanding of the family members' responses to his expressions of this. I also interviewed Joe about the events surrounding these expressions. With this information, we then stepped into a conversation that was unpacking of Joe's intuition. This conversation was initiated by a series of questions. I will provide a sample of these here. I did not ask these questions in a barrage-like fashion. Instead, each question was shaped by and sensitively attuned to Joe's previous response.

The first set of questions encouraged Joe to link his therapeutic responses to the invitations offered, by family members, for him to join with them in particular ways:

- *It is my understanding that you experienced this intuition being available to you at a time that your therapeutic responses were being embraced by the people of this family. What awareness do you have of the invitations that had been offered, by family members, for you to join them, in their lives, in the way that you did?*
- *Do you have a sense of which of these invitations you were being most respectful of in your therapeutic responses?*
- *What was it like for you to be invited into these people's lives in this way?*

The second set of questions encouraged Joe to link his expressions to the cues that family members gave about what sort of therapeutic responses would be significant to them. This set of questions also encouraged Joe to provide an account of the skills that he was engaging with that made it possible for him to attend to these cues in the way that he did:

- *This intuition was present at a time when your responses were particularly significant to family members. Do you have any thoughts about what cues they offered about what sort of responses would be significant to them?*
- *Could you provide me with some understanding of how you have developed a sensitivity to such cues? About how you developed these skills in identifying and responding to cues about what therapeutic responses would be more appropriate?*
- *How was this sensitivity expressed in your therapeutic responses?*
- *What can you tell me about some of the contexts of your own life that have provided fertile ground for the development of this sensitivity?*

The third set of questions contributed to the development, on Joe's behalf, of a consciousness of the extent to which some of his therapeutic responses were particularly relevant to the members of this family because they prioritised an agenda that was of shared significance to them all:

- *Intuition was a feature of your work at a time when the people of this family felt that you were honouring of their agenda for the consultation. How did you go about recognising and allocating a priority to an agenda that was of shared significance to the different members of this family?*

- *What thoughts do you have about how you and family members contributed to the negotiation of this shared agenda?*

The fourth set of questions drew Joe's attention to the skills expressed in his 'understanding ways of being' with this family, and that shaped his responses in a manner that was experienced as resonant, by family members, in terms of their understandings of life:

- *It is your sense that this intuition was active when family members felt deeply understood by you, and when you were expressing yourself in ways that seemed to fit well with their familiar understandings of life. What are you aware of in the history of your own personal experience, that may have been taken up in our understanding of the experiences of the members of this family?*
- *Can you think of any other contexts of your life in which you might have become acquainted with, and skilled in, the understanding ways that you expressed here?*
- *And how did these experiences contribute to the shaping of your therapeutic responses in ways that fitted with understandings of life that were familiar to members of this family?*

The fifth set of questions focussed on the identification of some of the general skills and knowledges employed by Joe in the fashioning of his therapeutic responses:

- *Your intuition was reflected to you in the fact that your therapeutic responses made a significant difference to this family. Could I ask you some questions that might assist you to provide an account of the skills or the know-how that shaped your responses, that contributed to them making a difference?*
- *Could you provide me with some account of the knowledges of life that were expressed in your responses?*
- *What thoughts do you have about the historical contexts of your life that have provided a basis for the development of these skills and knowledges?*

In response to these and other similar questions, Joe developed a rich description of the skills and knowledges that he was engaging with in his work with this

family – skills and knowledges for which intuition was an emblem. And in identifying many of the contexts of his life that provided fertile ground for the generation, acquisition, and refinement of these knowledges and skills, he also had an opportunity for a significant re-engagement with his own history. Through this re-engagement with history, the voices of some of the more influential figures of his life were acknowledged, including that of his maternal grandmother, an extraordinary woman who had been a focal point for the working-class community that he grew up in – she had been an unassuming but strong figure who had always been available to support neighbours and friends through times of trouble and desperation, yet never imposed on their lives. In finding new ways of acknowledging the contribution of these figures to his life and work, the voices of these figures were more present for Joe in his ongoing therapeutic explorations.

In subsequent conversations with Joe, there were yet further opportunities to unpack intuition. Within the context of therapeutic conversations, there are many options available to us to render more visible the contributions of the ‘other’ to preferred therapeutic developments and to preferred therapist identity conclusions – that is, to render more visible the contributions made to these developments and identity conclusions by the people who consult therapists. In the example given above, these contributions included the family-member initiated cues and the invitations that had been extended to Joe, which had been identified and acknowledged in our earlier conversations. Following this, we had further conversations in which we extended our understandings of the contribution of this family to what it was that Joe had identified as intuition.

Such contributions are invariably significant, yet rarely acknowledged. People who consult therapists often go to some lengths in persevering with their therapists through thick and thin. In these efforts, these people are often very understanding of therapists when they lose the plot, are quick to validate therapists when they are on track, and are encouraging and supportive of those therapist responses that strike a chord for them. As well, many of the conversations had with people touch therapists in ways that are sustaining of them in their own lives and in their work with others. When these contributions can be identified and acknowledged in the course of therapeutic conversations, people become aware of options for furthering their partnerships with the

therapists they are consulting. In these circumstances, therapists are less likely to experience a sense of burden, and more likely to find their work invigorating.

With the unpacking of intuition, which was for Joe a preferred identity conclusion, and with the rich description of many of the knowledges and skills that this intuition was an emblem for, the frustration that had been so troublesome to Joe dissipated. What had been relatively intangible – intuition – was now something tangible that could be known in its more intimate particularities. These skills and knowledges were now more available to Joe to reproduce in his work with other people seeking consultation, and he began to have a uniformly better time of this work.

Conclusion

In this paper I have described a number of aspects of narrative practice. In the story of Daniel and his family and of the preliminary steps taken to establish a shared position in relation to trouble, and in the story of Jane breaking from self-hate, I have presented accounts of the ways in which externalising conversations can assist in the unpacking of people's negative identity conclusions. I have also addressed the importance of an appreciation of the fact that the unpacking of these conclusions is not enough. Alternative knowledges of life and practices of living, that in the first place are often only visible as faint traces, must be more richly described in order to create new possibilities for action and life. These other knowledges and practices can be understood in various ways. I have proposed that naturalistic accounts of these knowledges and practices, that interpret these as expressions of essences and elements of a 'human nature', are relatively new understandings of life, and that these are culturally and historically specific understandings. Further, I have suggested that, within the context of therapeutic conversations, these naturalistic accounts bring with them particular hazards and limitations that tend to outweigh the possibilities associated with them.

In the retellings of the story of Helen and of the unpacking of resilience, and the story of Joe and of the unpacking of intuition, I have described some of the options that become available for therapeutic conversations when we move

beyond naturalistic accounts and into the realms of history, culture and family. It is through this unpacking of these naturalistic accounts that we come to know the history of alternative knowledges of life and practices of living. It is through this unpacking that we come to know how people's lives are linked to the lives of others around shared themes and values. It is through this unpacking that we can engage with the unexpected. This, I believe, can make all the difference.

Note

1. The questions that I provide here are Foucauldian.

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