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Editor-in-chief: .....Shelja Sen  
Senior editor: .....David Denborough  
Editorial consultant: .....Cheryl White  
Associate editor (Spanish): .....Carla Galaz Souza  
Managing editor: .....Claire Nettle  
Graphic Designer: .....Blackwood Design Studio  
Contact: .....ijntcw@dulwichcentre.com.au

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PO Box 7192  
Halifax Street Post Office  
Adelaide/Tarntanya  
Kurna Country  
South Australia, 5000

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## Editorial

Dear Reader

Over the past 20 years, the Tree of Life narrative approach, developed by Ncazelo Ncube-Mlilo and David Denborough, has travelled way beyond its original contexts in Southern Africa. Practitioners in communities across the globe have adapted and expanded this metaphor, finding ways to gather stories of survival, kinship and hope in the face of storms.

Across many parts of our world, people are living through ravaging storms of appalling war crimes and growing violence. The authors in this edition write from diverse contexts, including the intergenerational impact of atomic bombing, and communities being targeted due to their caste, religion, gender or trans identity. Where colonisation, neoliberal economic discourses, political denial, historical silences and poverty have led to immense suffering.

And yet these storms do not tell the whole story. People are not passive recipients of hardships, and they are always responding. It is heartening to witness the innovative ways practitioners are adapting narrative therapy ideas and rooting them in diverse soils across the world. Their practices honour people's knowledge and skills, acknowledge acts of refusal and resistance, and invite agency and enable contribution. Across the work represented here, therapy and community practice are understood not simply as sites of individual change but also as places where social and political change can be fostered.

Like a forest with many forms of life, this edition brings together multiple ways of sharing practices. Alongside peer-reviewed papers, readers will find book reviews, an interview, audio reflections and video contributions.

Dorothy Wanega and Jane Awi, in their paper "Dear Violence", describe the use of process drama, narrative therapy and collective letters to explore and acknowledge students' experiences of domestic violence in Papua New Guinea. In "Towards a decentred, politically influential, accountable and yet uncertain practice", Kelsi Semeschuk reflects on the ethical and political positioning of practitioners in narrative therapy. Tanya Newman, in "Fireworks, a funeral and friendship", offers a moving account of linking lives and enabling contributions at the end of a person's life. Muhammed Nurullah Demir and Mehmet Dinç explore conversations with earthquake survivors in Türkiye in "Desired Dreams". They invite us to take the conversations beyond trauma to emotions and meanings behind preferred experiences. In "Exposing the feeling of 'not good enough'", Jonaki Arora demonstrates how the Failure Conversations Map can reveal the failure of modern power while unpacking gender-based oppression in the Indian context.

In honour of the 20th anniversary of the Tree of Life narrative approach, this issue also includes a special section on metaphoric practice. These contributions demonstrate the many creative ways metaphors can open space for storytelling, identity and collective imagination.

Kynan Barnes shares how the practice of yarning about passions, strengths and interests can be done through the metaphor of the Fire of Life in Indigenous Australian contexts. Su Ying invites us to go beyond misconceptions and prejudices to explore the meaning of cosplay subculture in young people's lives. And how it can facilitate self-exploration, expression, social connection and the active construction of preferred identity.

Şeydanur Tezcan Özer and Mehmet Dinç introduce the metaphor of a Resilience Wardrobe, an imaginative approach to preparing for life's challenges and working with garments as cultural signifiers. The outfit metaphor is used to support externalising conversations, understanding emotions through sensory detail, and inviting the thickening of preferred stories

Paul Graham describes the innovative use of the video game Minecraft to create digital Trees of Life, while Helena Rose reflects on collective storytelling, witnessing and legacy in later life through "Reclaiming the Tree of Life".

Keiko Tsuzuki's paper, "The Marathon of Life: Storytelling for healing and peacebuilding with second-generation survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings", honours the largely unheard experiences of Hibaku Nisei, the children of atomic bomb survivors in Japan. Her work traces the impact of intergenerational trauma, social exclusion and historical silence. Through storytelling and community dialogue, Tsuzuki explores ways of "remembering, reconnecting and rebuilding", and invites conversations across generations and cultures about the impact of nuclear violence and the significant work we all have to do towards collective healing.

We are delighted to welcome Carla Galaz Souza to the Editorial Team in the role of Associate Editor (Spanish). Carla will be curating works about feminist narrative practice in Spanish-speaking contexts, beginning with a paper by Paola Kolher Salinas in this issue. Kolher documents her work with women and girls who have survived gender-based violence in Paraguay, including female sex workers and rural women in militarised areas. It describes how our collective work can become a site of resistance and preferred identity formation.

Similarly, a video contribution by Teresa Taouk (in both Arabic and English) conveys ways of using the metaphor of cedars, the national emblem of Lebanon, to support survivors of domestic violence.

Our salute to metaphorical practices concludes with an audio recording of a paper from our archives: Ncazelo Ncube-Mlilo describing the origins of the Tree of Life Project in work with vulnerable children in Southern Africa. We honour the roots of metaphoric practice, where the lives of children who have experienced significant losses are responded to in ways that are not retraumatising and shine light on children's own skills, stories and knowledges.

In all these metaphoric practices, it is heartwarming to witness the work being done in keeping with the ethics and what Helena Rose calls "the founding philosophy and purpose" behind Tree of Life narrative approach.

There are multimedia contributions that highlight creative community responses. Kwong Ka Fai and Wong Sau Mui share community healing for children and young people who have experienced trauma in Hong Kong using the “Here You, Hear Me” card game. Sue Gibbons, Njinga Kankinza and colleagues describe “In our own words”, a project that used theatre and storytelling to privilege the unheard voices of health service staff in the UK during the COVID pandemic.

In the book reviews, Tiffany Sostar, Aakhil Lakhani and April Wick review *Never Say You Can't Survive* and *Lessons in Magic and Disaster* by Charlie Jane Anders, reflecting on sustenance offered by intentionally engaging with the vibrant work of a trans author in a time of rising hostility towards trans folks. I have stayed with the tender words of Charlie Jane Anders: “Visualising a happier, more just world is a direct assault on the forces that are trying to break your heart.”

Tom Strong reviews *Why Dialogue Does Cure* by Jaakko Seikkula. Seikkula has researched and developed Open Dialogue, a family- and community-based response developed in Finland, and has widely advocated for its healing possibilities in crises. Strong appreciates how “it reminded me of the innovativeness that can come from continuously being curious about clients’ experiences while engaging with new ideas and ways of practice”.

Susan Shaw is interviewed by David Denborough, exploring the theme of “power, not panic” in community organising amid anti-immigrant violence. Shaw talks about the power of creating “windows of agency” by making space to ask questions about what people do to mitigate their suffering and the steps they take to protect others.

An audio note by Sara Asfiya Ali, “Resisting erasure: How Muslim women in India are responding to hate and hostility”, is linked to a collective narrative document that brings together voices of Muslim women living across urban India. It weaves testimonies into a shared voice, making visible both the impact of social hostility and the everyday acts of resistance, refusal and dignity that often go unseen. The exquisite illustrations by Neha Ayyub offer a visual language for memory and response, inviting readers to witness these stories and reflect on Muslim women’s ongoing struggles for belonging and justice.

As you dip into the rich multimedia of this journal, we hope these contributions offer moments of resonance and curiosity, and spark innovative adaptations in your context. In times when many communities continue to face devastating storms, the stories and narrative practices documented here remind us of the power of collective action and of our commitment to continue building strong forests.

In solidarity  
Shelja Sen

## ABOUT THE EDITOR



*Shelja Sen is narrative therapist, writer and co-founder of Children First, New Delhi. Her latest book is Reclaim Your Life and she is also a columnist with a national newspaper, Indian Express. Shelja has worked as a narrative practitioner and teacher for over 20 years in various contexts in the UK and India. She is an international faculty member at Dulwich Centre Foundation, Adelaide, and a clinical tutor at The University of Melbourne, Australia. Shelja is a curator of the unique skills, expertise and know-how of the children, young people and families she has the honour of working with, and is committed to building innovative, culturally aligned, ethical practices using a feminist intersectional lens.*

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Peer-reviewed  
papers



## “Dear Violence”:

*Using process drama, narrative therapy and collective letters to explore and acknowledge students' experiences of domestic violence in PNG*

*by Dorothy Wanega and Jane Awi*



*Dorothy Wanega is a lecturer with the Division of Learning and Teaching in the School of Education at The University of Goroka. Her qualifications include a Master of Counselling and a Postgraduate Certificate in Special Education from the University of Waikato, New Zealand. She also holds a Bachelor of Education with Honours from The University of Goroka. Dorothy obtained her diploma in secondary teaching from the Goroka Teachers' College and had over 20 years' teaching experience before joining The University of Goroka. Her research interests are in guidance and counselling, women's issues and student behaviour.*  
*wanegad@unigoroka.ac.pg*

*Dr Jane Pumai Awi is the Executive Director of the Somare Research Institute and Director of the Centre for Confucius Education, Culture and Research at The University of Goroka. She received her doctorate in creative industry from Queensland University of Technology, Australia, in 2014. For her PhD research, Jane conducted practice-led research that harnessed Indigenous performance elements and created a new folk opera form of applied theatre for HIV/AIDS education in Papua New Guinea. She has received two prestigious leadership awards: the Australia Pacific Prime Minister's Leadership Award and the Pacific Island Leadership Award, which gave her opportunities to study leadership principles in Australia, Hawaii and Taiwan. Her research interests are in performative literature, performing arts, theatre for development, community development and e-learning.*  
*awij@unigoroka.ac.pg*



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## *Abstract*

This article presents preliminary findings of a locally developed research project that combined arts-based research tools and narrative therapy as a response to the effects of domestic violence on the academic performance of school students between the ages of 16 and 19. Students in selected schools from two regions of Papua New Guinea (PNG) participated in the study. These students experienced a set of creative exercises devised to enable them to speak about their experiences of domestic violence and to elicit and honour their stories, responses and suggestions about ways of addressing and preventing further violence in PNG. From the rich material offered by the students, three collective letters were written for use in advocacy and education. These letters and this paper provide a voice for PNG school students. This paper also presents a way of bringing together arts-based research and narrative practice, offers an example of the use of collective letters to represent qualitative research findings, and documents a form of research that encompasses social action on community problems.

***Key words: arts-based research; qualitative research; domestic violence; family violence; process drama, externalising, collective letters; narrative therapy; narrative practice***

Arts-based research has become increasingly popular in the last two decades as a method to explore and understand social problems. It is used within education, health care, social science, behavioural science and developmental studies. Arts-based research engages an array of art forms including dance, drama, music, visual arts and creative writing. These art forms have been used to gather data especially when researching sensitive and complex issues such as teenage pregnancies (Zimeray, 2022), cyber bullying (Gerega, 2018) and domestic violence (Ganaii et al., 2017). In the last 10 years, arts-based research tools have been developed to better communicate the impacts of HIV/AIDS (Awi, 2014).

We used the arts-based research tools previously developed at The University of Goroka and Queensland University of Technology (Awi, 2014), and combined these with narrative therapy approaches to support school students to share their thoughts, stories and experiences of the effects of domestic violence on their academic performance. We also hoped to provide some relief from the isolation and silence that often accompanies domestic violence.

Domestic violence is a very significant issue in PNG. It is exacerbated by cultural practices such as bride price (Richardson et al., 2021). Cultural knowledge is needed to address this complex issue. There is research in PNG about Indigenous ways of addressing sensitive issues such as HIV/AIDS through the use of symbols, metaphors and cultural performance (Awi, 2014; Awi et al., 2018; Haseman et al., 2014). As local researchers, we drew from our cultural knowledge to complement the arts-based research and narrative therapy approaches. This enabled stronger connection with participants through our shared cultural understanding and play-based activities. The approach was purposefully designed to support young people to share their thoughts, stories and experiences of the effects of domestic violence on their academic performance.

Our research is perhaps the first attempt to use the specific arts-based practice of process drama (Neelands & Goode, 2015) in combination with narrative therapy to investigate how domestic

violence is affecting young people's lives and academic performance. It is also the first attempt to elevate the stories, experiences, ideas and suggestions of young people through combining process drama and collective letter writing (more on this later).

Four secondary schools – Aiyura National High School, Kondiu Secondary School, Kerevat National High School and George Brown Secondary School – located in the Highlands and New Guinea Islands regions of Papua New Guinea (PNG) were selected for the first two phases of the study. Phase one involved schools in the Highlands region and phase two involved schools in the New Guinea Islands region. Participants were aged between 16 and 19 years.

We hoped that if process drama and narrative therapy explorations proved helpful to students, then this might contribute new options for PNG researchers to use in further projects in response to pressing social issues.

## *Domestic violence and school performance*

Lester (2001) described domestic violence as violence between people living in a close relationship including spouses, conjugal couples, family members or even flatmates. Domestic violence can be physical, sexual or psychological. It is recognised that violence between two people impacts greatly on other members of the family, household or community – especially children.

Domestic violence is a global issue present across communities. According to UNICEF (Carmo, 2025), over 600 million children worldwide are exposed to violence at home. Studies have documented the prevalence of violence in PNG – within homes, in schools and in the wider community – and the lack of support services for survivors (Ganaii et al., 2017; Putt & Dinnen, 2020; Putt et al., 2021; Setepano, 2016). A recent study found an alarming 210 per cent increase in reports of gender-based-violence in PNG from 1986 to 2025 (Faa & Gunga, 2025).

Numerous studies from different parts of the world have established correlations between students' exposure to domestic violence at home and poor academic performance. Studies from the United States (McGaha-Garnett, 2013) to Kenya (Karanja, 2019; Pharles, 2017) to Fiji (Vakeke et al., 2017) have described how the immediate effects of domestic violence in students' lives can manifest in truancy and violence. Students may engage in fights and disobey authorities. Some drop out of school, significantly influencing the trajectory of their lives (Karanja, 2019; McGaha-Garnett, 2013; Pharles, 2017; Vakeke et al., 2017).

Michael McManus (2006) described in the words of students in Madang, PNG, some of their devastating experience of domestic violence and its prevalence – with 97% stating that the problem of domestic violence is severe in PNG. McManus (2006) also reported that students exposed to domestic violence in childhood responded in different ways. Their strategies included running away, hiding in nearby bushes and attempting to stop the fighting. Others turned to drugs and alcohol when they left home. One student recalled her mother losing consciousness and her father threatening to burn her alive. At that time, the student wished she was “a strong man and not a little girl then!” (McManus, 2006, p. 7). Another participant reported physical abuse from her uncle and consumed marijuana when she was in high school. These two examples illustrate students' varied responses to their exposure to domestic violence.

Influenced by narrative therapy responses to trauma (Denborough, 2008; White, 2004), we wished for our research to elicit and honour the diverse ways in which students and other family members seek to respond to the problem of domestic violence in accord with what they give value to.

### **Domestic violence services in PNG**

Here in PNG, there are very limited professional responses to families experiencing domestic violence. There are few safe houses and case-management services. These services involve collecting information and referring victims to

hospitals for medical treatment and to the police if they are seeking legal redress. Femili PNG is one organisation involved in case management, outreach, training, support and advocacy (see <https://femilipng.org/>).

Ongoing counselling services are generally absent. Heather Barr (2015) noted a lack of psychosocial counselling and case management and emphasised a need for qualified counsellors to provide such assistance.

When it comes to school students, services in schools in PNG are limited to educational and vocational guidance and lack counselling for survivors of domestic violence or other issues. Kravia (2016, p. 193) observed that there is a lack of guidance officers and school counsellors trained in counselling students exposed to domestic violence.

### *Our use of arts-based research and narrative practice to assist students exposed to domestic violence*

Arts-based research offers an array of methods that can be employed to generate, gather, represent and present data. This can include visual or performative methods such as painting, drawing, sculpture, film, media, poetry, music and theatre. These forms of practice create data that are emotionally and politically evocative, captivating, aesthetically powerful and moving. These arts-based research processes can help participants (and researchers) to make sense of the world we live in and to come to new understandings about problems and possible solutions.

We explored the use of process drama as a means of arts-based research to create a safe space for school students to share their experiences of domestic violence. Neelands and Goode (2015) explained that process drama engages the intellect, the emotions and the body. It enables negotiation of new images, ideas and meanings. Participants are enabled to change their perspectives on things. It was our hope that

through symbolic strategies such as storytelling, drama and rituals (Geldard et al., 2019), the young people would be able to contribute their experiences and ideas to the research and also experience some relief.

Process drama is a genre of applied theatre (Piazzoli, 2012) that is carried out in a non-conventional theatrical setting, especially in communities and public spaces. The participants and facilitator co-construct a dramatic world (Bowell & Heap, 2001). In this project, the co-construction of the dramatic world also involved the use of narrative therapy approaches, which privilege the sharing and documentation of lived experiences and insider knowledge. Co-research investigations (Epston, 1999) and externalising conversations (Sliep, 2005; Sliep & CARE Counsellors, 1998; White, 2007; Wingard, 1996a, 1996b, 2010) unpacked the experience of domestic violence in ways that acknowledged not only the effects of such violence but also young people's responses, ideas, knowledge and suggestions.

Sliep et al. (2004) undertook research on domestic violence in northern Uganda and concluded that collective responses generated through narrative therapy and forum theatre can provide possible solutions to addressing domestic violence. Their work, and that of countless others around the world, drew inspiration from the work of Augusto Boal (1978), the Brazilian dramatist known for his book *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Through theatre of the oppressed, government institutions can be challenged to improve their services, and grassroots solutions to problems can be elicited and supported.

In our study, we used Boal's "image theatre" because it "privileges physical expression over the spoken word. Through a series of workshop-based exercises, the human body is used as an expressive tool to represent, nonverbally, a wide repertoire of feelings, ideas, and attitudes" (Haig, 1996, p. 185). Image theatre was used to collect images of forms of domestic violence and narrative therapy approaches were used to give voice to the participants.

Narrative therapy has been used widely by counsellors, community workers and researchers in different parts of the world. Brown and Augusta-Scott (2007) explained that narrative therapy draws its theoretical framework from social constructionism, which emphasises the idea that we live by the stories that we tell of ourselves, and others tell of us. It is through stories we make meaning of our lives. Burr (2003) suggested that people's identities are shaped by the discourses of their social and cultural contexts.

A key element of narrative therapy is the use of externalising conversations, which position the problem as the problem rather than the person as the problem (White, 2007). Narrative practice sees people as experts on their own lives and assists them to find their own voice and their own solutions to their problems (Morgan, 2000). Narrative practitioners often use creative and playful approaches to respond to serious issues. For instance, Nyirinkwaya (2020) used playful approaches with children and young people who were experiencing hard times in Rwanda.

In this research, we devised a set of drama tools that used externalised language to unpack the effects of domestic violence on participants' academic performance; to elicit and honour students' responses to domestic violence; and to consult them in relation to their knowledge, suggestions and stories in the hope of reducing domestic violence in PNG.

The one-day process-drama workshop that we ran at each school followed five stages: pretext, narrative building, externalising, poetic action and reflection. This structure was adapted from Neelands and Goode's (2015) *Structuring Drama Work*.

## Introducing the workshop

We began each workshop by setting ground rules, explaining that participation was voluntary and that students could step out at any time, and letting participants know that their class teachers would be with them for support. Importantly,



responses listed outside the body outline reflected diverse community views on domestic violence. The most common response listed (40%) was sadness.

## Stage 2: Narrative building using image theatre

The second stage of the process drama introduced “image theatre” (Boal, 1978) to enable the students to share narratives of domestic violence. Image theatre involves participants working together to make their bodies into an image like a tableau to represent issues or tell stories about an issue.

Participants were encouraged to create an image of a situation of domestic violence. Different perspectives were encouraged. The predominant aggressive behaviours displayed in the images created by students involved one person punching, hitting or biting another person or pulling on their



Figure 2. Illustration of the image theatre process

shirt (most images were of men using violence against women). Some images included depictions of alcohol and the use of mobile phones. Almost 90% of images symbolised perpetrators punching the faces of survivors. Many images showed the survivors covering their faces to protect themselves. We asked the young participants to describe and explain the images they had created, if they wanted to. For ethical reasons, we are unable to share photographs of the students’ creating their images, but they represented different forms of violence as illustrated Figure 2.

## Stage 3: Externalising conversations – teacher-in-role

In process drama, “teacher-in-role” usually involves a facilitator taking on the role of an expert to lead group discussion. In this study, however, the teacher-in-role involved a trained counsellor (Dorothy) playing the role of “Violence”, enabling the students to have a conversation with this character (see Kaseke, 2010; Sliep & CARE Counsellors, 1998; Wingard, 1996a, 1996b, 2010). This process of externalising violence in a theatrical form unpacked domestic violence as a social issue and demonstrated the narrative therapy philosophy that “the person is not the problem; the problem is the problem”.

## Stage 4: Poetic action – three-picture story

The fourth stage involved what is referred to as “poetic action” (Neelands & Goode, 2015) and used “picture story” (Awi et al., 2018). Small groups of students were asked to create a three-picture story that captured three critical events in a perpetrator’s or survivor’s life. One picture was to represent the past, another was to represent the present, and the third image was to represent the future. Students were given flexibility to imagine any event relating to domestic violence.

Interestingly, almost all the picture stories depicted a peaceful, happy family in the past,

a family beset by problems in the present, and then a family of reformed character in the future. This reformation was depicted as being supported by pastors, counsellors, nongovernment organisations and community leaders.

Examples of past images included a happy family, a family having a meal together, children happily going to school, and scenes of fun and laughter in the home.

Present images represented by the participants included gambling, Teardrop crying with his younger sister, a father about to kill the mother, a father drunk and fighting with the mother, and Teardrop isolating himself from his friends.

Future images included families praying together, playing together and having meals together; children happily studying and reading; and Teardrop happily participating in class.

Through these collective representations, participants presented various forms of domestic violence as well as possible solutions and preferred futures. Additionally, gestures of forgiveness and harmony were displayed in the participants' images. Support, conversation and family reunion were also depicted.

### *Stage 5: Ritual and reflection – conscience alley*

The final stage of the workshop involved a drama tool called “conscience alley” (Neelands & Goode, 2015), which was used to create a community of support. Participants stood in two rows forming a tunnel for Teardrop to walk through. As students playing the role of Teardrop (survivor/witness to violence) walked through the tunnel, the rest of the participants offered them comments, encouragement, advice and suggestions: “Be strong”, “You’re not alone”, “We are all in this together”, “Study hard”, “Your future is bright”. Sometimes advice was also given such as “Go to church”, “Pray”, “Drink water”, “Go for counselling”, “Work hard”.

We also gave students the opportunity to represent a perpetrator of violence walking through the tunnel. Again, other young people offered encouragement and ideas such as “Change your habit”, “Go to church”, “Stop drinking and bashing your wife”, and “Think about the future of your children”.

In this part of the workshop, we wanted to create a community of support. For young people who were currently experiencing violence in their home, and who may not have spoken directly about this, we wanted them to experience a ritual of support.

At the end of the workshop, we asked each student to write a letter to Dorothy Wanega, the counsellor. In these letters, students who hadn't spoken aloud shared their explanations and experiences of violence. We also asked them to respond to the question: What are the effects of domestic violence on your academic performance? In their letters, we wanted to hear the students' stories. Some students may not have wanted to speak personally about their experiences, but they had a chance to write their stories in their letter. The students sat quietly and wrote. By the end of the workshops across the four schools, we had around 120 carefully written letters generously shared by students.

### *Collective letters generated from research data*

In his commentary and reflection on papers included in the Narrative Practice Research Network special issue of *The Qualitative Report* (Denborough et al., 2024), John McLeod (2024), described the ways in which narrative therapy qualitative researchers such as Marnie Sather (2024) have presented the findings of their research “not only as themes but also in the form of letters to different stakeholder communities, a technique for relational healing widely used within narrative practice” (McLeod, 2024, p. 234). In McLeod's view, this way of presenting research findings “represents a major contribution to qualitative research methodology” (p. 234).

Drawing on these recent developments and the long history within narrative practice of the use of letters and documents (White, 1995; White & Epston, 1990), and with the assistance of David Denborough, we have presented some of the findings of this research in three letters. All three letters are drawn from the words the school students included in the letters they wrote at the completion of the workshop. The first letter is addressed in the school students' collective voice to "Dear Violence". The second letter is addressed in the school students' collective voice to "Dear counsellors, community leaders and pastors" (the three groups for whom the students had suggestions and requests in relation to addressing and preventing violence). The third letter is written in the voice of the authors (Dorothy and Jane), quoting the students. It is addressed to "Dear younger generations".<sup>1</sup>

We have included the first and third letters in this paper. The second letter can be provided on request.

### ***Dear Violence***

Within the workshop, we provided an opportunity for the students to speak directly to or to ask questions of an externalised character representing Violence. This built on the work of Yvonne Sliep and the CARE Counsellors of Malawi (1998), Barbara Wingard (1996a, 1996b, 2010) and Sipelile Kaseke (2010). In the letters and surveys that school students completed at the end of the workshop, one young person had written: "I am writing to the violence against family." Inspired by this young person, we created a letter addressed to Violence that includes some of the key themes that the students shared in their letters and surveys.

Dear Violence,

Greetings to you in the name of the good Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

We are school students from all provinces of Papua New Guinea. We think domestic violence is a horrible and most dangerous form of violence which is practiced and done all throughout the world. Too often you are visiting our homes.

Especially when there are financial problems and our fathers and uncles are drunk, they bring you into our homes.

Some of us think that nowadays you, Violence, are getting worse because of the influence of alcohol and gambling. And you also seem to come around with jealousy and gossip. False rumours seem to bring you into our homes, like when our fathers are provoked by peers – being told that your partner is cheating on you.

Violence, you have really bad effects on our schooling. You make us worry so much about our mothers and sisters and brothers. Some students are sleeping in class, daydreaming, not attending lessons, falling behind in class, missing days or playing up a lot to try to forget their problems. Don't you want us to get an education?

Some of us are at boarding school now and we are frightened to return home. The feeling of losing school and going back home is hammering my heart every day.

Violence, you make children feel bad. You make a child feel like they have no place in this world. Is that really what you want?

Even if you happened a long time ago, it's still like a nightmare, like it's happening all this time and everywhere I go. The memories affect me all the time whenever I am alone.

At times, I feel unwanted and am questioning myself about whether I am one of the causes of my father's violent behaviours. Especially when my father hurts my mother and I don't do anything to stop it.

As a child, it always traumatised me seeing that someone you love so much and married could do such things to you. Seeing that, I always think about what will happen to me when I get married. Will I go through the endless cycle of abuse or not? Sometimes when I see a couple arguing or fighting, my entire body just gives up on me and I'm just standing there paralysed to the core of my bones.

That's why we are writing to you. We all want our fathers to stop hurting our mothers. Stop hurting us.

Violence, the child is dropping tears because their parents are not happy together.

Please leave our homes, our village, our province, our country.

If love, peace and harmony prevail among families, then the community, province and the nation will also be in peace and harmony, and it will be easy for the government to run the country.

Thank you for listening to us.

Please leave our families alone.

Yours asking for assistance,  
The school students of Papua New Guinea

This year, as the new university term and school term begins, we plan to share this letter through schools, churches and also with trainee teachers. We are looking forward to seeing how the words of the students, generated through this research, can be used to spark action to prevent and address domestic violence. We also hope to use radio and other media so that young people currently experiencing the effects of violence get to hear the words of others who share their experiences.

### ***Our letter back to the students***

Narrative therapy approaches to trauma emphasise the importance of recognising and elevating the ways in which people (including children) *respond* to traumatic experiences, and also the skills and values implicit in their responses (Denborough, 2008; White, 2004; Yuen, 2007). In a letter we wrote back to the students who participated in the research, and more broadly to younger generations, we sought to not only acknowledge the effects of domestic violence which the students had shared with us but also to highlight the ways in which many students honoured the actions of their mothers (and other family members) in trying to protect them, as well as their own diverse responses and their hopes and dreams for the future.

Dear younger generations,

Thank you for your honesty and courage to share with us your experiences about domestic violence. We are so sorry for what you have been through.

You shared with us so many important stories. You have taught us about the effects of the violence in your lives and on your schooling. One of you said:

Since I was affected by the violence, in school I am normally "giddy". For example, if someone drops a book or yells unexpectedly,

I freeze and then have a “flight” reaction. My friends, when they scare me, I always end up screaming and tearing up because of it. I have anxiety and panic attacks if I hear any fighting around my place. So yes, domestic violence has affected me negatively, has scarred me.

But despite all that you have been through, you are still in school and trying to create a good life.

When my dad’s younger brother used to belt up my mum, I used to see this and cry bitterly with sadness and anger, and even by seeing my siblings cry and feel uncomfortable ... When I think about it, I feel hopeless sometimes, but there is a voice inside of me telling me not to give up and face challenges in life to be a better person and live a happy life one day and to be the solution to domestic violence.

Some of you told us stories of how mothers try to protect their children:

- Some mothers hide their kids with their bodies receiving all the beating from their spouse.
- Other mothers hide their children. They tell the children to go into their room or to run away and stay with other family members. They bring their children to other family members so that only they suffer the beatings.
- Some survivors leave their violent spouse and take their children with them, never looking back. They may grow food for themselves or seek

help from elders, the police and the courts.

- Some take refuge with their close friends, relatives and children.

One of you told us about how your grandparents assisted you:

When I was a baby, my parents used to fight against each other, not caring about me. To escape that, my grandparents grabbed me and looked after me. And they continue to pay my school fees now.

But in other situations, you told us some children have no-one to protect them. Some escape their homes and end up involved in crime to survive. Others remain in their homes and try to find ways to endure the violence.

You told us of the ways that you or your friends or nieces and nephews respond when there is domestic violence in your homes. One of you told us about your niece:

My teenage niece goes out with her peer mates and back any time as she wants to just forget about her home. Or she brings her friends to the house so that the parents may not fight or argue. She goes for sleepovers (which I think is not safe). Or she goes to church every time to pray and sometimes she stays with our pastor’s family for a while.

We think that young people, like this niece, have developed many skills in enduring violence in their homes. Many of you told us you are searching for safety in different ways. You turn to elderly people, educated people and church pastors for advice. Some of you

turn to sports and to social activities and keep busy and your minds free.

Some of you told sad stories of when you were young children. When there was little you could do, some of you shared tears with your mothers: "When my mother cries I stand beside her and cry."

Now that you are older, one of you spoke of studying harder and harder. And some of you spoke of your faith:

I pray harder and continuously to God to instruct my parents to take up their responsibilities and also to help my grandparents. I keep putting my FAITH in GOD, no matter what circumstances I've been through and I'm in it. He always listen to me and answer me in one way or the other. Therefore, I will not give up.

One of you told a story of fighting back and escaping:

Back when I was 12 years old, my mom remarried to a bula man, and this man is an alcoholic. Every time he gets drunk and comes to the house he always beats up my mom and even though his family were there, he never cared to stop hitting my mom. There was a time he came so late in the night, and he was so drunk that he got the knife and came in the room and wanted to stab my mom and I, but then we fought back until we took the chance and escaped until then we never saw him again.

And we heard a story of change in a different family:

As the elder of two siblings, I can't stand seeing my violent dad beating my mother every now and then.

Seeing them getting cross and argue over little, little things make me sometimes thought of running away, or sometimes I usually thought that why was I born into such family? When I was around the age of 13, I still cry when my parents fought themselves. But now, when I have two lovely small brother and sister to look after, I started taking sides and involving myself in my parents' problem. I stopped my father from beating my mom and take him away for a walk. As we the kids grew older and older, my parents change some of their attitude and now we at least live a life free from fear. So I would like to thank all our good friends who have changed my parents' attitude.

We would like to thank all of you for the stories that you shared with us.

We also heard stories of your hopes for the future:

If we happen to find a family experiencing domestic violence, then we have to help that family in some ways so that the family can be resettled in a way.

I am planning to help run a program back in our community later to help our people from domestic violence.

One of you said:

As an upcoming generation, it's our responsibilities to teach the community about domestic violence.

Your words and stories are teaching us a lot.

We are listening.

And now we hope to share your words to bring about change so that women and children do not live in fear.

With respect,  
Ms Dorothy Wanega and Dr Jane Awi,  
University of Goroka

We had hoped from the beginning of this research project that it would not only provide information to us as researchers, but that it might also provide some modest form of relief for young people who are enduring hardship. The way we wrote this letter was shaped by this hope and also by a commitment to honouring the actions of mothers/survivors.

### *Providing relief*

In their individual letters to us, some of the students described the effects of the workshop. We will include some of their words here.

When you did not come yet, I normally feel hurt, lonely, embarrassed and so poor in my academic work, but since then, great improvement has happened. Thank you.

I have learnt much or I'll say, I learnt many new things from my friends during the workshop. One of the many things was to experience the thoughts and feelings of my friends and how they express it in their own ways. But still having them and me to express ourselves in the different and various activities we participated in. Much of the burdens and scar will still be within ourselves. But a big word of thanks to you guys for helping us to take the step and move forward.

I've learnt so many new things in this program which I will use everyday of my life.

Dear Counsellor,

Being young, I grew up in a community filled with violence. Not a day goes by that I have peace, just think of all these people involved made me feel sad. I never thought it would happen in my own home. It breaks my heart to see my parents fighting – actually, my dad beating my mum. Seeing all these while growing up made me feel lost and neglected. I also turned to violence myself. I get so angry all the time. I started beating and bullying others who annoy me. My life was turning upside down. I was always walking around with sadness, anger and depression in me.

I know that deep down my parents still love each other and I'm sure there are other reasons why they are fighting. I am really grateful and thankful for this wonderful program. It has helped a lot, for example, being with those other students who has been through this situation like me. It makes me feel comfortable because I'm not really open with my problems.

Once again, I appreciate everything and love every part of this program and it has really helped me.

This sort of feedback was heartening to us. It gives us confidence that arts-based research and narrative practice can elicit valuable research information and also provide some relief for participants in terms of all they are dealing with. This sort of feedback from students encourages us to continue to explore ways of using these practices to respond to community hardships and social issues.

### *The sharing of letters continues*

The collective letter to “Dear Violence” was shared with narrative therapy students and practitioners from different parts of the world, some of whom wrote letters back to us about how the ideas and stories of PNG students, and the process of

this research, could assist them in responding to domestic violence in their own diverse contexts and countries.

In the coming months we will be sharing the collective letters from this research and the letters from different parts of the world<sup>2</sup> in forums here in PNG. This may include within schools, universities, churches, the media and with community and political leaders. If you are responding to domestic violence in your part of the world, and anything about this project could be of value to you, we would welcome hearing from you.

We hope this research, which elevates the voices and knowledge of high school students, can play a part in addressing the social problem of domestic violence – here and perhaps elsewhere.

We will include here two messages we have received from different parts of the world that we will soon be circulating in PNG.

***From Joyz Tan who lives in Singapore***

Dear young people from  
Papua New Guinea,

The Lord be with you. I've heard your words to Violence, and you moved my heart so much.

I am from Singapore, a very small country located in Southeast Asia. Here too, many young or older people are also visited by violence.

Your words can support many of us here though. Will you let my people read your letters too? They will benefit from you, just like I did.

You have touched me with how you resist Violence.

You were visited by Violence, but you did not let yourself be poisoned by it. Your

heart remains so tender, so polite and so wise.

You care about your schooling, and mothers, and yourselves and others.

I think this is a strong care.

You said, at times, you feel unwanted. I hope you know you are wanted. And I hope you will want yourself.

I wish you well in your schooling and that the hurt you experienced can be comforted.

I hope the government and the church can hear your stories and wisdom.

I wish you abundant love, peace and harmony.

Affectionately in Christ,  
Joyz

***From Tyson Carmody who lives on Arrernte Country in Central Australia***

Hello young people of  
Papua New Guinea,

My name is Tyson Carmody. I am an Arrernte man from a small town called Alice Springs in the Northern Territory of Australia. Alice Springs is located in the very centre of Australia.

In our culture, family and connection to Country are so important for the health and wellbeing of everybody – for children, women and men. Unfortunately, we too share an unwanted relationship with Violence. This Violence causes

much trauma and pain for our families, particularly women and children, as it is our men who are most likely to use violence against them.

I was honoured to listen to your letter to Violence. Listening to your words took me to my own childhood witnessing Violence hurt our families, especially the women in our families. Your words also connected me back to a group of young people I worked with nearly 10 years ago in a local school. I took the young people camping out bush to talk about mental health and suicide, which are very serious concerns in our community. While on this camp, I conducted a role-playing activity with a psychologist and mental health worker from our local Aboriginal health organisation. The activity was called “an interview with Depression”. I played the role of Depression and the mental health worker interviewed me.

She asked me (Depression) the following questions:

- Who are your friends you like to hang out with the most?
- Why do you like hanging out with these friends?
- How do you feel when you hang out together, what are some of the things you like to do the most?
- How does hanging out with these friends of yours help you to stay close to young Aboriginal people?
- When do you feel strongest and when do you feel weak?

As I listened to your important words in the letter, I imagined you all interviewing Violence in a similar way and I heard

you already named some potential friends to Violence. Friends like Drunk, Alcohol, Jealousy, Rumours and Gossip and Money Problems. If you could ask Violence the questions above, what or who would Violence talk about? What might be some other important questions you'd like to ask Violence about?

