Honouring resistance and building solidarity: Feminism and narrative practice

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3.
Voice and solidarity

The previous chapter shared examples of moving from a focus on problems as individual experiences to a focus on problems as reflecting collective concerns: that people's experiences reflect and embody social issues. As practitioners, we can invite people to speak not just to us, but "through us" to others with whom they have things in common (Denborough, 2008, p. 16). We need to actively work towards fostering connections among people so that counselling doesn't perpetuate notions of problems being individual in nature and in solution. This could include connections with other people we meet with, connections within the person's own networks, or as will be explored in Chapter 6, connections with public figures or social movements. In this chapter, I develop this theme of connections among people and stories by sharing ways of supporting people to voice their experiences, describe problems in ways that bring into focus the social and political contexts of their experience, and join with others. I call this "voice and solidarity". These stories were developed in individual and couples counselling in private practice.

Politicising anxiety, depression and self-hate and moving towards solidarity: Rose's story

Rose, who was in her early 20s, was meeting with me to reduce the effects of anxiety and depression on her life. Anxiety had come and gone at different times in Rose's life and had risen again recently. Depression had grown quite large in the past year and forced Rose to leave some work she valued in preserving threatened environments. In response to externalising questions, Rose described depression as a "grey thing" that flattened her emotions and left her feeling numb. When I asked, Rose could describe many things that contributed to this grey thing. One of these was damage to the environment caused by capitalist endeavours. She had many skills in managing this grey thing, and we explored the social history of these skills, who she learnt them from, and which values they were connected to. We also explored Rose's support team. During our conversations, I used the statement of position maps 1 and 2, re-authoring questions and re-membering questions (M. White, 2007). We both witnessed the ways Rose was taking back her life from the grip of anxiety and the grey thing.

As I asked more about who or what influenced her values, Rose shared with me her passion for feminism, queer theory and politics. Rose's strong heart for social justice was also very evident. This included justice for people and protection for the environment. We had some lively discussions about the effects of capitalism and patriarchy on society, particularly on women, and on the environment.

Rose described how self-hate had joined with anxiety and the grey thing to provide a commentary on her life – she called it an "insidious voice". I asked her what sorts of things the insidious voice of self-hate was saying, and she told me it was criticising her body shape. When exploring issues of body image, I find deconstruction questions helpful. Examining and questioning dominant discourses can shed light on the public and social nature and history of problems that people perceive to be private. Once these discourses are made visible, space becomes available for the person, family, team or community to choose whether to continue going along with expected thoughts and actions, or whether to choose another way of being and responding (M. White, 1992). Exploration can also occur about times

when the person, family, team or community has already stood up to these sorts of expectations and demands. This process of asking questions to make discourses visible, and to examine their history, purpose and effects, is what I mean when I use the word "deconstruction".

I asked Rose where self-hate got its ammunition about her body shape: Who decides what is the right or good body shape? Is this idea universal or is it different in different cultures? Who benefits from cisgender women hating their body shape? Are people of other genders also affected by body shape discourses? After responding to some of the deconstruction questions, Rose concluded that "the insidious voice is a mirror of social messages". She wondered if perhaps the negative commentary of self-hate "is a microaggression against myself". I was quite taken by this response and appreciated how this thinking supported Rose to keep finding ways to step away from these socially constructed self-judgements. We both enjoyed feeling "fired up" against patriarchy during our conversations, and in thinking again about body image, Rose said, "capitalism needs us to hate ourselves". We then spoke about the fitness industry, the beauty industry, the media. Rose also raised some concerns she held about the connection between capitalism and the promotion of psychiatric medication, although she acknowledged that medication can be helpful. I continue to be inspired by Rose to stay close to my own efforts against the forces of patriarchy and capitalism.

