

Reconstructing life journeys: Group work with young women who experience mental illness

by
Little Lit Siu-wai¹

This article describes creative work with a group of young women who have been suffering from mental illness for several years. The work conveyed here builds upon the metaphor of a journey of life (see McPhie & Chaffey 1998) and adapts this to a Hong Kong context.

Keywords: *mental health, group work, narrative therapy*

People suffering from mental illness used to be labelled as 'abnormal' in the dominant discourse of Hong Kong society. This pathological label has had many negative influences on those subjected to it. It has contributed to experiences of marginalisation and to the generation of negative identity conclusions. Those experiencing mental health difficulties have often led isolated lives.

I have been working here in Hong Kong in the field of mental health rehabilitation for some time now. In witnessing the difficulties faced by those who consult our service, I started to think about the diagnosis of mental illness and the ways it affects people's lives. I have come to feel uncomfortable about the power of scientific definitions of mental illness, and how so often the people who are suffering most have no say at all in defining what is taking place for them. Too often they are helpless in front of mental health experts. At the same time, I am consistently surprised by the ingenuity and creativity demonstrated by those whose lives consist of considerable hardship.

The project described in this paper aims to deconstruct the dominant discourse of people suffering from mental illness and to create opportunities for a group of young women to generate rich descriptions of alternative/preferred stories of their lives. The groups described here were an opportunity for these young women to actively re-define their own lives.

The idea for this project was sparked by two articles: 'Companions on a Journey – an exploration of an alternative community mental health project' (Dulwich Centre 1997) and 'The journey of a lifetime: Group work with young women who have experienced sexual assault' (McPhie & Chaffey 1998). It was from this second paper that the metaphor of the journey of life has been borrowed, because it conveys a sense of movement and possibilities – even when the journey is at times difficult. Many of the ideas that we used in the group were first described by Lisa McPhie and Chris Chaffey.

The group members

The group consists of six people and me. Five of the group members are young women aged 19-24 who have been suffering from mental illness for several years. All of these young women attend a Training and Activity Centre. The sixth member of the group is the person in charge of this Centre. She is also a young woman and joined the group to learn more about the use of narrative practices in a group context.

Pre-group meeting

I had never met these young women before the group began, so before the formal meetings started we had an informal pre-group discussion. We got to know one-another and each young woman talked a little bit about their reasons for joining the group. I also took the opportunity to explain a little about the narrative approach.

Session One: Getting to start

The metaphor of the journey was introduced in this session. I had prepared different things to put on the floor such as stones, leaves, flowers, rubbish and footprints. We all walked hand-in-hand amongst these objects. Time to time we stopped and spoke about the images that these objects evoked for us.

A passport for the journey was then given to every group member. They were asked if they were willing, with the support of the group members, to go on a journey together. If they were willing they indicated this by signing the passport.

In the second half of the session, I asked about any 'hopes and fears' that group members had in starting this journey of reconstruction. They were asked to write down their hopes and fears in two worksheets and then share these with one another.

During this process, I asked several questions including:

- In going on this journey, what is your starting place?
- How would you describe this starting place?
- How do you feel in the starting place?
- What name would you give to this starting place?
- Where would you like for this journey to take you?

- What would be different standing there at the other end of your journey?
- How might you get there?
- Will there be any obstacles in the process?
- What might these be?
- What motivates you to go on this journey?
- What are your hopes for this journey?
- Have you always had this hope?
- What is the history of this hope?

Finally, the young women were invited to draw a picture to represent the life journey they were on and to give this picture a title. Sharing these pictures was the last thing we did in this session.

After each group session, I would write every member a letter referring to what they had mentioned in the group. My hope was that this would create further space for each young woman to think about the unique outcomes or the skills and knowledges that they had identified in the group session.

Here's an example of one of these therapeutic letters:

Dear May,

One of the things that captured my attention in the group today was the picture you drew: the tiny green grass in your bare field. As you explained, you still have hope for your future even though the field looks bare. May, what effect does this positive thinking and action have in your life? Can you identify any event from the past that reflects your spirit of 'never give up'?

Do you remember that in the group, Maggie said that this tiny green grass is tough and that it can grow in difficult environments? I strongly believe that with this toughness, you can change your bare field into a beautiful field of flowers. What do you think?

Yours,

Little.

Session Two: A Bullshit Book

The objective of this session was to deconstruct the dominant discourse relating to people suffering from mental illness. In the beginning, I asked the group members to list the adjectives that the public regularly used to use in describing people with mental health difficulties. The young women were asked to share how these descriptions affect them.

