

# The legacies of history

## From an interview with John Prowell

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As an African-American man, I was trained in conventional psychology in ways that encouraged me to see my clients in pathological ways, and to ignore the cultural factors which influenced their lives. For years, I missed opportunities in my conversations with other African-American people because I wasn't aware of my own history and our people's history - and the ways in which these relate to oppression and survival. Exploring the cultural narratives of my own life, and having these acknowledged and witnessed by others has significantly changed my life and the ways in which I understand it (see Prowell, 1999). Now, as a therapist, it is my hope to create contexts in which others can explore the cultural stories of their lives.

In order to understand the relationships that African-American people have with the problems in their lives it is necessary to explore stories of culture and history. Many young African-American people with whom I work, for example, due to the influence of internalised racism, have come to believe stories of self-hate.

Dr. Molefi Asante has presented on some of the ways in which these stories of self-hate are created (reference the conference). Dr Asante describes how members of dominated groups have their time, space and memory stolen and how this disorients and marginalises them. He also speaks of the ways in which this process contributes to crazyness and prevents opportunities for action and self healing.

His words echo in my mind and soul and help to explain to me why I did not know much about my own African heritage. They also explain the experience of many African-Americans who go to therapy and are pathologized for behaviors which, in actuality, are associated with oppression and self-hate.

The ways in which African-American people understand their lives are linked to the histories of this country, although sometimes they may not even be aware of this. When working with the young African-American people I was referring to above, the challenge for me is to find an answer to the question:

'How might the telling of their stories move them beyond the grasp of self-hate?'

### **Beyond pathology**

I have found useful the idea of externalising self-hate, locating it in its broader social context and the histories of racism in this country. This can assist in separating people from the problem-saturated description of themselves. Often this is not easy as stories of pathology have been built since childhood and have followed the young person into high school. What may have begun as a logical action in response to a situation of an African-American family may have been constructed as pathology, and then interwoven with stories of self-blame and self-hate.

Sometimes it is possible to intervene early. Tony is an African-American child who came with his father to consult with me. Tony had been diagnosed with ADD, and his father, Ed was becoming increasingly frustrated that his son did not understand the seriousness of the situation.

After an externalising conversation, Tony came to describe his ADD as 'Homie' (home-boy - another name for a friend, someone from the neighbourhood). "Homie" had Tony believing that there was no need for him to work or to focus. This had been going on for some time and was straining the father/son relationship.

I asked if it would be all right for me to interview Ed, with his son as an outsider witness to the conversation. I hoped that giving Tony a chance to speak about the effects of the influence of "Homie" on his life would make it more likely for father and son to be able to join against the problem.

It was only once we had begun this interview that the cultural meanings of the situation became more apparent. Ed spoke of his growing concern. He was afraid that his son was not going to succeed in white society. Ed had himself once been a member of a gang, and had needed to overcome a great deal in his own

life. He was extremely afraid that Tony was not going to find a way through life. Up until this time Ed had only been able to express his frustration rather than the history that was influencing his fears.

When I asked Tony what it meant to hear his father speak in this way, he reflected that his father had seen very difficult times. Tony, exhibiting sadness, said that it was new for him to understand the difficulties that were part of his father's history.

Through the initial externalising conversation, ADD (or "Homie") was able to be separated somewhat from Tony. In the interview with Ed we were then able to explore some of the cultural aspects of life and experiences of both son and father.

If these cultural stories have no forum in which they can be spoken it can lead quickly to division people who love one another. We are now, the three of us, working together in relation to reducing "Homie's" effects on Tony's life.

We are cautious about the use of medication in such a situation, and the conversations we are sharing are opening many possibilities for exploration.

### **Cultural story in substance abuse**

In working with people around issues of substance abuse, such as cocaine addiction, I am curious about how people can externalize their addiction. I requested one man, I'll call him Jake, to look at ways in which he could externalize his cocaine addiction. When he returned the following week, he indicated that he had identified cocaine as "white supremacy." It had told him that he needed the "coke" to succeed in the "white world."

The cultural story Jake shared with me was so moving that at times I found myself partially in tears. I had not heard anyone speak so clearly about how an addiction was the result of racism. Essentially, what effected me was how racism had limited Jake's access to the world of music and education.

Early in Jake's life he had been diagnosed with ADHD and placed in a 'Special Education' class. He said that he did not learn anything in this class. When he asked to take the music class he was told he could not participate in the music lessons because of his diagnosis. Instead, he was told to go out for football because he was large for his age. Jake stated that what he learned in football was how to take his rage out on his opponents and how to hurt people. He gained the appearance of a motivated athlete.

Jake expressed that it made all the difference in understanding these earlier events in his life to take into consideration the cultural and ethnic components. This had not been possible in previous therapeutic conversations he had had.