The insidious voice was also attacking Rose's relationship with her girlfriend. Rose identified as lesbian and asexual. The self-hate commentary was accusing her of having an invalid relationship. Feminism and queer theory have long utilised deconstruction to question taken-for-granted ideas in society and to make visible the effects of patriarchy. Part of deconstruction is tracing the history of these taken-for-granted ideas, demonstrating that they had an origin – they don't just naturally and eternally exist. Narrative therapists Tilsen and Nyland (2010), drawing on Foucault (1978), have described the influence that the emerging field of psychiatry had during the 1800s on the categorisation of bodies and of sexual acts, and how this led to the categorisation of sexual identity. This categorisation had the oppressive intent to regulate norms (Tilsen & Nyland, 2010). Tilsen and Nyland (2010) explored how deconstruction is used by queer theorists

such as Warner (1991, 1999) and Doty (1993) in their exploration of culture. When societal expectations are explicitly explored, this frees people up to make choices that fit with their values and hopes, rather than going along with the pressure to measure up (Tilsen & Nyland, 2010). Drawing on these queer theorists, I asked Rose some deconstruction questions:

- What ideas in society is self-hate utilising when it suggests your relationship is invalid?
- How long have these ideas been around in society?
- Where do you hear these ideas?
  Who benefits by reproducing or spreading these ideas?

At the time we were meeting, the Australian same-sex marriage debate was receiving much social media attention. The people of Australia were being asked to vote on whether or not the marriages of same-sex couples should be legally recognised. Many hurtful arguments were expressed about the validity and worth of same-sex couples' relationships and their children, and discussion spread to other issues such as gender identity. Misinformation circulated about school education on these topics, resulting in the defunding of a school-based anti-bullying program aimed at supporting teachers to address homophobia and cisnormativity in schools, which affects all young people, not just LGBTQIA+ young people. This was a painful time, and the pain is still being felt by the LGBTQIA+ communities[12] in Australia today. Rose questioned, "Why do other people get to vote on my life?" She saw the effects of this debate on her mental health, with anxiety and the voice of self-hate intruding on her life again after having been fairly quiet for some time. This reinforced for me the importance of asking questions about the contexts of people's lives. We also examined the skills and knowledges Rose had in limiting her exposure to these messages, and in finding avenues of support and connection. Some questions helped to bring forward rich and nuanced stories of support:

[12] At the time we were meeting, the acronym LGBTQIA+ was used to describe Rose's community. The term "sex, sexuality and gender diverse" was also commonly used to describe this community.

- Who understands your identity and supports you in this?
- Who makes you feel accepted?
- How do they do this?
- Who supports your relationship with your partner?
- What actions or words demonstrate this?

Rose's family and workplace were very supportive of her identifying as lesbian, but Rose had told me that people really struggled to understand asexuality, and at times cast doubt about her relationship with her girlfriend. We deconstructed many dominant ideas that Rose had heard about asexuality, such as:

- You must not have met the right person yet.
- This is just a phase.
- Perhaps you were abused and your sexuality is damaged.
- Counselling should "fix" you.

Therapy is not neutral in its effects. Asking questions is a political act: we can ask questions that open up exploration of ways to resist the status quo, or questions that shut exploration down. As well as making visible the influence of patriarchal and heteronormative messaging in society, narrative conversations can explore acts of resistance and of care or protection of the self or others. In the 1980s, Michael White and David Epston were bringing quite radical ideas to the field of family therapy, including

> the political idea (again inspired by both feminist and Foucauldian thought) that people can and do continually try to resist or refuse the formations of self proposed by the dominant culture, and that therapy can be a place to notice, elicit, and support people's acts of resistance and refusal. Indeed, this can be a very appropriate part of therapy

> work. This is perhaps a radical re-conception of the understanding of therapy. (Ron Findlay, in C. White, 2016b, p. 22)

I asked questions to bring forward Rose's skills and acts of refusal, and to connect her responses to the responses of others in her community to build a stronger sense of support and solidarity:

- How have you managed to survive this difficult time of additional negative media attention?
- Were there skills you were drawing on from previous experiences of stigmatisation, microaggressions or bullying?
- Who supported you during this time?
- How are other people in your community responding to protect themselves or others?
- What does it mean to you when you see these actions of others?
- What would you call these actions you and others are taking?

Around this same time, I met with another woman of similar age who identified as lesbian and shared similar concerns about expectations about relationships. She was feeling very isolated, not knowing anyone else who was questioning these expectations. I asked Rose if I could share a bit of her story and her wisdom about responding to the negative comments she receives. Rose agreed. The other woman was surprised and pleased to hear about Rose's knowledge, and this inspired Rose and I to share her knowledge more widely. To do so, Rose created a document for other people I might meet with. She has generously allowed me to also share this with narrative therapy students, and with readers of this book. The document describes how challenging it can be to have a sexuality that is perceived as different and offers some tips for getting through this.