After this sharing, I asked the young women if they agreed with these descriptions. They did not, so I then introduced the idea of the 'bullshit book' (McPhie & Chaffey 1998). The 'Bullshit Book' is designed to contain all the lies and myths that are sometimes presented as the truth about mental illness. Hence, the group members were then invited to fill in all the 'bullshits' they heard people say about those with mental illness. By doing so, the members were able to externalise these beliefs about mental illness and it created room for these young women to talk about how they were not problematic. More than this, the young women were then asked to describe one event in their lives when they were not affected by these 'bullshits'.

The young women were so excited during this process! The spoke out loudly: 'We are not crazy', 'We are not the burden of the society', and so on.

Here is an example of a letter I wrote after this particular session:

Dear Maggie,

I was very much impressed by your footnote in the 'bullshit book' – these are all bullshits!

As you said, sometimes our family members believe in the 'bullshits', and sometimes even we do. However, I was happy to hear from you that with the encouragement and support of your teachers, the 'bullshits' cannot function anymore. This is proved by the ways in which you are being able to continue your study and prepare yourself for entering university.

Do you think the ideas we listed in the bullshit book will affect you again? If they try to do so, what will you do? How do you think the group can help?

*Warm regards,
Little.*

Session Three: Knowing the Tactics of Voices

In this session, by using externalising practices I intended to assist the group members to openly describe the tactics of the voices that they were hearing (White 1995; Williams 2003; S. de Valda 2003; M. de Valda 2003; Bullimore 2003). By doing so, I hoped this would assist them in revising their relationships with the troublesome voices. I first shared someone else's story and then the young women were encouraged to share with one another the history and content of the voices that they hear. In this sharing, the

members realised that one of the key tactics of the voices was to alienate them, to isolate them until they 'surrendered'.

Through this conversation, the group members were also able to identify times and events in their lives when the voices were not able to affect them, or at least when the effects of the voices were lessened. In other words, I asked them to identify unique outcomes in relation to the effects of the voices. The questions I asked included:

- When did you start hearing voices?
- What was the content of the voice?
- How did the voice affect you?
- Is there any time that the voices can't affect you?
- How have you tried to resist the disturbances of the voices?

The young women were aware of the negative effects of the voices and they began to share the ways in which they try to minimise them. Some of the skills that they described included: switching on and off the light; singing a cartoon song; instructing the voice to stop; and telling the voice to wait for five minutes before she talked to them. While these strategies did not always work, the young women expressed how helpful it was to be able to share ideas.

What also became clearer during our conversation were the ways in which the voices reflect dominant cultural discourses. For instance, we discovered that the voices promoted the dominant cultural idea that people with higher education were worth more respect than those with lower education. These sorts of discoveries, and this deconstruction of the content of the voices, were invigorating for the young women. They said that they believed that if they shared more conversations together about the voices then perhaps they would be able to get the upper hand.

For some group members we were able to identify a positive voice and to elevate the status of this (White 1995):

Dear Sandra,

You explained in the group that you have an imaginary friend who is loyal to you. You spoke of how you can share with her freely. I wonder what you have learned from her about friendship?

I was so impressed when you said that you can control the emergence of this imaginary friend by 'switching on and off the light'. This sounds like a special friendship and I look forward to hearing more about it.

*Warm regards,
Little.*

We also developed a document together entitled 'To unveil the mask of voices':

To Unveil the Mask of Voices

1. The voices tried to manipulate us in the past. But now, we realise that we can resist them, and even control them.
2. We understand that these voices try to take up our life by encouraging us to evaluate ourselves, by making us anxious, panicky and insecure.
3. Now we have confidence that we are able to fight back against these voices. If we stand together, love ourselves and respect ourselves, the voices will lose.
4. Here, we declare that we will stand together, determined to build a bright future. The voices will no longer manipulate us!

Session Four: Life Journey Chess

The purpose of this session was to consolidate the members' experience of the past three group meetings. To do so we developed a game that we called 'Life Journey Chess'. This involved the group members revising the skills and knowledge they had mentioned in the previous sessions. For instance, the members were asked to point out three 'bullshits' about people with mental illness, and then to tell us three skills that they use to prevent the effects of voices, and then to describe three ways in which they enjoy life.

During this process, the skills they mentioned were written on a card and delivered to them. By the end, the number of cards they had represented the numbers of skills they possessed in moving forward in their life journey. We were all very excited because we each held many cards in our hands. To end the session, we celebrated one another by shaking hands.

Dear Ada,

Thanks for your initiative to prepare the warm-up game for the group. We enjoyed the game very much!

In playing 'Life Journey Chess' I was impressed by your ways of enjoying life. You told us many of the different things you enjoy such as watching television or going to the cinema with friends. I think in our busy lives, simply to enjoy life is not easy. How is it that you are able to make friends with different people? I would be interested to know more about how you do this.

I think I might try your suggested ways to relax myself.
Warm regards,
Little.