When speaking with Depression, we learnt that it liked having control over our young people and that's what made it feel strong, but on the other side of this, Depression felt weakest when it couldn't control our young people. We began to see that Depression was just like all of us – we have friends who we like to hang around with and there are also people that we don't like or don't know as much. Depression named Culture and Country as two people it didn't like because they made it feel weak, as though it didn't have as much control over young people when they were close to Culture and Country.

The friends of Culture and Country were named as:

- Love
- Happiness
- Fun
- Hunting
- Learning
- Language
- Family
- Sport.

Ever since this moment, whenever I have been tasked to support young people or men around issues of violence or mental health, I always end up talking about Culture, Country and all their friends.

It allows everyone to find a way (their own way) through the problems with our skills and strengths.

At the end of your letter to Violence, you named Love, Peace and Harmony. I wonder who you might name as their friends and how this group of friends may help you bring this important conversation to the attention of your community and government leaders. How might Love, Peace, Harmony and their friends help young people to stay in school? Or to feel good, knowing your place in your families and community? Would you have questions of your own to ask Love, Peace, Harmony and their friends? If you wrote a letter to Love, Peace and Harmony, what would you say to them and how would you let them know what kind of impact they have on you and your community?

With respect,  
Tyson Carmody  
Kings Narrative  
<https://www.kingsnarrative.com.au/>



To close this paper, we will include a letter we have written back to our colleagues as part of what is becoming an evolving international community project.

Dear friends in the counselling class,

Greetings to you all from Papua New Guinea. We want to say a big thank you for the reflections you shared after reading our young people's letter to Violence. Even though you are far away, your words reached us with so much care, respect and understanding. It truly meant something to us to know that our work spoke to you in your own places, cultures and stories.

We are grateful to David Denborough and Cheryl White for seeing value in what our students are doing and for connecting us with you. Through your letters, we felt like we were sitting together under the same shade tree, just talking and learning from each other.

Many of you shared powerful experiences of your own resilience. When we read about the ways you have stood up to violence, we knew these would encourage our young people here in PNG.

Some of the strengths you talked about really touched us, including:

- using cultural healing and identity to stay strong
- finding support in family, culture and connection to Country
- the "Interview with Depression" conversation
- fighting to continue your education when violence tried to block your path.

One of you asked who taught our young people to stand up to violence. For many of us who grew up in rural PNG, we witnessed tribal fights, ethnic clashes and community conflicts from a young age. Those experiences shaped us. They

taught us that when violence comes, we cannot just sit quietly; we must stand together, protect our families and speak against what harms our communities. So, when our students wrote their letters, they were drawing from that same spirit.

We were also moved by the image one of you shared about David standing up to Goliath. In PNG, that story speaks strongly to many people, because we also face “giants” in the form of domestic violence, sorcery-related killings, election-related violence and ongoing ethnic clashes. Your reflection reminded us that courage does not belong to one culture alone; it is something people everywhere carry in their hearts.

Some of you shared your own memories of being pushed around by violence when you were little. Others said our students’ letters reminded you of the care, comfort and strength that comes from standing together. These connections show us that even though our places are different, our experiences can speak to each other.

We enjoyed reading about how nature and culture play a role in your counselling work:

- The picture of the mob of kangaroos felt like a symbol of the community that stands ready to protect and restore peace and harmony. This is encouraging to know that we do have a community of support.
- Taking young people out to the bush to talk about mental health and suicide reminded us of how, in PNG, we often go to our gardens, rivers or mountains to think, talk and find peace.

- Your use of role-play connects with our own work in process drama.
- And your “Interview with Depression” really echoed our activity where one of us wore a mask to personify Domestic Violence and allow the young people to interview us.

Your stories helped us see that even though we come from different parts of the world, we have similar ways of healing through culture, through nature, through storytelling and through our community.

Thank you, friends, for walking with us in this learning journey. We hope this connection continues to grow, just like a yam vine finding another vine to climb with.

With warm PNG greetings,  
Dorothy and Jane

## Acknowledgments

This research had clearance from The University of Goroka Ethics Committee. Permission was also granted by the National Department of Education to conduct research in schools. The researchers sought consent from teachers and participants in the participating schools. Images generated from the research were deliberately left out for ethical reasons. The data coding systems used letters and numbers to represent the participants to preserve confidentiality. The authors acknowledge The University of Goroka for funding the research.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> If you are interested in more information about how these letters were created and the thinking behind them, please write to the authors.
- <sup>2</sup> For more about the process of exchanging messages across communities in collective narrative practice, see Denborough et al. (2006).

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# Towards a decentred, politically influential, accountable and yet uncertain narrative practice

by Kelsi Semeschuk



*Kelsi Semeschuk is a narrative therapist, registered psychologist and researcher living in Adelaide/Tarntanya on Kurna Land. She has a particular interest in supporting people with experiences of sexual abuse, interpersonal violence and associated trauma and has a strong dedication to working from a feminist lens. Kelsi's doctoral research at The University of Melbourne focused on the video archive of Michael White and his therapeutic practice in the realms of abuse and trauma. Kelsi integrates her research learnings in her counselling work to help the people consulting her to navigate towards preferred identities that exist beyond the problem-saturated narratives that so often try to dominate their lives. [kelsi.semeschuk@gmail.com](mailto:kelsi.semeschuk@gmail.com)*

## Abstract

A “decentred” therapeutic stance is often seen as one of the hallmarks of narrative practice, but it is interpreted differently by different practitioners. This paper draws on theory-building, feminist and collective doctoral research with the archive of video recordings of Michael White’s teaching and therapy sessions. This research involved detailed observation of Michael White’s therapy sessions, collective research with a group of practitioners, and a systematic search all of Michael White’s published writings that relate to a “decentred” stance. This article offers one situated account of learnings that emerged through a particular engagement with this archive. I hope this can contribute to ongoing conversations about how decentred and influential practice might be more fully described in contemporary narrative therapy.

**Key words:** *decentred; decentered; influential; centred; Michael White; narrative therapy; narrative practice*

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# THERAPEUTIC POSTURE

	<b>De-centred</b>	<b>Centred</b>
<b>Influential</b>	De-centred and influential (potentially invigorating of therapist)	Centred and influential (potentially burdening of therapist)
<b>Non-influential</b>	De-centred and non-influential (potentially invalidating of therapist)	Centred and non-influential (potentially exhausting of therapist)

Figure 1. Therapeutic posture

This paper focuses on Michael White’s concept of the “decentred and yet influential” position of the narrative therapist. White depicted this “therapeutic posture” in his teaching notes (2005), see Figure 1.

White elaborated on what it means to be in a “decentred but influential” position in *Maps of Narrative Practice*:

This is a decentred participation in that therapists endeavour to privilege the authorship of the people seeking consultation. And it is an influential participation in the sense that the therapist brings structure to this inquiry about the developments of people’s lives that may potentially be unique outcomes. (White, 2007, p. 233)

## Brief history

While the concept of remaining decentred but influential (White, 1997, 2005, 2007) is regularly drawn on in the narrative field today, the historical context in which this concept was developed is not richly articulated in White’s published writings. As Dragana Ilic (2017) noted in their dissertation on White’s decentred and influential position: “Not much is written about this position and it is usually unclear to many students of

narrative therapy what this position means and entails and how it is performed in the session” (Ilic, 2017, p. 109). However, having access to White’s early teaching videos (particularly those in which he is teaching with Karl Tomm), and discussing these early teachings with people who knew Michael and his work well (e.g., Jill Freedman, Mark Hayward, Cheryl White, David Denborough), I came to understand that the stance of decentred but influential was proposed in response to the concept of therapist “neutrality” that had been articulated by systemic family therapists (Selvini et al., 1980; Tomm, 2016; White, 1998, 1997, 2005, 2007). Karl Tomm has provided a succinct description of the history of “neutrality” in systemic and narrative practice:

One of the things that I don’t think people are aware of, is that when the Milan team popularised this notion of neutrality, it was in the context of psychiatric practice which consisted of professionals having and using authority to tell people how they ought to lead their lives. Introducing the concept of neutrality in that context, was therefore, not neutral! In fact, it was challenging the status quo in a very powerful way. People who aren’t familiar with that history think that the concept of “neutrality” was a wholly conservative notion, but it wasn’t at the time. Of course, considerations of the power differential between therapists and

clients, and between different genders, and so forth, have all questioned the notion of neutrality. But actually, it was a radical notion at the time and I think that's an aspect to the history that has been lost. The Milan team were hoping to encourage professionals within the mental health system not to impose their particular views on what people should be doing in the family, where, prior to this, it had been assumed that this was to be the role of the professional. (Tomm, 2016, p. 30)

Conversations about the concept of neutrality and therapist influence can also be found in commentaries and critiques of White's work from therapists working in systemic and family therapy traditions. For example, commenting on White's therapeutic work, Karl Tomm said the following:

We [Michael and I] used to have debates at first because he claimed that he didn't have so much influence on clients. He had a horror of dominating others but did eventually acknowledge his "decentered but influential position." He was influential because he understood the structure of narratives, unique outcomes, absent but implicit desires, future storylines, etc. (Tomm, as cited in Duvall et al., 2008, p. 4)

Karl Tomm elaborated on White's skill in being decentred but influential by referring to his ability to remain "humble" while also exuding a sense of "confidence" that things could improve:

Michael had a way of attending in such a complete, full manner to others' experiences that had a profound effect in opening possibilities. He had an unusual combination of respectful humility and absolute confidence. He was very humble with respect to the other having legitimate experiences of their own and was very attentive to them. You have to be humble to do that because if you are too full of your own ideas, you project them onto others. At the same time, he exuded confidence, a strong sense of knowing that something could be done, which created a willingness to trust' (Tomm, as cited in Duvall et al., 2008, p. 4).

Salvador Minuchin, who willingly embraced a centred and influential (some would say authoritative) position within his form of structuralist family therapy, also had certain critiques of White's work in relation to his "influence" on the people consulting him. Minuchin said the following about White's work:

I remember seeing Michael White do a very masterful session of narrative therapy, but it was like watching a sheep dog at work. He kept pushing people through a series of constructed questions into the groove of seeing their stories in the more positive way that he wanted for them. The therapist changes the old story and convinces the client that the new story is more true than the old. We all offer our patients a language, and we say, "Let's begin to see your life in this language, and I will give you solutions in this language". I do it. Everybody does it. (Minuchin, as cited in Simon, 1996, pp. 55–56)

In response to this comment by Minuchin, White said the following in an interview with Michael Hoyt and Jeff Zimmerman:

I have always admired Minuchin's questioning of therapeutic practices, and his efforts to encourage people to acknowledge and to name the power relations of therapy. And, although I don't see myself or my work in the description of Minuchin's that you quoted, I think the issue of the role and meaning of questions in therapeutic conversations is a really good one to consider. I am interested in how we can talk about this issue in ways that do not blur distinctions around different practices. This is important because if all acts of power in the name of therapy are equal – if it is not possible to differentiate between those acts that are more imposing from those that are less imposing – then we don't have anywhere to go in terms of questioning therapeutic practice, and there will be no impetus for us to find ways of making what we do more accountable to the people who consult us. (White, 2000, p. 100)

I view White's determination to discern and differentiate "acts of power in the name of

therapy” as very significant. To me, it reflects White’s unwillingness to be resigned to the fact that therapists hold a status of power and privilege in the therapy room – and that what they *do* to respond to this position of power, matters. I hear White saying, “we can work with this ... we can still make distinctions between acts that are more imposing from those that are less imposing, because otherwise, what are we left with?”

The efforts that White made to differentiate “acts that are more imposing” from “acts that are less imposing” is clearly evident in his video archive. Throughout the many therapeutic encounters recorded in the archive, one can see that the vast majority of White’s therapeutic work took place on the “less imposing” (decentred) but influential side of the continuum. However, there are also instances when he travelled towards the “more imposing” (centred) end of the continuum. One is left to wonder: What was influencing White at these times? What was he thinking? What might he have been resisting or attending to? What can we learn for our own practice from these moments?

### *Therapist positioning: A reflection of political and ethical commitments*

In reflecting on the questions mentioned above about Michael White’s positioning in the therapeutic context, I found the words of Mark Hayward (2003) to be especially helpful and illuminating. In a paper that Hayward wrote in response “to some of the specific and the generalised challenges to narrative therapy from therapists of other persuasions” (2003, p. 183), he skilfully highlighted the ways in which the therapist’s position reflects quite profound political and ethical commitments. The following two quotes stood out as especially significant in linking therapeutic posture(s) to political commitments:

Family therapy models are much more than a set of connected ideas and practices. They contain a philosophy, a view of the

world and a schema for relating to it.

This therapist positioning reflects attitudes that embody principles, beliefs and values. These are commitments about what’s important, how people should be treated and what’s right. It should be no surprise, then, that therapists are so committed to their models – a model might represent something as important as a commitment to justice or equality. As an early structural therapist, I stood for accessible theories, jargon-free clarity and therapeutic leadership. In my days as a Milan therapist, I stood for neutrality and self-determination. Come post-Milan, I also stood for more collaboration and a disbelief in grand theories. And now, as a narrative therapist, I stand for transparency, for accountability, for social justice and for reducing hierarchy. (Hayward, 2003, p. 184)

Hayward goes on to further articulate the political alignments related to narrative therapy:

For example, the narrative approach to reflecting teams that asks team members to situate their comments (“embodiment”) represents a particular commitment to the value of accountability. This accountability is further developed in the “Part 4” of narrative sessions where the team and family are encouraged to ask the therapist to account for their questions and/or areas of interest and/or theoretical orientation, etc. ... it is hard to imagine any new narrative practice developing that does not reflect values like transparency and collaboration or that does not make us accountable to those who consult us. (Hayward, 2003, p. 186)

Having now set a context for understanding therapeutic posture as representing certain political alignments, I want to describe a side project that I engaged with to better understand Michael White’s approach to decentred practice. It emerged from a particular conversation.

*Towards a decentred, politically influential, accountable and yet uncertain practice?*

As I was tussling with these different understandings about “decentred practice”, I had an interesting conversation with my PhD supervisor, David Denborough (DD).

DD spoke about how in his experience, the concept “decentred” cannot be separated from the couplet “decentred and influential”. This was how he understood Michael White’s teaching. The “influential” sphere included all sorts of ethical and political implications that could not be explained by the concept “decentred”. DD said that talking about narrative practice as a “decentred” practice (without the influential part) seemed fraught and limited to him.

This was intriguing to me, as in my training and engagement with narrative ideas, I had often heard of the imperative to practice in decentred ways, and it seemed that many believed that narrative practice equalled decentred practice, and that perhaps this was the key defining ethical orientation of narrative therapy.

As a result of our conversation, we decided that a further mini research project was required. I dove back into the electronic archive of all Michael White’s published writings to search for every instance in which he wrote about the concept “decentred”, and to determine whether or not this was linked to “influential”.

I first searched for the words *influential* and *influence*, and then I searched *decentred* and *decentered*, the different spelling, and the hyphenated versions (de-centred and de-centered), and then *centred*, *centering*, and then *decentred*: all of those words separately. When I searched for the use of the word *influential*, some of the terms that came up in relationship to it included, *authorship* or *authority*, *direction*, *discovery*, *being directive*. When I searched for *decentred* and *centred*, different concepts came up like *decentred tradition*, *a decentred form*, *decentred practice*, *decentred sharing*, *decentreing of knowledges* and *consciousness of a therapist*.

I made two key discoveries.

First, that it was in White’s workshop notes (2005) that he most clearly paired “decentred” and “influential”.

## THERAPEUTIC POSTURE

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Figure 2. Therapeutic posture from White (2005)

The following is the text that accompanied this diagram in White's workshop notes:

It is the intention of the therapist to take up a “decentred and influential” posture in conversations had with the people who consult them – to develop therapeutic practices that make it possible for him/her to occupy the top-left quadrant.

The notion “decentred” does not refer to the intensity of the therapist's engagement (emotional or otherwise) with people seeking consultation, but to the therapist's achievement in according priority to the personal stories and to the knowledges and skills of these people. In regard to the personal stories of people's lives, in the context of this achievement, these people have a “primary authorship” status, and the knowledges and skills that have been generated in the history of their lives are the principal considerations.

The therapist is influential not in the sense of imposing an agenda or in the sense of delivering interventions, but in the sense of building a scaffold, through questions and reflections, that makes it possible for people to: a) more richly describe the alternative stories of their lives, b) step into and to explore some of the neglected territories of their lives, and to, c) become more significantly acquainted with the knowledges and skills of their lives that are relevant to addressing the concerns, predicaments and problems that are at hand. (White, 2005, p. 9)

This aligned with what DD was saying, but what was surprising was that in the totality of White's writings, there was only one other place in which “decentred” and “influential” were linked (in the book *Maps of Narrative Practice* in relation to statement of position map 2, p. 233). There are over 40 references to *decentred/decentered* elsewhere in White's writings that stand alone, without reference to “influential”.

This was surprising to me (and to DD), but perhaps explained why the concept of decentred practice (as a stand-alone ethical imperative to define narrative practice) was espoused in a number of the focus group discussions I conducted with narrative practitioners as part of my doctoral research (Semeschuk, 2022).

### Keeping decentred and (politically) influential linked

I started to realise that there is not a clear understanding or consensus about what it means to be decentred or centred, as distinct from influential and non-influential.

As part of my doctoral research, I created anonymised transcripts from the video archive of Michael White's teaching and therapy sessions. In some of these transcripts, he was clearly being influential, and I was seeking ways of learning from these moments. There were times when it seemed that White was being “influential” and also “centring” the experience of those most marginalised (particularly children's perspectives). I couldn't easily explain these through the term “decentred”, but there were potentially more options when decentred was linked to “influential” or “politically influential”, as was suggested by some in the focus groups.

The concept of “decentred and politically influential” practice seems attuned to a quote I came across within White's teaching tapes in which he had been talking about the narrative therapist's position as being like that of an investigative reporter. When a participant in the audience spoke about how a reporter is meant to be “neutral”, White replied:

Oh no. An investigative reporter is not neutral. Bernstein and Woodward were not neutral. There is not neutrality there. They set out to expose this corruption of power. There's not neutrality. There's no neutrality in my position. (Michael White Archive, tape 198)

This also resonates for me with a description of Karl Tomm's: "As a therapist, he [White] is an applied deconstructionist activist" (Tomm, 1993, p. 174).

The "political influence" within narrative practice is not the imposition of a therapist's values on those who are consulting them, but a practice of making visible the operations of intersectional power relations, and of refusing to participate in normative judgement.

As well as the coupling of "decentred and (politically) influential", there is another coupling that seemed to emerge when I did this search of White's published works, and that relates to the concept of accountability.

### *Coupling decentred practice with accountabilities*

One of the places in Michael White's writings where he most fully described the concept of decentred practice is in the book *Narratives of Therapists' Lives* (White, 1997). Interestingly to me, having emphasised practices that are decentring of the therapist, he then turned to practices of accountability:

I will now briefly review the practices that I have already discussed in this book that are decentring of the therapist. Following this, I will focus again on the practices of "accountability" that are expressed in narrative work. I do this because, of all decentring practices, these are the ones around which there is the greatest potential for misinterpretation. (White, 1997, p. 202)

I think it's worth quoting what Michael White (1997) wrote about practices of accountability:

In decentred practice, the knowledges and consciousness of the therapist ... is not primary in providing a basis for a review of the real effects of the therapeutic conversation on the lives and the relationships of persons seeking consultation. Instead, it is the knowledges

and consciousness of the persons consulting therapists that is primary to, and privileged in, these considerations. This provides for a version of accountability that is bottom-up rather than top-down ... I have discussed the emphasis that can be given to processes of accountability in work with men who have perpetrated abuse (White, 1995). In this work, attention is given to the exploration of knowledges about alternative ways of being for men, and to the development of specific proposals for action that are informed by these knowledges. Once established, feedback on these proposals is solicited from women and from children. This provides some check on the unwitting reproduction of those men's ways of being in the world that are oppressive to others. (White, 1997, pp. 203–204)

In the same paper, White also referred to the development of processes of accountability in his work with women who had been subject to abuse by men:

This accountability is often facilitated by engaging other women as consultants to the therapeutic conversations. Special attention can be given to the review of any developments in therapy that might be reproducing of the power relations of gender. These processes of accountability are decentring of the knowledges and of the consciousness of the therapist in regard to the many considerations of the real effects of this work. (White, 1997, p. 204)

In this passage, in the book in which White wrote most about decentred practice, we find an explicit linkage to accountabilities.

In learning from the practice examples I identified in the videos from White's archive, I have found it helpful to consider how a decentred ethic was at play in the context of various accountabilities. Perhaps the shape of our "politically influential decentred practice" is influenced by the accountabilities that we put in place.

## Uncertainty

And yet, there is an important counterpoint.

There is a further ethical position that comes through so strongly in Michael White's teaching and writing. It is in relation to uncertainty: uncertainty about what is right for other people's lives; uncertainty about what is the preferred direction of a conversation:

I'm not actually feigning uncertainty, I am uncertain ... I am getting more and more of a sense of what might be valuable avenues for conversation as the interview develops.

... I think there are some things that we know that we learn from these conversations that we keep faith with, with others. But the uncertainty part, I think that perhaps, as the years go by, I become more intrigued about life and I guess this is reinforcing of uncertainty about other people's lives.

... When I'm talking about apprehension [or uncertainty] I'm not talking about incompetence. I believe I'm really competent about what I do, and I think people who consult me get a sense of that. But we're talking about uncertainty about other people's lives, and about where we might go in these conversations. That only becomes clearer as the conversation develops. This is not a question about competence. (Michael White Archive, tape 198)

And so, this brings me to the title of this commentary. Rather than uplifting "decentred practice" alone as a central guiding ethic of narrative practice, perhaps it is more complicated than that. Might we instead be seeking a decentred, politically influential, accountable and yet uncertain practice?

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# Fireworks, a funeral and friendship: Re-membering community at the end of life

by Tanya Newman



Tanya Newman is a hospice social worker in Aotearoa New Zealand. She is a student of the Master of Narrative Therapy and Community Work at The University of Melbourne. Tanya is interested in active re-membering practices and grounding frontline social work practice in narrative ideas. Community work makes her heart sing.  
[emailfortanya@gmail.com](mailto:emailfortanya@gmail.com)

## Abstract

This paper shares a joyful practice story about re-membering community at the end of life. A “socially isolated” man was referred for social work support to arrange a will. This task became a rich experience of re-membering community and supporting Colin to craft his own after-death care. These collaborative efforts enabled friendship, community and a funeral with fireworks. Colin’s story highlights the possibilities of actively re-membering people into one another’s lives, and how narrative practitioners can support people to reconnect with those important to them.

**Key words:** *re-membering; social work; hospice; palliative care; end of life; death; grief; community; funeral; eulogy; definitional ceremony; linking lives; enabling contribution; narrative practice; narrative therapy*

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Author pronouns: she/her

As a palliative care social worker, my days are filled with supporting people to navigate health systems, access resources, make informed-decisions and get their affairs in order. While narrative practice informs my work, this looks different than it might in a counselling or group-work context. Practical problem-solving is often the reason I meet people. This can become a doorway into therapeutic conversations, particularly with people who may be prepared to meet a “social worker” but not a “counsellor”.

The people referred to the hospice I work for usually have less than a year to live, and many die within six weeks of admission to our service. However, while we support the dying, our work focuses on enabling people to live well. As such, we “make now precious” (Lee, 2013), listening for what people hold dear and doing our best to support people to live comfortably and enjoy time with the companions, places and activities that are important to them. I “attend to goodbyes” (Lee, 2013) in every interaction, as it is always possible the people I support may die before we can speak again. This brings a particular clarity to the work and encourages creativity to make the most of the time we have.

In this article, I will share the story of my work with Colin in which the practical task of arranging a will became a rich experience of re-membering community. Colin’s story illustrates how narrative thinking, skills and ethics can enrich daily social work practice, and highlights the value of re-membering practice as more than conversation. All names in this article are pseudonyms.

### *A thin story: “Socially isolated”*

I first met Colin when he moved into an aged care residential facility, following a hospital admission. Prior to his time in hospital, Colin had been living independently in a cabin at a local holiday park. A hospital social worker sent me a referral, requesting that I support Colin to contact his brother, arrange a will,

sort out a phone plan, collect belongings, arrange storage and finalise his tenancy.

In our first conversation, I learnt Colin was interested in purchasing a campervan and travelling. He was adamant he would soon be moving out of the rest home. Colin was keen to arrange his will, but he was unsure about the content. As we talked about the kinds of questions a lawyer would ask when drafting a will, I learnt that Colin’s death and after-death care wishes centred on nephews (with whom he’d had no contact for 35 years), a previous landlord and a man he had bought fireworks from (whose last name he did not know and contact details he did not appear to have). Colin articulated wishes for a funeral with “adults and children singing”, fireworks, a motorcade of taxis and hot rod cars, and to have sunflowers planted on his grave.

At the time of our first conversation, Colin was very unwell. He was unable to mobilise more than 20 metres. It had been some years since he’d had contact with the people he hoped would support him. I felt a sense that we were inhabiting different worlds of expectation. I was momentarily confounded and slipped into pathologising thinking, briefly diagnosing Colin as “having unrealistic expectations”. Fortunately, I held myself to account and returned to my ethics of honouring the skills, knowledges and agency of the folk I work alongside. I chose to trust Colin’s vision and followed his lead.

Over the next six weeks, I met with Colin seven times. A colleague also supported Colin, helping with some of the practical tasks for which he had been referred. This is considerably more resource than we usually have capacity for. We adjusted our care to fit Colin, as initially his community was us. Colin was a private, methodical man who liked to make well-considered decisions. He needed time to connect with us, and to consider big questions such as, “Who would you like to inherit your estate?” and “Who do you want to care for you after you die?”

## *Re-membering in action: Enabling contribution*

Time was also needed to “re-member” people into Colin’s life (Myerhoff, 1982; White, 2007). Colin was initially referred to me as he was “isolated” and “had no-one”. In conversation with Colin, I quickly learnt about significant figures from his past. These people had membership in Colin’s “association of life” (White, 2007, p. 129), but either didn’t know it or may have thought their membership had lapsed. Rather than engaging in re-membering conversations with Colin, my focus was to actively re-member people into his life.

After my second meeting with Colin, I suggested he contact his brother and previous landlords/neighbours, the Massey family. Colin wanted to “let my brother know what is happening with me” and expressed his wish to take the Massey family “out on a fishing charter”. I asked Colin questions about his connections with his brother and the Masseys, so I knew a little about why they were important to him. I encouraged Colin to make these calls, as I hoped connecting with others would increase the support available to him, and assist Colin in becoming clearer about his will. I also wanted to support Colin’s agency to enact his own wishes. Colin said he would make the calls in the next few days.

When we met a week later, Colin had not made the calls. I realised poor health (and perhaps nerves), meant this task was beyond what Colin was able to do. The ethic of being “decentred and influential” is central to my work (Morgan, 2006; White, 2007). As a palliative care social worker, I often take on more practical “doing” than I would with people who are well. Prioritising people’s wishes for their lives sometimes requires me to lend my energy and take on responsibilities that could be disempowering in other contexts. Not doing so could risk being ineffective, uninfluential and abandoning what is precious for the people I am working with. Therefore, when I realised Colin hadn’t been able to make the calls himself, I offered to support him to do so. When he asked if I would make the calls for him,

I offered to lend him my phone and sit with him while he called. Colin called his brother and left a message before calling Nicole Massey. He did so on speaker phone, and I heard the surprise in Nicole’s voice. She initially declined Colin’s offer to leave his belongings to her family, gently telling Colin they didn’t need anything and suggesting a charity donation instead. Colin asked to pass the phone to me, so I could talk with Nicole. She asked if she was off speaker phone, and then said: “Tanya, this is a real surprise, I’m Colin’s old landlord and I haven’t seen him in years!”

I replied: “Yes, Colin told me. He’s been talking with me about the people who are important to him, and he shared his fondness for your family. He’s been telling me about your family’s kindnesses, like gathering wild mushrooms and sharing them with him. Your kindness means a lot to Colin.” I was intentional in my reply, hoping to “thicken” the story of connection between the Massey family and Colin (Morgan, 2000), highlighting some of what they had already contributed to his life in the hope this may enable ongoing connection.

Nicole thought about Colin overnight, and rang me the next day to tell me she was prepared to visit and to help out if she could. In that conversation, I asked questions about her connection with Colin, and heard stories about the years Colin spent living on the Massey family farm – the chats over cups of tea, gifts of fresh eggs, groceries collected, cars loaned and Christmas days where Colin was included in the Massey family lunch. I highlighted the significance of these kindnesses and connections in Colin’s life. Again, my hope was to thicken and “richly describe” stories of connection (Morgan, 2000) and to “enable contribution” (Denborough, 2008). Nicole is a kind-hearted, practical and energetic woman. She quickly shifted from surprise to feeling touched by her significance to Colin. Nicole then proceeded to thoroughly exceed my expectations, visiting to support Colin with practical tasks the next day, and extending the gift of her friendship to Colin over his final weeks.

When I first asked Colin about his family, he shared a tragic story of his elder brother Norman dying in an accident 35 years ago. He chose the cemetery where Norman was buried as his own final resting place, as he wanted to be as close as possible to his brother. Norman had two sons, who were teenagers when he died. Colin had little contact with them since his brother's death. Buoyed by our experience of reaching out to Nicole, I asked Colin if he would like to reconnect with his nephews. Colin was eager to do so and asked me to find them. Fortunately, an internet search produced a picture of a man who appeared the right age, had the right name and bore a striking resemblance to Colin. I emailed him, introducing myself, asking if he was Colin's nephew, and offering to connect them. Colin's nephew, Brendan, called me within 15 minutes. When we spoke, I shared Colin's love for Brendan's father, his decision to be buried at the same cemetery, and Colin's regret at not keeping in touch with Brendan and his brother. Again, I was intentional about thickening stories of connection and was guided by the ethic of enabling Colin to "speak through me, not just to me" (Denborough, 2018), "rescuing" Colin's words and sharing them verbatim (Newman, 2008). Brendan agreed to receive family photos and other heirlooms, and to video call with Colin. When I told Colin about this, his face lit up. It meant a great deal to Colin to reconnect with his brother's sons.

At this point, we were gaining momentum. Another puzzle piece was to find Darrell, a man who had previously sold Colin fireworks. Colin loved fireworks, had amassed an impressive collection of pyrotechnics and wanted to bequeath these to Darrell as he was "reliable", "safe", and would "know what to do with them". I initially tried connecting with a pyrotechnics supplier where Darrell had worked but was unsuccessful. Fortunately, during a later visit to Colin, he remembered he had Darrell's phone number. It was stored in a pill container, on a small slip of paper, which had ripped in two. Colin pieced the papers together, so we had most of the numbers. I tried a few variations to fill the number gap and was thrilled to get through to Darrell's voicemail.

Again, I left a message, introducing myself and explaining the reason for my call. Five minutes later, Darrell called me back. I shared Colin's sense of connection to Darrell, including the words Colin had said about him. Like Nicole and Brendan before him, Darrell was both surprised and willing to support Colin's wishes.

For Colin, actively reconnecting with the people who were important to him was what was needed, rather than therapeutic conversation. When Colin told me that he felt like a "lightbulb with the fuse burnt out" after Norman died, I tried asking, "What do you think it would mean to Norman, to know how much he meant to you?" Colin looked at me like I'd lost the plot. In that moment, I had centred my own curiosity and interest in re-membering conversations, rather than Colin's own priority, which was to get his will sorted. From there on, our teamwork focused on practical tasks and achieving outcomes. I think Colin liked me because I was up for straightforward conversation, getting things done and following his direction. This has been my experience when supporting other men Colin's age. He was an intensely private man, and he never would have agreed to "counselling". However, he was happy to meet with me as a social worker. Within the context of preparing his will, and on his own terms, Colin shared profound reflections with me. While our work together was not "therapy", it was therapeutic. I supported Colin to craft his own after-death care (Hedtke & Winslade, 2016). In the weeks we spent together, I saw Colin become more relaxed and at peace with his health, his story and his dying.

### *Honouring contribution and attending to goodbyes*

When Colin was ready, I arranged for a lawyer to visit him at the rest home. He asked me to be present for this meeting. Colin was a frugal man who didn't like spending money unnecessarily. Conversations with Colin were often meandering, and I was conscious that lawyers charge by the minute. Therefore, in preparation for the meeting

with the lawyer, I “rescued” Colin’s words and wishes (Newman, 2008), shared with me over our previous conversations, and documented these. I arrived early to share the document with Colin. He read and checked the document thoroughly, declared the content correct, and gave it to the lawyer as soon as she arrived. There was a real risk that Colin could die before his will was completed. Our preparatory conversations, and documenting Colin’s wishes, enabled the lawyer to work quickly. Narrative documentation helped ensure Colin’s will was finalised.

Supporting Colin in his meeting with the lawyer was the last time I saw him. He died two days after his will was signed. I think he held on to life to be able to complete this task, and once it was done, he relaxed into dying.

On Colin’s final night, Nicole spent hours with him. She read him psalms, sang him Elvis songs, shared a beer to toast his life and supported a phone call with his brother Graham. Shortly after chatting with Graham and saying their goodbyes, Colin told Nicole, “I’ll be going soon, it’s time for you to go”. As he expected, Colin died before morning.

When I first met Colin, I was in danger of holding a single storied account (Morgan, 2000) about Colin as “isolated” and “unrealistic”. Colin could have died without a will, friendship or anyone knowing his wishes. However, I listened for alternative accounts of Colin’s identity and particularly for sites of connection. The steps we took to re-member community meant Colin’s final weeks of living, dying and after-death care fitted a preferred story: Colin was a man who cared and was cared for.

### *Funeral: A definitional ceremony*

Colin’s funeral was one of the best I have attended. Nicole took on the responsibility for arranging the service. She created a photo montage, chose Elvis songs for us to sing and presented Colin’s casket beautifully – placing on the lid the Swandri jacket and beanie he customarily

wore, a bouquet of flowers, fireworks and a clean peanut butter jar (from the collection she found in storage). She wrote a moving eulogy, pieced together from the content of Colin’s storage containers and what she knew of him. Brendan travelled to attend his uncle’s funeral. He was a pall bearer and spoke at the service – a moving reclamation of family connections.

I also crafted a eulogy, comprised of conversations I had with Colin, Nicole, Brendan and Darrell, and an interview with brother Graham after Colin had died. My eulogy highlighted Colin’s connections with others, continuing to thicken the story of Colin as a man who cared and was cared for. This “ceremonial re-telling” (Denborough, 2008) honoured the contributions that Nicole, Brendan, Darrell and Graham made to Colin’s life. This was witnessed by the 40 or so people who attended Colin’s funeral, many of whom had not known Colin personally. I think the eulogies helped foster a sense of “communitas” (Denborough, 2018), as attendees connected to the stories of Colin’s life and to the knowledge that they were collectively honouring the wishes of a dying man.

At the end of the service, Nicole had a basket of bread bag ties (again, Colin had a surprisingly large collection of these). Everyone who attended placed a bread tie on Colin’s casket as a moment of individual farewell. Following the service, Darrell (who was also a pallbearer) let off an impressive fireworks display in Colin’s honour. I shed joyful tears watching the firework celebration of Colin’s life and the fulfilment of his wishes. I was in good company, with most of the small crowd crying, laughing or both!

After the service, Colin was taken for a last drive around town, accompanied by eight hot rod cars and their drivers from the local club. Nicole and I had both shared Colin’s wish for a hot rod motorcade with the funeral director, who happened to have an uncle with a hot rod connection. She took on the task of arranging a small fleet of hot rods for Colin, and the drivers were some of the people who attended Colin’s service. They too contributed to Colin’s story and seemed to enjoy doing so.

Additional staff from the funeral home attended Colin's funeral on their day off, bringing their own children along. Colin had "adults and children singing" as part of his farewell.

The following morning, when Colin left the funeral directors to be buried near his brother, he was flanked by a taxi guard of honour. Colin spent more than 20 years driving a taxi. He did so in a different city and had no ongoing personal connection with other drivers. However, when I rang the local company to share Colin's wish to have a taxi motorcade, I received an enthusiastic response. The local taxi company manager embraced Colin as a "taxi driving brother" and told me, "Once you're part of the taxi driving community, you're in it for life". He personally accompanied Colin alongside another driver he arranged to flank Colin. I understand more drivers joined the procession as Colin was driven through town.

Colin's funeral was a moving re-telling of Colin's life, and a celebration of Colin and his connections with the people he cared about. The funeral thickened preferred stories about Colin's life and community. It was a privilege to be involved. Colin was right – a funeral with "adults and children singing", fireworks, a motorcade of taxis and hot rods, and sunflowers planted on his grave was entirely possible.

### *Linking lives in social work practice*

Prior to Colin's funeral, I had not met Nicole, Brendan or Darrell. When we met, we greeted one another joyfully, exchanging warm hugs and sharing bewildered delight about the way we had come together to honour a man we both barely knew, and yet knew well.