On being different: What I know about having a sexuality that people aren't familiar with

- Frequently, people will struggle to understand. They may compare it to something that is completely wrong or completely offensive. I think the thing that's worth remembering is that most of these comments aren't intended to make you feel awful. They might anyway, but once you get past that initial reaction, it can be worth persevering with the conversation, because if you can help them come to an understanding, then it's a win.
- The flip side of this is the feeling of being a walking example, and the thought that everyone deserves a window into your life. This isn't true. It's hard to know what information is worth sharing because it might help, and what is worth keeping to yourself because sharing it would be outside your comfort zone. Eventually, through trial and error, you start to figure out where the line is.
- Maintaining a sense of self-worth and validity is like playing a never-ending game of snakes and ladders. Setbacks might be a comment someone makes, a line in a novel, a song, a conversation, a look from a stranger. Your confidence in who you are and what you know about yourself suddenly takes a hit. Sometimes these setbacks feel like sliding all the way back to the beginning of the board, other times it's just a little dip, and occasionally something great happens and you get a boost. I guess the trick is to just keep playing.
- The thought that you're only worthy of love if you force yourself to change is dangerous.
- The thought that everybody in the world wants the exact same relationship model is completely false.

- You're going to need to remind yourself of those last two points constantly.
- People can and will surprise you in a good way. You can negotiate on your own terms to find happiness in a relationship, and there are people out there across the spectrum who will come to the bargaining table. There is no right way to love, and there is no one-size-fits-all relationship. And it's possible that a lot of people out there have been tricked into thinking they should have something that they don't even want. Maybe everyone else is walking around thinking that they're different, and thinking that it's something to hide and change. They might be relieved to meet you and hear your story and realise they're not alone.
- Whatever you are, there is a community for you out there. Thank God we live in the age of the internet and can find them so much more easily.

Written responses to Rose's document let us know that people have indeed been touched by what she shared. Some mentioned a sense of resonance with Rose's experiences and a liberation that came with hearing her ideas. Hearing these responses, Rose said she felt "warm – knowing someone is listening, someone hears you", and "honoured that they thought enough about what I said to write back".

In my work with Rose, I used feminist narrative practices of deconstruction and externalising to support her to voice her experiences of oppression and marginalisation. Speaking about the social and political contexts of the problems she was facing strengthened Rose's resolve to live life in her own way. I used re-authoring practices to explore and expand on Rose's skills and knowledges in responding to the microaggressions she was subjected to. We also explored her support networks in line with feminist narrative ideas of identity being socially constructed and of seeking support outside the therapy room. By speaking through me to another woman in a very

similar situation, Rose felt a sense of solidarity, as did the other woman. In sharing her document, Rose received responses that some of her wisdoms resonated with people who may not identify as lesbian or asexual, but who nevertheless feel they don't fit heteronormative expectations of ways of being in relationship (see Warner, 1991).

Exploring the social and political contexts of people's lives in single-session work

In my previous volunteer work on a phone line for LGBTQIA+ folks, the conversations were one-off and anonymous, so I was not able to consult with people about whether they would be comfortable with sharing their stories here, or how they would like their stories to be represented. For this reason, I won't share detailed stories here. However, in listening to the problems and dilemmas people were facing, various themes emerged: exclusion from family or social networks, bullying at school or in the workplace, and the pain and distress these experiences caused. Like in my work with Rose, discussing the social and political contexts of people's experiences seemed to be useful. Trans people from regional towns or from families with strong religious beliefs, for example, seemed to be at particular risk of isolation, and spoke to me about fearing violence if they started wearing clothes that expressed their gender identity or acting in ways that didn't fit with society's expectations. We spoke about strategies they had used to survive. This sometimes included "flying under the radar" by trying to fit stereotypes about the gender they were assigned at birth. We also spoke about ways they were resisting these expectations. For some, these steps were named as "measured risks" or "small protests" and included ordering clothes online and wearing them alone in their bedroom, or slowly trying out changes to their appearance in public. Exploring support systems, both locally and online, was also an area I tried to make time for in our conversations. One person who worked in the building industry felt particularly concerned for their safety if they started the process of transitioning from male to female and so had started a "safety project" of finding at least one person in the workplace who might be understanding and able to be an ally.