Session Five: Searching for our own good

This week I wished to identify the skills and knowledge the group members had neglected. But due to translation, I used the term qualities instead of skills and knowledge. To begin, I played an auction game with the group members. I listed out many different qualities, such as tough, positive thinking, responsible and reliable etc., which the group members could then 'buy' in the auction. This provided a chance for the young women to discuss which qualities in life they particularly value and why.

In the second part of the game, the members were asked to speak about one quality that they valued and to describe an occasion or event in which they had demonstrated this quality. I was very moved by the stories that were shared, because they evoked preferred identity conclusions. As the conversation evolved, the alternative stories of people's lives became more richly described. For instance, one young woman had selected the quality of 'being responsible'. When we asked if there was any occasion that reflected this quality, the member was delighted to tell us that she is now able to wake up very early in the morning (she used to wake up in the late afternoon) to join in a fund-raising program. She described how she had a responsibility to attend this program, because the sponsors had given her the money earlier, and being able to fulfil this responsibility was something that she valued. Listening to this, we all clapped hands. I would like to point out that this was not exemplary, all the alternative stories that the young women shared were very significant!

One young woman described that she was a brave person as she had been able to speak in Mandarin with a group of strangers. Other group members discussed their positive thinking, their acts of optimism and their toughness in times of hardship. Each young woman was able to speak about the particularities of the alternative stories that were linked to these qualities so as to build up alternative identity conclusions.

Finally, the group members were asked to write a letter to another group member. This letter focused on their experience of listening to each other's alternative stories. The letters described what had captured their attention the most and why.

At the end of the group I also wrote a short letter to each of the young women.

Dear Sandra,

It was good to hear you talk about 'trustworthiness' today. All the people involved did show their trust in you even though the money bag had been lost. What was it, do you think, that you had done before this to earn people's trust in this way? What was it that they saw you do that made them know that you were worthy of trust?

Have you always been 'trustworthy'? What is the history of this in your life? Did someone teach you to be trustworthy ... how did you learn this? And why is it important to you?

You told us how this trustworthiness not only facilitated your work, but it also helps you to make friends with various people. In the future, how could this quality further help you in your work and in your relationship with others?

Warm regards,

Little.

Session Six: Re-membering Practice

Having identified the young women's skills and qualities, this session intended to identify the significant persons who had positive effects on their lives. To facilitate the conversation about this, I circulated a 'magic memory box' claiming that while a person held this box, the magic power would help them to re-member (White 1997a) one valued person in their life. We then tried to summarise the qualities that this person had and how they had influenced the

young women's lives. We wrote this down on pieces of paper which we placed inside the magic memory box (see below).



The young women were also invited to share one recent successful experience and to imagine what the re-membered person would say about how this experience reflects on the young women's identities.

Holding the memory magic box, the members were able to identify the significant persons and described in detail how these persons affected them positively in times of hardship. For instance, three members recalled how their mothers had always taken good care of them when they were in hospital. The other two group members identified how their friend and sister modelled persistence for them in the face of difficulties. The stories told by the young woman who is in charge of the Centre were very moving in this particular session.

I then introduced the concept of a ‘life club’ (White 1997a) and each young woman decided who (friends, family, acquaintances, workers, pets) would be formally included in their life club, and who would not. At the end of the session, each young woman was given ‘life club membership cards’ (see below) which they could then give to those they had selected as members.



Dear Karen,

‘This little girl has grown up.’ This is the sentence you thought the lady you re-membered would say if she met you again. This is a simple sentence but it reflected a very touching story.

Today, you have grown up. From your sharing in the group and the genuine concern you show towards the group members, I can see the seed that was planted in you by that lovely lady. If she had been here today and she realised her influence on you, what do you think she would say to you? What would be the effect on her life when she saw your thanksgiving tears and the ways in which you treasure her? This is a beautiful image and I am sure she would a VIP (Very Important Person) in of your life club.

Warm regards,
Little.

Session Seven: Planning a next step of the journey

This session aimed to help the members plan a concrete short-term goal in the near future. It was the woman in charge of the Centre who articulated that it would be

important for the group members to plan for their future, as they had to leave the Activity Training Centre in one year.

There were three steps in this planning. Firstly, the members were invited to calculate their strengths – their skills and knowledges. We wrote down on stickers the skills, knowledges and qualities that they had demonstrated and discussed over the previous sessions, and then stuck these stickers on their bodies. Secondly, the young women spoke to each other about their concrete plans. And finally, each group member wrote a card to the other group members to support them in their journey.

All the members were happy to see so many stickers on their body. It increased their confidence and made it more possible to think about the future. The plans they developed were very concrete and practical, so much so that some of the young women started to put these plans into action even before we had finished the session. This was a very positive experience.

Dear Yu,

Looking back on the group today, I remember your concrete plans very well. You plan to wake up before nine every alternate day. You spoke about how you thought this will be possible because recently you had a successful experience in getting up very early in the morning to rush to the airport to say goodbye to a friend.