Ideas about "boundaries" can be pervasive in social work practice. Had Colin had a different social worker, the focus could have been limited to organising a lawyer to visit. Efforts to reconnect Colin with the people who were important to him could be considered "out of scope", and attending a "client's" funeral (especially on the weekend!) might have been

labelled "unprofessional". This would have missed the opportunity to honour Colin's dying wishes. Fortunately, I'm a narrative social worker. As such, I'm interested in questioning taken-for-granted ideas, resisting individualising discourses and careful consideration of context-specific ethical practice. I also deeply value the healing possibilities of linking lives and enabling contribution (Handsaker, 2012). A narrative orientation towards social work practice supported me to step beyond both practical problem-solving and therapeutic conversation, towards opportunities to re-member community into Colin's life. While our work together was brief, it was deep and meaning rich (Young, 2006), and certainly much more than arranging a will!

As I said at Colin's funeral:

It is a privilege to have known Colin. When I first met him, he told me of hopes and plans that required the support of several people he had not had contact with for some time. I admit, I was doubtful at first. However, I followed his lead, and everyone Colin hoped would support him has done so (and then some!). Colin taught me about faith and the goodness of people, and reminded me that what seems impossible may in fact be possible.

One thread of Colin's legacy will be my resistance to professional assessment (my own or others) of other's knowledge as "unrealistic". Colin's memory will encourage me to step more quickly into re-membering as an active practice of (re)building community. I hope sharing the story of our work together will encourage other narrative practitioners to do the same.

### *Beyond re-membering conversation*

My work with Colin was inspired by Michael White's work. In particular, the story of his work with James which explored the history of "better judgement" in relation to his parenting, and White's "farfetched suggestion" that they get in touch with the parents of James's childhood friend Frank (White, 1997, p. 44).

I am grateful for White's examples of the therapeutic benefit that sleuthing, audacious phone calls and "opening up the therapy room" (Handsaker, 2012) can contribute to people's lives. White's example encouraged my efforts to "reactivate dormant memberships through re-engaging with some of the figures of [Colin's] history" (White, 1997, p. 23).

Much of what I have read about re-membering focuses on conversations between a therapist and the person seeking their support. Re-membering is often used in the context of grief, where the person seeking support is no longer able to speak directly with their loved one (Hedtke & Winslade, 2017). I see the value of these conversations in my daily work and will continue to invite such re-membering conversations. My experience with Colin deepened my appreciation of the possibilities of actively re-membering people into one another's lives, and the role of narrative practitioners in supporting people to reconnect with those who are important to them.

I hope this story offers another example of what can be possible when narrative therapy ideas and skills disrupt task-oriented social work practice.

Narrative practices assisted in making Colin's preferred story a reality, wove a compassionate community around him, and ensured a dying man's wishes were honoured. Fireworks and all.

## Acknowledgments

For Colin – thank you for granting me membership in your "club of life". It was my privilege to walk alongside you through your final weeks and to receive your stories. Thank you for the lessons learnt and for the joy of a funeral with fireworks.

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To my colleagues – your kindness, competence, flexibility and heart makes our work easier and more joyful.

To the community members everywhere who show up for one another in generous and unexpected ways, thank you.

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## Desired Dreams:

*Narrative therapy conversations with trauma survivors  
about the dreams they would like to experience*

*by Muhammed Nurullah Demir and Mehmet Dinç*



*Muhammed Nurullah Demir is a clinical psychologist and a doctoral student in clinical psychology living in Türkiye. He works as a research assistant in the Department of Clinical Psychology at İnönü University. His clinical and academic work focuses on narrative therapy, trauma, post-traumatic growth and addiction. He is especially interested in narrative practices related to dreams following traumatic events.*  
*muhammednurullahdemir@gmail.com*

 ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7411-8739>

*Mehmet Dinç is a narrative therapist living in Türkiye. He is an associate professor and faculty member in the psychology department at Hasan Kalyoncu University. He works on psychological resilience, conducts extensive research, and has written several books on the subject.*  
*mehmetdinc@gmail.com*

 ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9544-8999>



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Pronouns for both authors: he/him

## *Abstract*

This paper introduces the “Desired Dream” practice, an innovative psychotherapy approach based on narrative therapy. It involves conversations about dream content that individuals want to see and imagine, as distinct from dreams that occur spontaneously during sleep. The practice was designed to be used with people affected by the 2023 earthquakes in Türkiye. It may be of use when working with people who have been through a traumatic event, whether or not they are experiencing disrupted sleep or distressing dreams. The three-step process elicits participants’ personal and cultural perceptions and knowledges of dreams, then invites them to describe in detail a dream they would like to experience. The final stage explores the meanings and emotions these desired dreams hold. The aim is to create space for people to discover values, hopes and preferred directions in life. This paper describes the application of the Desired Dream practice with 12 participants (four children, four adolescents, four adults) affected by the 2023 earthquakes Kahramanmaraş, Türkiye. The practice supported participants in constructing alternative narratives about their lives that contained hopes, values and resilience, rather than trauma-centred narratives. The dreams the participants wanted to see facilitated conversations about their search for meaning in their lives, their longings and their capacity for personal agency. The paper offers a unique approach that contributes to the consideration of dreams not only within a clinical or pathological framework but also within a cultural and relational context.

***Key words: dreams; nightmares; sleep; trauma; earthquake; natural disaster; narrative therapy; narrative practice***

Natural disasters can have profound consequences at both individual and societal levels (World Health Organization, 2013). Due to their sudden onset, unpredictable nature and impacts on living conditions, such events can be extremely distressing. Earthquakes, floods, storms and fires can also significantly impact social structures, affecting forms of solidarity within communities, their collective memory, and their cultural meaning systems (Cova & Rincón, 2010).

The effects of natural disasters on individuals are often framed in terms of trauma: intense reactions such as fear, helplessness and horror experienced in response to events that have threatened physical or psychological integrity (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Psychology literature frequently emphasises that natural disasters can lead to mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety and depression (Harvey et al., 2003). These can begin immediately after the event or affect individuals' mental and emotional wellbeing in the long term. Symptoms of PTSD include re-experiencing the traumatic event, avoiding reminders of the event, intense anxiety and sleep disturbances (Yehuda, 2002).

Disturbances to sleep and dream patterns constitute a critical dimension of the impact of trauma on individuals (Ross et al., 1989). Nightmares are common and often contain emotional echoes of the traumatic event (Germain et al., 2007). This can reduce sleep quality and negatively affect daily functioning. Recent research has shown that nightmares can both hinder the mental processing of trauma and reflect an individual's response to trauma (Mellman & Hipolito, 2006; Simos & Berle, 2020).

However, the relationship between trauma and sleep is not limited to psychopathological effects. Sleep and dream content can also contribute to the reinterpretation of traumatic events by reflecting individuals' emotions, thoughts and hopes (Walker, 2017). Germain (2013) noted that post-traumatic nightmares indicate confusion in the individual's emotional

processing, while also emphasising the importance of therapeutic approaches that enable new understandings of these experiences.

One such therapeutic approach, narrative therapy, assists individuals to make sense of their traumatic experiences and bring alternative narratives to the fore alongside dominant ones (Freedman & Combs, 1996; White & Epston, 1990). Findlay (2016) has argued that in narrative therapy, dreams can provide a basis for active narratives about unique outcomes, initiatives and reactions that individuals produce in their dreams. Carla Souza (2021) showed that dreams can reveal not only past traumas but also provide a basis for double story development. Milan Colic (2007) stated that consciously constructed dream content can play an important role in individuals' emotional healing processes. Hong-Ru Liang (2022) considered daydreams as an expressive space that can open a door to alternative narratives.

Based on these perspectives, we propose the concept of the "desired dream". A desired dream is not a dream that a person experiences spontaneously during sleep; it refers to exploration of dream content that the person would wish for, imagines and constructs. Participants are both the narrators and interpreters of the "dream" in this process. This approach allows individuals to move away from trauma-centred narratives and create alternative stories that strengthen their connection to hopes, values and relational bonds. Thus, the Desired Dream practice is presented here as a method that highlights the cultural and relational dimensions of dreams and is consistent with a narrative therapy approach.

### *The significance of the Desired Dream practice*

Dreams have held a special place for me (Muhammed Nurullah Demir) since my childhood. As a child, I would excitedly tell my family about the dreams I had, and with their positive interpretations, I would transform these dreams into a hopeful story. With my

psychology education, my curiosity about dreams took on an academic dimension, and I turned to Freud's and Jung's dream theories. Treating my dreams as messages, I often asked myself questions like "What is my dream trying to tell me?" or "What hidden message is my dream conveying?" However, interpreting my dreams through generalised psychoanalytic theories eventually had a negative impact on my ability to remember them. I noticed that the more I approached my dreams this way, the less I remembered them. When I set aside psychodynamic interpretations and approached my dreams with a more open and nonjudgemental attitude, I began to remember them again. This personal experience marked the beginning of my awareness that the relationship we establish with our dreams can directly affect how they are remembered and how we make sense of them.

This personal awareness was compounded by my firsthand experience of the Kahramanmaraş Earthquake in February 2023. I experienced the earthquake in Adiyaman and stayed onsite in a tent for about a month. Fear dominated the first few days; however, helping those trapped in the rubble, sharing food and water, neighbours supporting each other, and the solidarity of volunteers from different cities replaced fear with a sense of coping together. Spending the nights with dozens of other campers, I witnessed people grinding their teeth and having nightmares. When I started working with clients after the earthquake, they expressed intense difficulties related to sleep and dreams. All these experiences increased my desire to investigate more closely how dreams can be related to traumatic experiences.

Discussions between Muhammed Nurullah Demir and his then doctoral supervisor Mehmet Dinç encouraged M. Nurullah to develop the idea of working with dreams within the framework of narrative therapy. Focusing on the concept of "a dream one would want to have" rather than "a dream experienced during sleep" opened up an exciting new horizon for M. Nurullah. The idea that dreams are not only a reflection of past

traumas but also a source of hope and alternative narratives for the future formed the basis of my approach. I encountered a similar perspective in David Epston's (1989) work on "counter-dreaming". Epston aimed to offer new perspectives on the client's life narrative by writing positive fictional dreams for the client. This approach was inspiring in that it showed how dreams could emerge from the shadow of traumatic experiences and open the door to alternative narratives.

In the psychology literature, Freud (1900) viewed dreams as a reflection of repressed desires, while Jung (1964) argued that dreams reflect the personal and collective unconscious. Modern neuroscience, on the other hand, has mostly associated dreams with cognitive functions and memory consolidation processes (Stickgold, 2005). All these approaches have largely prioritised the therapist's knowledge in interpreting dreams, pushing the individual's wisdom about their dream experience into the background. In contrast, in the Desired Dream practice, the client is both the "screenwriter" and the "interpreter" of the dream. This builds on White and Epston's (1990) statement that positioning the individual as the narrator and interpreter of their own life story contributes to psychological wellbeing.

In conditions such as PTSD, nightmares re-experiencing the trauma can negatively affect sleep patterns and emotional wellbeing (Germain, 2013; Mellman & Hipolito, 2006). Behavioural approaches such as exposure and response prevention or EMDR use repeated exposure techniques to desensitise the person to the traumatic experience (Shapiro, 2001). In contrast, in the Desired Dream practice does not elicit accounts or re-enactments of traumatic dream content; instead, the client is invited to construct a dream they would wish to have. This method allows the individual to move beyond traumatic events and construct narratives they desire for their life. Thus, the Desired Dream practice can support the thickening of alternative narratives and the construction of empowering life stories for individuals exposed to traumatic experiences.

## Developing the Desired Dream practice

The work described in this paper was conducted in Adıyaman, one of the provinces affected by the 7.7 and 7.6 magnitude earthquakes centred in Kahramanmaraş on 6 February 2023. Located on the East Anatolia Fault Zone, these earthquakes impacted 11 provinces, causing 50,783 deaths and 107,204 injuries (Afet ve Acil Durum Yönetimi Başkanlığı, 2023). Alongside immense destruction, the disaster revealed strong solidarity and coping practices. Shared life in tents and containers strengthened neighbourly ties, and experiences of mutual aid entered participants' dream narratives.

M. Nurullah worked with 12 participants equally distributed by gender and developmental stage: four children, four adolescents and four adults. The work was carried out 22 months after the earthquake on a voluntary basis. One participant had been trapped under rubble and lost a first-degree relative; the others had not had these experiences.

Before the practice, a literature review and expert consultations informed the development of open-ended questions and age-appropriate guidelines for the Desired Dream practice. A test group with six volunteers from each age group helped to refine the process. Based on feedback and expert input, the guidelines were finalised and applied in conversations with the participants.

### Stage 1: Cultural perceptions of dreams

In the first stage of the Desired Dream practice, questions were asked to understand the participants' perceptions of dreams and the familial and cultural contexts of these perceptions. This starting point aimed not only to gather information but also to establish a relationship of trust with the participants and to allow them to express their worlds in their own terms. This approach is a direct reflection of narrative therapy's emphasis on local knowledge and

meanings arising from individuals' everyday life practices. According to White and Epston (1990), individuals shape their identities not only through individual introspection but also through social contexts, cultural narratives and collective memory. Therefore, understanding how participants position their dream experiences within their families, communities and cultural backgrounds in the first step of the practice was critical to grasping what kinds of values, hopes or meanings the imagined dreams could be built upon in subsequent stages.

Through open-ended questions – such as: Do you remember your dreams? How are dreams addressed in your family? What do you think about dreams? – we explored individual meaning production in relation to dreams and the familial and cultural foundations of these meanings. This approach reflects an ethical and narrative position that centres participant knowledge rather than expert knowledge by allowing participants to speak within their own linguistic and cultural contexts. At the same time, this method allowed dreams to be approached not only as an individual mental process but also as an experience intertwined with collective meanings.

This initial phase also used the “small question” technique, one of the basic techniques of narrative therapy. In narrative therapy, instead of asking individuals big and abstract questions, simple, small questions are asked to help them understand their worlds. This approach is important for ensuring the participant's involvement in the process (White & Epston, 1990). The small question technique helps participants generate meaning about their own lives without being overwhelmed by big questions. This technique also allowed clients to express their dreams in a less judgemental way.

Examples of the first stage of the Desired Dream process are provided below, beginning with Yusuf, who was seven years old.

M. Nurullah: Do you remember your dreams?

Yusuf: No. I don't remember.

M. Nurullah: So you don't remember your dreams? Do you always forget the dreams you see?

Yusuf: I always forget them.

M. Nurullah: If you remembered a dream, would you like to tell someone about it?

Yusuf: Of course.

M. Nurullah: Who would you like to share it with?

Yusuf: My mom, dad or brother.

Yusuf did not generally remember his dreams, but expressed his willingness to share his dream experiences with his family. To prevent performance anxiety among the participating children, the Desired Dream exercise was presented as an activity rather than a homework assignment. The work with Yusuf was conducted with the consent of his family and with Yusuf's approval.

The conversation format was adapted to adolescents, as in the following conversation with Aysima (16 years old).

M. Nurullah: Aysima, what do you think about dreams?

Aysima: I didn't think about dreams before. I had no idea before, but now it just seems like something bad. It's scary for me.

M. Nurullah: You said you were scared in your dream. What do you see in your dream?

Aysima: Silly things ... Even if they aren't real, I always see bad things. I see silly, meaningless things. When I wake up in the morning, I say to myself that I don't want to see this person's face today.

M. Nurullah: Your dreams seem meaningless and bad to you. Do you often remember your dreams?

Aysima: Well, I do remember them, teacher, but not all of them. I remember some things, I don't remember others, and I try to get those things out of my head.

Aysima described her dreams after the earthquake with words such as "evil", "fear" and "meaningless". She stated that the dreams she experienced were generally negative in content and that for this reason, on certain days, she did not want to meet certain people. Aysima remembered some of her dreams but did not want to remember others and tried to get them out of her mind.

In one of the sessions with adults, Fatma (37 years old) shared her family's practice of interpreting dreams through their opposite meanings.

M. Nurullah: How does your family approach and interpret your dreams?

Fatma: For example, in a dream where I cry a lot, they tell me I will laugh ... When I share a dream where I see my father passing away with my mother or sister, they say, "His life has been extended". That's how they interpret it.

M. Nurullah: When you have a sad dream, they interpret it as meaning you will be happy. What about when you have a happy or pleasant dream? How do they interpret that?

Fatma: They interpret those as sadness too. So when I'm happy or joyful [in a dream], they say I'll be sad.

## Stage 2: Description of the Desired Dream

In the second stage, participants were encouraged to describe in detail a dream they would like to experience. This aimed to allow individuals to express their imaginations and explore meanings. Questions included:

- Can you describe a dream you would like to experience?
- How would you describe the setting of your dream?
- Is this setting familiar to you or is it new?
- Who is in your dream?

These questions encourage participants to provide rich descriptions of the dream they wish to see and to gain insight into their hopes.

The nature-themed dream description of Hüseyin (16 years old) is noteworthy.

M. Nurullah: Can you describe a dream you would like to experience?

Hüseyin: First of all, it's far from the current world, a bit like what they call the realm of imagination. An environment where I feel at one with nature and peaceful. Like a house with a garden, with a dog and a cat inside. Far from technology, alone with nature. And when I wake up, I want to feel really good from the dream.

M. Nurullah: Can you describe your dream in a bit more detail?

Hüseyin: So, a two-story house, a small vegetable garden in the yard, a doghouse and a small family. But a happy family.

M. Nurullah: A happy family, a small house with a garden. What's in the garden? What are you growing?

Hüseyin: Tomatoes, lemons, tangerines. Maybe oranges. There will be vegetables, there will be oranges. So the whole focus is on the vegetable garden. And then there are the creatures there, the animals. But I also want a small family. A small family too.

M. Nurullah: Can you tell me a little about this family?

Hüseyin: So, there could be a spouse and children. There could also be a mother and father, but they're a bit happy.

M. Nurullah: What do you think they do there right now?

Hüseyin: Away from the troubles of this life, just happy, you know? Breakfast, reminiscing about old memories together in the garden.

M. Nurullah: So you're having a lovely breakfast together in the garden, reminiscing about the past, happily. You said away from troubles. What troubles would you want to be away from?

Hüseyin: Away from which troubles? Well, the ones we're thinking about now, the ones that stress us out even when we think about them, like financial difficulties ... And the wars in the world. Things like that.

M. Nurullah: When you say the wars or troubles in the world, would you like to elaborate on that a bit?

Hüseyin: There's the Palestinian-Israeli war. It's been going on for about a year. It's been over a year. It bothers us, and every day, along with the pain of it, along with the difficulties they are experiencing, we are also being tested, and that's why we can't really relax, to be honest. Because while they are giving their lives there, it's not right for us to be comfortable here. So if their troubles end, if there is peace and happiness everywhere in the world, then it would be easier for these things to happen.

Hüseyin gave considerable space to nature and peace in his Desired Dream. These descriptions provided openings for conversation about Hüseyin's desire to escape the stress of his daily life and be in a more peaceful environment.

His sensitivity to the humanitarian crises that have occurred during Israel's long occupation of Palestinian territories and his desire to support the just struggle of the Palestinians are evident. Hüseyin's dream of a world filled with peace and tranquillity shows that he is not only seeking personal peace, but also expressing a longing for peace and social justice.

Ahmet (44 years old) wished to dream about life before the earthquake.

M. Nurullah: Can you describe a dream you would like to see? Can you describe it in detail?

Ahmet: What kind of dream should I describe?

M. Nurullah: For example, if we asked you to describe a dream you would like to see when you sleep, what would you describe?

Ahmet: What would I describe? For example, I would like to see what life was like before the earthquake.

M. Nurullah: If you were to describe a life before the earthquake, which part, which place would you want to see?

Ahmet: I would want to see a memory related to my old life. I lost my wife in the earthquake. I would want to see those things with her. It could be at home. Old home life and such.

M. Nurullah: You want to see the old house. Your wife is there. Who else is there?

Ahmet: The children.

M. Nurullah: How many children do you have?

Ahmet: I have two children. A daughter and a son. Thank God my children are healthy. My wife passed away.

M. Nurullah: My condolences. I wish you and your children a long and happy life. You're

thinking about a time when you were all together like before. What time of day?

Ahmet: It doesn't matter what time. Any time.

M. Nurullah: If you had a preference, what time would you choose?

Ahmet: For example, when I come home from work, I would like to see my wife. After I get home from work.

Therapist: Is this the house you used to live in, the one you know? What do you do there, for example?

Ahmet: Well, when I go home, I'd like her to greet me. I don't know, the food ... You miss it. Her cooking, all kinds of food. It was usually ready. She would greet me.

Ahmet's Desired Dream focused on a scene from his life before the earthquake. He wanted to see an ordinary but meaningful moment spent at home with his wife and children. Ahmet's narrative opened space for conversation about the warmth of his memories of his wife and his desire to reconnect with those moments.

### *Stage 3: Meanings and feelings related to the dream*

The final stage of the desired dream application explores the meaning of the dream in the individual's life, how this dream makes them feel, and any symbolic values. I asked questions such as:

- What do you think about the dream?
- How did this dream make you feel?
- What is the meaning in your life of the people in the dream?
- Can I learn the meaning in your life of the place in your dream?
- What might this dream be trying to tell you?

- What do the symbols and objects in your dream mean to you?
- What might be the reason for your desire to have such a dream?

Participants are encouraged to interpret their dreams in relation to their past experiences, emotional states and relationships. The questions posed to participants are designed to elicit responses that connect the figures and symbols in their dreams to significant elements in their lives. For example, the question “What is the meaning in your life of the location of your dream?” helps participants make sense of their environmental and personal contexts. This process offers participants the opportunity to reframe their life experiences within a new framework of meaning. Narrative therapy emphasises meaning-making. Questions such as “How did this dream make you feel?” are used to help participants explore their emotional responses and relationship with symbols while thickening alternative narratives. Participants are also asked about whether the Desired Dream conversation has been useful to them.

The following conversation was with seven-year-old Ali. Ali was exposed to the February earthquakes and then had to leave his city for a while. He wished to dream about Heaven.

M. Nurullah: How did seeing this dream make you feel?

Ali: Very good.

M. Nurullah: You wanted to see Heaven, right? Would you like to say anything about Heaven?

Ali: There will be beautiful things there. I will go there. I will go there with my money. I will buy a red fan.

M. Nurullah: Why do you want it to be red?

Ali: I want it to be red. It's always black. It's always black anyway.

M. Nurullah: Why did you choose Heaven?

Ali: No-one dies there. No-one dies.

M. Nurullah: Who dies?

Ali: No-one, but I think they never actually die.

M. Nurullah: No-one dies in Heaven. That's why you chose it, as far as I understand. Why else did you choose it?

Ali: Why else did I choose it? Because it's a very beautiful place. You eat chicken, yum.

In interviews with Ali's family, it was noted that Ali often asked questions like: Why did the earthquake happen? Why did God create the earthquake? Did God create the earthquake to kill people? His family explained that earthquakes are natural events, and that God has established rules governing the workings of nature. They emphasised that earthquakes themselves are not bad things, but that many people suffer harm due to irresponsible human behaviour. They also told Ali that they believe in the existence of Heaven after death and that it is a beautiful place full of happiness.

Ali described Heaven as a “beautiful place” where “no-one dies”. In describing his dream, Heaven took shape as both a safe space and a source of happiness.

Ömer (14 years old) reflected on the meanings of his Desired Dream.

M. Nurullah: How did describing your Desired Dream make you feel?

Ömer: Describing this dream makes me feel peaceful, happy, calm and clean.

M. Nurullah: What does your dream tell you? You mentioned some people in your dream. Even some animals. You mentioned a cat. You mentioned a tree, right? What else was there? You mentioned a house, a place far from technology, and there were people. Your mother, father, siblings, relatives. What do these people mean in your life?

- Ömer: These are people who have been by my side since I was born. People who held my hand when I started school. Generally, people with whom I have memories of growing up together.
- M. Nurullah: What do you think the place in this dream means, the one you mentioned, the house ... What do you think this place means in your life? Can we learn that? What does such a place mean in your life?
- Ömer: I think such a place is just imagination. Apart from that, a few more wishes can be added. Imagination and wishes. The desire to be supportive. That is, being with family, being away from trouble and worries, being comfortable, carefree, beautiful, closer to God, remembering, and such wishes.
- M. Nurullah: What do you think this dream is trying to tell you?
- Ömer: What is this dream trying to tell me? I mean, everyone has desires. We have to strive to achieve these desires. I think we should live our lives without forgetting God and without distancing ourselves too much from the people around us. That's what I'm trying to say.
- M. Nurullah: What do you think is underlying your desire to have such a dream?
- Ömer: I think it's because I can't fully experience most of the things I want.
- M. Nurullah: Which one do you feel you can't experience the most? Which one?
- Ömer: I live in the middle of the city. I mentioned rural areas as an example. We can't live in the countryside. We don't. I mentioned a two-story house. A garden, things like that. Other than that, we don't have much technology in our house. We communicate well. We live close to our relatives anyway. I experience them, but other than that, a garden, a quiet environment in the house, birds chirping, clean air. These kinds of things are things I don't have much control over.
- Like Hüseyin, Ömer described a house, garden, silence and being surrounded by nature in his dream as a world that made him feel peaceful, clean and happy. Ömer's dream was peopled with close relationships, such as with his mother, father and relatives, with whom he collects memories. He described these people as holding his hand in life. Linking the places in his dream to "imagination and desire", Ömer said these spaces meant being together with his family, getting away from troubles and spiritual closeness.
- Enes (24) reflected on the relationships and locations in his Desired Dream.
- M. Nurullah: How did describing this dream you wanted to see make you feel?
- Enes: It made me feel happy. I felt happy, honestly.
- M. Nurullah: Now, you mentioned some people in your dream. For example, your mother, your siblings, your fiancée. What would you like to say about the place and meaning of these people in your life?
- Enes: My wife will be my companion, of course. She'll be a friend from marriage, sir. She'll be a guide when needed. Maybe I'll tell her things I can't tell my mother or siblings.
- M. Nurullah: What do you think the place in your dream means in your life?
- Enes: We always lived in a family home. Being together all the time feels a bit heavy to me. I want to be in a house with a garden, a beautiful house, a more peaceful environment.

M. Nurullah: For example, you mentioned some symbols and objects in your dream. You mentioned greenery and fruit trees. What do these objects mean in your life?

Enes: I've always admired village life. Maybe working with the soil, producing something with my own labour, would be good for me.

Enes's Desired Dreams reflected his longings and needs. The setting and symbols contain information about Enes's life. Expressions such as village life, garden and greenery provided openings to explore Enes's connections with nature.

## Conclusion

This Desired Dream practice was conducted within the framework of narrative therapy principles to enable individuals exposed to traumatic events to re-examine their experiences through the dreams they wish to see and to express their individual desires in this process. The Desired Dream method enabled participants to rediscover their perceptions of their traumatic experiences, and the meanings produced about these experiences in an individual and cultural context.

The constructed dreams reflected wishes and desires that would make individuals feel good in their post-traumatic life. For example, the participant who was trapped under rubble and lost first-degree relatives dreamed of

returning to peaceful memories from the past. Participants who did not experience the loss of first-degree relatives and did not have the experience of being trapped under rubble generally wanted to see dreams full of hope for the future. This is consistent with Souza's (2021) view that dreams can be a means of giving meaning to an individual's current life and expressing their hopes for the future.

We found that with children whose verbal communication skills are not yet developed, drawing dream descriptions may be more effective than verbal communication. This reflects narrative therapy's respect for clients' unique forms of expression.

The Desired Dream practice enabled individuals to make new meaning of their perceptions of traumatic events and to position themselves as authors of their own stories. Through dream narratives, participants not only moved away from trauma-focused stories but also expressed hopes and values in life. Dreams can be used as part of conversations making meaning of traumatic experiences and creating new narratives after trauma. This approach, based on narrative therapy, offers an effective method that supports people's capacity to create meaning in their lives in post-traumatic processes. Future studies are recommended to examine the application of this method in different cultures, its long-term effects, and its impact on clients experiencing different forms of distress.

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# Exposing the feeling of “not good enough”: Working with the failure conversations map

by Jonaki Arora



*Jonaki Arora has been working with young people in India for over 16 years. She has a background in developmental psychology and holds a Master of Narrative Therapy and Community Work. Jonaki works in private practice with individuals, families and in school settings, walking alongside young people as they challenge the labels and dominant stories placed upon them. She teaches narrative therapy through a course run by Children First in collaboration with Dulwich Centre, and believes firmly that therapy is political.*  
*jonakiarora@gmail.com*

## Abstract

This paper addresses the phenomenon of personal failure and its relationship with modern power. It describes Michael White’s failure conversations map and the underlying narrative practices that support it. It demonstrates the usefulness of the failure conversations map in subverting modern power and generating preferred identity conclusions through conversations with a young woman in India. The paper also brings attention to the politics of therapy. Through this, I hope to not only address people’s sense of failure but to also use therapy as a site for local social activism.

**Key words:** *personal failure; failure conversations map; modern power; inadequacy; imposter; India; narrative therapy; narrative practice*

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Perhaps we have all felt inadequate at some time. But despite being ubiquitous, experiences of personal failure are not evenly distributed. A sense of personal failure is rooted in comparison with restrictive societal norms. Intersectional feminism highlights how these norms — steeped in privilege and power — affect people differently based on race, caste, gender, sexuality and other identities, compounding pressures for those at the intersections of marginalisation (Crenshaw, 1991). Neoliberal ideologies further embed this by promoting self-actualisation, self-realisation and individual responsibility, shifting blame for systemic barriers on to individuals (Foucault, 2000). Attributing life struggles to personal failings conceals the intersecting forces of oppression that shape access to opportunities and success (Mark Hayward, personal comment, 2019).

In India's collectivistic society, pressure to conform to moral and normative codes is particularly strong for marginalised communities and individuals. India's longstanding history of colonisation, its caste system and religious politics all contribute to maintaining a steep economic divide and class-based discrimination. Gender-based oppression intersects with this, creating pockets of harsh suffering.

In my work in New Delhi, I meet many young people who are constantly evaluating their worth, treating life like a video game in which one might get points by following certain instructions or carrying out certain tasks, and incur losses if they fail certain briefs. The game never ends; it just continues to level up. It invites people to constantly practice perfecting or proving themselves, whether in academic performance, looks, popularity, relationships or many of these at once. A pervasive sense of inadequacy or the feeling of "I'm not good enough" often disguises itself under labels of depression, anxiety or even "personality disorder", with grave consequences like isolation and suicidal thoughts (Angela, Brett, & Jess, 2004).

This paper advocates for the use of the failure conversations map (White, 2002; see also Denborough, 2014, pp. 147–176; Hutton, 2008) and sets out the narrative principles and

practices that it embeds. I discuss the map in the context of my work with a young woman and her experiences of "not good enough". But first, let's look closely at the relationship between modern power and personal failure.

### *Modern power is directly proportional to personal failure*

Modern power and its omnipresence have increased people's sense of inadequacy (White, 2002). Modern power acts through normalising judgements. Based on Foucault's (1980, 1997) theories of power, discourse, social control and ethical subjectivity, White (2002) elaborated on the formation of norms and how they are granted "truth" status. We are led to believe that abiding by such truths is the point of life. Local bodies of culture dispense these truths and contribute to the formation of normalising judgements. Our inevitable failure to meet these limiting and exclusionary norms can lead to a sense of inadequacy and to negative identity conclusions.

White (2002) proposed that we recognise agency in this sense of failure and see it instead as an act of refusal of modern power. This can help us to shake the truth status of certain discourses and to set aside the pursuit of adequacy.

I am drawn to explore what makes such refusal possible: how we might bring to light ways of living that do not reproduce the norms of contemporary culture, and how we might endeavour to remanufacture identity in ways that are not wedded to conforming with the "truth". White (2002) proposed a failure conversations map to navigate such conversations. This map draws on the influential work of Foucault (1980, 1997, 2000), who delineated categories of pursuit of identity. Using these categories to build stories about refusal to conform to modern power can be helpful in the creation of alternative and preferred identity conclusions.

The failure conversations map (White, 2002, pp. 58–60) is presented in eight stages or categories of inquiry as shown in the table below.

Table 1. The failure conversations map

Stage	Description	Background	Questions
<b>Failure in relation to ...</b>	<p>Inquiry to reveal the norms, standards and expectations against which we measure our failure.</p> <p>What are we comparing ourselves with when we feel we have failed?</p>	<p>Often, we take these “truths” and standards for granted, which makes them invisible to us. This invisibility affords them their power.</p> <p>It is important to expose these norms so they can be available for examining.</p>	<p>What is this sense of failure in relation to?</p> <p>What measures have you used to reach these conclusions about yourself?</p> <p>What standards are you thinking about when you think you’re not measuring up?</p>
<b>Response to failure</b>	<p>Investigation of actions and efforts we have made to measure up.</p> <p>What have we done in pursuit of adequacy?</p>	<p>These norms have us go through excruciatingly effortful steps to comply with them.</p> <p>Businesses have been set to teach people how to ace these steps.</p> <p>These are the ways all of us participate in perpetuating social control through modern power.</p> <p>It’s important to lay bare these efforts and practices. This also helps us to take a position.</p>	<p>What does this standard have you do or not do to meet it?</p> <p>How have you tried to measure up?</p>
<b>Unique outcomes</b>	<p>Inquiry about expressions, actions and responses that don’t fit with expectations.</p> <p>How might we be refusing to completely comply with these norms?</p>	<p>These expressions and actions are important to identify as they indicate places we might continue to explore.</p> <p>Moments of noncompliance point to a failure of modern power itself. Making these moments visible allows us to see that modern power is not all pervasive and is susceptible to resistance.</p>	<p>What do you do that might be different from your efforts to measure up?</p> <p>Have there been moments of stepping back from some of these efforts to comply?</p>
<b>Foundations of action</b>	<p>Identifying actions that have formed a platform for refusal.</p>	<p>Alternate identity conclusions lie in the shadow of failure. Uncovering the foundation of actions is an entry point to bringing this shadow to light. This is where questions about what is absent but implicit will be useful.</p>	<p>How have you managed to step back from your efforts to comply?</p>

Stage	Description	Background	Questions
<b>Ethical substance</b>	<p>Exploration of the values that are embodied in the steps taken to resist compliance with norms.</p> <p>Identifying primary or “bottom-line” considerations that inform how we live our lives.</p>	This helps a person recognise that their actions have not come out of a vacuum, that they are deeply rooted in a personal value system. From here, we traverse into the landscape of identity.	<p>What is it that comes through as important here?</p> <p>What guides these actions of yours?</p>
<b>Bodies of values and principles</b>	Inquiry about what guides us in applying our most treasured values and bottom-line considerations.	What we hold to be important has a history: it comes from our culture, context and belief systems, and in relationship with people we love and respect. Considering shared value systems can link stories together.	<p>What guides you in your expression of these values?</p> <p>How did these ideas come to be important for you?</p> <p>Who introduced you to these ideas?</p>
<b>Self- and relationship-forming activities</b>	Investigating the life-shaping activities we engage in to pursue an ethical way of being: how we treat ourselves and others.	As we become more attuned to what guides us, we reach an arena of possibilities. We can now think about how we might make this more apparent in our life.	<p>How do you maintain your connection with this value?</p> <p>What do you do in your everyday life that keeps this alive?</p>
<b>Desired goals</b>	Exploration of our goals in life: what we would like to achieve through our efforts to live by our ethics.	Alternate identity conclusions become available to us.	<p>What does this say about you?</p> <p>What does this tell us about the kind of life you want to live?</p>

I have found that the failure conversations map relies heavily on deconstructing conversations that situate problems in their social contexts, the identification of unique outcomes, inquiries about the absent but implicit, and exploration of the landscape of identity (White, 2007). I'd like to share a story of practice and my learnings from it to elaborate on these practices.

### *Radical failure*

I met a spirited 21-year-old woman named Sunita who was reflective and not afraid of questions and confrontations. Sunita had grown up in orphanages and institutions. When she turned 18, she had to move out and make her own way. She worked with a theatre group and as a tour guide, but when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived,

she lost her job and became socially isolated. Around this time, Sunita became interested in exploring sex with herself and others.

She became an avid user of dating apps. When some of her peers and previous guardians found out about this, they were surprised and called Sunita *nalayak* (good for nothing), *badtameez* (mannerless), and *awara* (rogue/characterless). Some of her friends laughed and said, “You do not belong to our culture”. Her previous guardians told some of her friends not to hang out with her anymore as they deemed her not to be good company. Over time, this led Sunita to thoughts that “maybe something is wrong with me and I can’t control myself” and “I need to fix myself”. She reached out to her guardians who took her to a psychiatrist. She was told she was a sex addict and was put on medication. She was advised to practice abstinence and was told that she would cause harm to her body if she continued to have “a lot of sex”. She was also advised to undertake therapy to be rid of thoughts about sex. That’s how she reached me.

From our initial conversation, I held on to the key narrative principle of ensuring we located the problem in its social context rather than within the person. Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese and Cheryl White (2007) emphasised that gender and culture cannot be separated. Externalising conversations and experience-near language are useful to locate a problem outside of the person, making it possible to attend to intersectional considerations, such as class, caste, culture, gender, ability and sexuality. Then it is also possible to examine how broader relations of power have contributed to the creation of the problem (Russel & Carey, 2003).