In these one-off conversations, I found that the narrative skills of externalising the problem and its effects, deconstructing dominant discourses, identifying and exploring acts of survival and resistance, connecting these actions with values, and discussing support networks assisted us to connect quickly and explore new territory, contributing to a multi-storied sense of self. It was tricky to cover all these areas in a single conversation, so listening out for areas that were most relevant and checking in about this was key. Fortunately, when it came to deconstruction, I discovered that most people I was speaking to had already been thinking about the dominant messages in society and whether there were some they wanted to go along with and others they wanted to reject. As these conversations were limited to a single session, we also spoke about ways to hold on to and thicken any emerging preferred narratives. Feedback suggested that the people I was meeting with felt heard and understood.

Navigating multiple relations of power with Grace and Elizabeth

As in my work with Rose and on the phone line, when I hear stories of hurt and pain, I aim to explore the social contexts of these experiences. This helps to make visible the various discourses that have shaped not only the initial situation, but also how others have responded. For those who have been oppressed, violated or marginalised, this exploration supports them to have a voice – to name their experience in their own words. Grace and Elizabeth have agreed to share their stories with you as an illustration of ways that race, gender and sexuality can intersect to cause a complex web of discrimination. At the time I was meeting with them, Grace was visiting Sydney from Canada to spend time with her partner, Elizabeth. They had a long-distance relationship. An additional intention in visiting Sydney was to secure work, as Grace was hoping to migrate to Australia so she and Elizabeth could live together. Elizabeth had already been living in Australia for many years. Both were from Asian families.

Grace's story

In recent years, I have met with many women who work professionally in the arts, as writers, editors, actors, musicians, illustrators or animators. For some

jobs, performers are required to audition in front of other applicants. Grace told me that to be hired as an actor, dancer or musician in a professional company requires not only committing your entire life to intense training and practise, but also convincing the company director that you have "that special something". This is highly subjective. There had been many times when Grace had auditioned and been told by others in attendance that she performed exceptionally well and had excellent experience, but then did not get the job.

Grace had auditioned multiple times for a company in Australia in which the existing workers were all white, and each year, those who succeeded in the auditions were also white. Was discrimination on the basis of her Korean background affecting her chances of being accepted into this company? She wondered whether it was harder to prove racism in creative industries because success is not determined simply by who is the most qualified, but by other subjective factors. Grace was troubled by this and felt a sense of hopelessness and disillusionment. She told me about a time when she had seen an Asian woman perform amazingly in a competition, and various people were convinced that she would win, but the prize was awarded to a white person who had not performed as strongly. When she shared with white colleagues her analysis that these decisions had been shaped by racism, they said something along the lines of "You are just a sore loser". When she told Black friends, they concurred with her interpretation. Grace said to me, "What does this tell you? They believe me because racism is a problem they are facing". More recently, Grace had been told by two Asian friends about their similar experiences of rejection despite performing better than the white contenders who were awarded the positions. Although she was sad for her friends, Grace felt a sense of relief at hearing this confirmation of her experience. The additional injustice of having her story dismissed had compounded the negative impact of the racism she had experienced. A couple of Grace's white colleagues did accept her conclusion. Grace said that these were people who educated themselves about social issues including racism. She felt that people who were willing to learn about racism and reflect on their own privilege would be more likely to understand that there is not an "equal playing field" in job interviews and auditions.

After Grace shared these stories, Elizabeth mentioned some acts of

racism she had been subjected to growing up in Australia. As we attempted to explore and deconstruct what had been happening to Grace, the forces at play and the dominant discourses, Grace said that when people try to deny that racism is the issue, she feels powerless, and this has her spiralling down into depression. This sense of powerlessness and downward spiral was affecting her relationship with her partner. Elizabeth's view of how the world worked had been shaken. One dominant discourse that Grace and Elizabeth had been questioning was "if you work hard, you will succeed". In our conversations we examined this further. Both women stated that the meritocracy that supposedly characterises Australia, the USA and Canada does not exist. We also discussed the link between the myth of meritocracy and the spread of the self-help industry. They spoke about a sense that self-help books can have you thinking that the problem is you and is something you can fix, when actually there is a problem in the way society is operating. Grace appreciated that we were able to create space to look at the effects of these external factors on her relationship.

