Collective Narrative Practice:

Responding to individuals, groups, and communities who have experienced trauma

David Denborough

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Dulwich Centre Publications
Hutt St PO Box 7192
Adelaide 5000, South Australia
Phone (61-8) 82233966 Fax (61-8) 82324441
Email: dcp@senet.com.au
Website: www.dulwichcentre.com.au

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To Michael White
1948–2008
Whose ideas changed forever the ways
in which I understand my own life
and those with whom I work.
How can I ever convey the significance of this?

To Cheryl White
Whose feminist and collective thinking
has influenced every page of this book.

And to their partnership
which offered so much to so many.

CHAPTER TEN

Can we contribute to 'social movement'?

If it doesn't start personal, it does not start.
But if it ends personal then it ends.
Pancho Arguelles (2007)

As counsellors, therapists, psychosocial workers and community workers, stories of hardship find their way to us. In some ways, we are cultural receivers of stories of suffering (Waldegrave, Tamasese, Tuhaka & Campbell, 2003). And often this suffering is linked to broader injustices: to violence, abuse, racism, poverty, sexism, heterosexual dominance. To be the cultural receivers of these stories brings with it awesome responsibilities; for instance, there are responsibilities to comfort and to somehow alleviate hardship. But there is another responsibility that I am hoping we will also engage with. How can we receive these stories and engage with them in ways that not only alleviate individual sorrow, but also enable and sustain local social action to address the broader injustices, violence and abuses in our varying contexts? How can we provide forums for the sorrow, anguish and hardship of the stories that we receive to be transformed into collective actions? I don't mean grand social actions, I mean local, meaningful, resonant, sustainable, social action or social contributions.

The phrase 'social action' is often associated with a narrow meaning, linked to particular forms of public political protest. But this association limits our vision. The women's movement the feminist movement, has been one of the defining fields of social action of my lifetime. Public political protest was, and is, one strand of this vibrant social movement, but there are so many other strands of feminist thought and action that have rippled through personal, family, community and institutional life (Freedman, 2002). Following the lead of bell hooks (2000) who refers to 'feminist movement' as a verb rather than a noun, I am interested in how our work can contribute to 'social movement'.

Within the field of narrative therapy, Michael White (1988/89) introduced the phrase 'the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem'. This philosophy of externalising the problem is an antidote to pathologising practices. Collective narrative practice is based on externalising principles and on taking them one step further. It becomes possible to externalise the problems people are facing *and* enable possibilities for collective contributions. In this way, 'The person is not the problem, the problem is the problem and … the solution is not only personal'. I am interested in ensuring that, once the problem is externalised (therefore placed in the social realm), the solution does not simply return to a personal one, and that, instead, opportunities are created for collective contribution; opportunities are created for people to contribute to 'social movement'.

There are many examples within the field of narrative therapy and community work of these sorts of opportunities being created through the establishment of archives, leagues and the sharing of 'solution knowledges' (see chapter eleven).

And in this book I have provided further examples of the ways in which experiences of trauma can be transformed to enable collective contribution. I am hoping that if we develop a vocabulary for noticing how opportunities for 'social movement' are created that many more possibilities will emerge.

Social movement

There have been three social movements which have been powerfully influential in my life: the antinuclear (peace) movement, the feminist movement, and the queer movement. This is not the place to describe my own relationship with these movements (see Denborough, 1998), except to say that once I start reflecting on the effects of these social movements on my life it is difficult to stop! They have been, I believe, as influential as any other factor (including family, biology, background) in influencing the person I have become. I suspect this is true for many others, but I cannot know for sure because it is rare to have conversations about such things. The influence of social movements on people's identities is largely neglected. Once I start considering the effects of social movements in my life, however, others then start to appear in my consciousness, such as the environment movement or the Aboriginal rights movement, which are continuing to alter how we understand our relationship to land, to country, to culture, and to history.

In my experience, social movements involve people taking action not only on their own behalf but on behalf of others, future generations, past generations, and other people with whom participants are identified but who they have never met. Following this, one way of creating the groundwork for broader social movement is to enable those with whom we are working to make contributions to the lives of others with whom they identify in some way.