I used the following questions with Sunita to attend to these considerations:

- How and when did you come to see your desire to engage in sex as a problem?
- Who determined that this is sex addiction?
- What parameters were used to come to this decision?
- How did these parameters come to be? Would they be the same for men and women?

- Would the parameters be different in different cultures? Or for someone from another class or caste?

These questions helped us to uncover gender and class politics in these discourses. Sunita pointed out that “a man would not have been slut shamed if he was using Tinder and a woman from a different class might not be called a slut so easily”. This helped her feel less frustrated with herself.

After a few months in therapy, in a surprising turn of events, Sunita decided to take up a job as a sex worker. At first, I saw this as meaning our therapy had failed. Sunita’s guardians had been encouraging her to see a different therapist because she had continued to have sex and declined to practice abstinence. They saw this as meaning the therapy wasn’t working. When Sunita shared her decision to take up sex work, I was infected with a strong bout of self-doubt. I used conversations about “safety” to have her rethink this decision, taking a very “centred and influential” position. I believe this was modern power trying to ensure I took the “right steps” as a therapist. Fortunately, I had the principles of the failure conversations map to fall back on along with Sunita’s strong voice.

I had many questions and worries about my work with Sunita. Although Sunita was clear she had chosen this work to gain access to more and good sex, I didn’t want to ignore the social meanings and impacts of sex work in our culture. I was concerned about viewing women’s engagement in sex work as purely a matter of choice, as this risked overlooking exploitation and diverting accountability away from the structural conditions produced by marginalisation and poverty. This concern was shaped by a dominant single story of sex work in India, where sex trafficking is prevalent and sex work is illegal. My worries had me interested in unpacking what had led to Sunita’s choice in light of her context and how it influenced her decision. Sunita saw this work as a choice that brought her a sense of agency. She saw sex work as conveying her ownership of her own body and openly told everyone around her about her work. She said this kind of ownership

and acceptance helped her exercise consent in her work. At her workplace, Sunita resisted various norms expected of sex workers, such as dressing a certain way. This often got her into trouble, but she persisted and refused to comply.

Questions about Sunita’s position on her decision were helpful. I asked about:

- the effects of this decision on her and her life
- whether this was a positive development or a negative development in her life.

These conversations made it possible for me to establish this decision as a (radically)

unique outcome connected to her efforts to be rid of normative ideas about sex.

The last few categories of inquiry in the failure conversations map attend to building a landscape of identity. These questions focus on intentions, values, hopes, beliefs and commitments associated with actions that convey a refusal to reproduce or comply with certain norms. Understanding the meaning, history and relevance of such actions in a person’s life can provide support for similar actions. My landscape of identity enquiries and Sunita’s responses are shown in the following table.

Table 2. Landscape of identity inquiries

Stage of the failure conversations map	My questions	Sunita’s responses
<b>Foundations of action</b>	What led you to this decision to take up sex work? How were you able to “not care” about being a <i>layak ladki</i> [worthy woman]?	I enjoy sex and want good sex, so was curious to try it to seek more pleasure and experience of sex. Also, I have to earn money. Besides, if a man had posted such pictures on Instagram, no-one would slut shame him, but they would to me. If we stay quiet, they’ll continue to bully us. So this is my answer and I feel no shame.
<b>Ethical substance</b>	What comes through as more important for you here?	Sex. It’s important for me and it’s my body so my rules. No-one can tell me what to wear or what to do. Self-respect is also important to me. It’s important to take a stand.
	What guides you to go forward in this direction?	I don’t want other girls to feel shame or not be able to fight. If I do it, then someone else may do it too. Concern for others and myself keeps me going.
<b>Bodies of values and principles</b>	When did this become important for you? How did you come to care about it so much?	Even when I was younger, the guardians couldn’t get me to change my clothes even if they beat me. I’d never show them my tears either. It takes guts, acceptance, confidence. I am standing up for girls.
<b>Self- and relationship-forming activities</b>	How are you able to prioritise this in your day?	Telling everyone about what I do honestly. And connecting with other girls who work at the spa – I talk to them about sex, about saying no. Wearing what I want to wear, telling men to look away. Registering my objections on Instagram, at the workplace, with men.

Stage of the failure conversations map	My questions	Sunita's responses
<b>Desired goals</b>	What does this say about you and your hopes? What might be made possible if you continue in this direction?	I want to share my story and ideas about sex so girls don't shy away from talking about sex, periods, masturbation, pregnancy and their bodies. <i>Mujhe sharm nahi aati ab</i> [I am not ashamed anymore] so my story should be used for that.

Sunita's meaning-making process helped me see how her decision to engage in sex work was imbued with agency. She had let go of the shame that had brought her in for therapy. Locating her actions as resistance to normative judgements helped us examine ideas of consent, the rights of sex workers and the effects of patriarchy. These conversations helped Sunita reconnect with her values and beliefs about how she would like to live her life.

One day, Sunita described an evening with her friends where she had discussed and debated ideas around sex. She said, "*Mujhe bada mazza aaya parliament bithane mein*" [I had fun debating this!]. This was a different experience than when she had felt ashamed about thinking about sex all the time! It seemed we were moving towards a preferred territory of agency. In addition, this made it possible for her to have confident conversations with other sex workers encouraging them to demand consent and practice safety.

Sunita also thought about writing a book about her experiences as a sex worker to help young women in India normalise talking about sex and their bodies. She wanted to help young women explore and understand more about female pleasure. Sharp (2024) and Serendipity (2024) have both demonstrated the power of documentation and insider knowledge in fostering solidarity and elevating stories of agency for sex workers.

Sunita felt she no longer needed therapy to address her "sex addiction". She had been nudged into therapy by others who thought her ways of living were problematic, and now that she had connected with how she wanted to

live her life, she was making her own decision about therapy. I respected this act of agency. We tapered our meetings slowly, and at present, we meet once every few months to check in. During one such check in, Sunita shared that she had started attending church again, and that letting go of shame had made this easier. She wanted to work on rekindling her faith. This helped her reconnect with some of her peers and previous guardians. She continues to work as a sex worker and is trying to save money to travel to the city of her birth.

### Deconstructing conversations

When people come into the therapy room, they are often weighed down by negative conclusions either about themselves or their lives or both. Modern power is almost always complicit in such conclusions, but it often remains invisible to the person (White, 1991). It can impersonate the person's voice to the extent that the person finds it difficult to separate the voice of modern power from their own voice. Its omnipresence makes it more difficult to untangle its influence from a person's life. It is important that we make efforts to bring attention to the operations and effects of modern power on a person's sense of self and their life. A compelling way to do so is through deconstructing conversations that question taken-for-granted practices.

Tracing the presence and influence of normative judgements on a person's life can make such judgements available for examination. This enables the person to take a position on the judgement and decide on the kind of relationship they'd like

to have with it. Through this, more choices can become available to the person about how they wish to live their life, as they did for Sunita when we deconstructed the label of “sex addict”.

Unique outcomes can widen conversations about failure. Conversations about personal failure can be flipped over to see failure of modern power. A unique outcome is essentially modern power not able to do its job! Since the operations of powers are pervasive to the extent that it's next to impossible for people to figure out when they are under surveillance and when they're not, they are goaded to perpetually evaluate themselves (White, 1991). This can make modern power seem invincible. If we use these conversations in therapy to consider acts of resistance as failures of modern power then we can point out cracks in its operations. Realising the fallibility of modern power is important to conversations about agency and maintaining the will to stand up to its ruses.

### *The absent but implicit*

Positioning experiences of failure as acts of refusal of modern power is a practice of identifying what is absent but implicit in an experience (Danilopoulos, 2011). To do this, we might ask questions like, “What is it that you hold important, which is so strong that the dominant discourse failed in front of it?” The question states the failure of dominant discourse and at the same time implies the triumph of a personal value. The absent but implicit is key in heralding alternative meaning-making from the shadows of failure. Serendipity (2024) used questions about the absent but implicit with sex workers to acknowledge their struggles. She asked: “What do you give value to, that you're refusing to abandon, that sustains you in this work? What matters to you?” This made me think of the failure conversations map. The question stands to be useful in eliciting responses about foundations of action leading us to conversations about ethical substance.

To elicit a personal value system becomes a political act in the therapy room because now power can be subverted. We can see how in the

face of certain personal values and knowledges modern power can be vulnerable. This forms a pathway to the landscape of identity.

### *Irony of preferred shoulds*

Dominant discourses set out directives for people to follow in their pursuit of “normality”. These directives involve many shoulds, musts and have-tos. Karen Horney (1950) called these pressures a “tyranny of should”. Similar to this, we stand to meet the “irony of preferred shoulds” in the landscape of identity. These are discourses disguised as apparently positive ideas. These preferred shoulds can be expressed in the form of values: a person may want to align their actions with such a should, making it desirable and meaningful. Since the ways of power are insidious, preferred shoulds can encourage a person's subjugation to their directions. A person might not see this as an effect of power, but rather as something like fulfilment (White, 1991).

Sunita initially felt aligned with the idea that she should not have so many thoughts about sex, should not want so much sex, and should not masturbate. Compliance with these shoulds had been presented as the answer to her problems and she wanted to be “cured”. However, she moved away from these assumptions soon after we began reflecting on them.

In my work, I've noticed that when identifying what is it they give value to, young people often name things like “being productive”, “staying healthy”, or “being my authentic self”. If we leave the origins and effects of these preferred values unexamined, we can unwittingly perpetuate dominant discourses. White (2002) pointed out that narrative therapy does not promote an “anything goes” approach, but rather an approach in which “nothing goes” unexamined.

### *Navigating power and privilege*

I want to acknowledge my struggle with Sunita's decision to end therapy. I was visited

by normative judgements encouraging me to measure “success”. Was this a “success story” suitable to share in a journal article? This led me to reflect on dominant discourses about what therapy is for: What’s the role of a therapist? What makes for a successful story? Does closure of therapy require a success story? Who decides that? Again, the failure conversations map and reflection on therapists’ ethical substance helped me make sense and find the path ahead.

I am a therapist who studied psychology, a discipline that tries very hard to be seen as science and in that attempt has fashioned many tools to classify people and their problems. Psychologists are afforded an expert position in the therapy room. Therapy is considered a treatment or cure for people and their problems. This creates politics and power in the therapy room. If we do not take care to understand and respond to the effects of this context then we can intentionally or unintentionally become conduits of modern power. The process of therapy can recruit people into recreating norms of life: I might have used therapy to “help” Sunita leave sex work and make efforts to be a “good girl”.

When we become a channel providing modern power with greater access to people, then aren’t we participating in forms of social control? Aren’t we then multiplying experiences of failure for people rather than addressing their sense of inadequacy? Whom does therapy really serve then? I don’t think it serves the people who consult us, and I definitely don’t think it serves therapists either. We can get caught up with measuring the success and worth of therapy and therapists, forming a vicious cycle of modern power’s flow. Fareez’s (2019) ideas reminded me that we can challenge and deviate from the technologies of modern power that push us to adhere to norms, not just with the people who consult with us but also with ourselves. Supervision, readings, reflections and engaging with ideas of accountability become important. These ideas also helped me understand and decide on my role as a therapist in the therapy room. I agree with the following understanding:

Ethical substance for narrative therapists is to work on power ... What this seems to call the narrative therapist to do is to acknowledge the power, the distribution of privilege, and the marginalising potential of therapy, and consider, as an ethical priority, how relations of power may be subverted and the effects reduced. (Haugaard, 2016, p. 9)

I am drawn towards exploring ideas and practices that resist the dominant discourses that marginalise and oppress people. Acknowledging our privilege or social location in the therapy can be a first step towards this.

Sunita and I are both cisgender heterosexual women and we grew up in the same city in India. While this could help me understand some of the ways in which the culture around us might have affected her and her problem, my social location was completely different from hers, so I tried not to assume anything and to focus instead on redressing power relations. I have many privileges. I am an upper caste, Hindu (dominant religion in India), older, able-bodied, married woman who has a house, an education, a job, a family. I have always had access to financial stability, health care and (relative) safety. Sunita, on the other hand, belonged to a lower socioeconomic class and converted to Christianity in her childhood (a religion of minority in India). She had lived in charity institutions all her life, so access to education, knowledge, health care, safety and personal space were limited. Circumstances of her birth and context of orphanhood also placed her at a social disadvantage in our culture. Her marginalised social location led to poverty, which in turn made her more vulnerable to exploitation and hardship. It was important to ensure I didn’t render invisible the broader contexts of Sunita’s experiences. Ensuring we discussed how the context might have shaped the problem and her resistance to it remained important throughout. Some other practices that guided me to stay on this path were:

- staying tentative and curious instead of taking an “I know what you mean” position
- enquiring about the usefulness of our conversations
- maintaining respect and transparency by gaining consent to document and then share this story
- decentring my knowledges despite overlaps in experience
- holding on to Sunita’s knowledge and bringing in other sources of information so my knowledge wasn’t the only “truth” in our conversations
- using Sunita’s preferred name rather than her given name
- considering language — not centring English yet not dismissing it completely because Sunita felt a certain pride in her skills with English
- not using labels or diagnoses to make meaning of Sunita’s experiences.

Some of these practices were significant in contributing to Sunita’s growing sense of agency and movement towards a preferred narrative.

Drawing on Foucault’s work, White (2002) emphasised that

If the operations of modern power are derived through the uptake of self and relationship practices that are first developed at the local level of culture, and if they principally operate at these levels — in clinics, schools, families, and so on — then there is the ever present potential for people to contribute to social change through the local development and sponsorship of self-and relationship-forming practices that do not directly reproduce the constructed norms of contemporary culture. (White, 2002, pp. 37–38)

To this end, we can cultivate practices that tend to resist normative judgements, and encourage people’s ownership of their own stories.

Children First, India, the organisation I worked with for many years, has continuously challenged ideas about how mental health services should be run by not subscribing to many common and dominant discourses. These acts of resistance highlight how the professional is also political. “As therapists we can be a bridge between the social justice work being done in the community and our therapy rooms” (Sen, 2021, p. 61).

## Conclusion

Understanding the mechanics of power and its relationship with a sense of personal failure has helped me find meaningful ways to respond to expressions of “not good enough”. Locating the problem outside of the person and making visible the contribution of broader contexts and relations of power in the experience of personal failure have been significant.

The failure conversations map involves the use of deconstruction, unique outcomes, absent-but-implicit, and landscape of identity conversations. It was influential in generating agency and preferred identity conclusions with Sunita.

I hope further use of this map in therapeutic conversations will shift blame from individuals to social contexts and will encourage people to shed shame. This is likely to reduce isolation and lead to both personal and collective actions that will continue to debunk feelings of “not good enough”, and stand in the way of modern power’s mechanics, turning therapy into a site for social activism. The following words by Michael White bring me a lot of hope and joy at the prospect of working with a sense of personal failure:

This is a power that is everywhere. However, this is not a reason to despair. If modern power is everywhere to be perceived ... then there are endless opportunities for us to develop an account of these operations, and to subvert them. (White, 2011, p. 26)

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# *Che rete che mba'e ("My body is mine" in Guaraní language): Expanding the preferred identities of women sex workers through organisation as a place of political and vital resistance*

*by Paola Kolher Salinas*



*Paola Kolher Salinas is a decolonial feminist, Paraguayan and therapist. She works in communities accompanying women and girls who have survived gender violence in Paraguay and organised urban and rural women's groups. In recent years she has accompanied female sex workers and rural women in militarised areas of northern Paraguay. She is a founding member of the Feminist Mental Health Network of Paraguay and Espacio Juliana. paolakolher@gmail.com*

## *Abstract*

In a context of social and gender inequality, such as that of Paraguay, women's collective organising becomes a space where their identities acquire new meanings. This is especially true for women sex workers, whose identities are constructed within a context of prejudice, discrimination, and stigmatisation. This work aims to highlight, through the use of collective narrative practices such as the Tree of Life and the development of a collective document, the sense of agency that organising grants women when they expand their stories of resistance and preferred identities, making their skills, dreams, and hopes visible. As a result, a collective document was produced, richly describing their achievements, acts of resistance, and alternative storylines to the dominant story of clandestinity that many women sex workers still experience. All the writing and reflections are politically situated within feminism, decolonial thought, and the ethics of narrative practices, with some phrases in Guaraní, one of Paraguay's two official languages, a language of resistance and territory of the Guaraní people.

**Key words:** *sex work; Tree of Life; organisation; collective document; personal agency; preferred identity; decolonial feminism; narrative therapy; narrative practice*

Kolher, P. (2026). Che rete che mba'e ("Mi cuerpo es mío" en idioma Guaraní): Ampliando las identidades preferidas de mujeres trabajadoras sexuales, a partir de la organización como lugar de resistencia política y vital [Che rete che mba'e ("My body is mine" in Guaraní language): Expanding the preferred identities of women sex workers through organisation as a place of political and vital resistance]. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), 58-73. <https://doi.org/10.4320/HBLQ2689>



# *Che rete che mba'e ("Mi cuerpo es mío" en idioma Guaraní):*

*Ampliando las identidades preferidas de mujeres trabajadoras sexuales, a partir de la organización como lugar de resistencia política y vital*

*by Paola Kolher Salinas*



*Paola Kolher Salinas es feminista decolonial, paraguaya y terapeuta. Trabaja en comunidades acompañando a mujeres y niñas sobrevivientes de la violencia de género en Paraguay y a grupos de mujeres organizadas urbanas y rurales. En los últimos años ha acompañado a mujeres trabajadoras sexuales y a mujeres rurales en zonas militarizadas del norte de Paraguay. Es integrante fundadora de la Red Feminista de Salud Mental de Paraguay y de Espacio Juliana. paolakolher@gmail.com*

## *Resumen*

En un contexto de desigualdad social y de género, como el de Paraguay, la organización colectiva de mujeres se convierte en un lugar donde sus identidades adquieren otros sentidos. Esto es especialmente en la vida de las mujeres trabajadoras sexuales, cuyas identidades se van construyendo en un contexto de prejuicios, discriminación y estigmatización. Este trabajo tiene como propósito visibilizar, a partir del uso de prácticas narrativas colectivas como el Árbol de la vida y la elaboración de un documento colectivo, el sentido de agencia que la organización otorga a las mujeres cuando se amplían sus historias de resistencia e identidades preferidas, visibilizando sus habilidades, sueños y esperanzas. Como resultado, se elaboró un documento colectivo, con descripciones ricas de sus logros, sus respuestas de resistencia y de historias alternativas frente a la historia dominante de la clandestinidad con la que viven todavía muchas mujeres trabajadoras sexuales. Toda la escritura y las reflexiones están políticamente situadas desde el feminismo, el pensamiento decolonial y desde la ética de las prácticas narrativas, con algunas frases en guaraní, uno de los dos idiomas oficiales de Paraguay, lengua de resistencia y territorio de los pueblos guaraníes.

***Palabras claves: trabajo sexual; árbol de la vida; terapia narrativa; organización; documento colectivo; agencia personal; identidad preferida; feminismo decolonial***

Kolher, P. (2026). Che rete che mba'e ("Mi cuerpo es mío" en idioma Guaraní): Ampliando las identidades preferidas de mujeres trabajadoras sexuales, a partir de la organización como lugar de resistencia política y vital. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), 58-73. <https://doi.org/10.4320/HBLQ2689>

## Introducción

En el año 2022 empecé a trabajar como consultora de Salud Mental en la Red de trabajadoras sexuales de Latinoamérica y el Caribe (RedTraSex). Desde entonces, he conversado y acompañado a mujeres trabajadoras sexuales, organizadas, de la Asociación Unidas en la Esperanza (UNES). UNES es la primera organización de mujeres trabajadoras sexuales en Paraguay, fundada en 2004 por ellas mismas. Su objetivo es reivindicar sus derechos y promover políticas públicas que reconozcan el trabajo sexual, garanticen condiciones laborales dignas y erradiquen la violencia. Está dirigida por una Junta de siete mujeres trabajadoras sexuales y cuenta con el apoyo de un equipo técnico.

A lo largo de estos años, desde el acompañamiento que realizo con ellas, he sido testiga de las situaciones adversas que atraviesan. Según sus propios relatos, algunas de estas situaciones tienen que ver con la estigmatización y la discriminación que se acrecientan en sus vidas cuando deciden ejercer el trabajo sexual.

La discriminación empieza desde el momento en que el trabajo que realizan no es reconocido como tal en Paraguay. Como resultado, no cuentan con ninguna seguridad laboral y social; al contrario, existen en ordenanzas municipales que sancionan el ejercicio del trabajo sexual, lo que las expone al riesgo de la clandestinidad.

La discriminación también se da en el contexto familiar de las mujeres trabajadoras sexuales, viviendo situaciones de violencia física y emocional. Muchas de ellas fueron expulsadas de sus familias, mientras otras se han visto obligadas a sostener económicamente a sus familias, como intercambio de afecto y aceptación.

Es en este contexto de trabajo que este artículo busca visibilizar la importancia de la organización en la vida de las mujeres, especialmente de las mujeres trabajadoras sexuales, para el surgimiento del sentido de agencia personal y para el ensanchamiento de identidades preferidas.

La Terapia Narrativa ofrece el Árbol de la vida (Ncube & Denborough, 2007) como metodología para visibilizar las habilidades, compromisos y sueños de las personas. Es una práctica narrativa colectiva que invita a las personas a hablar de ellas mismas de una forma que amplíen sus identidades preferidas y su sentido de agencia personal. En este caso, con mujeres trabajadoras sexuales, visibiliza respuestas de resistencia frente a los mandatos patriarcales que las llevan a la clandestinidad y las despojan de su dignidad. Como resultado, al final del artículo se presenta un documento colectivo elaborado con las voces de las mujeres trabajadoras sexuales durante el taller del árbol de la vida.

Como ética relacional y política, toda la escritura y las reflexiones están políticamente situadas en el feminismo, pensamiento decolonial y narrativa, con algunas palabras y frases en guaraní, uno de los dos idiomas oficiales de Paraguay, lengua de resistencia y territorio de los pueblos guaraníes. Esto lo hago porque es un lenguaje de resistencia de los pueblos guaraníes y, es también, idioma oficial de Paraguay. Escrito con pausa y ritmo paraguayo. Lo haré en forma de *jopará*, con traducciones al español, que es la forma en la que nombramos la mezcla de los dos idiomas.

## Contexto histórico y político

Paraguay, es uno de los países más desiguales de la región. Según los datos del Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE, 2023), su población en el 2023 fue alrededor de 6.372.623 habitantes, donde son 50,3% hombres y 49,7%, mujeres. La desigualdad en Paraguay tiene que ver principalmente con la distribución de la riqueza. En el país con respecto a Latinoamérica, el 10% más rico de la población se lleva el 39% de los ingresos totales, mientras que el 10% más pobre solamente alcanza el 0,7% de los mismos. Luego de haber vivido la dictadura más larga de Latinoamérica, el país está en manos de los ricos, más del 80% de las tierras fértiles (ahora deforestadas) en Paraguay, se encuentra en manos de menos del 3% de la población. A esto se suma que, según el índice global del

2023, la brecha de género en Paraguay fue del 69,5%, porcentaje que tiende a seguir creciendo (Datosmacro, 2023).

La brecha de la desigualdad está profundizada al no contar con garantías sobre derechos humanos. Por ejemplo, no hay acceso a una educación de calidad y gratuita, menos aún laica y pública; así como tampoco se cuenta con el derecho a la salud pública y universal; ni con una ley contra toda forma de discriminación. La gran mayoría de los derechos humanos están privatizados y en manos de los grandes dueños del país.

En los últimos años, ha habido un avance fundamentalista en el país cooptando los ministerios con pastores y representantes del conservadurismo más duro. Desde 2017, se prohibió el uso de la palabra género en todos los libros oficiales del Ministerio de Educación, mediante la Resolución N.º 29.664, conocida como Resolución Riera por el apellido del ministro de entonces, la cual sigue vigente hasta hoy. También, si bien la mayoría de las familias en Paraguay no son las denominadas familias tradicionales en su composición, desde 2021 el Congreso de la Nación se ha declarado Provida y Profamilia. No contar con educación sexual integral ubica principalmente a niñas y mujeres en situaciones de riesgo. Cada año se registran casi 20.000 embarazos en adolescentes de entre 10 y 19 años, ubicando al Paraguay en el primer puesto de los países de la región respecto a la tasa de embarazo adolescente (CDE, 2018). El embarazo adolescente es el causante de 1 de cada 10 casos de abandono escolar en Paraguay, truncando los proyectos de vida de miles de niñas y mujeres. Estos datos forman parte de la Encuesta Nacional de Demografía y Salud Sexual y Reproductiva (CEPEP, 2008).

Desde la mirada de la interseccionalidad, la pobreza aumenta el riesgo de vulnerabilidad a niñas, adolescentes y mujeres frente a situaciones donde el Estado niega el derecho a decidir sobre sus cuerpos con sus políticas (embarazos forzados en niñas, embarazos adolescentes, abortos penalizados, muertes en abortos clandestinos, trata y explotación sexual).

En este contexto, este trabajo invita a escuchar las voces de las que no suelen ser escuchadas; en este caso, las voces de las trabajadoras sexuales acerca de sí mismas, sin que nadie hable por ellas, sin que nadie las interprete o ni las traduzca. Hacer cuerpo desde una ética decolonial implica habitar la periferia, colocando en el centro de la conversación el saber situado de las personas sobre sus vidas y sus decisiones. Hasta antes de trabajar con ellas, el ruido de los discursos abolicionistas tenía la fuerza de permear mis prácticas, como suele suceder con los discursos colonialistas. Entonces, esto ya no solo es una invitación a que los discursos abolicionistas no estén en el centro de la vida de las mujeres que deciden ejercer el trabajo sexual, es una demanda política y ética de descentrarnos de ideas totalitarias y colonialistas.

### ***Participación política y organización***

Paraguay es también uno de los países con menos paridad en la participación política en la región, siendo la participación política de las mujeres menor al 20% (ONU Mujeres, 2015).

Son muchos los factores, dentro de la estructura de este sistema patriarcal, que siguen limitando a las mujeres al ámbito privado con los roles de género establecidos. Dice Bareiro (2023) sobre uno de esos factores:

La maternidad se suma como factor determinante a la extensa lista de dificultades que debe sortear la mujer para vivir su autonomía e ir más allá en los espacios de poder, también influyen la discriminación de pares y su exclusión de los principales epicentros de poder (p. 103).

Es por ello que, la organización adquiere tal relevancia en la vida de las mujeres.

Históricamente las mujeres se organizaron en Paraguay. Una de las más conocidas es durante y posterior a la Guerra de la Triple Alianza, con un país en ruinas y casi sin población masculina adulta, las mujeres llamadas las Residentas levantaron el país y construyeron comunidades.

En el último tiempo, otro hito importante, fue la organización de las mujeres de las ollas populares que, durante la pandemia del COVID-19, sostuvieron la vida en los barrios empobrecidos. La organización también ha estado relacionada a los roles que nos han asignados culturalmente, roles de cuidados, especialmente.

¿Pero qué pasa cuando la organización va más allá de los roles de género? ¿Cuándo las mujeres, en este caso trabajadoras sexuales, se revelan a la clandestinidad y ponen sus cuerpos frente a medios de comunicación y hacen proyectos que buscan hacer incidencia política para cambiar la vida de ellas y de sus compañeras? Esta es una parte de la historia de las mujeres organizadas de UNES.

La organización no sólo es un relato alternativo a la clandestinidad obligatoria, sino más bien, es el espacio político donde asumen la agencia sobre ellas mismas y luchan por objetivos comunes. Es también el lugar de construcción de historias de resistencia y de historias que devuelven la dignidad a las personas y a las comunidades.

### **Con pausa y ritmo paraguayo**

Situar nuestra escritura, es dar por sentado que ninguna coma o punto seguido o final suena igual en todos los sitios, cuando decidí hacerlo en español y en guaraní, me pareció ético nombrar las pausas y el ritmo paraguayo. Trasladar esto al contexto de terapia es respetar el tiempo en el que las personas deciden hablar, es andamiar desde la narrativa y habitar el tiempo que haga falta la periferia de quien observa, escucha y está presente, sin apuros.

Para entender un poco más de estas pausas, podría contarles sobre el “tereré jeré”, que en español sería el círculo o ronda para tomar tereré, bebida originaria de los guaraníes, hecha de yerba mate y que, a diferencia del mate, que también se toma en rondas, el tereré es con agua fría. En un país con temperaturas tan elevadas en el verano, el tereré es la manera en la que se calma el calor y la sed. Es familiar, comunitario, barrial, casi nunca

se toma solo, se comparte la misma bombilla, esto significó una crisis durante la pandemia, dejar de compartir el tereré, pero esa es otra historia. En este trabajo traigo la analogía del “tereré jeré” para explicar que nadie le apura a nadie, se respeta el lugar de cada uno en la ronda, el primer tereré de la ronda suele ser servido para algún santito y es el tiempo en que la yerba se moja y absorbe el agua servida, el que se toma el santito antes de que empiece el turno de las personas de la ronda. Durante el tereré se cuentan historias, como las que hoy les cuento en este trabajo.

### **El trabajo sexual es trabajo: Un acercamiento desde el feminismo decolonial y las prácticas narrativas**

“Aprendí con la organización que yo no vendo mi cuerpo, vendo un servicio”

Patty, trabajadora sexual organizada.

Desde la terapia narrativa, la agencia personal podría ser algo como tomar las riendas de tu vida, pero no desde una construcción individual, sino profundamente colectiva. Según Michael White (2016):

Las concepciones del estado intencional de la identidad se distinguen por la noción de “agencia personal”. Esta noción ubica a las personas como mediadoras y negociadoras activas de los significados y dificultades tanto en lo individual como en colaboración con otras personas (p. 79).

Desde la mirada decolonial se asume una crítica a la modernidad. En este caso, el giro del lenguaje moderno y capitalista de prostitución a trabajadoras sexuales, ubica a las mujeres como sujetas activas de derecho y no como objeto de consumo machista. Al decir de Kenneth Gergen (1996), el lenguaje es una construcción social que crea realidades. El nombrarse trabajadoras sexuales genera en ellas otras historias de agencia personal y de saberes colectivos, y las ubica como personas que realizan un trabajo y que exigen al Estado todas las garantías para vivir de manera digna.

Desde el pensamiento decolonial, así como desde las prácticas narrativas, se reconoce a la persona como experta en su vida y se cuestiona el poder ejercido sobre las personas. Históricamente, el poder del sistema patriarcal, que es a su vez colonialista, racista y clasista, se ubica por encima la autonomía de las mujeres, que deciden sobre ellas mismas. De acuerdo con Anderson (1997), una forma de mirar a las personas como expertas en sus vidas, es asumiendo una postura de no conocer.

En consecuencia, asumir una postura abolicionista del trabajo sexual sería asumir una postura colonizadora; en el sentido de que, cuerpos privilegiados deciden silenciar las voces de las protagonistas y sentenciar lo que es trabajo y lo que no lo es; lo que hay que hacer y lo que no hay que hacer. Esto excluye del diálogo las voces de las trabajadoras sexuales y termina precarizando algunos cuerpos, sobre otros. Tal como señala Raquel Osborne (2004), “el feminismo abolicionista intenta, paradójicamente, liberar a las mujeres de su trabajo por medio de la eliminación del mismo, teniendo como consecuencia aumentar la precariedad y vulnerabilidad”.

Lucy Esquivel, secretaria ejecutiva de la RedTraSex y fundadora de la UNES, frente a la Asamblea de la Organización de los Estados Americanos (OEA) 2023, expresó que las trabajadoras sexuales deben ser las responsables de contar sus propias historias, que ellas son personas reales y no una parte del imaginario machista, más allá al control ejercido desde el patriarcado sobre el cuerpo de las mujeres.

En este artículo ubico a la organización como práctica política, colectiva y comunitaria; pensamiento y acción, que reconoce y recupera el saber local de las mujeres trabajadoras sexuales y las valida sin necesidad de la academia.

Algunas autoras que me inspiran son Ochy Curiel, activista lesbofeminista, dominicana, y teórica del feminismo decolonial; quien expresa que desde las posturas “de(s)coloniales, se propone una crítica al eurocentrismo y a la modernidad occidental desde pensadores y pensadoras latinoamericanas que

relacionan colonialismo con la modernidad, con la colonialidad del poder, saber y del ser” (Curiel, 2013, p. 20)

Curiel (2013) cita a Chandra Mohanty ([1984] 2008) en su libro *La nación heterosexual*, cuando dice que el colonialismo sitúa a las mujeres del Tercer Mundo en el “afuera” y no “en todas partes de” las estructuras sociales, y las expone siempre como víctimas y no como agentes de sus propias vidas, con historias importantes de resistencias y luchas (p. 163).

Silvia Federici, militante feminista y autora referente para entender al sistema capitalista y el golpe de este sobre el cuerpo de las mujeres, dijo en una entrevista con Nuria Alabao —luego de firmar el manifiesto “Nunca sin nosotras” pidiendo la retirada de la denuncia contra el sindicato de trabajadoras sexuales en España— que “el sexo para las mujeres ha sido siempre un trabajo”, preguntándose:

¿Qué abolicionismo queremos? No podemos decir: este tipo de explotación es aceptable y esta no. Eso implica establecer jerarquías entre las mujeres en relación a qué tipo de explotación están sometidas o soportan. Es verdaderamente una forma de moralización (Federici, como se citó en Alabao, 2018).

También, desde el feminismo comunitario del Abya Yala (término en idioma Kuna que significa tierra y se utiliza para nombrar a lo que hoy conocemos como Latinoamérica), de acuerdo con Adriana Guzmán, aimara y lesbiana:

La lucha se hace desde los cuerpos, no desde los libros, ni de las teorías... así que fuimos construyendo un feminismo que nos sirviera, desde estos nuestros cuerpos, desde estos territorios del Abya Yala, un feminismo que plantea la comunidad como forma de vida de la humanidad, como parte de la naturaleza, la comunidad como autoorganización y autodeterminación (Guzmán, 2019, p. 2).

En este trabajo fueron nombrados los cuerpos de mujeres que fueron silenciadas o castigadas,

como cuentan algunas con el destierro familiar. Cuerpos que también se rebelan al mandato de la hegemonía, con sus formas diversas, territorioscuerpos que decidieron salir de la clandestinidad y llevar acciones colectivas que las ubique no como pasivas en este sistema extractivista, sino como mujeres agentes de sus vidas que, al estar organizadas, siempre es colectiva.

## Prácticas narrativas

La terapia narrativa surge en los años 80 con Michael White y David Epston, desde el Trabajo Social, la Sociología y la Antropología, por fuera de las formaciones dominantes para el trabajo terapéutico (Psicología y Psiquiatría). Inicialmente ubicada dentro del ámbito de la terapia familiar, ha migrado hacia múltiples territorios, ampliando su alcance y siendo contada con voz propia desde diversas comunidades y personas. Quiero visibilizar la cercanía ética entre el pensamiento decolonial y la terapia narrativa, que se posiciona desde la filosofía posestructuralista y el construccionismo social, sosteniendo que la identidad no responde a una estructura biológica, sino que es construida socialmente y de forma fluida. Russell y Carey (2003) señalan que:

Las ideas narrativas están informadas por entendimientos post-estructuralistas sobre la identidad y particularmente la idea de que nuestras identidades son multi historizadas (Thomas, 2002). Esto abre posibilidades para las terapias inspiradas en el feminismo, tanto con mujeres como con hombres (p. 19).

White, también se influencia de Foucault, reconociendo el poder que los discursos dominantes ejercen sobre los cuerpos dentro de una comunidad. Ubica al problema por fuera de las personas y las invita a seguir ensanchando sus identidades preferidas, honrando las historias de resistencia de las personas y de las comunidades.

Las historias preferidas, encajan con lo que las personas quieren para sus vidas y con lo que les es importante. El término “preferida” conlleva el sentido de que un juicio ha sido

emitido al buscar algo más allá del problema y que las personas tienen preferencias acerca de cómo ellas quieren vivir sus vidas (Carey, Walther, & Russell, 2010, p. 2).

El concepto de identidad, desde las prácticas narrativas, no es individual y no busca hacer relatos de identidades preferidas como actos épicos; al contrario, el ensanchamiento de las identidades preferidas, junto con el reconocimiento de las habilidades, se construye con otras personas y pasan a ser saberes colectivos que la comunidad atesora como respuestas de resistencias. Dice White (2016), en su libro *Mapas de la práctica narrativa*, que las conversaciones sobre habilidades e identidades preferidas permite a las personas reconstruir sus relaciones con otras, favoreciendo así la identidad relacional.

### Metodologías narrativas colectivas

El trabajo de David Denborough, a partir del uso de metodologías narrativas colectivas, posibilita el trabajo en distintos territorios desde una ética que nombra los factores que oprimen a las personas, como la raza, el género, la clase; y coloca en el centro de las metodologías a las personas y a las comunidades.

Cheryl White y David Denborough (2011) presentan preguntas sobre como las metodologías narrativas colectivas le dan sentido a la forma en la que está pensado este trabajo: “¿Están las personas con las cuales estamos trabajando, siendo vinculadas con cuentos, historias y conocimientos acerca de cómo las iniciativas, habilidades y conocimientos locales pueden traer cambios?” (p. 3).