I learnt a lot from witnessing Grace's and Elizabeth's stories. They had me reflecting on how my race is not something I think about when I apply for a job, but that my name, my accent and my appearance all give me an advantage. I felt saddened that Grace and Elizabeth had these experiences in Australia. When I expressed this to Grace and Elizabeth and apologised for the racism they had both experienced at different times, they felt moved and acknowledged by my response. They said that it was significant to hear an apology from a white Australian.

Grace was also experiencing marginalisation in her workplace due to identifying as a lesbian. Various people had made negative comments about homosexuality and jokes about lesbians, sometimes using sexually violent and threatening language. Others laughed along or were silent. When Grace appeared upset by the sexually violent comments, fellow members of the company told her she should accept it as "just a joke". Grace's experiences were shaped by her positions as a woman, as a lesbian, and as someone subject to racism. This is an example of how multiple sites of oppression and harm can converge and compound each other, as discussed in intersectional feminism (Crenshaw, 1991). We explored ways that Grace could make a complaint, and also explored responses she had already been making to this

harassment. Unable to find work in Australia, Grace returned to Canada. Having been part of these conversations with Grace about converging and intertwining sites of oppression and harm, Elizabeth chose to speak with me about some of her own experiences at work.

Elizabeth's story

Elizabeth had moved to Australia from Malaysia as a child. Like her partner, Grace, she was a talented, creative woman. She said the move had been hard at first: leaving her beloved grandmother, experiencing a new culture, and trying to make new friends.

Elizabeth felt that her voice was being silenced at work, even though she was employed to advise on creative direction. In team meetings, whenever she or Annalise, a female manager, tried to speak, they were immediately spoken over by the senior men. A clear example of her being undervalued and white privilege playing out was when the agency was creating an Asian child character who had recently migrated to Australia. Elizabeth assumed she would be invited to give some input into the development of this character, but when she suggested this, the senior men dismissed her, saying they were confident they had the ideas needed. Elizabeth and I shared an incredulous laugh. These old white men felt that they knew more about moving to Australia as a child from an Asian country than she did!

We discussed different ways Elizabeth was already responding to this situation, and looked at other steps she might consider taking. Elizabeth said it was hard to determine what actions constituted racism in her workplace as there were no other Asian people there to discuss this with, but the women would know about gender discrimination. We decided to explore ways of increasing a sense of solidarity among the women in the workplace. This was informed by the feminist principles of seeing issues as social and political rather than individual, and of formulating a collective response (Schechter, 1982). These principles underpin narrative therapy and community work.[13]

A couple of weeks later, Elizabeth told me that she had shared lunch with Annalise at a local park. Being out of the office environment freed

[13] The history of the connection between women meeting together in consciousness-raising groups and the philosophy and development of narrative practice was described by Cheryl White in her (2016a) piece, "Feminist challenge and women's liberation".

them up to speak openly in a way that hadn't seemed possible before. It was a wonderful conversation in which Elizabeth had been able to share her thoughts about some other talented women in the workplace who were also being undervalued, and how she felt they could encourage and draw on the talents of these women. They wondered together how they might address the silencing practices and increase the profile of women in their workplace. As the only two women in senior positions, Annalise and Elizabeth agreed that in future team meetings when either of them was interrupted, the other would point this out to the men and encourage them to listen. This solidarity would lead to a stronger voice.

One comment Annalise made during their lunch gave Elizabeth a "weird feeling". Annalise said that she thought she was employed as a manager because it looked good to have female staff when the agency was applying for arts funding. The weird feeling was telling Elizabeth that maybe she herself had been hired because she was Asian or because she was a woman or because she was a lesbian. "Am I just in the agency for token diversity, or because I am valued as a talented and creative person? What will it take for my voice to be heard and valued in the workplace?"