Please note that I am not suggesting we engage in our work with those who have experienced significant hardship with a grand plan. In fact, I am suggesting the opposite: as we start to notice and richly describe diverse local skills and knowledges in dealing with hardship, we can then find ways that this diversity and these local knowledges can contribute to social movement in ways that are resonant to those with whom we are working. The focus of energy is local, decentralised, and diverse.

Those who are most marginalised are often living in circumstances where they know that solutions to their own problems are not going to be found overnight or even in their lifetime. And yet significant meaning to life is found as they attempt

to make a contribution to the lives of future generations. Following this, one part of our work can be to create contexts in which the local initiatives, skills and knowledge of one group of people who are experiencing significant hardship can make contributions to others in similar situations. As these groups start to experience contributing to each other, assisting each other in facing the consequences of trauma and hardship, this can be a starting point for 'healing' *and* local social movement.

It's my hope that collective narrative practices can play a part in sparking local social movement and sustaining it. If we orientate our work towards unearthing and richly describing the ways in which people are *responding* to experiences of trauma and social injustice; if we find ways of collectively *documenting* the skills, knowledges and values that are implicit in these responses so that people experience their lives as linked to others around shared themes; if we find ways of *convening rituals* and ceremonies in which collective self-definitions are performed and strengthened ; and if we find ways to enable the skills and knowledges of groups of people who are affected by social issues to *contribute* to the lives of others affected by such social issues; then this may spark local social movement. And if at the same time we find ways to *make and remake local folk culture* from the rich raw materials of people's responses to trauma and injustice, then this can be powerfully sustaining of local initiatives. As those at Highlander Folk School have always testified, 'There can be no movement without song' (Johnson-Reagon, 2007).

Is our work creating the conditions that make local social movement more possible?

If we wish to ensure that, at the very least, our ways of working are not diminishing the possibilities for collective local actions, then it may be necessary for us to develop a framework by which to reflect on the effects of our work. There is a rich tradition of critique in relation to how therapeutic discourse can 'personalise' and 'individualise' social and political issues (Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993; Prilleltensky, 1994). These are critiques that I believe are worth taking seriously and responding to. I don't believe there is any need for us to be defensive about this. Instead, we can engage with the critique and develop ways of continually reflecting upon whether our work is creating conditions in which local social action / social movement is more or less likely.

The following 'checklist' is one that I find helpful in reflecting upon my own work.

- Are the people I am working with experiencing an increased sense of agency? Are they becoming more knowledgeable about their own skills, knowledges, abilities, that can be put to use in addressing the difficulties that they (and others) are facing? Are they experiencing putting these into action and seeing the results in their own lives?
- Is our work linking people together around shared concerns and also around their skills, knowledges, and abilities?
- Are the people we are working with being enabled to experience making a contribution to the lives of others?
- Are the broader social, historical, cultural factors that are influencing the strength of the problem they are facing becoming articulated and named? If so, is this generating dissatisfaction with the status quo?
- Are the people we are working with becoming linked with stories, histories and knowledge about how local initiatives, skills and knowledge can bring about changes? In other words, are they experiencing increasing hope in contrast to fatalism?
- Are there ways in which those with whom we are working are becoming actively engaged in the creation of collective folk culture (music, art, drama, literature) around themes of addressing the difficulties, injustices, being faced by themselves and others?
- Are there ways in which they are experiencing acknowledgement and celebration of these expressions of local culture?
- To what degree is our work a collective endeavour, involving partnership and collaboration with other colleagues?
- Are we taking care to ensure that metaphors of healing are not precluding metaphors of local action?
- Are we inviting rigorous critique and questioning of our work – about ways in which we may be inadvertently replicating the status quo, or normative ideas in relation to gender, class, race, sexual identity, and so on?
- To what degree is our work inviting people to re-engage with personal/social history, and to what degree is it inviting a rearrangement of the current social world?

None of this is about us as facilitators coming up with the agenda for social action, nor the method of social movement, nor the 'correct way' to think about how broader social factors are influencing the lives of those with whom we work. If we were to do so within an approach of responding to trauma, then this would be fraught with hazards. Nor is this about envisaging revolutions or utopias. If I was to impose a view of how the world should look on the people with whom I am working, then the possibilities for creative action would be greatly diminished.

Considering how our work can either hinder or support the possibilities for social movement seems significant. If we are the receivers of stories of suffering and injustice, then how can we ensure our work in some way contributes to healing *and* justice?