En este trabajo utilicé dos metodologías narrativas colectivas: el árbol de la vida y el documento colectivo.

## El Árbol de la Vida

La metodología del árbol de la vida fue desarrollada por Ncazelo Ncube y David Denborough inicialmente para el trabajo con niñas y niños en África que habían vivido experiencias

traumáticas relacionados a la muerte de sus padres y madres por el VIH/SIDA (Ncube, 2006). Se inspiraron en el trabajo de Michael White acerca del trauma y de cómo las personas siempre responden al mismo (White, 2004). David Denborough y el Dulwich Centre continuaron enriqueciendo la metodología como práctica narrativa colectiva y, hoy día, es una herramienta de trabajo con personas de todas las edades y territorios.

Parte de la ética de las prácticas narrativas es tener la certeza de que todas las personas tenemos habilidades, saberes, valores, sueños y compromisos. En este sentido, la metodología del árbol de la vida (Denborough, 2014) es uno de los documentos narrativos colectivos que puede utilizarse en el trabajo comunitario con personas cuyas identidades, en este caso el de las mujeres trabajadoras sexuales, están saturadas de mandatos culturales patriarcales, contrarios a la agencia personal y colectiva.

### **La metodología del árbol de la vida**

Cuenta con una estructura dividida en 4 partes; 1. El árbol de la vida 2. El bosque de la vida 3. Las tormentas de la vida 4. Certificados y canción.

Las primeras dos etapas son para construir una segunda historia –territorio de identidad enriquecido y preferido– de la vida de las personas. Esta segunda narración está estructurada en función de sus recursos, habilidades, sueños y esperanzas. La tercera etapa permite a las personas hablar e identificar sus dificultades y sufrimientos, pero también hacer visible las respuestas que han dado en esas situaciones y sus efectos en la protección de aquello que valoran y, la última etapa tiene como propósito asegurar que los participantes se vayan con el reconocimiento de los recursos, habilidades y vínculos con personas importantes en sus vidas. (Latorre, 2010, p. 5).

Si bien son varias las metodologías de las prácticas narrativas para el trabajo en

comunidades, escogí ofrecerles a ellas el árbol de la vida por varias razones. En primer lugar, creo que vuelve horizontal el conocimiento, nadie sabe más que nadie, y hace énfasis en las habilidades, esperanzas y sueños. Después de haber mantenido con ellas conversaciones a lo largo de tres años, en este contexto de opresiones y con resoluciones hostiles frente a ellas y al trabajo que realizan, sentí que podría ser valioso honrar lo que hicieron para llegar hasta este momento, nombrando a compañeras que estuvieron antes que ellas, nombrando sus sueños desde lo más íntimo a lo más comunal. Ellas son compañeras hace muchos años; por eso sentí que no hacía falta que cada una tenga un árbol, ya eran bosque que resistían juntas a las mismas tormentas.

### *El desarrollo del taller*

Les expliqué de qué trataba el encuentro y de cómo pensaba yo que esta metodología podría colaborar a visibilizar y fortalecer sus habilidades, valores, sueños y compromisos con la vida. Así también, les dije que esta es una propuesta para honrar a las personas importantes en sus vidas y registrar el legado de cada una de ellas. Les compartí lo que yo pensaba de cómo esta metodología podría colaborar en sus vidas.

Previo al día del taller les envié un mensaje de voz a cada una de las participantes: Lucy, Moni, Jenny, Carmen, Patty y Angie, quienes conforman la Junta Directiva de UNES, recordándoles la cita y diciéndoles lo valioso de su participación y de su tiempo y agradeciéndoles su colaboración. El taller fue en uno de los espacios físicos que tiene la asociación, todas llegaron puntuales.

### **Paso 1: Dibujar el árbol**

Invité a las participantes a que trabajen entonces en un solo árbol, que serviría como registro de sus historias y recordatorio de resistencia. De las 6 mujeres que participaron del taller, una de ellas no lee y no escribe, y este fue el otro motivo por el que decidí que sea un solo árbol para todas, porque no quería que nadie se sintiera afuera. Entonces, al tener un solo árbol, la compañera que



## **Paso 2: Poblando el árbol con historias preferidas**

Para todas el guaraní es el primer idioma y, buscando acercar la metodología del árbol a sus saberes conocidos, traduje las partes del árbol al guaraní, con ellas. Las preguntas las formulé de manera individual y colectiva, buscando ampliar sus contextos. Tanto las raíces como las ramas fueron los lugares del árbol donde más presente se hizo la identidad de mujeres organizadas, recordar el lugar de donde cada una llegó, pero también recordar dónde y con quiénes nació la organización, nombrar a compañeras que ya no están, emocionarse recordando anécdotas con ellas. En las ramas emergieron sus sueños, todas, pese a que la mayoría no tiene una casa propia, pidieron contar con algún proyecto financiado que les permita tener un lugar propio para la organización, no una oficina, una casa, para recibir a otras compañeras y cuidarse entre todas. Ellas sabían que sus respuestas estaban siendo grabadas para que yo tenga el registro literal de sus expresiones y colocarlas al final en un documento colectivo para la organización. A continuación, le presento las preguntas que realicé en cada parte del árbol.

### **Hapo (raíces):**

¿Hay algún lugar que quieran recordar en este árbol? ¿Qué personas fueron importantes para ustedes cuando eran niñas y adolescentes?  
¿Hay alguna compañera que haya estado al inicio de esta organización que fue importante para ustedes?

### **Yvy (suelo):**

¿Dónde viven ahora? ¿Qué actividades realizan a diario? ¿Qué roles tienen en la organización?  
¿Tienen alguna actividad preferida, que realizan actualmente?

### **Yvyra (tronco):**

¿Pueden nombrar algunas de sus habilidades?  
¿En qué dicen las personas que las conocen, que son buenas? En este momento todas nos sentamos en círculo, invité a que digan en voz alta

sus habilidades y el de las compañeras, posterior a eso, colocar esas palabras en el árbol. Continué preguntando ¿Cómo aprendieron esa habilidad? ¿Qué persona o comunidad nos compartió esa habilidad? Después hice preguntas relacionadas a los valores y las historias de esos valores ¿Cuáles son los valores que consideran importantes? ¿Por qué son importantes estos valores para ustedes? ¿Los aprendieron de alguien?

### **Yvyra raka (ramas):**

¿Cuáles son sus sueños? ¿Qué esperanzas tienen? ¿Cómo logran sostener en el tiempo esas esperanzas? ¿Cómo lograron aferrarse a sus sueños?

### **Togue (hojas):**

¿Qué personas, vivas o muertas, son importantes para ustedes?

### **Yva (frutas):**

¿Qué regalos, físicos o no, recibieron en sus vidas?  
¿Quién te regaló? ¿Qué vio en vos esa persona para darte ese regalo?

### **Ra'yi (semillas):**

¿Qué les gustaría dejar como legado a su comunidad, a su familia, a las compañeras?

## **Paso 3: Las tormentas**

Conversamos sobre las tormentas y otras condiciones que ponen a los árboles y a los bosques en peligro. Así como a los árboles también a las personas las ponen en riesgo o en peligro algunas situaciones o contextos, les pedí que hablen acerca de esto último.

### **Ybytupochy (tormenta):**

¿Qué las pone en riesgo? ¿Qué situación las hace sentir que están en peligro? ¿Qué les pone tristes?  
¿Qué les preocupa?

#### **Paso 4: Las respuestas frente a las tormentas**

Les ofrecí preguntas para indagar las respuestas que ellas dan, para sentirse mejor, para cuidarse y protegerse.

#### **Pytú'u (calma):**

¿Qué hacen para sentirse mejor, cuando viven situaciones difíciles? ¿Cuáles son esas situaciones que las ponen en riesgo a nivel individual y colectivo? ¿Cómo responden a esas situaciones, riesgo, peligro? ¿Con quién o quiénes se sienten acompañadas para hacer frente a esas situaciones?

Todas tuvieron su propio ritmo para responder, como en el turno del “tereré jeré”, y todas se consultaban para ver si estaban de acuerdo en lo que cada una sentía como situación de riesgo para la organización, antes de escribir en el árbol.

Nos sentamos en ronda y en el centro el árbol, con sus historias, fui testiga de cómo sus rostros se alegraban cuando escuchaban nombrarse en las hojas del árbol de las compañeras, “estamos todas”, dijeron, y yo las vi orgullosas de ellas y de su organización.

Sus respuestas están registradas, en el documento colectivo que sigue a continuación.

### *El documento colectivo de las mujeres trabajadoras sexuales de UNES*

Si bien el mismo taller del árbol de la vida cuenta con documentos que honran los saberes y los sueños de cada participante, elegí terminar el taller con la construcción del documento colectivo, en el que también constan sus sueños, sus

esperanzas y la manera en la que siguen aferradas a pesar de las tormentas. Esto también lo conversé con ellas previamente al taller, a ellas les gustó la idea de contar con un documento colectivo, no lo habían hecho antes. Les propuse el documento colectivo para ensanchar las historias de ellas como compañeras, de ellas como integrantes de una organización con sueños colectivos y esperanzas.

El documento colectivo es una forma de cristalizar la historia alternativa de las habilidades y los conocimientos de las personas y las comunidades descubren que tienen y que les son útiles en situaciones difíciles. (Chimpén-López, Dumitrascu & Montesano, 2014, p. 50)

En las conversaciones mantenidas durante este tiempo con las mujeres de UNES, me compartieron lo importante que es para ellas contar con archivos que sirvan como testimonio de ellas, de sus nombres y de la historia de la organización. Ser reconocidas y valoradas en un contexto que tiende a silenciarlas y ocultarlas es lucha, resistencia y supervivencia.

El documento fue construido siguiendo la forma metodológica que sugieren Chimpén-López, Dumitrascu y Montesano (2014).

Una vez elaborado el documento, construido con lo que ellas dijeron en el taller del árbol de la vida, me reuní con todas y les leí el borrador de este. Les pregunté si reconocían sus palabras y sentires en el documento y todas dijeron que sí y expresaron sentirse emocionadas.

Lo que sigue es el documento colectivo de las mujeres trabajadoras sexuales organizadas de UNES.

Queremos compartir con toda aquella que quiera y que necesite, como, la organización ha influido en el desarrollo de nuestras identidades preferidas y del sentido de agencia personal y colectiva que construimos, para sentirnos seguras y empoderadas.

Queremos contarles sobre las habilidades que aprendimos al estar organizadas y sobre los valores que nos impulsan a negarnos a vivir en la clandestinidad, y que refuerzan nuestros compromisos de habitar la vida con toda la dignidad que nos corresponde.

Que somos mujeres y somos trabajadoras sexuales, que frente a un Gobierno de derecha y frente al machismo con su violencia estructural, resistimos, nos juntamos y nos organizamos.

Que, frente a la ausencia de derechos, nos formamos y nos preparamos, aprendemos y tomamos el micrófono como protagonistas de nuestras vidas.

Que, como a los árboles, también hay tormentas que nos ponen en riesgo, como la existencia de ordenanzas municipales obsoletas, que nos sancionan, que nos prohíben habitar la calle, que nos arrojan a la clandestinidad, nosotras, apoyadas unas en otras, hacemos incidencia política, ponemos el cuerpo.

Que, para evitar que nos sigan revictimizando en las comisarías y otras instituciones, cuando denunciarnos la violencia que vivimos, nosotras nos capacitamos y damos talleres de sensibilización sobre el trabajo sexual, a policías, funcionarios y a la comunidad.

Que nosotras somos solidarias y la organización es un espacio común de cuidado y crecimiento.

Que aprendimos a hacer testeos y a dar charlas a compañeras sobre el uso de preservativos y sobre nuestros derechos como mujeres y como trabajadoras.

Que cuando una necesita, puede contar con las demás, que en la organización somos compañeras y no competencia, que a veces eso nos cuesta en el cotidiano, pero que siempre hay alguien como Lucy que nos recuerda eso.

Contarles a todas, que nosotras sabemos escuchar y que somos alegres, que nos gusta bailar y salir a tomar con nuestras amigas, que nos enamoramos y soñamos, algunas sueñan con tener casa propia, otras con tener una casa para UNES, otras sueñan casa para las compañeras, yo quiero que todas tengan una casa para envejecer tranquilas. Algunas quieren casarse, otras no, otras quieren viajar lejos y otras se quieren quedar, que somos madres, tías, abuelas, hijas y que estamos trabajando para que todas las compañeras trabajadoras sexuales cuenten con todos sus derechos, que tenemos la esperanza y el compromiso para dejar como legado a las que vienen.

Y que frente a un sistema que nos objetiviza, como material de consumo, nosotras nos organizamos y salimos a las calles como sujetas de derechos, orgullosas de nosotras y empoderadas.

Que resistimos

Lucy, Moni, Carmen, Jenny, Patty y Angie

## Preguntas que otorgan reconocimiento a la metodología del árbol de la vida

Con el fin de validar con ellas la metodología del árbol de la vida, realicé cinco preguntas a cada una, que incluían tanto lo individual como lo comunitario.

Para el registro de respuestas les pregunté si podía grabar la entrevista y al finalizar les leí como quedó y les pregunté si estaban de acuerdo y si había algo más que querían agregar. Hice pública mis elecciones de sus frases y respuestas, primero porque a nivel de extensión, superaba el límite de páginas; y segundo lugar, porque quería ampliar sus historias de habilidades y de comunidad.

A partir de eso, estas fueron las preguntas y las respuestas de ellas, están en cursiva.

1. *¿Ha aparecido algo nuevo en tu identidad después de escuchar a tus otras compañeras?*
2. *¿Es la organización una comunidad para vos? ¿Por qué?*
3. *¿Qué te gustaría dejar de legado a la comunidad?*
4. *Si tuvieras que contar una historia de la importancia de estar organizadas a otras mujeres, ¿qué historia contarías?*
5. *¿Qué habilidades y estrategias de las compañeras que has escuchado te gustaría llevar para enfrentar las dificultades en el futuro?*

### Lucy

Fundadora de UNES, es mujer y tiene 59 años, terminó el colegio, según sus propias palabras, gracias a la organización, siendo una mujer adulta. Se hizo cargo de sus hijos y nietos. Tiene casa propia.

1. *Sí. Cuando hicimos el árbol y mis compañeras reafirmaron lo importante que yo era en sus vidas, para mí fue grandioso Paola, porque me*

*sentí querida, me sentí importante. Entonces eso me dejó el árbol, volver a sentirme querida por mis compañeras.*

2. *Sí, es una comunidad, siento que hace falta una compañera que salió de la organización, siento que tiene que volver, siento que está sufriendo, que está sola.*
3. *Que mi trabajo sirva para que mis compañeras estén bien, que tengan trabajo, que ganen dinero, yo quiero que con el tiempo mis compañeras confíen más en ellas.*
4. *La historia de Karen, una compañera a la que yo visité por varios años, hace poco me llamó y me dijo que terminó la carrera de Derecho y que en el día de su colación le gustaría que yo esté sentada en primera fila. Me dijo que yo le ayudé dándole fuerzas, cuando yo cuidaba su salud, cada vez que le llevaba condones.*
5. *Quiero llevarme la habilidad de Carmen, de no guardar las cosas que me hacen daño y echar para adelante.*

### Moni

Es la presidenta de UNES, vive sola en una casa de alquiler, en unos de los barrios empobrecidos y criminalizados de Asunción, tiene 61 años.

1. *Sí, sobre todo al escuchar que mis compañeras me ven como referente en política, cambié mucho como mujer organizada.*
2. *Sí somos, tenemos nuestras diferencias, pero cuando una necesita, hacemos todo para colaborar y tenemos en común el trabajo sexual y eso a mí me da mucho orgullo, porque significa que nosotras elegimos hacer esto.*
3. *Mi mayor sueño es conseguir que nos reconozca el Ministerio del Trabajo como gremio y de mujeres trabajadoras sexuales, eso ya sería un reconocimiento de nuestro trabajo. Y eso me hace levantar todos los días y seguir trabajando por conseguir ese derecho.*

4. *Para mí es contar mi propia historia, dejé de ser una persona adicta a las drogas. Yo nunca antes de la organización iba a animarme a hablar en voz alta, en los medios de comunicación y tampoco iba a saber de mis derechos como mujer y como trabajadora.*
5. *Me gustaría llevar la habilidad de Jenny, de saber escuchar, eso me cuesta todavía.*

### **Jenny**

Mujer de 65 años, vive en una casa de alquiler, se hizo cargo de su familia en un contexto empobrecido y criminalizado, asume sola el cuidado de sus nietas.

1. *Sí, a mí me gusta mucho mi habilidad en la carga de datos, soy buena en eso, aprendí cuando entré a trabajar en la organización, pero el día que hicimos el árbol mis compañeras me dijeron que la escucha era mi habilidad y yo no me daba cuenta de que eso era importante.*
2. *Para mí sí es una comunidad, sobre todo desde la solidaridad. Yo acá crecí como persona, aprendí muchísimas cosas dentro de la organización. Viví mucha violencia física y psicológica de parte de mi exmarido y acá aprendí mis derechos y somos muy solidarias entre nosotras.*
3. *Aprender a decir no, a decir basta incluso frente a nuestros hijos. Pienso en mi nieta cuando pienso en legado y le hablo mucho de cómo cuidarse e intento que mejore la relación con su mamá.*
4. *Yo contaría mi historia, de haber logrado dejar una relación en la que casi me mata mi exmarido. Y que la organización me dio las herramientas para poder seguir con mi vida.*
5. *Admiro el conocimiento y la inteligencia de Lucy y el liderazgo de Carmen y su habilidad para saber expresarse.*

### **Patty**

Mujer, 23 años, cría a su hijo de 3 años con su madre, ella con su trabajo mantiene a toda su familia. Integra la organización desde hace 2 años.

1. *Sí, me dijeron que era muy inteligente, y que soy cuidadosa, eso me hace ver un poco mejor las cosas.*
2. *Para mí somos una comunidad. Yo entré hace 2 años y en este tiempo ellas estuvieron para mí cuando necesité y yo estuve con ellas, el año pasado le mataron al hijo de Carmen y yo me quedé con ella y le cocinaba todos los días.*
3. *A mi mamá siempre le digo que cuando yo muera no quiero que nadie llore, quiero que me recuerden alegre y loca, como soy, disfrutando la vida.*
4. *Les contaría mi historia de empoderamiento. Yo entré sin saber nada y las chicas me ayudaron, aprendí sobre mis derechos, aprendí a hablar frente a otras personas.*
5. *A mí me gustaría aprender la habilidad de Lucy de ser fuerte, tantas cosas ella pasó y sigue luchando por nosotras.*

### **Carmen**

Mujer de 40 años, está a cargo del cuidado de sus hijos, tiene casa propia. Está en la organización hace 16 años.

1. *Da gusto escuchar cuando las compañeras te dicen tus habilidades, sigo con esa sensación. Todas tenemos distintas capacidades. Para mí, mi habilidad es el trabajo de campo, disfruto mucho visitando a las compañeras y hablando con ellas, en eso yo soy fuerte.*
2. *Sí, es una comunidad, nosotras nos organizamos no solo para que el trabajo sexual sea reconocido como trabajo, también nos organizamos cuando alguna compañera necesita o está enferma.*
3. *Mi legado sería poder sumar a más compañeras y que se comprometan como nosotras lo hicimos.*
4. *La organización me abrió los ojos, a nivel personal me salvó la vida. Antes yo aguantaba la violencia de mis parejas para no quedarme sola, hoy día ya no, hoy me vinculo solo con personas con las que pueda proyectar un futuro sin violencia.*
5. *Yo estoy bien con mis habilidades, tengo liderazgo y eso me gusta mucho.*

## Angie

Mujer, 24 años, forma parte de la organización desde hace 4 años, es madre de una niña y un niño, ella se encarga del cuidado de sus hijos. Terminó el colegio. Vive en una casa de alquiler.

1. *Me gustó escuchar a mis compañeras, sobre todo en estos meses que estuve muy mal, ellas me dijeron que soy inteligente y también hago lo posible por ayudarle a mis compañeras.*
2. *Más que una comunidad, UNES es mi familia, Lucy por la forma en que nos cuida sería como mi mamá y mis compañeras son mis hermanas.*
3. *Quiero sumar a nuevas compañeras, ese sería mi legado y me gustaría que me recuerden como una buena compañera.*
4. *Yo les contaría mi historia de como la organización me ayudó a reconocer la violencia que viví con mi expareja, que casi me mató. Y a reconocer que el trabajo sexual es trabajo.*
5. *A mí me gustaría tener la habilidad de Lucy para aprender y me gustaría viajar como ella y conocer muchos países.*

## Reflexiones finales

*Nombrar para que exista,  
nombrarnos para existir*

Dos meses después de finalizar este trabajo, la organización cumplió 20 años de trayectoria. Invitaron a representantes de instituciones del Estado, a otras organizaciones y a muchas mujeres trabajadoras sexuales, organizadas y no organizadas. Patty tomó el documento colectivo que había surgido después del taller del árbol de la vida y, con el uso de un micrófono, lo leyó fuerte, segura; todas sus compañeras celebraron. Ellas celebran cada vez que una de sus compañeras habla en voz alta, saben que en ella están las voces de todas. Sobre todo, frente al Estado que las obliga a la clandestinidad. En el taller del árbol de la vida, la parte final también es de celebración y eso se dio en el momento de la lectura del documento.

Finalizando este artículo, presto palabras de Michael White (2002) sobre el trabajo con personas desde las prácticas narrativas: "Pienso que trae el mundo a la terapia. Pienso que transforma en político lo personal" (p. 52).

Esto me invita a mirar la forma en que transformaron mi identidad como terapeuta las conversaciones con las mujeres trabajadoras sexuales; en la manera de encarnar la postura del no saber y de que las personas son expertas en sus vidas y, sobre todo, en las diversas formas que deciden en contextos como el de Paraguay, sobrevivir y defender la alegría, al decir de Benedetti, como una trinchera.

En el momento en que a ellas les hace sentido la propuesta, hice público todo lo que haríamos en el taller: les pregunté a ellas qué les gustaría que suceda en los encuentros, qué no les gustaría que suceda, compartí el poder, lo volví horizontal, y no había nada de nuestros encuentros que fuera secreto para ellas. Pensé que esto haría que la propuesta fuese lo suficientemente cercana, para que todas se sintiesen cómodas y familiarizadas.

Me pregunto, de manera intencional, si estoy hablando por alguien cuando hablo. Esto incluye también las voces con poder ¿estoy hablando como la modernidad, la hegemonía de la academia, los manuales de diagnóstico, el colonialismo?

Asumo entonces, de manera pública, mi crítica a la modernidad que trajo la colonización sobre nuestros cuerpos y nuestros territorios; y celebro que, pese a cargar con historias de violencia en este sistema, que es patriarcal, colonialista y racista, las mujeres nos seguimos juntando y organizando nuestras luchas, donde mantenernos vivas y con otras compañeras es un acto de resistencia y dignidad.

## Aguyje ("Agradecimiento" en idioma guaraní)

Este trabajo no sería posible sin la coautoría de las mujeres trabajadoras sexuales de la Asociación Unidas en la Esperanza UNES que, de manera

generosa, han participado en este trabajo. Ellas son: Lucy, Moni, Jenny, Carmen, Angie y Patty.

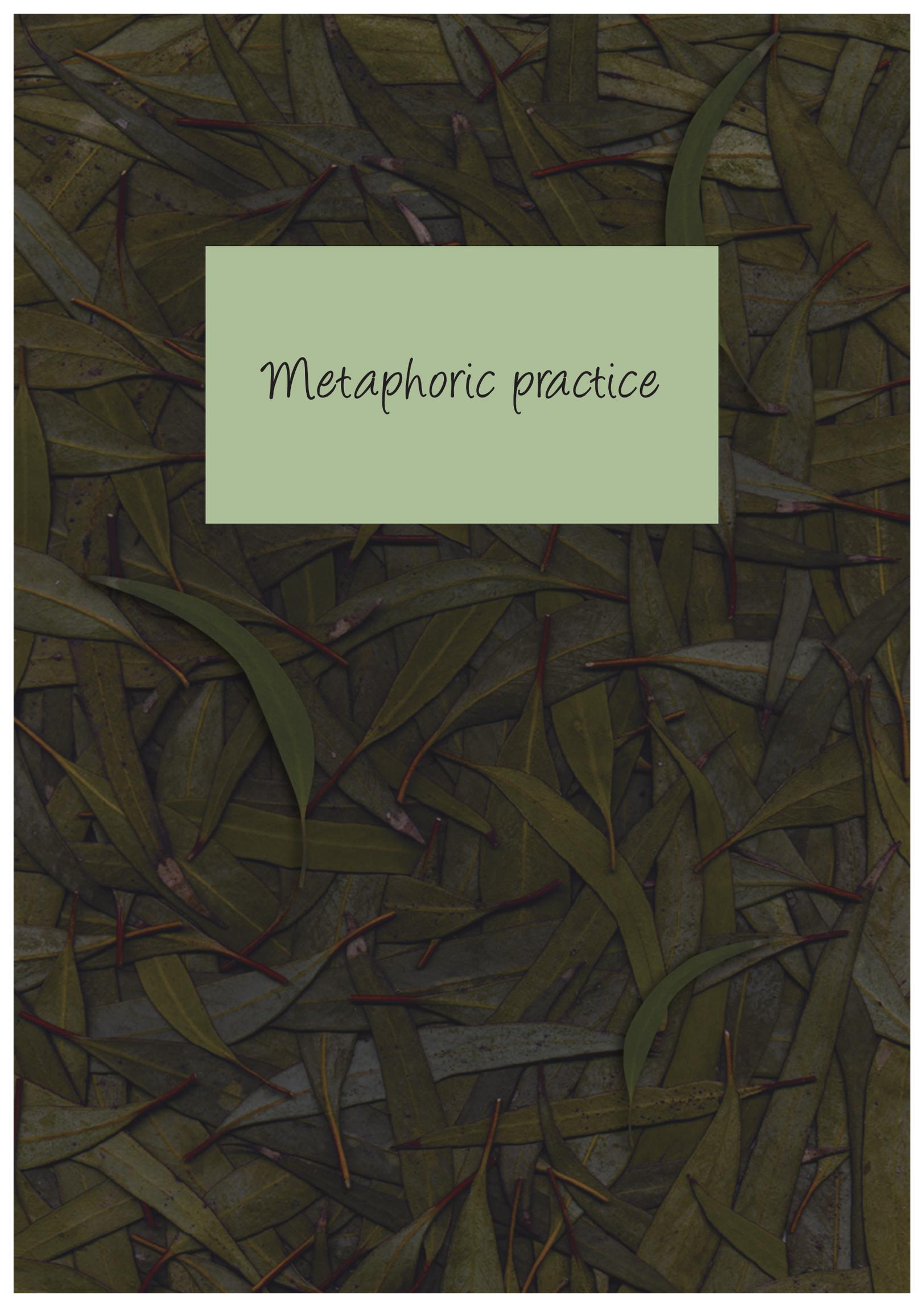
A Marcela Polanco, Mariangels Ferrer Duch, Carlos Chimpén, Sheila Fernández y Diego G. Reinfeld quienes me brindaron su tiempo, ampliaron mi mirada y me compartieron sus conocimientos

durante los espacios de covisión del Máster en Terapia Narrativa y Trabajo Comunitario de la Universidad de Extremadura.

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*Metaphoric practice*



## Fire of Life:

*Yarning about stories of passions, strengths, skills,  
interests and hobbies of our mob*

*by Kynan Barnes*



*Kynan Barnes Ampetyane is a proud Arrernte man from Anarpipe. As a Kwertengurle, he holds cultural responsibilities as a caretaker for his Country. His work is grounded in strong connections to Country, community, family and Culture, which continue to shape his identity and guide his practice. Kynan holds a Bachelor of Education and a Master of Narrative Therapy and Community Work. Over the past decade, he has worked with young people and communities across Central Australia and metropolitan Melbourne in roles including educator, youth worker, Aboriginal education worker, counsellor and facilitator. He currently works as the operations manager at Kings Narrative and holds a role as Chairperson of Apmwerre Aboriginal Corporation, where he supports community self-determination to actualise their vision of healthy Country, strong in Culture, and thriving community. Kynan's practice sits at the intersections of Country, Culture, education, healing and social justice. He is particularly interested in narrative practices that strengthen cultural identity, honour Aboriginal knowledges, and support collective and community-centred healing. His approach is trauma-informed, strengths-based and relational, with a strong commitment to honouring people's stories, dignity and collective wisdom. [barnes.kynan@gmail.com](mailto:barnes.kynan@gmail.com)*

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Author pronouns: he/him

## *Abstract*

This paper presents a narrative practice metaphor called the Fire of Life. It's been designed to help tell our stories in ways that make them stronger by yarning about the passions, strengths, skills, interests or hobbies of Aboriginal people, along with the problems that we can face. Culture is healing, and the Fire of Life combines culturally resonant metaphors with practices and principles of narrative therapy to facilitate and guide therapeutic yarning. Through a story of practice, the paper illustrates how the Fire of Life can be used to yarn with someone about their passions and strengthen the story as a result. We explore Gilly's passion for living and promoting a healthy lifestyle in the context of challenges surrounding Aboriginal people's health in Central Australia. .

***Key words: metaphor; re-authoring; outsider witness; Aboriginal; First Nations; narrative practice; narrative therapy***

## Origins of the Fire of Life

My pop said, “Everything you need is in your culture”. In Arrernte culture, everything comes from the Land and is forever arising from and within Country. The Land, story, kinship and people hold everything together in sacredness (Turner et al., 2010). And so it is by no coincidence that the idea for the Fire of Life came to me while on Country, around a fire, telling stories. Inspired by metaphoric practices such as the Tree of Life (Ncube, 2006), the origins of the Fire of Life lie in culture and on Country, opposing negative stereotypes and discourse about Aboriginal people.

Sadly, in my professional and personal experiences, it is clear that problem stories have been attached to our mob. In the education sector, where I’ve spent most of my career, this has included stories of school disinterest, student underachievement and deficit (Lowe, 2017). These attitudes can even limit our educators’ interest and capacity through what Lowe (2017) described as “deficit theorising”. This can lead to low expectations, and the blame for low outcomes being placed on individuals, families and communities. Our educational institutions must move away from the colonial worldview into contextualised, trauma-informed and strength-based approaches. Because, as Lowe’s (2017) findings suggest, in order to address sociocultural and educational needs of Aboriginal students, schools need to honour, understand and actively reflect on community history, contexts and aspirations. The principle of highlighting and attending to the strengths of our students holds true outside the classroom and can be extended to our communities and society more broadly. It is from this position that there is a platform to yarn about our stories in ways that make them, and us, stronger (Wingard, 1999).

The facilitation of the Fire of Life is intended to be a yarn – preferably around a campfire, though this is not necessary and not always possible. Mary Terszac (2008, p. 90) described yarning as “a process of making meaning, communicating and passing on history and knowledge”. I was

interested in the Fire of Life practice being facilitated in this way. Described by Aunty Carolynha Johnson (2014) as “yarning with a purpose”, therapeutic yarns “allow time, free flowing conversation, two-way sharing” (Drahm-Butler, 2015, p. 28) and are connected to our ways.

## Yarning with the Fire of Life

The Fire of Life practice provides guidance for people to yarn about their passions, strengths, skills, interests and hobbies in ways that make them stronger (Wingard, 1999). It consists of 12 parts that relate to the metaphor of a campfire. Depending on the facilitator, or the yarn itself, the process may take place over a number of yarns. This is not rigid and is meant only as a guide. The 12 parts of the practice are:

1. Naming the fire
2. Spark
3. Kindling
4. Sticks
5. Log
6. Coals
7. Losing light
8. Stoking the fire
9. Warming others
10. Future of the fire
11. Sharing embers
12. Fire watch

I will illustrate this with a story of practice at Apmwerre, our family Estate on our Country, Arnapipe. For context, I was here on a men’s cultural camp reconnecting back to Country, culture and traditions. A day into the camp, I was speaking to one of my kekes (brothers, male cousins) Gilly about their experiences of the camp so far, along with sharing stories about our lives since we last spoke. Within these conversations, Gilly referred to personal and career pursuits. These implied strengths and passions, which was a nice segue into yarning with the Fire of Life.

As you engage in the story of Gilly, you will notice that within their rich stories, there are possibilities and opportunities for further and alternative questions or narrative enquires. I encourage the reader to think about those possibilities and what further questions might be asked throughout.

## Naming the fire

In preparation for a Fire of Life yarn, it is important to explain the concept, gauge interest in the yarn, and gain permission to go ahead. After building understanding of the metaphor, we begin by naming the fire. As it was in the following yarn, it may be helpful to consider stories from previous conversations where a passion, strength, interest, skill or hobby was discussed, whether it was implied or explicit. It may also be that the person is simply asked what their particular passion, strength, interest, skill or hobby is. I imagine there are many interesting and creative ways to name the fire.

After getting Gilly's permission and building interest in the yarn, we sat around the fire with a warm cup of tea while our nephews played in the background and other family members prepared for the day's activities. This was the perfect setting for this yarn: on Country, with family, around a fire. And so our conversation began with setting and naming the fire.

Kynan: Remember I was saying that thing was like a fire, the fire in your belly? Well, same thing with the Fire of Life. So that fire represents your passion, maybe a strength, skill, hobby or something that you might be interested in in your life. I know we spoke about some things before, but what's your fire? That fire that you have?

Gilly: Well, I think it's actually being healthy – healthy living and lifestyle, you know?

## Spark

A spark is where a fire begins. In this part of the metaphor, we establish the history of the fire and learn about what particular time, event or experiences brought the fire to life. This is very much grounded in re-authoring (White, 2007), particularly in the landscape of action where the history of the preferred story is established and explored. Questions may include:

- What sparked your fire?
- Can you tell me a bit about what happened?
- Was there a particular time, event or experience that sparked the fire?  
Or was it a collection of events?
- When did you realise this was a fire for you?

Kynan: So you know when we make that fire, before it lights up, it comes from a spark. Could be matches or lighter, you know? So that spark is where it first started. What sparked your fire?

Gilly: For me it was changing my lifestyle. That eating and looking after your body. That sort of sparked me up to change our younger generation, you know? Back in the day, our ancestors and everyone were not built to eat this Western society side of food, you know? Not used to eating sugar and everything. And being able to have that knowledge – growing up we never really got taught that. Sort of figuring out myself, you know? Actually, myself and my partner. That sort of opened up that side of the world for me. And I wish we would have learnt that growing up from our mob.

Kynan: That looking after your body sounds like something important for you.

Gilly: No smoking, drinking. All that, you know?

Kynan: And you mentioned ancestors and your partner. Like they were there to sort of help you on your journey. To spark it.

Gilly: Missus helped me find it; find something I never had before. And being able to find that now, and looking back and thinking: no-one ever taught us that, you know? Especially here. Her helping me to find this makes me want to help other people.

Kynan: You might start that spark in someone else!

Gilly: [Nodding] Start that spark! Yeah! And start that ripple effect from that one kid, and then they'll think, "Ah, look at this young fella. Look at how he's doing it. I might ask him now what he's doing with himself". And then – boom! From one it will be two. From two, three, four – next thing you know it will be the whole community behind it then. That's the knowledge I need to pass down now.

## Kindling

After the spark, you need kindling to get the fire going. In this section we continue to build rich descriptions in the realm of re-authoring (White, 2007) through tracing histories. This part of the metaphor elicits a story of the fire first coming into action. Questions may include:

- When did you get your fire going?
- When did you first engage in your passion?
- What is your first memory of the passion in action?
- Where were you?
- Who was around?
- What were the steps that you took to get yourself ready to do what you did?
- What do you think was the turning point that led to you being able to do what you did?
- Was this event unusual or have there been times when you've done this sort of thing before?
- How did you manage this?

My conversation with Gilly was picked up again in the troopy (four-wheel-drive vehicle), which I've found is another great environment to facilitate the Fire of Life because the point of focus is outside. We were travelling back to town after the camp had finished with two other brothers in the car. They had both agreed to listen, be outsider witnesses and be a part of the Fire Watch, which I will explain further on.

Kynan: When did you start to be passionate about being healthy, healthy living and lifestyle? What was your first memory of that?

Gilly: First memory I think was with footy. I wanted to benefit myself in that area. I was looking at AFL [Australian Football League] players and their physique, and I thought in order for me to get on that level and be able to look like that: start off by doing all the right things. So I started to knuckle down. Yeah, and cut all the sugar and things. That was sort of the gateway for me then. And after doing all right things for a year, I sort of saw my body start to develop and my mind wasn't lazy, and I was more active, more energetic. Once I had a taste of that, I just wanted more of it. And it sort of opened my mind up and then had me thinking, well, imagine if I can – if other people could feel like this back home, they could be flying.

Kynan: So, you said that started with football. When was that, was that high school or?

Gilly: So that started, you know, only in my late twenties ... about when I was 27, 26. Sort of started there with me and my partner being into the gym and everything. She sort of taught me everything in that area ... I wanted to do it for footy, but at the end, I sort of did it for myself. Just wanted a change and break that cycle with alcohol and all that other stuff.