I was so taken by Jake's story that I shared with some of my colleagues how it had affected me. They became quite curious themselves and wanted to ask various questions. Their curiosity served as a reflecting team. When I next saw Jake I shared with him what had transpired and asked if it would be okay for me to do an interview with him using the questions that had been posed by my colleagues. He agreed to doing this and we taped the interview. Here are some of the questions that were asked:

1. What did cocaine tell you about your life and yourself?
2. How did cocaine lie to you?
3. What methods did cocaine use to convince you that what it was saying about you and your life was true?
3. What plan(s) did you have for yourself that cocaine would not accept?
4. How did you come to see through cocaine's lying ways?
5. What truths have you used to be able to recover from cocaine's grip?
6. What would you advise other people who are listening to cocaine about how to see through cocaine's lies?
7. What truths may others be neglecting about themselves under cocaine's influence?
8. What plans do you have now for your life that cocaine wouldn't permit before?
9. What steps have you taken toward your own truths and away from cocaine's lies?
10. What steps would you advise for others to take from cocaine's lies toward their own truths?
11. What lies does cocaine still have that might trip you up, to convince you to come under its influence?
12. What have you learnt so far that you might apply in order not to fall for cocaine's lying ways?

### **Contextualising problems**

Many times the problems that people are experiencing have cultural roots. For example, it may open possibilities for action to contextualise the anger and rage being expressed by an African-American young man within his personal, family and people's

history. Alternatively, the protectiveness with which a family may be treating a young woman (and which maybe causing tension between daughter and parents) may perhaps only be understood in the context of how so many families who have been through trauma with no recourse seek to shelter their children from hardship.

In both these sorts of situations, explorations of history can lead to unexpected discoveries. When we begin to trace the history, people often do not fully comprehend the effects of the social context in which their families lived. Often it requires curious questions and a respectful audience to create a context in which people can reconnect with their own histories.

The idea is to invite people to tell the cultural stories that have influenced their family, and to inquire as to how these stories have served them over the generations. There may be aspects that have served them well. There may be others that are now being questioned by a new generation.

A conversation might explore how an African-American family story which validates 'keeping quiet' or 'not causing trouble' is linked to days of living within the South when causing trouble meant increasing the likelihood of physical danger. Alternatively, the outspoken rage of a young woman which had previously been understood in pathological ways, might instead be linked to broader histories of protest within the family, if not in the present generation, then in those of the past.

## **Legacies**

I am always interested in exploring with families the experience of living as African-Americans in this country, how it has affected their life and families, how they have overcome the difficulties and how they have succeeded.

Alternative stories take many forms. Most people, most families, have found ways and places in which they have succeeded in resisting the effects of the dominant culture. These aren't necessarily very big successes, instead they might be very simple, very small. Holding a job everyday, or creating a loving family are significant achievements. Other unique outcomes might include how they finished school, cared for their family, took up athletics, took pride in reading, became a vocalist, or involved in politics.

I am always interested in eliciting how a person or a family has drawn strength and skills from their heritage, from the legacy bequeathed to them. How are

these unique outcomes linked to what has come before? In this way, people are understood not as simply a part of a current living family, but linked to broader responsibilities in relation to those who have come before them. (Reference Just therapy).

It becomes relevant to seek ways in which people can become more connected to and respectful of their heritage. The following questions give some ideas as to the sorts of things I might ask:

Do you think your grand parents grandparents or great grandparents would be surprised at the kind of things that you are doing today? Do you think they would have thought that their grandchild would have gone to college? How might they respond if you were able to tell them?

Making the connections between alternative stories in the present and what they might mean through the eyes of people who have come before can be a powerful process.

Sometimes it is appropriate to ask other speculative questions - 'Do you think, from what you have told me about your grandmother, that you might in some way be acting like a spokesperson for what she never got to say, never got to do? Do you think that might be possible? Do you think that the steps you are taking in your life now are steps that others in your family's past might have taken if they had ever had the chance?'

All these sorts of explorations involve making links between the present, the past and the future. To assist in this process, it is also often significant to find audiences to witness the alternative stories of people's lives. I have written about this elsewhere (Prowell, 1999).

## **Stories to tell**

When I first came in contact with narrative ways of working, there were certain aspects that felt familiar - that fitted for me. Sharing stories and externalising conversations fit with ways of living that are a part of the culture of which I am a part. Most importantly to me, in relation to how narrative therapy relates to ethnicity and culture, is the space it can provide for individuals and families to tell their own cultural stories, and to realise that these are their stories to tell. Those who witness the telling of these cultural stories are privileged to do so. I get to hear their stories and reflect how they impact on me.

As I have described elsewhere (see Prowell 1999), when I first had the experience of having my cultural story listened to and reflected upon, healing began in powerful ways. This feeling was nothing like I had ever experienced in mainstream therapy. It is a healing that deepens each time I reflect upon the experience. I would have to say that the wounds of oppression are so deep and unspoken that one definitely needs a sacred space and respectful listeners in order to deconstruct history. In so doing, the story teller breaks

their silence and the burden of holding in generations of ethnic abuse is lifted.

**Reference:**

Prowell, J. (1999). Reflecting on issues of culture. *Gecko: a journal of deconstruction and narrative ideas in therapeutic practice*. Issue 2, 43-50