**Reflection 10: Thinking behind Practice**

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This year of Narrative Therapy learning has provided an opportunity for me to rethink and evaluate many things I held to be true as a part of community work, wellbeing and the helping professions overall. It feels fitting to finish the reflections component of the course with reflections on normativity, post structuralism, decolonisation and anti-colonialism. This year has been, in part, like learning another language. For me, it is a language that has journeyed between the meta (the philosophies, histories and tracing of narrative practice, counselling, sociology and anthropology) and the micro (how the meta influences interactions, the personal and the structures of talking). The readings this month, as most narrative readings do, combined both.

In `Decolonising our lives: Driving a post-colonial therapy’ Makungu Akinyela writes, “post structural therapies instead honour, acknowledge and build upon the healing knowledge of those who seek counselling” (Akinyela, 2002). Akinyela’s articulated core principles of narrative practice acknowledge the potential of the narrative space, that includes storytelling and ‘creating meaning through call and response’ and on this way, Akinyela reminds me narrative practice can be anti-oppressive and anti-colonial but it is through reflection, consultation and thinking that it is made possible. Akinyela’s article reminds me too that in a modernist and structuralist setting, the role of the therapist is to impose meaning, interpretation and their ‘cure’ (Akinyela, 2002). An assumption, as Akinyela says, that we (the therapist) can hold the secrets of the meaning of somebody else’s life (Akinyela, 2002). It is revelatory to learn what can be meant by ‘post structural and post colonial therapies’- how that informs our thinking as practitioners but also how this thinking can be enacted in our professional work and individual contexts.

David Denborough’s article, ‘Travelling Down the Neuro-Pathway….’ raised a number of ideas and questions that are new to me: the ideology of ‘brainhood,’ individualism as a part of enacting western colonisation, ‘supreme value’ given to individuals as ‘autonomous agents of choice and initiative’ (Denborough, 2019) and ‘neuro-conceal’- a practice within the helping professions, through focusing so intimately on measuring changes in our brain, that we “conceal” or subordinate the external and political context. As Denborough points out, narrative therapy seeks to couple emotion, meaning and action and in this way reinforces that these processes are not separate from politics.

In reading Denborough’s article I reflected on the ways practices and approaches are measured. That is, Denborough discusses how researchers are considering changes in neuro-biology through narrative therapy. For him (and for me) it does raise the questions of how we evaluate changes for a person and asks;

“Is it more important that through externalising conversation, and near-naming of experiences it releases neuro-transmitters that are soothing OR should we be looking at the ways externalising conversations may influence the quality of relationships for that person outside of the therapy room?” (Denborough, 2019).

A regular process of the helping professions is to measure change. As a way of evaluating if a practice, approach, or discipline works, the assessment as valuable, useful and largely positive is embedded in our empowerment to use them. I wonder if we used different structures, different points of view that honour and build upon healing knowledge- if we may find different possibilities for the helping professions to be transformative. I think of the video by Tileah Drahm-Butler; ‘decolonising identity stories’ includes rethinking viewing people in a damage centred way and challenging the idea that supports those who seek the counselling process as deemed to have a problem (Drahm-Butler, 2015).

Through this course I learned that counselling is not a neutral act, that it is not a-political and in the process of it, we have the potential to colonise people’s own meanings. In my experience, this idea of neutrality also colonises people’s experiences in doing their work and in workplaces, that is a ‘taken-for-granted-notion’ that in the helping professions, being neutral and showing ‘no emotion’ is a healthy and important way of surviving as a worker.

These readings invited me to consider the ways that as workers we have our own meanings colonised. It prompted me to consider what might be made possible in the structures of peer ‘supervision’, group supervision and group practice. In Wednesday workshops at the Dulwich Centre, we talk often about the ways systems, professions and community organisations are structured to support colonising, structuralists understanding of what people who seek care. Much of these conversations (and conversations I have had in the workplaces too) bring to light how common the experience of frustration and concern exists over the way folks are pathologized and judged in these settings.

I think about the future importance, for me, of group practice, the questions and thinking that informs the way we express our experiences and the ways inviting discourse and normativity into the room might be transformative in the ways we enact resistance in systems that might feel insurmountably rigid. I think of ‘Stories from Sri Lanka- responding to the tsunami’ by Shanti Arulampalam as a place to look. The processes Arulampalam write about, as a structure, includes suggestions of questions addressing identity, power/neutrality and utilising an alternative assessment rubric that considers skills, knowledge as well as vulnerabilities and I wonder how this could be translated into group/peer supervision setting.

This last reflection has been, in a sense, learning one of the last parts of the thread. The year has felt like a process of learning the skills and practices of narrative and this last month has been filling in the foundation. The words that come to mind following this learning are: the core, roots, and the history.

**References**

​​VIDEO: [Decolonising identity stories by Tileah Drahm-Butler](https://dulwichcentre.com.au/decolonising-identity-stories-by-tileah-drahm-butler/)

‘Post-structuralism and therapy – what’s it all about’ compiled by Leonie Thomas. In Russell & Carey. *Narrative Therapy: Responding to your questions*

‘Broadening the horizon: Looking beyond individualism/collectivism’ by David Denborough *Chapter 9, Collective Narrative Practice*

[Stories from Sri Lanka – responding to the tsunami, Shanti Arulampalam](https://dulwichcentre.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Avoiding_psychological_colonisation_Stories_from_Sri_Lanka_responding_to_the_tsunami_Shanti_Arulampalam.pdf)

[De-colonizing our lives: Diving a post-colonial therapy, by Makungu Akinyela](https://dulwichcentre.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Decolonizing_our_lives_Divining_a_post-colonial_therapy_by_Makungu_Akinyela.pdf)

[Travelling down the neuro-pathway: Narrative practice, neuroscience, bodies, emotions and the affective turn by David Denborough *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work, 2019, #3*](https://dulwichcentre.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Travelling-down-the-neuro-pathway-by-David-Denborough-1.pdf)