## Sticks

We put sticks on to make the fire grow. This part of the metaphor continues in the landscape of action and also explores the person's fire in the landscape of identity (White, 2007). Here we yarn about how the flame grew, drawing on more experiences and events that may have supported that. This section also opens up possibilities for re-remembering conversations (White, 2007).

Questions might include:

- What other events or experiences made your fire grow?
- What happened? What did you do?
- Were there people involved?
- What internal efforts did you make that allowed the fire to grow?
- What support did you have from others?
- If there was someone who saw this, what did they see or what do you think they would have seen in you?

Kynan: Those bigger sticks are there to make the fire grow a little bit more. What enabled that passion for your health to grow?

Gilly: Just being in that cycle back home here, coming back. Nothing's ever changed. All the family members not being healthy. Yeah, coming back and seeing that hit me as well. Having young family members on dialysis, that sort of hit me as well. I want to be able to teach these younger kids while they're fresh and haven't really taken this bad stuff in their body yet. I want to be able to spark that up for them.

Kynan: So, seeing family on dialysis and things like that sort of fuels your fire because you don't want to see that happening.

Gilly: Especially [because] you go to buy a healthy sandwich and that's the same price as a Big Mac meal, a large Big Mac meal! Or a combo meal or whatever. It makes it hard for people because it's an easy road to that unhealthy eating lifestyle. And it

doesn't help when all the healthy food is really expensive as well!

Kynan: Absolutely. Was there anything you did to sort of grow that passion?

Gilly: I taught and tried to get a few families on it. But they kept teasing me by saying I'm a kangaroo eating grass! So right now, I'm trying to figure out a way where I can get family members on board, even it's for a couple weeks, just to feel that difference in how your body can change and all that. And what I experienced was sugar. Two weeks of craving that sugar was the hardest part of getting over that period, and once I got over that, everything just came naturally. Tried to explain to family but it's the same thing again. It's hard because you sort of get teased for it as well. I'm sort of at that stage of how I'm going to bring this in with my family and all the other young fellas.

Kynan: How did you then grow that in yourself? Were you reading? You mentioned before about AFL players' physiques.

Gilly: Yeah, just research. YouTube and things like that. And seeing body builders and stuff, how they went vegan. And that sort opened my eyes up. And our ancestors and everyone. They weren't vegan, but they were eating lean meat, kangaroo, walking, eating veggies and all that. And that's why they were really ripped and that's why they were full of energy, carbs that they could burn. So doing all that sort of stuff and having that research and everything sort of helped me as well.

## Logs

Large logs keep the fire going all night. In this part of the metaphor, we continue exploring the landscape of action and also prompt reflections in the landscape of identity (White, 2007). Here, we explore what has kept the fire burning for

the person. This could include internal efforts, particular experiences or events, or influence from others. Questions might include:

- What keeps your fire alive all night? What sustains it?
- What have you done to keep the fire going?
- What keeps it strong?
- Is it important that it keeps burning? Why?

Kynan: The next part is the big log. You know how we grab that big log. The big log keeps the fire going all night and for a long time. What is that log for you? What sustains the fire for you? What keeps it going, keeps it alive?

Gilly: I reckon my younger siblings that are living with me now. How they feel and they've changed and seeing them develop, you know? What I've been though is sort of good as well.

Kynan: So being able to pass it on and working with younger family members and your community is what keeps it strong for you.

Gilly: Yep.

Kynan: Is there anything else? There doesn't have to be, I'm just asking.

Gilly: Yeah, just especially the young kids we work with back home, back in Adelaide, with the criminal side of things, you know? Working with youth justice for a long time as well. Being able to create programs for these young kids that are running around town about opportunities for work and all that. You learn a lot at school, but how we teach our young people going out bush – that's proper teaching. Instead of having a meeting place in there [in prison], make it out here [on Country]. Yeah. So, I reckon the biggest one is the justice system. Trying to break the cycle for that.

Kynan: Yeah, sounds like there's a theme of passing it on, being able to pass that

on to younger generations even outside your family where you're working in youth justice.

Gilly: That's it, yeah. It's not cool to do silly things – breaking cars and breaking into houses and all that, you know? Our ancestors were warriors, not criminals. But they don't see that side of things at the moment, you know? And that sort of breaks families apart now, and culture. So, stop that and start putting in all these programs, right things to do, and then – boom! – we are heading in the right direction. Boats are turning slowly, we just gotta keep cruising.

## Coals

The coals are where the fire is hottest. They keep the fire strong. Coals can be likened to our values, which are the foundation for our fire in life. In this part of the metaphor, we explore values in the landscape of identity, yarning with the person about the values that their fire speaks to. Questions might include:

- What does your fire say about your values and what you stand for?

Kynan: And the next part is the coals. So, like you make the fire and coals are there keeping the fire really hot, and they're always there when the fire is going and we sort of relate that to your values. Those are the things that you can fall back on, you know? And can keep you doing what you're doing and remembering why you're doing it.

Gilly: That's creating that foundation then, that start.

Kynan: Yeah. What's some of the values that your fire speaks to?

Gilly: Respect is a big one. Knowledge. And I reckon Future. Especially with language. And especially with our culture. Yeah, that's another one: culture. Culture is that main one where social media is coming

out now and it's easy for our younger generation to choose that path and forget about culture. Just teaching them language and everything now. You know, it's scary to think that we're already in line to take over for Country. It's scary that all our grandfathers are gone now. Our grandmothers and all our uncles are the last ones left now. Uncles and aunties. And they're the ones holding all the knowledge, and we're in that scary part of it where it falls to us now to teach these mob. It's scary to think in the future, you know? But we gotta think about the future for our little ones.

## *Losing light*

Losing light is where the metaphor moves into double story development (White, 2007). The earlier stages of the metaphor focus on building the preferred story as a platform and foundation to talk about problem stories. Here, the metaphor integrates externalising conversations (White, 2007), including naming the problem, mapping the effects of the problem, evaluating the effects of the problems, and justifying the evaluation.

Questions might include:

- Was it caused by a particular problem?
- What was going on around you when this happened?
- If something was putting your fire out, what might you call that? Or do you have an image in your mind of what it was?
- How did it affect you or your fire?
- Is it okay or was it okay with you that this [problem] affected your fire?

Kynan: And so the next part – sometimes that fire can go down a little bit, it can lose its heat a little bit and get a little bit small. Has your fire ever dwindled a little bit, you know, that passion for health?

Gilly: It did go down a little bit there. I had this down patch.

Kynan: What did this down patch do to you or your fire?

Gilly: It really had me missing my family and home and all that. Making me a little bit thing – unhappy, you know?

Kynan: And did this down patch affect anyone around you?

Gilly: Yeah, I suppose my missus a little bit. She had to deal with me with being a bit short, you know? And it was no good for us really.

Kynan: Did it impact other parts of your life?

Gilly: Just had me feeling a bit down, especially for home, for Country, you know? And family.

Kynan: Was it okay or is okay with you that it's had this effect?

Gilly: Nah, it's not.

## *Stoking the fire*

We stoke the fire to bring it back to life, to breathe in oxygen so the fire can reignite. This part of the metaphor continues the externalising conversations and builds stories of resistance.

Questions might include:

- How did you respond?
- How did you know to stoke the fire?
- What helped you to be able to stoke the fire?
- Can you name this skill? Or do you have an image?
- What does it say about what you might value?
- What does it say about you as a person?
- What does that say about your relationships? Your family? Your people?

Kynan: You know how we have to stoke the fire to bring it back up again, get that fire going again? This part is like that. How did you respond to the down patch. How did you get the fire going again?

Gilly: I think by coming out here. Yeah, I'm at my peak now. Coming out here with all my brothers, sons and nephews, that's that spark I got again, you know? I needed that. Now I can go back and restart again. So, I'm at that journey now where I fell down, and now I can get myself back up. And that's that support that I had from all my brothers out bush. Being at home and Country and that. Go back home stronger now.

Kynan: Deadly. And what does that say about you? Come out here and that helping with the down patch?

Gilly: Probably that I can get through it, you know? Just got to keep pushing on.

## Warming others

Our fires can warm other people, and this stage of the metaphor invites the person we are yarning with to reflect on the membership of their life through re-membering conversations (White, 2007). We focus on what the person's fire may have contributed to the lives of others. Questions might include:

- Does this fire warm anyone else?
- Who gets warmed by this fire?
- How might it make them feel?
- If you were them, what do you think you would feel?
- What's that like for you to see yourself through their eyes?

Kynan: Your fire can warm not only yourself, but it can also warm others as well. So, people might be impacted by your fire in positive ways. Does your fire warm anyone else?

Gilly: Yeah, it does. It warms only the ones that want to listen, the ones that are close. There's a saying that my partner taught me: "You can't change the world but changing one young fulla or one young woman's life – start from there." Because changing

that young woman's or young fella's life changes their world for them. That's [when] that ripple effect starts to kick in – make them sort of open up their own flame from their own spark, their own world from there. But start from there and you can sort of see how a big bushfire [can] come alight from that one positive change.

Kynan: That's deadly. And do you have a story about a young one that's been warmed by the fire, a particular person that you think of?

Gilly: Nah, not a young fella, but I'm thinking of one our brothers, Bro Ron. He's come a long way and he opened his akaperte [mind] and he's heading in that right direction now. And we had a good chat last night until about two in the morning. We was just talking really positively, and you know, he's really refreshed and recharged too. And he's really looking forward to going back to apmere [home] too, back to Adelaide, and we want to start that journey together. So I am really looking forward to that. I can't wait.

Kynan: What do you reckon it's like for Bro Ron to share that fire?

Gilly: We always talk, and I think he appreciates it. But we're brothers, family, that's what we do, you know?

## Future of the fire

We may want our fires to burn on into the future, and in this part of the metaphor we explore the person's hopes and dreams for their fire in the landscape of identity (White, 2007). Questions might include:

- What are your hopes and dreams for this fire?
- What's it like to know that might be on the horizon?

Kynan: What about looking to the future – what are your hopes and dreams for the fire?

Gilly: Well, you know, it's just looking after our health by learning our culture now. So that's the main part of this next journey ... for all us brothers to get together, learn together from each other. Learn together. That's the part I'm looking forward to, too. So we can feed off each other, being able to sing together and dance together. I'm really looking forward to that, so I can't wait til that day comes where we are all together.

## Sharing embers

We can learn valuable lessons from our fires and those can be shared with others as embers to contribute to building their fires. This stage invites the person to think about themselves and their stories in the context of others. The Fire of Life process may elicit hard-won knowledges (Denborough et al, 2006) that can be shared with others. It is my aim to collect these embers in a collective document so they can be shared and responded to. Questions might include:

- What advice would you give to others who might be working on their own fires?

Kynan: We can share the embers of our fire so that others could start their own, or it could fuel someone else's fire. So, what advice would you give to some who might be working on their own fire?

Gilly: I reckon that first part is going to be hard. With every journey that first part is always going to be hard, you know? And then it just gets easier and easier. Not too easy though – you're going to have your challenges up and down. You just got to keep steering that boat in the right direction. Because in your journeys, you're always gonna reach the top of the mountain, but you're always going to go down and reach another [low point]. Just don't give up. If you got a dream, you got a passion that you want to reach, just keep pushing.

## Fire watch

The light of our fires can be helpful to those who witness it, and so this part of the metaphor includes an outsider-witness reflection (White, 2002). The witnesses listen to and acknowledge the preferred stories of the person and authenticate their stories (Carey & Russell, 2011). Questions might include:

- What resonated with you?
- Does the story make any difference in your life as a witness to the fire?
- Does their fire remind you of any experiences in your life?
- Do any images come to mind when you hear about their fire?
- Does witnessing the fire make any difference for you?

Kynan: When you listen to keke [brother] there, what resonated with you about what he was saying? What did you connect with?

Ron: His commitment and dedication to what he's trying to do: to make himself better, healthier, stronger and share that knowledge and pass it on. But, like he said, it's hard but he keeps going with it, you know? He keeps pushing through it and it's good to see and good hear and it gives you energy to want to do it yourself.

Kynan: And anything stand out for you, keke? Anything you connect with?

Daniel: Yeah, I really like it too. When he was talking about young kids, you know? Back where I'm from, we don't have any of this happening up there, you know? But down here, it's a good idea to take something and share what I experienced down here, take it back home and share it with my people up there. Maybe doing something out like this. But here, I'll take this thought, this idea back up to Top End and share it with my people up there.

Gilly: Culture is the key!

Daniel: Yeah! That's so true.

Gilly: It brings you back on track when you go off track. Like he said, all the other things dragging you away: Western culture, alcohol, TV, or doing drugs or video games or sit-down town movies, or whatever you want to do. But what brings you back is culture. Keeps you on track.

Daniel: That's true. Even taking young ones back and teaching them about living off the land! That's a good one. That's a really good thought. When I get back home, I'll share this with my people.

Kynan: Are there any images that come to mind when listening to Bro Gilly's story?

Ron: He's talking about old people, ancestors. They didn't have takeaway or junk food, sugar or fatty foods. They was all living off the Country, and I think that image is really strong people, you know? They are walking around hunting. No big guts or chubby cheeks: they all solid. Just really strong people. Strong physically, strong culturally, spiritually, everything. They was strong. When he was talking like that's what it makes you think about. You see them old photos, sixpack and everything – solid! Muscly, strong, could run everywhere, walk all day, everything.

Gilly: Happy people too, because [they were] eating all that right stuff!

Kynan: Yes, absolutely! So, tell me, what was it like for you to hear them connect with your story?

Gilly: It was good, you know? I want to be able to give that to keke mob. So, it was good. That's what I want to do is bring that to our people, our family groups, our people, you know? One will have that one specialty in this area and one in that area, so we all bring everything to the table. So that's why

we need to find that balance now. Can't wait to do this again in six months' time, and I'm really looking forward to it.

## Reflections

People come with their own skills and knowledges in life, and I strongly believe that exploring, learning and relearning those skills, particularly our cultural knowledges, strengths and skills, is fundamental in healing our mob.

When we finished the Fire of Life yarn, I asked about Gilly's experience of exploring his passion for healthy living in this way. It was interesting to hear the ways he felt it supported him.

Kynan: Thanks, keke, for having a yarn. What was that like for you, those questions?

Gilly: It was good, keke. You know, it's sort of eye opening again. Brings you back. And them questions sort of open up new ideas and opportunities for yourself.

## Future fires

The Fire of Life is by no means a complete practice. I hope the Fire of Life metaphor will continue to grow and be developed by those who might use it, and that facilitators will acknowledge the practice and where it comes from. I've used the practice in group settings and would love to explore artistic expressions of people's fires such as songs, paintings and media. I hope that it can be adapted and shaped in new and interesting ways within others' contexts utilising their own skills, knowledges and experiences, and that these new ways are shared. I hope that people's strengths, passions, interests, skills and hobbies can be acknowledged and honoured in ways that make them stronger by using the Fire of Life metaphor – hopefully on Country, maybe with a tea, yarning around a campfire.

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# Exploring the meaning of cosplay for adolescents: A narrative approach

by Su Ying



Su Ying (Sue) works as a counsellor in Hong Kong. She holds a Master of Social Science in Counselling from Hong Kong Baptist University and recently completed a one-year advanced training program in narrative practice. Sue is passionate about narrative practice and strives to incorporate it into her work with young people. [sue950316@gmail.com](mailto:sue950316@gmail.com)

 ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6479-3948>

## Abstract

Cosplay has become a popular subculture among teenagers and is prevalent in Hong Kong, yet it is subject to misconceptions and prejudices. The imagined identities formed through cosplay can contribute to the formation of preferred identities. Cosplay can facilitate self-exploration, expression, social connection and the active construction of identity. I employed a narrative approach to explore the meanings of cosplay in young people's lives. In conversations with Julia, a secondary student, we made links between the "imaginary self" she constructed through cosplay and her skills, hopes and intentions in life. Our conversations provided the basis for a series of questions that can be used with other young people who are interested in cosplay. Julia was supported to document her story of using cosplay to support preferred directions in life. This facilitated connection with other young people, who were invited to respond as outsider witnesses. It also allowed Julia to challenge some misunderstandings and stereotypes about cosplayers, fostering new understandings for teachers and others working with young people.

**Key words:** *cosplay; Hong Kong; subculture; youth; double story; therapeutic documents; outsider witnesses; narrative therapy; narrative practice*

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Cosplay, short for costume play, is a form of performance art in which participants dress as characters from anime, video games, books, movies, manga or other comics. In Hong Kong, cosplay has grown rapidly over the last two decades, becoming a significant part of youth culture (Chen, 2007; Rahman et al., 2012). Many students at the secondary school where I work are passionate about cosplay, finding that it offers fulfilling experiences and a way to relieve academic pressure. However, these students say that their parents, while not actively opposing this hobby, often have significant concerns. Their ambivalence reflects wider misconceptions of cosplay, including an association with “fanaticism” or unhealthy obsession (Abramova et al., 2021; Peirson-Smith, 2012). External observers frequently view cosplay as an extreme form of fandom, suggesting participants are unable to distinguish fantasy from reality. In Chinese cultural contexts, cosplay is often dismissed as childish, a frivolous waste of time (不务正业 *bú wù zhèng yè*), or as socially deviant escapism (宅 *zhái*) (Rahman et al., 2012).

My curiosity was piqued by students facing academic pressure, strained family relationships or emotional distress who reported overwhelmingly positive experiences with cosplay. I was interested in whether they used cosplay to assist them in navigating these difficulties. As a site of creative expression, I wondered if cosplay might provide an opening to conversations about young people’s values, hopes and intentions. One student, Julia, explained that cosplay provided a powerful and positive experience that helped her through moments of loneliness and misunderstanding. By embodying characters she admired, she felt empowered and moved closer to being the person she hoped to become. This suggested that for her, cosplay was not an escape from reality but a way to regain agency.

### *Cosplay and youth identity*

The cosplay subculture originated in the 1970s in Japanese *dōjinshi* (amateur magazine or comic) conventions. During the 1990s, this subculture

became increasingly popular outside of Japan, springing up in other areas of Asia, including Hong Kong, Taiwan (Chen, 2007), mainland China, the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia (Rahman et al., 2012). Over the past two decades, cosplay culture in Hong Kong has significantly evolved, emerging as a vibrant and influential youth subculture. Young people in Hong Kong have adopted and adapted cosplay not merely in imitation of Japanese culture but as a means of exploring an “imaginative self” (Rahman et al., 2012). Cosplay offers a powerful medium for young people to explore and express their desires and choices, not only as individuals but as part of a supportive cosplay community in which they feel accepted and understood (Pérez-Torres, 2024; Reysen et al., 2018; Wang, 2010).

I was interested in how the imagined identities formed through cosplay might contribute to the formation of preferred identities. The following conversations were informed by narrative practices. Narrative therapy seeks to render visible subjugated stories that have been eclipsed by problems, allowing people to re-author their experiences in ways that emphasise their skills, knowledge, preferences and agency (White & Epston, 1990).

### *Julia’s story: Deconstructing “nobody cares”*

Julia initially sought help for depression and suicidal ideation. After immigrating from mainland China to Hong Kong for primary school, Julia had faced significant challenges adapting to the new language and cultural norms. She endured discrimination and ridicule. Her parents often quarrelled. In secondary school, especially after the pandemic, social interactions became overwhelmingly difficult. She ruminated on whether her words and actions were inappropriate, and she didn’t feel accepted by classmates. When Julia began sessions with me, she had been experiencing escalating distress, deteriorating sleep quality and thoughts of suicide.

During our conversations, Julia talked about feeling “not good enough” and said that nobody cared about her. She saw herself as unworthy of love: “I think I’m a very strange person.” Julia’s oft-repeated belief that “nobody cares about me” affected how she saw herself, making it difficult for her to find confidence, happiness or other possibilities. Together, we began to gain awareness and understanding of how certain beliefs had shaped her identity. We tried to deconstruct “nobody cares”, working from the premise that our lives and identities are shaped by the meanings we ascribe to our experiences and by the cultural discourses we absorb (White, 1993). Negative beliefs are often shaped by larger societal ideas about what’s “normal” (White, 2002). In examining these beliefs, we make hidden norms visible and available for questioning (Denborough, 2019). The following questions were used to investigate “nobody cares”:

- When did “nobody cares” first appear, and how did it convince you that it was true?
- How has “nobody cares” influenced your view of yourself?
- What would it be like to be cared for? Does care have to be expressed in words?
- Have there been any times when you’ve felt like you might be cared for?
- You mentioned a time when you felt profoundly sad and uncared for, even having suicidal thoughts. What prevented you from giving up your life then? Do you recall what you cared about, or who cared about you, at that time?

Through these questions, Julia traced her belief in “nobody cares” to when, as a child, she had witnessed arguments between her parents, which made her feel left out or disconnected. She came to realise that her friends’ patience with her temper was a form of caring, even if they didn’t explicitly say so. Recalling a time when she felt intensely abandoned and suicidal, she said she had thought about the characters she cosplayed. The acceptance she felt from these characters and her cosplay experiences made her feel that she could be liked and loved.

## *Cosplay as an opening to unique outcomes*

When working with teenagers struggling with suicidal thoughts, I’ve often observed a common thread: a deep reluctance to leave behind their loved ones, which ultimately dissuades them from acting on these thoughts. However, Julia’s experience introduced a new idea, sparking my curiosity: How might engagement in creative expression encourage a teenager to abandon resist ideation? Could embodying characters through cosplay provide companionship and a path forward?

For Julia, cosplay emerged as a significant unique outcome. In narrative practice, unique outcomes represent moments of divergence from a problem-dominated story (White & Epston, 1990). They can provide crucial entry points to developing preferred narratives, enabling individuals to gain new understandings of their experiences and reclaim their sense of agency (Denborough, 2019; Payne, 2000). Through the collaborative construction of alternative narratives, counsellors can help transform fleeting exceptions into enduring anchors of identity.

Once cosplay was identified as a unique outcome that challenged Julia’s belief that she was unworthy of care, we began exploring her cosplay experiences together. These conversations allowed her to move away from problem-dominated stories and to identify a deeply held value: to “try my best to help others”.

## *Cosplay as folk culture metaphor*

Julia’s comments about the gifts and challenges she encountered in cosplay reminded me of the “fruits” and “storms” explored in Ncazelo Ncube’s (2006) “Tree of Life” practice. Because of its resonance with many of the young people I was meeting with, I thought that cosplay metaphors might provide a way into narrative therapy conversations with others. I developed a set of questions inspired by folk cultural narrative

therapy practices (Denborough, 2018), using cosplay metaphors to identify and clarify skills, values, hopes and relationships that are significant to a young person. From my conversations with Julia across a number of sessions, I extrapolated five sets of questions that could be explored in conversations with other young people.

### ***The first cosplay experience***

These questions invite individuals to reconnect with their initial reasons for engaging with cosplay:

- When did you first try cosplay?
- What happened at that time?
- What initially drew you to cosplay, and what keeps you coming back?
- Did a friend introduce you to cosplay? How important is that person to you?

### ***People to invite to Comic-Con***

These questions invite reflection on significant others in a young person's life, and on potential witnesses to different facets of their identity. These may include real people, living or no longer living, or characters from their cosplay experiences. These may form part of the young person's association of life, with the potential to support the emergence of preferred identities (White, 2007).

- If you were going to a really important Comic-Con, who would you want to invite?
- You've put so much effort into your costume. Who do you most want to see it?
- Whose acknowledgment means the most to you? Why is their affirmation important to you, and what effects might it have?
- Why are these relationships important to you, and what do they add to your life?
- How do these relationships influence your goals, values, beliefs, hopes, dreams and commitments?
- What do you think it would mean to them to know how important they are to you?

### ***Overcoming cosplay challenges***

By recalling difficulties encountered in cosplay and how they were overcome, individuals can reflect on the skills and knowledge they have applied. They can be invited to consider how these might be used in other situations.

- Have you ever faced difficulties in cosplay that made you want to give up?
- How did you respond to those challenges?
- Have you ever used the skills you learnt from overcoming these difficulties in your everyday life?

In our conversations, Julia shared some of the difficulties she encountered in cosplay, how she responded to them, and how these skills had helped her tackle other challenges:

Yes [I have thought about giving up], because [cosplay] requires a lot of effort, time and money. But passion keeps me going. When I recall past experiences at comic conventions and being appreciated by others, it makes me happy and gives me the confidence to continue. Actually, I've learnt a lot from cosplay, like comparing prices and calculating costs, checking different e-platforms to buy affordable and high-quality materials. So now I've developed a habit of comparing prices across different shops to get the best value for money.

### ***Favourite characters***

As imaginary roles often play a crucial part in adolescent identity formation, exploring favourite characters can illuminate a person's aspirations and dreams.

- Who's your favourite character to cosplay?
- What do you admire about them?
- Do you aspire to be like this character? Why?
- Do you see parts of yourself in them?
- Has there been a moment when thinking about that character made a difference for you? What happened?

- What hopes do you have for your future when you think of this character, and how do those hopes impact you now?

Julia shared with me the character she cosplayed the most and what attracted her to this role:

The character I've cosplayed the most is Tōru Oikawa, one of the main characters in the Japanese anime *Haikyū!!* He serves as the setter within the [volleyball] team. He is capable and loyal. Even though the opposing teams were stronger and invited him to join them, he refused. He chose to stay with his own team and lead them. He has his own values ... I hope I can also become like him and demonstrate my ability in the school football team.

When I asked Julia if she saw a reflection of herself in Oikawa, she pondered for a moment and replied:

I think we're alike because we both seem tough on the outside but are soft on the inside. He's often sarcastic, and people might see him as arrogant. But deep down, he's very caring. He quietly helps his teammates and encourages his friends without seeking attention ... Even though I often joke around with my friends and my words might sound harsh, they know me well enough to understand it's just my way of talking. When they're in need, I never hesitate to do anything I can to help them.

Julia also described two other characters she loves: Geto Suguru from *Jujutsu Kaisen* (Akutami, 2018–2024) and Shin Ermi from *Frielen: Beyond journey's end* (Yamada, 2020–ongoing). Geto Suguru, one of four top-tier jujutsu sorcerers, strongly believed that “sorcerers must protect non-sorcerers”. Shin Ermi is a celebrated hero and recognised leader of the group that defeated the Demon King. Julia said:

Before he turned to the dark side, Geto Suguru was a sorcerer who dedicated himself to helping the weak. He felt a strong sense of duty and was endlessly patient and protective towards anyone vulnerable.

Shin Ermi is such a narcissist! He always calls himself a handsome man. But he's also very helpful and often volunteers to assist residents with all kinds of tasks.

I noticed that Julia emphasised some common traits in the three characters she described, and I wondered whether this was why Julia was drawn to them.

Sue: I noticed that these three characters seem to share certain qualities. Is that part of why you're attracted to them?

Julia: Definitely. They are all highly capable and try their best to help others. I really admire their skills, but what I admire even more is their willingness to do what they can to support people. While they may seem a bit narcissistic because they like to show off their talents, deep down they have a strong desire to help others.

Sue: How does the idea of trying your best to help others resonate with you? It reminds me of what you mentioned earlier, that even though you feel your relationship with your classmates is somewhat distant and that they don't seem to care much about you, you're still willing to explain how to do homework when they need help. Or back when you were on the soccer team, you helped new junior members learn the basic rules of the game. Does this relate to what you mean by “a strong desire to help others”?

Julia: Yes, exactly. The qualities these characters embody encourage me to keep helping others. If I'm able to help, I will, and when I do, I don't really worry about whether people will appreciate it or not. I feel like, at heart, this is just the choice I want to make.

Through reflecting on these characters, Julia came to recognise “trying one's best to help others” as a treasured value. She also became more focused on her dreams about playing football. She hoped to prove her capabilities through the sport and become an outstanding goalkeeper.

### ***Precious gifts from cosplay***

Julia mentioned the small gifts that are sometimes exchanged in cosplay settings. The questions here go beyond physical gifts to invite reflections on kindness, support and other intangible benefits received through cosplay. They can open conversation about the positive changes the “gifts” have brought, and about what sustains continued involvement in cosplay.

- Have you received any gifts from others at comic conventions?
- Were there any special gifts that really stuck with you? Tell me about that experience.
- What do these gifts mean to you?
- How have these gifts made a difference in your life?

Julia shared some heartwarming experiences she'd had at comic conventions:

They are so thoughtful. They prepare little gifts for us. They wrap them themselves, and inside there might be homemade cookies. In the summer, some even give us towels [for wiping sweat] ... When they see cosplayers wearing high heels, they kindly offer band-aids [preventing heel damage].

It feels really nice. It's a feeling of being cared for. Being complimented and having people take photos with me is such a rewarding experience. Whenever I feel down or start doubting myself, remembering those moments makes me feel so much better.

### *Enabling the person to speak through us, not just to us*

My conversations with Julia were rich and meaningful. They helped to identify values and directions that were important to her and provided a sense of direction in life. I wanted to thicken and sustain the preferred story that was emerging, and to offer a way that Julia might contribute to other young people who were interested in cosplay (Denborough, 2008;

Hilker, 2013). I asked if she would be interested in writing a letter to some of the other students I was meeting with. Julia was happy to do so.

I carefully typed her words and checked that my notes captured what she wanted to convey. In this way, I became a conduit for Julia's story, ensuring that her language, metaphors and values shaped the document rather than professional or societal discourses (White & Epston, 1990). The following is an extract of Julia's letter:

Hey!

I wanted to share a bit about what cosplay means to me. I actually started back in fourth grade in primary school. I was super bored during an online class one day when I stumbled on a video about cosplay and was instantly hooked.

Later, my friends and I started going to comic conventions. Those experiences really stuck with me, especially when people would ask to take my picture or compliment my costume. It was amazing to feel seen and appreciated, especially during times when I was feeling down or doubting myself. Just thinking about cosplay or my favourite characters always puts a smile on my face.

The truth is that cosplay can be pretty tough. For example, you must wake up super early to do your makeup, then lug a bunch of bags to the convention. On the way, you sometimes get weird stares, and some people might even secretly take photos with bad intentions. Having friends with you definitely helps make it less awkward. But no matter how hard it gets, I'll never give up because it's something I genuinely love. My passion for it keeps me going. Just thinking about the upcoming Comic-Con gives me the motivation to tackle homework I'd otherwise have no energy for!

My most unpleasant cosplay experience was when I met someone cosplaying the exact same character as me, and honestly, their costume was way more accurate. I felt so defeated and like I just wasn't good enough. I felt shame and tried to avoid them. But I didn't leave the convention. I realised I had put in a lot of effort and tried my best to bring the character to life. It wasn't worth completely dismissing my own hard work just because someone else seemed better. Your efforts are always worth recognising.

On the flip side, my happiest experience was when a ton of people wanted to take pictures with me. Throughout the day, they even gave me little gifts called "free material" (むりょ *muryou*). Most of these were homemade trinkets or practical things like slippers, cotton swabs, bandages and tissues. I thought those gifts were incredibly thoughtful. Thinking back on it still warms my heart. It made me feel so cared for and like people genuinely appreciated my efforts and wanted to encourage me.

My top three anime characters to cosplay are Tōru Oikawa from *Haikyū!!*, Geto Suguru from *Jujutsu Kaisen* and Shin Ermi from *Frielen: Beyond journey's end*. What draws me to them is that they all possess qualities I've always admired and strived for: trying their best to help others, being humble (with a dash of self-confidence!), and having strong leadership skills.

For instance, even if I know my efforts might not be rewarded, I'll always try my best to help my friends when they're in need. And even though I was bummed about not being captain of the football team, when new, younger players were being ignored, I made sure to talk to them and teach them some basic skills. Because I've been through tough times,

I don't want others to experience that same unhappiness. This mindset has really shaped how I treat others.

I'm curious — do you have a similar experience of cosplay, or is your perspective totally different?

### ***Outsider witnessing***

To enrich the therapeutic process, narrative practice uses outsider witnessing to help individuals feel that their stories are not only heard but also valued, leading to a strong connection with preferred identities and with community (Denborough, 2008; White, 2007). When properly delivered, outsider witnessing also has a profound effect on the listener, who is invited to offer a response (Denborough, 2008).

With Julia's permission, I invited two students who also loved cosplay to read her letter and to respond. I chose them because they had both gone through some difficult times and found a lot of comfort in cosplay. I hoped that Julia's letter would spark new ideas for them, and in turn, that their responses would help reinforce Julia's preferred identity.

May was the first student I invited to read the letter. May was struggling with social anxiety. In crowded places, she often had a racing heartbeat and trembling. However, she didn't experience this fear at comic conventions. She explained that through cosplay she got to experience feeling liked and noticed:

After reading Julia's letter, I realised we have so many similar experiences ... When I think about all the people giving me gifts and telling me I look great, it makes me feel so happy and accepted ... Thinking about those experiences always cheers me up when I'm feeling down ... My favourite character is Suzuki Iruma.<sup>2</sup> He also loves helping people, but I think he has his own set of principles for how he helps. I feel like if I can help

others, I'll be happy ... I want to tell Julia that I hope she can always enjoy cosplay and become the person she wants to be.

Kate was also afraid to show herself in public. She avoided school because she felt so stressed after being criticised by her teacher in front of everyone. Kate also enjoyed cosplay and Julia's letter moved her deeply. She said:

I think cosplay really gives Julia a lot of support. I like cosplay too, and she reminded me of my favourite and only cosplay character, Nice Nature.<sup>3</sup> She's a racehorse, and she's incredibly tough. She's come in third in eight races, but she's never given up running. I remember signing up for the 100-metre race on school sports day, and I'm really not good at sports. I wanted to give up then, but when I thought of Nice Nature, I felt like I could keep pushing through. I tend to give up easily. I want to tell Julia that I'm so happy to see she can find the strength to support herself in cosplay.

Identity is socially constructed: people make sense of their lives through the stories they tell and the responses they receive from others (White, 2007). May and Kate responded in ways that honoured, expanded and thickened Julia's preferred narratives. Julia was touched by May's and Kate's replies. She said it was inspiring that her story resonated with others:

I'm delighted to see that they share similar feelings. This is truly wonderful! I'm so glad that my letter resonated with other people and made them feel the energy that cosplay brings. It also makes me feel like I'm truly doing my best to help others, which is really good.

### *Some reflections from adults*

As someone who was not previously familiar with cosplay, Julia's stories gave me a new understanding of this subculture. This made me wonder if Julia's letter could help other

adults learn more about this beloved hobby, and whether her letter might contribute to shifting prejudice against cosplay. With Julia's consent, I invited another counsellor and four teachers to read her letter and respond as outsider witnesses. One teacher shared this reflection:

There are many students in my class who love cosplay. Honestly, I never really understood why young people were so into it. It seemed like such a huge time and energy commitment. I even worried they might get too caught up in a virtual world. I thought it was just an escape from reality. And I used to be concerned about certain costumes being too revealing, fearing it would make teenagers mature too quickly or leave them vulnerable in terms of their understanding of sex. But after reading Julia's letter, I thought maybe I was overworrying. Some characters are like their idols. They want to emulate them because they admire those characters' qualities, hoping to become more like them. I now see that through cosplay, they can actually learn some life skills, which is fantastic. This actually reminded me of my own star-chasing days when I was younger. In hindsight, my passion for idols wasn't that different from their love for cosplay. We're all drawn to specific traits in our idols and want a deeper connection to the person we aspire to be. I remember putting up posters of my idols in my room as a kid. When I felt frustrated, I'd look at those posters, think of my idols and suddenly feel re-energised. Looking back now, I'm so grateful they helped me through my teenage years. Julia's sharing is truly meaningful, and it's given me a completely new understanding of my students' world.

Julia's letter clearly transported these adults and influenced their perspectives. The teachers' responses, as outside witnesses, explicitly acknowledged this transformation. Hearing their responses was incredibly meaningful for Julia. She felt she had made an impact by

shifting adult stereotypes about cosplay, and this sense of efficacy strengthened her preferred identity as someone who acted to help others.

## *Reflections on practice*

One of the consistent challenges in youth work, for me, is breaking age barriers and fostering genuine engagement with young people. Narrative practice, by centring the individual as the author of their own life narratives, offers a powerful way to bridge these gaps. By asking experience-near questions, counsellors and social workers help young people articulate their own values, hopes and dreams. Acting as curious collaborators rather than guides or experts, this approach allows practitioners to maintain curiosity, creating a safe and inviting environment for young people to share their experiences.

Exploring cosplay profoundly enriched my conversations with Julia. She connected the knowledge and skills gained from cosplay to her daily life. She articulated how her cosplay expressed a treasured value of helping others, and was supported to make a tangible contribution by writing and sharing her letter. The resonant responses of outsider witnesses helped to solidify this preferred identity.

When asked who she would invite to witness her cosplay, Julia initially hesitated, stating she didn't want to invite anyone. She explained that while family and close friends were important to her, they didn't truly understand cosplay as a subculture. We unpacked the meaning of their "passive support" for cosplay, and Julia concluded that even though her family and friends didn't understand what cosplay meant to her, they still respected her. After Julia's letter had been shared with several people, I asked her if she would be willing to let her family and close friends read it. Julia refused. She was worried they still wouldn't understand, and that this could lead to more awkward conversations. She also wanted to keep it as her own secret. Although I thought it would be wonderful if her letter could give them a new understanding of her, I respected her decision.