Besides, I also remember your VIP member of your life club, your mother. Are there ways in which you and your VIP member will be able to work together to help you to achieve this plan?

Warm regards,
Little.

Session Eight: Stepping forward on the journey

This was the last group session. I tried to prepare the young women for leaving the group and moving on in the journey of their lifetime. To do this I invited them to interview one another together by asking the following questions:

- What impressed you most in the group? Why?
- What values did this reflect?
- How did this group help you to continue your life journey?

Most of the members described that the two things that had impressed them the most were the mutual sharing of the group members, and realising the qualities which they each demonstrated in their lives. The young women said that they had appreciated how enjoyable the groups had been.

Towards the end of the session, we declared that we were willing to continue our life journey by creating and then speaking out loud the following document: 'Our Determination to Continue the Life Journey'.

Our Determination to Continue the Life Journey

1. We have decided to continue our life journey, even though we knew that there might be difficulties and hazards in the future. These backlashes will not block us from going on.
2. We know very well that we are the authors of our lives and we are sure that we can write a beautiful future.
3. We strongly believe that we are unique and that we each have various life qualities. We are worthy and we have the ability to re-write the darkness past and to build bright futures.

Creating this document and reading it out was a very symbolic action.

Finally, we shared a very delicious dinner together.

Reflecting on the group

There were a number of factors that contributed to this group being a good experience for all us, group members and facilitator alike! I will just mention some of these here.

Therapeutic Documentation

Various therapeutic documents were created during the life of the group and these contributed significantly. The passports symbolised the willingness of the young women to move forward in their life journey. Handbooks were used to record the skills and knowledge that were identified in the groups as helpful in resisting the effects of problem situations. And we also made use of several declarations in the group. We declared our realisation over the tactics of voices; we

declared that we were the masters of our own lives; and we declared that we would continue our life journey even though we knew that there might be difficulties in front of us.

Letter writing also became a common practice in this group. Not only did I write a letter to each member after each session, but some of the young women also responded with their own letters. In fact, one of the group members replied to every letter that I wrote to her and the content of her replies became richer and richer. At the end of the group, each young woman was asked to write me a letter about their feedback to the group.

These different forms of therapeutic documentation contributed to making the group's conversations live on beyond the sessions themselves. Each time a document was created we knew that this would be available for the young women to refer to in the future. In this way the group's influence would continue.

Slogans and Songs

We also created slogans within the group, which is something that fits well with Chinese culture. In every group session we would collectively speak out these slogans. The ways in which the group members spoke changed over time.

In the beginning, these slogans were expressed as hopes and wishes. By the end, these slogans came to represent our spirit, our determination to move on with the journey. Here are some of the translations of our slogans:

- To rewrite the darkness past, to wait for the bright future.
- An unfinished trip, a new trip.
- Let's remember the joy, let the joy be our memory.

This final slogan was created after the session on remembering conversations. In this conversation one participant had said: 'If you remember the sorrow/painful experience, then the sorrow/painful experience becomes your memory'. Another member re-phrased this slightly to be 'let's remember the joy, let the joy become our memory'.

Participation in the discussions

Throughout this process, the young women became significant members of each other's club of life. The way in which this happened was important. One of the young women reflected in her feedback that in the groups she was sometimes naughty and made fun with the others. For this young woman this was a unique outcome. She said that this 'version of herself' never appears in other situations. She said

she liked this version of herself very much and described how the group had assisted in constructing her identity in this way. She gave thanks to every group member for this.

As the young women embraced the alternative stories of their lives, and as these were witnessed and authenticated by the other group members, this was reflected in people's increasing involvement in the group. For instance, as the weeks progressed the young women initiated warm-up games in the beginning of every session: they began to lead us in singing songs and playing the guitar while others prepared snacks for the members.

As this occurred, it enabled me as a facilitator to remain de-centred (White 1997b). In addition, the Life Journey Chess game, the auction game and the magic memory box all enabled me to step back and for others to step forwards.

During the group, I often noticed that, once they were given the opportunity, these young women would talk about certain 'stalled initiatives' of their lives (White 2003). As space was created for them to speak about the particularities of the alternative stories of their identity, however, these stalled initiatives became 'un-stalled'.

In this way, it was not me as the worker who tried to teach or to force these young women to take certain actions in their lives. Instead, creating a context which enhanced the personal agency of the group members allowed them to explore new possibilities and directions. It was a pleasure to be with them on this portion of their journey of life.

Note

1. Little Lit Siu-wai is a narrative practitioner in Hong Kong and works at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. She can be contacted via email: sslitswa@polyu.edu.hk or in writing to: Department of Applied Social Sciences, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Kowloon, Hong Kong.

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