I used Michael White's statement of position map (2007) to further explore the impact of racism and gender discrimination with Elizabeth, mapping its effects such as "silencing", "losing hope" and "losing confidence". In this discussion, the term "injustice" emerged. Exploring the historical and current context of gender discrimination, Elizabeth shared with me some ideas about the ways women in managerial and leadership positions are treated in broader society. She mentioned the former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard and former US secretary of state and presidential candidate Hilary Clinton. Elizabeth noted that women in leadership positions seem to be more harshly treated by colleagues and the media than male leaders. She also noted that attacks on female leaders are often focused on their female identity. An example Elizabeth highlighted was when in 2011 the then federal opposition leader, Tony Abbott, spoke at a rally that was protesting the introduction of an emissions trading scheme with a carbon price, as proposed by Prime Minister Gillard's government. Rather than sticking to arguments about carbon pricing, the protestors brought misogynistic signs and attacked Prime Minister Gillard personally. Tony

Abbott joined the protestors and spoke in support of their actions in front of signs saying "Ditch the Witch" and "JuLiar ... Bob Brown's bitch".[14] Despite many thinking this should have been the end of Tony Abbott's political career (Massola, 2015), he was elected prime minister two years later.

Elizabeth commented that these wider events affect our daily lives. She said that when female leaders are derided in public, it condones misogyny and shapes the responses of men in the workplace. She also cited Grace's audition experiences as a turning point in seeing how the world works. "It woke me up to what is happening. Things don't operate as a meritocracy. Racism and gender discrimination make me angry." In taking a position on injustice and its effects on her, Elizabeth said, "I am finding that stepping back and noticing the political landscape and my emotional reaction is useful. It gives me clarity on how I want to respond".

In my work with Grace and Elizabeth, some sessions were conducted with both women together and some individually. Key areas of narrative practice I used with Grace and Elizabeth included:

- externalising the problem
- deconstructing dominant discourses
- supporting efforts to address injustices
- supporting collective efforts, solidarity and stronger voice through Elizabeth joining with Annalise
- supporting Grace and Elizabeth to articulate their hopes, values, skills and intentions.

They both reported finding the counselling useful. Grace noticed that Elizabeth was increasingly able to speak about her emotions, which had previously been difficult and a source of tension. Elizabeth also noticed this change. This was having a positive flow-on effect in their conversations outside the counselling room. Elizabeth said that speaking about her emotions was a new experience for her, as it did not happen in her family

[14] Bob Brown was leader of the Australian Greens political party and is a well-known environmental activist.

context, and that having the space in counselling to talk about things helped her form her ideas more clearly, and then gather the threads together. She noted that the threads had always been there, but she hadn't been sure how they fit together until now.

Therapeutic support guided by a collaborative and intersectional feminist framework seemed to be useful to Elizabeth. She said that she appreciated that I didn't jump in with advice, and that she appreciated my "awareness" about issues of gender, sexual identity and race: "You met me in the middle. I didn't have to educate you about these issues, and yet you didn't assume to know my experiences. You were willing to listen." As well as working towards having an awareness of important concepts and definitions, I have learnt from the people I meet with that it is important that we as practitioners ask directly about experiences of racism, discrimination or abuse based on sexual or gender identity or on disability, as it can be hard for the person holding the story to know whether we will be receptive to this information. If we are part of the dominant group, asking about these experiences lets the person know that we are willing to hear without defensiveness.

On the work front, Elizabeth noticed she felt more able to speak up, and was really pleased to have created solidarity with her colleague. This had brought her a sense of hopefulness, and she shared with me some of her visions for a more inclusive team in which she could highlight and celebrate the skills and talents of women.

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In this chapter I have shared stories from people I have met with about social issues such as racism, homophobia and heteronormativity. I have also sought to describe the learnings I have gained over time through the generosity and patience of people who have let me into their lives. My hope is that this chapter invites you to reflect on your own work and experiences of life, to honour your learnings and those who have contributed to these learnings, and to examine areas for further development. In the next chapter I will describe additional considerations when working with people from backgrounds different to our own.

Reflection

- When you think about your work with clients, what is a situation that stands out to you as a significant learning experience?
- What was it about this situation that stands strong in your memory?
- What did you come to appreciate about your client during this period?
- What might they have come to appreciate about you?
- What did you notice about the context of your workplace, or of society? How did you respond?
- Was noticing or addressing this broader context part of your learning experience?
- Which dominant ideas are currently causing trouble for someone you are meeting with?
- How are you making this visible in the conversation? Or how might you do so?