When, with permission, I shared Julia's letter with colleagues who had no prior exposure to cosplay, I found that they developed new understandings of both cosplay and teenagers in general. This was especially impactful because many had previously stereotyped cosplayers as socially awkward or childish and saw cosplay as a frivolous hobby. This experience underscored that, beyond helping individuals redefine and strengthen preferred identities, narrative practice can also challenge cultural stereotypes and shift perceptions, leading to expanded understandings of culture and traditions.

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The artificial intelligence Google Gemini was used to modify the grammar and syntax of an earlier version of this paper.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Haikyū!!* (Mitsunaka, 2012–2020) is an anime based on the manga series by Haruichi Furudate (2012–2020). The story follows a school volleyball team.
- <sup>2</sup> Suzuki Iruma is character from the manga series *Welcome to Demon School! Iruma-kun* (Nishi, 2017–ongoing).
- <sup>3</sup> Nice Nature (ナイスネイチャ Naisu Neichā) is a character in the game and multimedia franchise *Uma Musume Pretty Derby*. She is based on the Japanese racehorse Nice Nature (1988–2023) (Cygames, 2018).

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## Resilience Wardrobe: An outfit for coping with challenges

by Şeydanur Tezcan Özer and Mehmet Dinç



Şeydanur Tezcan Özer is an assistant professor and head of the Department of Psychology at the University of Karabük in Türkiye. She works at the intersection of clinical and social psychology, focusing on psychological resilience, generativity and community-based psychosocial interventions with young people. She is passionate about working alongside young people and developing culturally responsive narrative practices in individual and group contexts. [seydanurto@karabuk.edu.tr](mailto:seydanurto@karabuk.edu.tr)

 ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6312-7557>

Mehmet Dinç is a narrative therapist living in Türkiye. He is associate professor and head of the Department of Psychology at Hasan Kalyoncu University. He works on psychological resilience, conducts extensive research, and has written several books on the subject. [mehmetdinc@gmail.com](mailto:mehmetdinc@gmail.com)

 ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9864-8117>



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Author pronouns: Şeydanur Tezcan Özer she/her; Mehmet Dinç he/him

## *Abstract*

This practice-based paper introduces “Resilience Wardrobe”, a narrative therapy exercise that uses wardrobe and outfit metaphors to support externalising conversations, concretise emotions through sensory detail, and invite the thickening of preferred identity stories. The practice was developed collaboratively by the authors and implemented across five individual and three group sessions (N=33; ages 18 to 45) conducted online and in person. The practice unfolds in three movements: (1) a brief “real wardrobe” warm-up; (2) an “imagined wardrobe” to scaffold values, hopes, relationships and cultural meanings through colour, texture, scent and sound; and (3) an “imagined coping outfit”, which may be animated to speak from a preferred position. An optional final step invites drawing/naming and selecting a low-cost “trace” (e.g., colour token, scent, song, small object) to keep the preferred meanings close in daily life. The paper describes two individual sessions and one group session. Across sessions, participants took up the metaphor in varied ways: through garments, environments, rest, ritual, modesty, spirituality and migration histories. Implementation notes emphasise keeping the warm-up brief, spending time in sensory scaffolding and garment “voice” when useful, and pivoting to environment/ritual when clothing metaphors feel distant. The practice is offered as a low-resource narrative scaffold that can be adapted to participants’ own meanings rather than applied towards predetermined outcomes.

***Key words: metaphor; externalising; young women; collective narrative practice; narrative therapy***

Narrative therapy practices have often drawn on metaphors to externalise problems and strengthen alternative stories. For instance, the “Team of Life” metaphor has been used to support young people in re-authoring their lives in collective contexts (Denborough, 2008). In a similar way, the wardrobe metaphor we have developed expands the possibilities of externalising by linking clothing and identity in ways that are culturally resonant for the young women we work with in Türkiye. In this paper we introduce a metaphor grounded in everyday practices of clothing and fashion, which supports therapeutic re-authoring through culturally situated meaning-making. By situating identity reconstruction within familiar cultural symbols, the wardrobe metaphor offers both accessibility and creativity for participants. While narrative therapy has been applied in diverse cultural contexts, there remains a need for innovative practices that resonate with participants’ lived experiences and cultural expressions. This article responds to that need by presenting the “Resilience Wardrobe” practice, which combines the therapeutic strength of narrative questions with the symbolic richness of clothing and fashion.

Narrative therapy seeks to separate people’s problems from their identities. Instead of seeking what is “lacking” or “wrong” in individuals, it enables them to discover their strengths and preferences (Morgan, 2022). It helps people rewrite their life stories, cope with their problems and develop new perspectives (Russell & Carey, 2020). Narrative therapy encourages clients to apply their own knowledge rather than relying on external expert perspectives (Kaldor, 2020). The experiences and values of young women are filled with elements that can empower them during difficult times, yet they await rich description. In line with Kaldor’s (2020) school-based narrative work, we sought to foreground preferred identity statements through culturally resonant documents and metaphors.

## *Origins of the idea*

In Safranbolu (a district connected to the university city of Karabük in Türkiye), many young women live away from their families as students or early-career adults. Local youth and cultural centres often function as informal sites of support. When staff from one of the centres relayed interest in a psychology workshop, the first author circulated a brief online questionnaire via the centre’s WhatsApp group asking the centre users what topics they would like to explore. Responses included stress coping, self-esteem, boundary-setting, self-knowledge, gender dynamics, discipline, emotional management and spirituality; “coping with stress and difficulties” was most frequently requested. The “Resilience Wardrobe” practice was developed collaboratively by the two authors in response to these themes. The wardrobe metaphor emerged from everyday conversations at the centre where clothing and style were common topics.

The Resilience Wardrobe practice and question set were refined through repeated use in individual and group applications. The practice was conducted in five individual and three group sessions with 33 women (aged 18 to 45), mostly university students seeking psychological empowerment and ways of coping with challenges. Sessions were held online and in person.

This practice is offered as a scaffold rather than a prescriptive method: participants may take it up through garments, textures, scents, environments, rituals, rest or other personally meaningful anchors.

## *The Resilience Wardrobe practice*

Participants are invited into three movements, followed by a brief consolidation:

1. real wardrobe description (warm-up)
2. imagined wardrobe description (scaffolding values, hopes, relationships through sensory detail)

3. imagined “coping outfit” for difficult moments
4. consolidation: drawing/naming and selecting a small “trace” to recall preferred meanings in daily life.

### **Resilience Wardrobe questions for each movement**

#### *Real wardrobe description*

- Do you ever spend time in front of your wardrobe?
- Generally, what do you feel when you stand in front of your wardrobe?
- What do you pay attention to when putting together an outfit?
- Why do you think you pay attention to this? (Could it be related to your personal history, cultural context or social expectations?)
- Do you love your wardrobe?
- What would make you love it even more?

#### *Imaginary wardrobe description*

- If you could have a wardrobe exactly the way you’d like, what would it look like?
- Would it be a large wardrobe or a small wardrobe?
- What kinds of clothes would you imagine inside?
- When you open it, what colours stand out to you?
- Is there a scent you notice? What does it remind you of?
- When you touch the clothes, what textures do you feel? Do these textures connect to any memories or feelings?
- Why do you think these colours, scents or textures matter to you? Do they remind you of values, hopes or relationships that are important in your life?

#### *Imaginary outfit for overcoming challenges (coping outfit)*

- When you think about a difficult time,

what kind of challenges or problems were you facing then? How did those challenges affect you?

- If you were to choose an outfit that made you feel good, what kind of outfit would it be?
- Do you have this outfit in your wardrobe?
- Does this outfit have a story? (When did you get it? Where did you see it? How did you come to buy it?)
- What scent is present?
- What kind of texture do you feel?
- Would you like to go somewhere or do something in this outfit? (Where would you go? What would you do? What would you say?)
- If this outfit could say something to you, what would it say?
- How did this outfit make you feel?

#### *Consolidation*

- Can you think of a small thing you might do to remember this outfit in a hard time? It could remind you not only of the good feelings but also of your strengths, the people who support you, or the values that matter to you.

In the final step, participants choose a small action or object to help recall the exercise in daily life. If participants want suggestions, practitioners may offer low-cost options (e.g., a colour token, scent, song or a small accessory) while keeping the choice with the participant.

In group sessions, drawing can support externalising by making the “coping outfit” visible and shareable. As participants respond to one another’s drawings, meanings may be elaborated collectively, supporting the thickening of preferred stories (White, 2007). Narrative practice aims to open space for alternative stories that stand in contrast to dominant problem-saturated narratives (Morgan, 2022). Questions about coping outfits encouraged participants to articulate preferred stories of strength, creativity and dignity.

This paper shares examples of individual practice with Zerrin and with Nur. The conversation with Nur shows how the outfit metaphor may be used in a goal-focused manner when participants are navigating difficult life experiences, including loss. We also share an example of a group session with nine women.

### *Individual conversation with Zerrin*

In an online session (~30 minutes), the first author worked with Zerrin (31 years old). The conversation began with Zerrin's current wardrobe and the meanings she associated with it. Zerrin described her wardrobe as "in transition", holding a tension between past versions of herself and an evolving self-image. She wished for more colour.

Zerrin explained that she often chose black to avoid unwanted attention, particularly in contexts where hijab signalled both religious identity and modesty. Over time, black had become her default even in women-only environments. A recent experience with a navy sweater illustrates the relational meanings clothing can carry. Although she liked the sweater, Zerrin decided not to wear it, saying, "It was too elegant for them ... 'you are not worthy of this'". Moments like this may provide openings for questions about how clothing choices can be shaped by anticipated judgements and social positioning.

The conversation moved to an imagined wardrobe without constraints. Zerrin described a wardrobe "in the clouds" with floating racks, garments that change colour and form, soft lighting, floral or ocean scents and comforting fabrics – particularly cotton and honeycomb textures.

Next, Zerrin recalled a difficult experience: visiting her in-laws for the first time after marriage. In that moment, she would have chosen a loose, monochrome outfit of breathable material, free from restrictions. The colour would shift from navy to turquoise, inspired by the sea. She described a rosewater scent and the sound of waves as part of the emotional landscape tied to this outfit.

From a narrative perspective, these detailed sensory descriptions offered entry points to explore what Zerrin valued and hoped for in relational situations. In addition, these details can be understood as thickening an alternative story grounded in calmness, authenticity and relational presence – resources that may be available to her in future moments of difficulty.

When asked what the outfit would say if it could speak, Zerrin responded: "Be yourself. Stay calm." She said the outfit would help her feel less alone and more grounded. She named the garment "Wavekeeper". Rather than drawing, Zerrin wrote a description and attached it to her wardrobe.

### *Individual conversation with Nur*

This individual application illustrates how the Resilience Wardrobe practice can be used in a goal- and value-oriented way when a participant is seeking steadiness, connection or comfort in a difficult moment. While the context here included loss, the focus remained on the participant's preferred meanings and practical steps that helped carry those meanings into daily life.

Nur was a 23-year-old university student studying translation and interpretation. She was living in Istanbul with a roommate; her family lived some distance away in Elbistan, Maraş. As an adolescent, Nur had received cognitive behavioural therapy for anxiety. Our session took place approximately two-and-a-half years after she survived the 6 February 2023 earthquake in Maraş and lost a close friend.

#### ***Emergence of the grief***

Nur: I went back to a period of time I experienced. As I just said, my family lives in Maraş, so I went back to the time of the earthquake. I was there during the earthquake. I am in that moment right now, actually not exactly at the moment of the quake but a week or two afterwards.

Şeydanur: Okay. Which part feels especially difficult when you think about it?

Nur: I had losses.

Şeydanur: Who did you lose?

Nur: I lost my friend.

Şeydanur: Would you like to talk a bit about your friend? This relates to your grief.

Nur: I don't think there's really anything I can say.

Şeydanur: I mean, would you like to tell me a bit about your friend?

Nur: I had known her since middle school. We were also distant relatives. I had known her for so many years. We were close. We didn't see each other all the time, but when we did, it was like those friends you don't need to see constantly but always feel connected to. I lost her.

Şeydanur: May she rest in peace.

Nur: That part was very hard for me. Because it was the first time I had lost someone. It was the first time I had experienced such a feeling. Thank you. May God bless you. Hopefully.

Şeydanur: That must have made it especially hard. What does this difficulty tell you about your relationship with her?

Nur: Well, what happened is this: during the earthquake, it didn't occur to me to message her. In fact, it wasn't the first quake but the second one when she was trapped under the rubble. I keep thinking I wish I had messaged her after the first one to ask how she was. That part was hard [pauses, eyes fill with tears]. And she had a twin. Thinking about that also made me feel awful, because living your whole life together and suddenly losing one of them must be incredibly hard.

Şeydanur: Do you talk to her twin, do you see her?

Nur: I saw her a little after the earthquake, then I didn't.

Şeydanur: How did it feel to see her?

Nur: At that time, I knew there was nothing I could do, but I just wanted to show her that someone else shared the same grief. I knew I couldn't do anything. If I was this devastated, losing her own sister would have been countless times harder. But I just wanted her to know that there were people around her.

### ***Bodily representation of grief: The outfit metaphor***

Şeydanur: If you were to imagine an outfit that could bring you comfort in this, what would it look like?

Nur: It would be a soft, thick, plush sweater in yellow, blue and green. It would smell like an old cedar chest.

### ***Emergence of an alternative story***

Şeydanur: If this sweater could speak, what would it say to you?

Nur: It would say, "It's going to pass. The pain won't stay as fresh as it is now".

The metaphor became a vehicle for a new story. The message "It's going to pass" reflected how Nur was relating to the sweater as a source of comfort in that moment.

### ***From words to touch***

Şeydanur: Is that really what you would need, or might it be something else?

Nur: Actually, not words – I would want a hug. A hug would help more.

### ***A symbolic bridge for remembering***

Şeydanur: What might serve as a reminder of this feeling when you feel challenged in your daily life?

Nur: Maybe a small plush keychain in blue, green and yellow – something I can carry with me.

Nur's account centred on her experience of loss following the earthquake and included expressions of regret: "I wish I had texted her". Rather than treating these expressions as defining, the conversation stayed with how Nur was relating to her loss and to the people affected by it, particularly her emphasis on "being around" for others who were grieving.

When Nur described wanting a hug rather than words, this need was taken up through the metaphor of an imagined garment. The sweater came to represent a form of closeness and comfort, allowing Nur to speak about grief in embodied and relational terms.

In this way, the garment functioned as a symbolic point of reference through which Nur could express connection, care and continuity. Rather than resolving grief, the metaphor created space for it to be held and spoken about differently.

This example illustrates how narrative practices may draw on metaphor and externalisation to support conversations that connect emotional experience with relational meaning, without defining the person through the problem or prescribing particular outcomes.

### ***Participant reflection on practice***

Şeydanur: I'm curious – what does this sense of comfort, and the outfit you chose, say about you?

Nur: Yes. It's like watching from a distance.

Şeydanur: So, could we say it creates a space? Watching from a distance, following without overwhelming, but still being there when needed – even embracing. Does that remind you of anything in your life?

Nur: My family did something like that. They watched from afar, and it made me feel comforted.

Şeydanur: What might this say about you, your relationships or how you cope?

Nur: It was helpful. It helps a person discover their own resources. Everyone's difficulty and source of strength is different. That's why it was helpful: it showed me the difficulty first, then the source.

This dialogue offers valuable insights into how the participant experienced the practice. Nur's reflection that the exercise "helps a person discover their own resources" aligns directly with a core principle of narrative therapy: the person is the expert on their own life.

### *Group session*

The first two group sessions were conducted with young Turkish women. The third group session involved a culturally diverse group of female university students. The nine participants were from Myanmar, Uzbekistan, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Mauritania, Syria, Turkmenistan and Türkiye, with ages ranging from 17 to 28. The whole Resilience Wardrobe practice was completed in approximately 90 minutes.

The session began with a brief introduction to narrative therapy and moved to everyday clothing preferences and what shaped participants' choices. Starting with ordinary topics appeared to support engagement.

In the imagined wardrobe phase, participants described wardrobes without material limitations and elaborated on sensory elements such as shape, colours, scents, textures and sound. While some accounts focused on feelings, participants also linked clothing to values, relationships and cultural-historical contexts. For example, one participant associated her father's clothing with protection during war, connecting to family ties and collective memory. Others emphasised values such as modesty, formality or success.

In the coping outfit phase, participants recalled a difficult moment and described a garment that

could have supported them then. One described a lucky pink T-shirt for exams; another described wearing her father's shirt for security. Some emphasised solitude and sleep, describing soft, clean pyjamas as meaningful during hardship. Participants then named and drew their garments. While drawing, participants continued to add textures, colours, scents and sounds and shared reflections about how the metaphor connected with who they hoped to become.

## *Lessons learnt from the application*

### **Metaphors enable the rewriting of life stories**

Clothing served as an entry point into stories of luck, comfort, habit, protection and embodied coping. A conversation with Ms Sare (20) made this visible.

Sare: I have a T-shirt that I always wear during exams, especially finals. It's pink. I also wear light-coloured pants. I wear them often, almost every day. These clothes exist in my wardrobe. I don't know why I wear them – I just do.

Şeydanur: How do they make you feel?

Sare: Comfortable.

Şeydanur: Do these clothes have a story?

Sare: Well, I started wearing them for exams, and when I did well in an exam, I continued wearing them for good luck.

Şeydanur: So, they became lucky clothes for you. Since when have they been lucky?

Sare: Since my first year of school – my first year of university.

Şeydanur: Do they have a specific scent?

Sare: I don't know. My own scent. My perfume.

Şeydanur: What perfume?

Sare: A sweet fragrance.

Şeydanur: What about their texture? How does the T-shirt feel?

Sare: It's cotton. Plain pink. Just a simple cropped T-shirt.

Şeydanur: If these clothes could talk, what would they say?

Sare: "Let me go."

Şeydanur: And how does that make you feel?

Sare: It doesn't really affect me. I'll still wear them [laughs].

Şeydanur: Imagine wearing them now, during an important exam. How does that thought make you feel?

Sare: It lightens the stress of studying a bit.

Şeydanur: Would you like to keep that feeling?

Sare: Yes.

This suggests that clothing can become a symbolic resource for speaking about comfort, continuity and preferred ways of coping.

Not all participants chose outfits they already owned. For example, Ms Melike (21) described an imagined outfit connected to unproductive days.

Melike: On days when I feel unproductive, when I can't do what I want to do.

Şeydanur: Okay. What kind of clothing comes to mind?

Melike: I usually wear things I don't normally wear. For example, I don't wear dresses often, but I feel like wearing one during those times.

Şeydanur: What kind of dress do you picture?

Melike: A very simple dress. Really plain. With heels.

Şeydanur: What colour is it?

Melike: Maybe brown.

Şeydanur: A light brown or dark brown?

Melike: A dark brown.

Şeydanur: And the shoes? Are they also dark brown?

Melike: No, the shoes should be black or maybe burgundy.

Şeydanur: Burgundy shoes. What about the scent of this dress?

Melike: It smells like the ocean – like a fresh sea breeze.

Şeydanur: Do you mean the scent found in body sprays or the actual smell of the sea?

Melike: Sometimes body sprays are similar, but I want the real sea scent.

Şeydanur: Do you actually own such an outfit?

Melike: Not really. But it felt good to imagine it.

Şeydanur: That’s great. If this outfit could talk, what would it say?

Melike: “Believe in yourself.”

Şeydanur: How does it feel to hear that phrase from your outfit?

Melike: It makes me trust myself a little more.

### ***Externalising alternative narratives***

In line with White’s (2007) emphasis on “thickening the story”, the wardrobe practice supported participants in enriching alternative narratives by connecting their clothing choices with personal values, histories and hopes for the future.

One of the most challenging yet impactful moments was when participants imagined their clothing speaking to them. While envisioning a difficult situation often lowered their mood,

the question “What would this outfit say to you?” sparked emotional reactions. Some cried, others smiled or pondered. This shift exemplifies externalising, as problems and alternative narratives were relocated into garments rather than remaining solely internal, creating space for double-story development.

Ms Zeynep (22) imagined wearing a soft, powder-pink cotton outfit during a tough time, even associating it with tears. The imagined outfit spoke to her, saying:

You are in a difficult and tough moment right now, but I am soft. Everything transforms over time. Everything is temporary. These cotton fabrics once came from thorny fields and became soft. Let this outfit remind you to stay gentle, because if you do, you will find it easier to handle hardships.

This narrative opened space for reflections on gentleness and transformation. While it was not explored in depth due to time limits, such expressions may point to values that participants already hold close – like resilience through softness – or to new, emerging perspectives. Narrative practitioners could build on such metaphors by asking questions like: “Does this idea of transformation reflect something you already believe in or is it a new way of looking at hardship?” or “Who else in your life might agree with this message?”

Throughout the process, sensory-related questions enriched participants’ imagination and helped make alternative narratives more tangible and vivid. Such sensory detail helped thicken the alternative story, turning it into a vivid and repeatable resource for resilience. For example, Ms Betül (35) imagined a long, dark blue, shiny dress and envisioned a place where she would wear it: “It could be anywhere in Bursa – perhaps Uludağ or the seaside in Mudanya.” When she imagined the dress speaking, she described it saying: “Welcome back. Where have you been in all this time?” The imagined scene was not only about clothing but also about place: a return to open landscapes, fresh air and memories of freedom.

In this way, the exercise connected her preferred story to histories of place and belonging, showing how alternative narratives can be grounded not only in emotions but also in geography and personal history.

Similarly, Ms Merve (19) described an outfit she had never worn before: a bright, floral dress in shades of pink and red, a style she would not typically choose. When asked why she imagined this, she responded:

Merve: I believe in the saying that “A person should dress their best on their worst days”. I strongly believe in that.

Şeydanur: Now imagine that the dress starts speaking to you. What would it say?

Merve: I don't always think words mean much. Feelings are more important than words. Even if I were feeling awful, I know that wearing this dress would make me feel good. It doesn't need to say anything extra.

Şeydanur: What about this dress makes you feel better?

Merve: I don't know. Maybe because I initially judged it but later let go of that judgement.

Although Ms Merve did not explicitly animate her outfit, she spoke about it in ways that conveyed meaning and presence. Rather than personifying the dress, she attributed qualities and significance to it, which shaped the conversation that followed. In moments such as this, practitioners may choose to remain attentive to how meaning is already being generated within participants' narratives. If appropriate, questions like the following can be used to invite further reflection and support the thickening of alternative stories:

- What might this outfit make possible?
- Where does this meaning come from?
- How might others respond to seeing you in this?

### ***For difficult times: Flexible, transitional and transformable solutions***

In therapy, flexible, transitional and transformable solutions can be found for difficult times. When Ms Sedef (32) was asked to imagine an outfit that would make her feel good during a hard time, she responded:

I thought of a camel-coloured dress, a dress made of suede. Not too short, not too long. It has thick fabric inside but definitely not wool. A chic-looking sweat [blouse]. With thick socks and an ankle bootie [boot] on. The bootie is brown, and the sock with the sweat is something like orange that came to my mind. Nicely cut, not restricting my mobility.

After describing the outfit, her focus shifted:

I never wear the things I love during my hard times. Because I don't want to link that beautiful outfit with my hard moment, with that bad moment in my mind. Normally, in my hard times, I choose extremely mediocre outfits, outfits that I can easily discard. When I wear something mediocre, I probably don't even remember what I wore afterwards; if I think about it, I don't easily forget it.

Although Ms Sedef's account did not frame this choice as a problem, the first author noticed an initial sense of uncertainty about how this practice might unfold. Rather than interpreting the participant's preference for “mediocre” clothing as negative, the focus shifted towards understanding what this choice made possible for her during difficult moments. The first author chose to stay with what the participant brought. Rather than steering her back to the elegant outfit she first described, the first author acknowledged the possibility that her “mediocre” clothing might in fact be the one connected to her difficult moments. Continuing with this, the first author asked about the outfit's qualities, the environment she would imagine being in while wearing it, and what the outfit might say to her. This approach, drawing on the narrative practice of double

listening, enabled the seemingly ordinary clothing to become a source of new meaning. In describing what this outfit might say, Ms Sedef articulated: “Problems are temporary. You sacrificed a beautiful outfit, but now you are living a good moment, and what you wore has faded into the background.” This suggests that even a modest garment might carry symbolic potential for change and continuity during hardship. Next, Ms Sedef was invited to imagine where she would go wearing this outfit and to describe an environment in which she would feel at ease.

Dim lights, moderate-volume music, an old song playing. A place I visited recently came to mind; it was a café that wasn’t too pretentious, with plenty of glass frontage. They had placed a long table in front of the glass. They had also arranged a ton of chairs in areas facing the glass. You watch the outside. It’s dim, and as you watch, it’s raining outside – it was beautiful. I lost all sense of time that day. It was very nice.

Ms Sedef was invited to bring the “mediocre” outfit to life and have it speak, and she expressed the following:

It would say, “Temporary – problems are temporary”. It might say, “Since you didn’t wear your beautiful outfit today because something bad happened, you wore me instead, you are experiencing a beautiful moment right now, there’s nothing you can link me to. You sacrificed your beautiful outfit”, perhaps. For instance, I do have that memory (of the pleasant experience with the café) in my mind, but that day I don’t remember what I wore, because I wore something mediocre.

When asked how it felt to hear the outfit say these things, the response was:

“Next time, when you go out, dress more carefully,” [the outfit] says to me.

In this process, the imagined “mediocre” outfit became associated with messages of temporariness, ease and emotional relief. Through sensory details – light, rain, music,

atmosphere – the wardrobe metaphor supported the externalisation of hardship while allowing alternative meanings to emerge. Rather than being defined by aesthetic value, the garment functioned as a flexible and transitional resource, illustrating how clothing metaphors can hold space for coping, continuity and endurance during difficult times.

Another challenging yet meaningful moment occurred in a group session with Ms Aylin (28), who described clothing as holding little relevance during moments of intense difficulty. She explained that while dressing well mattered to her in everyday life, during times of hardship her attention narrowed and clothing receded from awareness. Rather than treating this as a limitation of the exercise, the conversation followed Aylin’s own meaning-making, shifting from clothing to environment, rest and sleep as her preferred responses to difficulty.

Aylin: In a hard moment I don’t really pay attention to my clothes. It doesn’t matter what you wear at that moment. But normally, on a daily basis, I care a lot about dressing well. Yet if something very difficult happens, at that moment I don’t see anything. I’m not aware.

Şeydanur: Uh-huh. Well, that may generally be the case. But let’s say that from now on, if you wanted to wear an outfit during a hard moment, what kind of outfit would you like? An outfit that would ease that difficult moment.

Aylin: Like, an outfit doesn’t give me anything. Whether I wear it beautifully or not, it doesn’t mean anything to me. It doesn’t make me feel much.

Şeydanur: Okay. Then, let me say this: environment. What kind of environment makes you feel good, or strengthens you more, makes it easier for you to overcome that difficulty?

Aylin: I would want that environment to be calm. A calm environment.

Şeydanur: So what would be in that environment?

Aylin: I wouldn't see any people. There would be no people. Nobody should be around at that moment. And, I mean, I wouldn't want to talk either.

Şeydanur: Okay.

Aylin: I would want to sleep.

Şeydanur : Sleep?

Aylin: Yes. Directly into sleep, I mean. For some people, for example, they might eat or dress well, or go out or do cleaning. I go straight to bed.

Şeydanur: Okay. So what do you wear during that sleep?

Aylin: I do care about sleep. I need to wear something very comfortable. Clean.

Şeydanur: When you think of sleep, you feel the need to wear clean clothes. Okay. Clean, comfortable clothes make it easier for you to sleep. Consequently, they make you feel good.

Aylin: Yes.

Şeydanur: So, is there a colour that comes to your mind? I mean, the clothes.

Aylin: I prefer light colours.

Şeydanur: Light colours. Okay. What texture comes to mind?

Aylin: It must be very soft. Soft. Something light.

Şeydanur: Does it have a scent?

Aylin: No.

Şeydanur: Okay. So this comfortable, clean outfit will take you to sleep. What would it say to you?

Aylin: It would say, "Only I can make you forget what you have experienced".

Although Aylin initially spoke about clothing as carrying little meaning during moments of hardship, she later described her sleep outfit in ways that conveyed comfort and relief. She said that this outfit carried the message "Only I can make you forget what you have experienced". In this description, the exhaustion and depletion she had been living with were acknowledged, while a different story – one connected to rest, restoration and care – began to take shape. The light colours, softness and cleanliness she emphasised became available for thickening this alternative story, linking resilience to simple, embodied practices rather than to effort or strength.

In some conversations, emotions served as entry points to richer stories that included values, such as modesty or perseverance, as well as skills participants drew on when facing challenges. In this way, the wardrobe metaphor not only evoked feelings but also made visible the broader resources that might sustain preferred identities.

### ***When no outfit emerges***

When an outfit cannot be described, describing the environment may be preferred instead, as in Ms Sedef's detailed description of dim lights in a rainy café.

In one of the group sessions, another difficulty arose in making emotions more tangible. Ms Özlem (39), who was answering the initial questions about herself, struggled to imagine a coping outfit for dealing with difficulties. The conversation proceeded as follows.

Özlem: It doesn't evoke any feeling at all. I just can't get out of the pessimistic mood.<sup>1</sup> Even if I wore a dress, it wouldn't make me feel good.

Şeydanur: What would matter at that moment? What is something that would comfort you and make you feel good – something that would come across as beneficial?

- Özlem: It could be some sort of consolation from within.
- Şeydanur: What kind of consolation?
- Özlem: That they see your sadness and realise that you are upset. That a “big person” comes to take you away. I mean, I grew up with such a big person [referring to herself].
- Şeydanur: And what does that “big person” say when they console you?
- Özlem: They can’t really console you. They probably can’t fix it.
- Şeydanur: If that big person were to say what you needed, what would they say?
- Özlem: “Forget it. Forget it,” they would say. “Remember, it will pass,” they would say.
- Şeydanur: What kind of outfit does this big person wear?
- Özlem: Dark-coloured. I imagined something like a coat. Maybe with a cap, for instance. There’s a cap, there’s a coat. Yes, probably male.
- Şeydanur: How does this cap-and-coat combination come across? How does it feel?
- Özlem: It comes in a calm, reassuring manner. Yes. So the [coping] outfit is a cap and a coat then.

This illustrates a pathway where comfort was accessed through a relational figure and then concretised through garments.

### *Addressing cultural and spiritual dimensions in therapy*

Inviting participants to reflect on cultural and spiritual values through their clothing choices helped to ensure that therapy remained connected to the broader social context. For example, when

Ms Zerrin (31) was asked, “How do you generally feel when you stand in front of your wardrobe?” she replied, “First, I think I define myself through the clothes there. Especially in terms of hijab. After all, we are Muslims. Our hijab also indicates our religion in a spiritual sense. That’s what comes to mind initially”. Based on this response, she was asked: “How do you choose clothes that are in accordance with hijab?” Ms Zerrin replied, “I make sure they are not too sharp. I mean, they shouldn’t be too pointed”.

Ms. Zerrin’s response provided important insight into her spiritual and social contexts. Acknowledging her values felt essential, particularly given the historical experiences of many women in Türkiye. Until the early 2000s, the public ban on hijab left deep marks on the lives of young women. Especially during women’s high-school and university years, often significant in shaping identity, these bans created difficult narratives, from social exclusion to even abandoning education. While Ms Zerrin did not indicate whether she personally experienced the ban, its effects resonated in her story, as they have for many women of similar age.

Clothing emerged as a culturally meaningful signifier within Zerrin’s story. When she spoke about hijab, it carried layered meanings: on one hand, associations with restriction and exclusion linked to Türkiye’s recent history; on the other, expressions of spiritual identity, belonging and faith. These layers were not resolved into a single meaning but existed alongside one another, allowing different stories to be held at the same time. Attending to the historical and cultural context surrounding hijab made it possible to situate experiences of constraint next to preferred accounts of self-definition and spiritual grounding. In this way, the wardrobe practice invited attention to clothing as something that is shaped not only by personal preference, but also by relational, social and cultural histories.

This understanding is consistent with recent narrative work that has conceptualised clothing and fashion as a relational and cultural site where dominant social norms are both reproduced and

resisted. For example, in the project *Threads of Identity* (Olson, 2025), clothing was explored not merely as personal expression but as a medium through which individuals negotiate gender norms, safety, belonging and survival within broader

cultural contexts. Such work highlights how attending to garments as cultural signifiers can support the externalisation of problem-saturated narratives while thickening preferred stories grounded in identity, values and community.

### *Considerations for practice*

**Keep Phase 1 brief:** For some participants, extended discussion of the “real wardrobe” can become repetitive or overly concrete. This phase was best used as a short warm-up to support movement into imagined and sensory scaffolding.

**Avoid predefined “good outcomes”:** Rather than aiming to evoke “beautiful” or “empowering” feelings, we found it useful to hold an open stance: What meanings are emerging for this participant? What matters here? What does this make possible?

**Use experience-near language:** Stay close to participants’ words and descriptions. If an interpretation is offered, it can be framed explicitly as the practitioner’s wondering rather than as a statement of what the participant “is experiencing”.

**Expect multiple pathways:** Garment, environment, rest, ritual, relationship. As Aylin’s and Özlem’s accounts show, “clothing” may not be the most resonant metaphor. Pivoting to environment, sleep or consoling figures kept the practice aligned with the participant’s own meaning-making.

**Attend to cultural, spiritual and historical layers without assumption:** Clothing may carry layered meanings shaped by modesty, faith, migration histories and social surveillance. Practitioners can invite reflection while avoiding assumptions about what these layers might mean for the participant.

**Be alert to material constraint and comparison:** Imagining a wardrobe may highlight what someone does not own. Imagining a “wardrobes without limits” can reduce brand/material comparison and keep the practice anchored in meaning-making rather than consumption.

**Group context changes what can be shared:** In groups, participants may be less inclined to narrate specific hardships; the practice may be taken up through cultural sharing, playfulness and collective reflection instead. Both forms are valid; neither is inherently “richer”.

### *Note*

<sup>1</sup> Due to time constraints in the group session, the practitioner moved the conversation forward to maintain balance across participants. However, additional narrative questions (e.g., “If this pessimistic mood were like a presence, how would it act towards you?”) might have further supported the externalisation of the problem.

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# The Marathon of Life: Storytelling for healing and peacebuilding with second-generation survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings

by Keiko Tsuzuki



*Keiko Tsuzuki is a narrative therapist and collective narrative practitioner whose community work focuses on intergenerational trauma and healing, including supporting refugees and clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. Alongside this professional practice, she has developed a longstanding project with Hibaku Nisei – the second generation of survivors of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – a body of work that began during her master’s research and has since evolved into a lifelong narrative and peacebuilding collaboration. Keiko holds a master’s degree in narrative therapy and community work. [ecov@me.com](mailto:ecov@me.com)*

 ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5388-5010>

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Author pronouns: she/her

## Abstract

This paper introduces “the Marathon of Life”, a narrative project developed in collaboration with four Hibaku Nisei – second-generation survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings in Japan. Although they did not directly witness the bombings, their lives have been shaped by intergenerational trauma, moral responsibility and enduring histories of silence. Born into the aftermath of the bombings, these individuals became peace activists. The project offers one contribution to ongoing conversations within narrative therapy and collective narrative practice about how our work may respond to historical trauma, activism and intergenerational memory. Through the collaborative development of the Legacy Marathon map, familiar narrative practices such as definitional ceremony and outsider witnessing were thoughtfully adapted in ways that reflected participants’ lived realities. The project explores how narrative practice can remain accountable to social and political contexts while sustaining a non-pathologising ethic. Practices including *goinkyo* community dialogue and an informal ethics process are shared not as prescriptive models but as locally situated responses to questions of care, accountability and collaboration. The Marathon of Life work also invited critical reflection among Japanese narrative practitioners, supporting deeper understanding of the Hibaku Nisei’s position in society. By centring lived experience and collective meaning-making, this paper suggests a possible pathway for narrative practitioners engaging in peacebuilding and social justice contexts.

**Key words:** *metaphor; trauma; Japan; Hiroshima; nuclear disarmament; Hibaku Nisei; activism; collective narrative practice; narrative therapy*

They run, not to escape the past,  
but to carry it forward with purpose.

This paper offers a narrative therapy project co-created with Hibaku Nisei, second-generation survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings. Though not direct victims, they carry the emotional, social and moral legacies of their parents who lived through one of the most traumatic and destructive events of the 20th century.

In postwar Japan, the fear of radiation-related illness led to deep-rooted stigma and discrimination that haunts the survivors' progeny. Combined with Japan's complex postwar identity, this has left many Hibaku Nisei caught between their own unresolved grief and a society shaped by political denial and a collective desire to escape a painful history. While some attention has been given to first-generation Hibakusha, the voices of Hibaku Nisei have remained largely unheard. The work described in this paper explored how these individuals have navigated intergenerational trauma, social exclusion and historical silence in a world still threatened by humanity's capacity for destruction – particularly the ongoing risk of nuclear warfare and its potential to annihilate all forms of life.

The project emerged in response to Hibaku Nisei seeking more effective ways to share their stories with a broader public. This aligned with my academic and ethical commitment to narrative practice and historical accountability.

I used collective narrative practice to co-create alternative ways of telling their stories: ways that honour pain, reclaim dignity and open up space for activism and healing. Core practices included testimonial storytelling, definitional ceremonies and the creation of the Legacy Marathon map,

which helped Hibaku Nisei activists reflect on the past, present and future in culturally resonant ways. These practices supported identity reconstruction and collective activism.

The project engaged Japanese narrative practitioners as outsider witnesses. Additionally, a small informal group, "my own research ethics committee" (MOREC), was formed to ensure the work remained grounded in cultural respect, ethical reflection and accountability. This project became a narrative-based approach to history, identity and justice, rooted in lived experience, shared hope and activism.

## Why Hibaku Nisei stories matter

### **Remembering Hiroshima and Nagasaki**

On 6 and 9 August 1945, the United States dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, marking the first and only use of nuclear weapons in war. In Hiroshima, an estimated 70,000 to 80,000 people were killed by the end of the day, many within seconds of the blast. In Nagasaki, approximately 40,000 were killed immediately, with total deaths reaching around 70,000 by the end of 1945. Combined, over 210,000 people died by the end of that year, with tens of thousands more dying from burns, cancers, radiation exposure, trauma and suicide in the years that followed.

Survivors – known as *Hibakusha* – faced long-term illness, psychological trauma and widespread social discrimination. Their children, the *Hibaku Nisei*, inherited not only the stories but also the health concerns, emotional wounds and social stigma. Although the physical blasts ended in 1945, the psychological and cultural reverberations continued through generations. Most Hibaku Nisei have remained silent; however, a few have become peace activists determined to prevent future nuclear catastrophes. In 2024, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Nihon Hidankyo, the national organisation representing the first-generation atomic bomb survivors (ICAN, 2024; Lamche & Landale, 2024). This long overdue

recognition of survivors' testimonies refocused attention on their experience and on the ongoing threat of nuclear weapons. Yet, despite this honour, the world remains perilously close to repeating the same catastrophe.

### ***Intergenerational trauma: The silent inheritance***

While Hiroshima and Nagasaki set the historical context, it's equally vital to acknowledge the enduring psychological and social burdens carried by the Hibaku Nisei – burdens that stem not just from memory but from inherited trauma and social prejudice.

Intergenerational trauma refers to the transmission of psychological wounds from one generation to the next. In the context of narrative practice, it's essential to not only name this phenomenon but to understand how it is experienced by those who live it. When working with Hibaku Nisei activists, I often asked myself: What kinds of invisible forces shape their lives, beliefs and activism? Alongside considerations of intergenerational trauma, we can also enquire about the intergenerational transmission of survival knowledges.

A study by Japanese researcher Masahiro Tatara (1998) highlighted the silent suffering of Hibaku Nisei. Many live with ongoing fears about gene mutation and chromosomal abnormalities due to their parents' exposure to atomic radiation. This fear is compounded by social exclusion. The stigma surrounding radiation has led to marginalisation, discrimination and cultural invisibility for Hibaku Nisei. The trauma they carry is not only emotional or biological; it is shaped by historical silences and political neglect. Their experiences show how personal suffering can be part of larger stories of marginalisation and resistance.

### ***Social marginalisation and political silencing***

Since the end of World War II, Japan's geopolitical entanglement with the United States has influenced its military, diplomatic and domestic decisions. Against this backdrop, Hibaku Nisei activists have voiced opposition to both

governments about the legacy of the bombings. Yet calls for recognition or compensation have been dismissed or deflected.

The Radiation Effects Research Foundation (2019) analysed the emotional landscape across generations. It found a consistent pattern: anger with nowhere to go. Hibaku Nisei reported feeling erased by national silence and international indifference.

### *My personal connection to this project*

I am not a Hibakusha or Hibaku Nisei, but this project has a special place in my heart. I am a Japanese Australian narrative therapist who grew up in postwar Japan but lived most of my adult life in Australia. My family has a lineage of antiwar activism, but since I settled into a peaceful life in Australia, I almost put this behind me. My paternal great-grandfather was an antiwar activist. He condemned all wars and forbade any of his three sons from going to war. To make sure of this, he took advantage of the conscription system at the time, which was patriarchal and exempted the eldest son from military service: he secured eldest-son status for his younger sons through adoption to childless families.

My father continued that tradition as a young man, resisting military indoctrination and refusing to become a suicide bomber pilot at the end of World War II. Fortunately, the war ended, but if it had not, my father would have been punished under Japanese wartime military law, most likely with the death penalty.

I reconnected with this family tradition when I was studying narrative therapy. One day, my lecturer David Denborough mentioned that his parents were antinuclear activists who had grave concerns about the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (see Denborough, 2019). The moment I heard this, I pictured the flattened and devastated landscape covered with death ash and radioactive fallout from the atomic bombs. This vision was powerful enough to reawaken

my connection to my family's tradition of antiwar activism. This led me to discover the Hibaku Nisei activists seeking recognition of their parents' suffering and their own inherited trauma. Their courage and clarity were the catalyst for the collaboration shared in this paper.

Together with four Hibaku Nisei activists, I co-created an alternative pathway to tell their stories. Drawing from collective narrative practice, the Legacy Marathon map uses the metaphor of a marathon to symbolise strength, endurance and purpose. This supported Hibaku Nisei activists reflect on the past, present and future in culturally resonant ways, honouring their families and envisioning hopeful futures.

For these stories to be received and understood, we invited seven Japanese narrative practitioners to participate as "outsider witnesses". They listened without judgement and responded with heartfelt reflections during formal storytelling events. This respectful practice opened space for shared meaning, empathy and deeper historical understanding.

## *Theoretical framework*

This work drew from narrative therapy, trauma studies and the evolving discourse on moral injury to develop a culturally grounded, ethically responsive framework for working with Hibaku Nisei activists.

### ***Narrative practice***

Rooted in the work of White and Epston (1990) and extended through Denborough's collective narrative practice (2008), narrative therapy emphasises externalising problems, re-authoring identities and co-creating stories of resistance. The Legacy Marathon map, adapted from the Tree of Life method (Denborough, 2007; Ncube, 2006), uses metaphors of movement and endurance to reflect the lived activism and historical burdens carried by participants.

### ***Intergenerational trauma and invisible inheritance***

Hibaku Nisei experience trauma not directly, but through familial silence, social exclusion and embodied anxiety – an "invisible inheritance" (Danieli, 1998; Tatara, 1998). Rather than pathologising these effects, I sought to honour participants' own language and meaning-making, focusing on narrative and symbolic forms of expression.

### ***Moral injury and ethical testimony***

Originally applied to soldiers (Shay, 1994), the concept of moral injury has been expanded to include collective and historical dimensions (Denborough, 2021). In this paper, moral injury is understood not as pathology but as a relational and historical rupture. In postwar Japan, where official narratives often avoid addressing past wrongs, Hibaku Nisei face ethical paradoxes: carrying the trauma of victimhood while embedded in a national context that resists full moral accountability.

This work positioned narrative testimony as a form of moral repair, an act of ethical resistance that echoes Paulo Freire's call to "name the world":

To name the world is an act of liberation.  
(Freire, 1970, p. 88)

When marginalised individuals speak their truths and define their own realities, they reclaim agency over their histories. Through the Marathon of Life, Hibaku Nisei activists engaged in this liberating act, transforming inherited silence into shared stories of dignity, resistance and hope.

### ***Therapeutic storytelling as social intervention***

Definitional ceremonies serve as public rituals to counteract invisibility and foster recognition (Myerhoff, 1986; Strauven, 2016). Within a collectivist culture like Japan's, such storytelling becomes both healing and political: a way to restore dignity, challenge historical silence and allocate responsibility in future outcomes.

Together, these frameworks position the Marathon of Life not only as a therapeutic method but as a narrative intervention into memory, justice and peacebuilding.

## *Connecting with Hibaku Nisei activists*

I reached out to several organisations representing survivors of the A-bombings and was told that the first-generation survivors were all too old to participate in a storytelling project. However, four second-generation activists agreed to meet with me. Our initial meeting was an online video conference with them in Japan and me in Australia. I was concerned that meeting online might feel unfamiliar and uneasy. However, this concern was unfounded: fortunately, they were used to meeting online for their remote work because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At first, the Hibaku Nisei activists rejected any involvement with therapy or psychological treatment. When I initially introduced myself by referring to my university training and participation in a master's course in narrative therapy and community work, this raised concern. They positioned me within dominant individualising and pathologising mental health discourses often associated with mainstream Western clinical psychology. They did not see their suffering as a personal disorder but as the result of structural violence: nuclear warfare, state denial and global militarism. In their view, many therapeutic approaches shift responsibility on to individuals, overlooking the broader historical and political causes of their pain.

However, after I explained the unique ethics and spirit of narrative therapy – its emphasis on non-pathologising collective meaning-making and attention to social and historical context – they agreed to participate. They were also seeking more effective ways to engage others and strengthen their message of nuclear disarmament.

This project could not have moved forward without me first seeking to understand their lived experiences. Although born after the bombings,

the Hibaku Nisei carry deep emotional and cultural wounds inherited from their parents. Most parents kept their identities as Hibakusha secret to protect their children from social discrimination. To explore how this trauma had been passed down, I invited the four activists to share their own stories, not only as participants but as co-creators of this project.

What follows is an introduction to the Hibaku Nisei who participated, followed by key aspects of the testimonies that shaped the project. The ongoing project initially included four Hibaku Nisei activists. To protect their confidentiality, all names are pseudonyms:

- Mrs Aya Saki, 57, daughter of a first-generation A-bomb survivor
- Mr Masa Saki, 60, Aya's husband and son of A-bomb survivors
- Mr Taka Fuji, 64, whose family history is deeply connected to the nuclear bombing of Nagasaki
- Mr Shin Saito, 74, who was undergoing treatment for stage 4 pancreatic cancer.

When Mr Saito first disclosed his health condition, I hesitated to invite him to the project. I worried it might place an undue burden on him. But he was determined to take part, right until the very end. Mr Saito bravely broke the long silence that many Hibakusha carried and passed on to their children. He shared how fear of discrimination from mainstream society had silenced survivors for decades. Despite his terminal illness, Mr Saito shared not only his story as a Hibaku Nisei but also his personal struggle with cancer, which he linked to the radiation-affected genes inherited from his parents. His decision to continue treatment was influenced by his wife. "I'm ready to go", he told her, explaining that many of his relatives and friends had already died from cancer and were waiting for him. But his wife gently pleaded, "Please keep going – I want even one more day with you". I was fortunate to meet Mr Saito in Nagasaki during my visit in February 2023. Heartbreakingly, he passed away the following month. I am deeply grateful for his participation.

## Testimonies of lived trauma

To increase understanding of Hibaku Nisei lived experience, I would like to share how these four people experienced trauma as second-generation survivors. Through interviews and collaboration, I elicited stories that show how their trauma continued to be carried in relational and historical ways, not just psychologically but socially and somatically:

- **Indirect exposure to trauma:** Mr Fuji witnessed his parents suffering from PTSD, anxiety and depression following the bombings. Their unspoken anguish shaped his own experience of constant anxiety and hypervigilance.
- **Physical health anxiety:** Mr Saki's father endured chronic illnesses linked to radiation exposure. As a child, Mr Saki internalised the fear he saw on his parents' faces during each of his own health episodes. Over time, this evolved into an existential dread – a belief that he must be terminally ill, even without diagnosis.
- **Socioeconomic strain:** Many survivors face systemic employment discrimination. Their families, including the Hibaku Nisei, often live through restricted economic opportunity, creating layers of intergenerational poverty tied to stigma and exclusion.

These stories don't sit neatly in diagnostic categories or within clinical frameworks. They carry pain shaped by history, amplified by silence and transmitted in the most intimate spaces: families, memories and identities.

## Engaging with Japanese narrative practitioners

A striking quality of the Hibaku Nisei activists was their readiness to move from reflection to action. After the initial interview, Mr Saito said, "We need to tell our stories". They wanted their voices heard, especially as their experience had been excluded

from public memory. As someone who grew up in Japan, I saw only a short mention of their experience in my school textbooks.

In response to their request for a wider audience to their testimony, I carefully selected seven Japanese narrative practitioners, diverse in age and gender, to witness their stories. Why be so selective? Because Hibaku Nisei activists often speak in strong, direct ways that protect their deeper feelings. Collective narrative practice can open new paths, but it also risks changing how stories are shared. That's why I focused on choosing people who understood that behind bold voices there's still ongoing intergenerational trauma.

This wasn't just about storytelling; it was about making sure those who listened were truly ready to honour and respect what they heard.

## My own research ethics committee

The Hibaku Nisei's straightforward testimonies overwhelmed me. I came to understand my ethical responsibility to care for and collaborate with these participants and vowed to myself that I would take this responsibility seriously and ethically. To support this, I organised what I called "My own research ethics committee" (MOREC) to consult before conducting each session with participants. This informal committee consisted of six people from outside the Hibaku Nisei group and the practitioner group. While we never met all together, I met informally with whoever was available at any given time. We all shared a commitment to social justice and human dignity.

In creating MOREC, I found the principles expressed by America Bracho in "An institute of community participation" (2000) to be deeply applicable. Bracho wrote, "When we articulate and work with these common desires and hopes, we can create space for cooperation across great differences" (p. 7). This insight resonated with the collaborative and reflective spirit I sought to cultivate with MOREC.

These were the members of MOREC<sup>1</sup>:

- Miya, late 40s, a nurse and counsellor with deep insight into trauma-informed care
- Sari, 38, a former perpetrator of domestic violence who courageously transformed her life and now advocates for change and accountability
- Aki, 40, had lived with a rare and intractable disease for over 25 years<sup>2</sup>
- Moto, 50s, a cisgender gay man and a complaint-handling specialist in a luxury hotel chain<sup>3</sup>
- Tom, 70s, a veteran social justice documentary filmmaker with a lifetime of experience in community advocacy
- Mie, 70s, was living in Australia and keeping her identity as a Hibaku Nisei hidden because of fear and stigma.

I feel incredibly fortunate to have received the thoughtful input, critical perspectives and heartfelt encouragement of these individuals. Their support helped shape this project into one

that is not only ethically grounded but also socially meaningful and deeply human.

### Testimony as transformation

Hibaku Nisei activists have long spoken in testimonial style – a language honed in courtrooms and public forums over years of resistance. In this project, their narratives were reshaped through Denborough’s (2005) framework for receiving and documenting double-storied testimony. This method allowed for both acknowledgment of pain and amplification of resistance, bridging strategic storytelling and healing narratives.

As they shared stories of inherited trauma, institutional neglect and geopolitical erasure, the Hibaku Nisei participants also shared acts of resistance, hopes and dreams. They described being Hibaku Nisei as “both a curse and a calling”, an identity forged in the fire of injustice and sustained through activism.

Table 1 provides a snapshot of the stories shared in these sessions, capturing both problem-saturated stories and responses.

Table 1. Hibaku Nisei testimony

Participant	Problems and their effects	Unique outcomes, acts of resistance, hopes
Mr Fuji	Japanese government and society have neglected Hibaku Nisei’s health concerns and perpetuated discrimination. Disappointment, anger and emotional exhaustion.	Determination to win a court case against the Japanese government for medical assistance. Meeting with a Mexican organisation that encouraged him to speak up at a United Nations conference.
Mrs Saki	The decades-long work of the Hibaku Nisei towards the abolition of nuclear weapons seems to have been forgotten. Feeling disappointed and disillusioned.	Revitalised purpose after meeting people who had been exposed to radiation at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. “This gave me strength to keep working towards the abolition of nuclear power and nuclear weapons.”
Mr Saki	Sporadic media coverage of the Hibaku Nisei doesn’t translate into sustained public attention and support. Feeling frustrated.	Cherishing irreplaceable ties with friends and comrades in the close-knit Hibaku Nisei community. Dreaming of expanding this circle of friendship all over Japan.

Participant	Problems and their effects	Unique outcomes, acts of resistance, hopes
Mr Saito	Japan's invasion of Asian countries during World War II is unforgivable. This makes it hard for a Japanese person to raise their voice for peace. Feeling caught between.	A wild dream of founding an Earth Federation for World Peace, in which all countries would be equal and treated fairly.

In these moments, activism and healing were no longer opposites but entwined possibilities. When asked how they wished to move forward, the Hibaku Nisei participants emphasised their longstanding desire to reach those outside the Hibaku community. I agreed to co-create an emergent narrative practice – one that might carry their stories into a living, forward-moving framework of transformation.

### The Legacy Marathon map

We initially considered using the Tree of Life method (Ncube, 2006), a popular narrative approach. However, Mr Saito, remarked, “We are not standing still. We are running”. This powerful metaphor gave rise to the Legacy Marathon metaphor and map: a method grounded in movement, direction and endurance. The marathon metaphor reflected the ongoing, often nonlinear, nature of personal growth, activism and legacy-building.

We found this method to be a deceptively simple yet generative practice. It draws from narrative

therapy principles: supporting people to separate themselves from problem-saturated narratives and rediscover the values and hopes that have carried them forward, often quietly, across time and borders. It supported participants in re-authoring their lives by imagining new versions of their stories.

The marathon metaphor enabled people to share their life stories in ways that reveal not only what they have struggled with, but also what they care about, believe in and hope for. It is significant for Hibaku Nisei, the children of atomic bomb survivors, who have inherited emotional trauma yet continue to fight for justice and peace. In Japanese culture, *gaman* – the ability to endure tough times with patience and strength – is a deeply respected trait. That’s why we used the image of a marathon: it is not just about surviving but about moving forward with purpose. The participants aren’t just victims of history; they are runners carrying forward their family legacies.

Table 2 shows how the Legacy Marathon map guides inquiry across four “scenes” using questions based on narrative practices.

Table 2. The Legacy Marathon map

Scene	Example question	Narrative practice basis
<b>Scene 1 PRESENT TIME: Here and now</b>	What would you name your journey?	Re-authoring identity
	What keeps you going now?	Identifying unique outcomes
	What is your path like at this point?	Thickening narrative
	Who is around you and what are they saying?	Re-remembering conversations
	Where are you standing now? What's this place like?	Metaphor and landscape of identity
<b>Scene 2 PAST: Legacy and origins</b>	When did this path begin for you?	Tracing origins of preferred story
	What turning points shaped you?	Unique outcomes
	What legacy or values have been passed down to you?	Re-remembering / cultural inheritance
	Who has supported you in hard times?	Mapping relationships of support
	Where were you and what spaces mattered?	Contextualising story in place
<b>Scene 3 FUTURE: Vision and destination</b>	What goals are you moving towards?	Preferred identity project
	What kind of person do you want to become?	Future-oriented re-authoring
	What will it look and feel like to arrive at your destination?	Imaginative metaphor
	Who will witness your arrival?	Anticipatory re-remembering
<b>Scene 4 NEAR FUTURE: Next steps</b>	What are your next steps?	Action planning from preferred story
	What strengths will you carry forward?	Building on unique skills and abilities
	What will you need on this part of the path?	Resource-based narrative mapping
	What is the climate of the space you are entering?	Anticipating emotional and social contexts

Initially, we tried using paper and coloured pens to record the participants' marathon journeys. However, the first storyteller described her journey as beginning in prehistoric times, and extending to travels to Chernobyl, Bikini Atoll and the Australian desert, where nuclear tests and accidents have occurred. Attempting to capture

this vast story as it was told was difficult and resulted in many sheets of paper pasted together. When the participant said that the goal of lasting peace on Earth was too far away even to see, we gave up on recording their marathon journey on paper. We settled on gently closing our eyes and using our imaginations to visualise the stories.

## Mrs Saki's marathon journey

Mrs Saki is a Hibaku Nisei activist who occasionally uses a wheelchair. Her story shows how deeply the Legacy Marathon metaphor

connected personal pain with shared hope. This method is very flexible. As you can see in the following table, Mrs Saki wanted to go back to prehistoric time, so we included that in her story.

Table 3. Mrs Saki's testimony: A life in which I never gave up on my dreams

<b>Present</b>	<p>I am in my wheelchair and parking at the Hiroshima Memorial Dome. I see my husband and close friends surrounding me. I know we all go on this marathon. They are rooting for me. Usually, each runner runs alone, but thankful for my disabled condition, I can run with them. I have an essential mission of passing on the stories of my father, a first-generation survivor, to future generations.</p>
<b>Past</b>	<p>Looking back, I see a rough road. I often wonder how I will keep going. I can see my parents waving their hands for me. I can see my mentors who encouraged me when I started my activism. Some Korean Hibaku Nisei comrades there, too. I feel they are all cheering for us. In the past, I felt bitter about not having children due to radiation health concerns. Surprisingly, today I have become a mother figure for younger activists.</p>
<b>Future goal</b>	<p>My goal is to advocate for Hibaku Nisei's medical aid and, ultimately, to work towards world peace by abolishing nuclear weapons. What a beautiful place the goal is. We can feel free and safe. However, I know it is impossible to reach during my lifetime. I feel people need some reminder not to forget the war. If peace continues, people may forget how destructive war is. Even though there are no weapons in this imagined future, there could still be conflict.</p>
<b>Historical past</b>	<p>I want to go back to the time when humans first started conflict. Deep in my heart, I know it is not weapons that make war but humans. Even farming tools or stones can kill people if someone uses them for that purpose. We should face humanity's tendency to engage in conflict. I need to carry on the legacy of antiwar movements. Now, I accept the historical significance of my activism.</p>
<b>Near future</b>	<p>I am doing some volunteer work for protecting the ocean environment. I feel calm there. I will listen to people and have more discussions with them, unlike before when I was shouting. I will continue the storytelling work in the community centre. I will have an internet platform to connect with like-minded people worldwide with Keiko and fellow narrative friends. We will have fun.</p>

Mrs Saki reported that the Legacy Marathon map helped her recognise not only her role as a messenger for first-generation survivors, but also her unique identity as a voice of the second generation. She is now expanding her life's work to include environmental activism and supporting

the non-Hibaku community, particularly through opposing the construction of a nuclear power plant along a coastal area in alignment with her commitment to nuclear disarmament and ecological protection.

## Definitional ceremony

Having recorded testimony from each of the Hibaku Nisei participants using the Legacy Marathon map, we held a definitional ceremony. Drawing inspiration from Barbara Myerhoff's (1986) observations of marginalised Jewish elders in California and Sarah Strauven's (2016) work with Afghan refugees in Belgium, the ceremony was designed to offer visibility, recognition and space for shared reflection. These precedents showed how collective storytelling and "rituals of hospitality" can counter invisibility and foster social change.

Here, I would like to share Mr Saki's story. During the ceremony, Mr Saki was initially tense and spoke in an adversarial manner. However, the witnesses' reassuring reflections brought visible relief to him. He opened up and shared his father's story of being labelled "lazy" due to the effects of his painful radiation-related illness. With Mr Saki's encouragement, his father had testified about the impacts of radiation disability on his life, becoming a first-generation survivor-activist. With his cheeks flushed and tears flowing, Mr Saki described his father as a hero.

This was the first time Mr Saki had told the story of his father's courage to a wider audience, and it marked a departure from the single-story of victimhood he had carried about the survivors. The outsider witnesses were deeply moved. After the ceremony, Mr Saki's previously angry voice shifted towards a more grounded and reflective tone, and those present experienced this moment as opening possibilities for intergenerational healing.

## Confronting collective and historical moral injury

Originally studied in soldiers (Litz et al., 2009; Shay, 1994), moral injury is now understood as a collective phenomenon. Societies suffer when they avoid confronting historic injustices (Bleiker, 2014; Sznajder & Levy, 2002).

The Hibaku Nisei's ultimate goals – national reconciliation and world peace – require mutual recognition between victims and perpetrators. Japan holds both positions, and this has led to fragmented collective memory and unresolved cultural shame. In Nagasaki, the Hibaku Nisei have taken courageous steps to address the silence about Japan's wartime aggression by establishing Japan's War Crimes Memorial Museum – a powerful attempt to preserve and transmit painful truths. Yet their efforts have often been met with resistance, reflecting deep discomfort with confronting guilt and bearing collective responsibility.

Many in the group of Japanese narrative practitioners had grown up with limited awareness of Japan's wartime aggression in Asia; education and media in Japan have often emphasised Japan's status as a victim. During the definitional ceremony, the practitioners experienced a profound shift. Through group reflection, they began confronting the historical silences.

The practices we had used – collaboration, receiving testimony, the Legacy Marathon practice, definitional ceremony – laid a foundation for reflection and healing. This made it possible to introduce discussion about the profound themes of historical moral injury. In particular, our prior work supported the narrative practitioner group to confront difficult truths about Japan's past and collectively imagine a path to peace. This was supported by a culturally resonant practice we called *goinkyo* community sessions.

### ***Goinkyo* community sessions**

In Japanese tradition, a *goinkyo* is an elderly person who no longer holds formal responsibilities but remains highly respected and actively involved in social activities. The style of conversation one might have with a *goinkyo* is informal and relationship based. Rather than following a strict format, it would foster a warm and trusting atmosphere and encourage thoughtful reflection. This closely resembles the narrative therapy principle of a "decentred yet influential" facilitator (White, 2007).

During one such session, Mr Ito<sup>4</sup>, a member of the narrative practitioner group, assumed the role of goinkyo facilitator. He opened the discussion by establishing ground rules, creating a safe environment for participants to engage with difficult material. The session centred on a complex and challenging topic the group had decided to discuss to develop their understanding of the cruelty of war: Hannah Arendt's influential work *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil* (1963).

### **The banality of evil**

Arendt's book examines the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a key bureaucrat in the Holocaust. Contrary to widespread expectation, Arendt depicted Eichmann not as a monstrous figure but as an ordinary man performing his duties without critical thought or personal malice. Arendt introduced the concept of the banality of evil, suggesting that significant harm can be committed by individuals who conform to systems without questioning their moral implications.

Mr Ito guided the group in reflecting on this concept, helping participants relate Arendt's ideas to their own cultural context. This approach allowed the group to explore themes of ethical responsibility, complicity and silence without feeling accused or defensive. Although many of the Japanese narrative practitioners were initially reluctant to discuss Japan's wartime actions, the decision to examine Germany's example through Arendt's lens provided a safer indirect means of beginning to reflect on their own historical context.

Participants responded with meaningful insights. One practitioner commented on her grandfather's service in the imperial army, not to blame him but to understand how silence can preserve harm across generations. Another found the strength to begin speaking with her children about Japan's war history, transforming inherited patriotism into a commitment to ethical responsibility and inquiry.

These reflections marked a turning point. The narrative practitioners began to realise that their

work was not only about supporting individual healing but also about shaping how society remembers and talks about the past.

### *Catalysing transformation through outsider witnessing*

Another significant moment was catalysed by a video message sent from Aboriginal rights advocate and Elder Robert Eggington to the Hibaku Nisei activists. This message, offered from the perspective of another historically marginalised group that had been harmed by the nuclear cycle, helped participants see their struggle through a broader lens of justice and reconciliation. In response to Robert's message to "never give up", the Hibaku Nisei participants sent a video back to Robert and his community. The narrative practitioners watched both videos and shared outsider-witness responses. This encouraged the narrative group to voice thoughts they had previously kept silent, initiating a healing process both personal and collective.

Miki: "Human rights" and "justice" – these two terms left an impression on me. These have become disparaged terms in Japanese society. Perhaps it's because the term "human rights" is already shady. In a sense, using the term "human rights" and words like "justice" are hated in Japan. I was struck by these words because they seemed authentic when Robert and Mr and Mrs Saki used them. Somehow these words were different [from how I've heard them used in Japan]. It would be interesting if we could think a little bit about this.

Taka: In Japanese society, there aren't a lot of positive feelings towards words like "justice" and "human rights". When I hear "I'm an ally of justice" or "social justice", I feel like a shady smell accompanies them. It's like we've been betrayed in so many ways.

It's like there's something not-so-beautiful going on behind the scenes. Some people use words like that because they have dirt on their hands. But on the other hand, it is very important to reinstate these words. [People's feelings about terms like] "human rights" is troublesome for human rights issues and human rights groups. If you get involved in that work, you'll get troublesome high-handed remarks. In the end, you feel "I wish I hadn't gotten involved".

Abe: You expressed the sentiment that the human rights group cannot be trusted. Human rights groups probably don't trust outsiders, either. But if you ask me, is it their fault? NO. Instead, creating such a system itself is something peculiar to Japanese society.

Yama: When I was young, I attended a rally for a human rights organisation that was so radical that I thought it wasn't my place. However, when I think about it now, I think there was a reality that if you weren't overbearing, you would be crushed, and if you don't raise your voice, you won't be noticed.

Abe: The term "human rights" is mouldy and suspicious, so no one uses it. So when we are in a situation where we really need human rights, no human being can access human rights. Very scary. Japan is very scary. I'm really careful about things like that.

Miki: If the words "human rights" and "justice" disappear from the Japanese language, we'll be at a loss for words when it really matters. Without the words, the concept disappears – we have no vocabulary for thinking. This is going to be a scary place. What started out of my curiosity is that we're headed to an unbelievable place.

Abe: That's why collaboration is needed. I saw the web pages of social welfare organisations in New Zealand and Australia. They clearly named "social justice". Human rights are respected there. Thus, they can receive social justice. We need to collaborate with someone like Hibaku Nisei and Robert.

Kei: It is a huge topic, but we can investigate how much we accept dominant discourses and make them visible step by step. Our efforts will be a signpost for future generations.

Through this dialogue, the practitioners began to interrogate the meanings of "human rights" and "justice", how these have been distorted in Japan, and how intercultural collaboration might help restore these essential values to future generations.

### *Conclusion: A practice of connection and change*

The Hibaku Nisei participants and the Japanese narrative practitioners described their involvement with this project as life-changing:

"This is the first time I feel truly seen by the next generation." – Mr Saito

The activists felt validated. The narrative practitioners began to see themselves not just as helpers, but as co-authors of moral transformation. Silence turned into speech. Memory became action.

The Marathon of Life project has illuminated ways that storytelling may extend beyond personal healing into a relational practice of peacebuilding, where collective witnessing invites intergenerational accountability and contributes to locally situated social transformation towards justice. For the Hibaku Nisei activists who took part, it suggested a way to honour inherited legacies while inviting wider audiences to engage in ethical reflection on justice, peace and historical responsibility.

The practices we used combine emotional healing with public responsibility. This didn't offer simple answers but created safe spaces for difficult questions. As war memories fade, we need more honest, respectful conversations across generations and cultures.

In times of silence, stories can speak. In times of uncertainty, stories can guide. The Marathon of Life is not just about running. It's about remembering, reconnecting and rebuilding.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> To protect MOREC participants' confidentiality, all names are pseudonyms.
- <sup>2</sup> Aki's ongoing on and off physical pain, manageable only with morphine, was accompanied by psychological distress due to the absence of any real hope for recovery. Despite this, Aki is one of the most resilient, courageous and positive people I have ever met.
- <sup>3</sup> Although Moto's parents rejected his gay identity, leading him to conceal it in professional settings, Moto quietly lives with his male partner in Japan, where same-sex marriage remains illegal.
- <sup>4</sup> All names of Japanese narrative practitioners are pseudonyms.

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# Walking in virtual forests: Using Minecraft to create digital Trees of Life

by Paul Graham



Paul Graham is a therapeutic family practitioner for the Reconnect program on Awabakal and Worimi lands in New South Wales, Australia. He holds a master's degree in social work from Charles Sturt University, a master's degree in family studies from the University of Newcastle, and a master's degree in narrative therapy and community work from The University of Melbourne. He is interested in the ways alternative subcultures interact with therapy models. [paul.graham1991@gmail.com](mailto:paul.graham1991@gmail.com)

 ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4018-509X>

## Abstract

This article introduces the use of the video game Minecraft to complete the Tree of Life narrative therapy process and discusses new possibilities for practice that the medium creates. This is explored through a story of practice with an individual, with whom the practice provided an alternative to a traditional intake session. It also includes a story of practice in a group setting, as a program offered within a school.

**Key words:** *Tree of Life; video game; Minecraft; school; children; youth; young people; narrative therapy; narrative practice*

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Author pronouns: he/him

The use of video games as tools to facilitate therapy sessions has become increasingly prominent in recent years (Bender, 2023). In my youth I was an avid player of video games and spent many hours playing a Nintendo 64, both on my own and with friends. However, as I got older, I moved away from playing video games and as a result missed much of the development that came with the sixth and seventh generations of video game consoles, particularly the presence of internet connectivity (Kemerer et al., 2017). I am not entirely removed from video game culture — I still play the occasional game, so I hold some degree of insider knowledge — but to position the young people I have worked with as the experts in these systems, I have taken an outsider perspective.

I began working in out of home care 10 years ago, and video game consoles were present in every group home I entered. I would often sit with young people as they played video games and was regularly impressed with the passion they showed. Minecraft (Mojang, 2011) was played by young people of all ages, and they would regularly express pride in their creations. I would see young people looking up tutorials on YouTube to build working cars, planes and even computers from the materials within the game. It became clear to me that Minecraft had incredible potential for creativity and engagement.

I was not alone in this observation. Since Minecraft was released in 2009, it has emerged as not only one of the most popular video games of all time (Mavoa et al., 2018) but also an effective educational tool (Baek et al., 2020). Minecraft released an “education edition” that has been rolled out in schools across Australia. The education edition features all the same features as the full game but with added controls for teachers and the incorporation of additional learning tools (such as items that allow for chemistry lessons).

I was curious about ways I might draw on young people’s engagement with Minecraft to facilitate therapeutic conversations and saw its potential as a tool for facilitating the Tree of Life.

## The Tree of Life

The Tree of Life methodology within narrative practice draws on the metaphor of a tree to assist with the creation of a second story (Denborough, 2008; Ncube, 2006). Different parts of a tree are used to represent elements of a person’s life: the roots are used to explore where the person is from and their histories; the trunk represents values, skills or abilities; the leaves are used to reflect on significant people and relationships; the fruits represent gifts the person has received, and so on. The drawing and labelling of a tree creates space to view the story of a life from a different perspective (Ncube, 2006). Through the process of creating their tree and responding to prompts, participants can be invited to engage in further narrative practices (Dickson, 2009). These include externalising, where problems are named and located as outside a person (Carey & Russell, 2002; White, 2007); re-authoring, where alternative storylines are created to assist in exploring preferred identities (Carey & Russell, 2003; White, 2007); and re-membering, where relationships with others are explored to develop understandings of our identities (Russell & Carey, 2002; White, 2007). In a workshop setting, individual trees can be joined together to form a “forest”, providing opportunities for discussion about the “storms” or collective problems that trees may face.

Ncube (2006) and others (e.g. Carmichael & Denborough, 2015; Elhassan & Yassine, 2017; Ken, 2022; Nicholas, 2021; Senehi, 2015) have invited participants to draw on paper to create their trees. The use of Minecraft to render trees creates an alternative practice utilising digital resources to assist people to develop alternative storylines in their lives.

## Working in Minecraft

Minecraft presents a number of possibilities for therapeutic conversations. It is a virtual sandbox with blocks that players can use to build structures (Davis et al., 2018; Mavoa et al., 2018). A sandbox game has no predetermined goals and instead allows for creativity in the way one interacts with



Figure 1. A Minecraft avatar

the game world (Ching, 2012). There is no one “correct” way to play. Minecraft players have access to a limitless virtual “Lego box”, allowing them to grow their confidence in a low-stakes creative environment (Kilmer et al., 2023). The user operates an avatar that can walk within and around the structures they create. Customisation of this avatar provides opportunities for identity workshopping (Li et al., 2013), and while there is risk of addiction when players have a high-level of self-identification with the avatar (Zhong & Yao, 2013), there is the potential to discuss values and personal goals through avatar exploration.

There are many different playstyles and difficulty levels within Minecraft, which are relevant to those considering its use for the Tree of Life process. For playstyle options, there is “creative mode”, in which the player cannot be “killed”, can choose any item to use from a menu, and can fly around the map so they can access any area with ease. Alternatively, there is “survival mode”, in which all resources must be collected by the player before they can be used. Within either of these modes there is the option to set the difficulty anywhere from “peaceful”, with no enemies in the world, through to “hard”, where the “enemies” are more active in attacking your avatar and what you have built (Faulkner, 2025; Overby & Jones, 2015). These enemies take the forms of skeletons, zombies

and “creepers” (which explode if touched). The game also offers a quest for users to collect a number of items that will allow them to face the “ender dragon” and “finish” the game.

When players or administrators are setting up their worlds, they have control not only over how the world is created and how characters in the game react to the player, but also who is able to access it. This means the game can be tailored to be an individual experience, or through internet connectivity, other players can be invited in.

One of the strengths of using Minecraft is that it has become highly accessible. It is available on computers, every major video game console, and there are even options for the game to play on smartphones (Scianca, 2025). Its low-resolution graphics mean that it can run on computers with lower processing power, meaning anyone with access to a device from roughly the last decade should be able to access and play the game.

Minecraft is a “cross-platform” game, meaning that people using a variety of devices can access the same online server to play with others (Scianca, 2025). This offers possibilities for engaging in collective “forest of life” processes. However, there are limitations to this. There are two editions of Minecraft and players will need to be aware of which version of the game they are playing to ensure they are able to access the server. Beyond this, Minecraft has been available since 2011, so while cross-platform play is available for current consoles and computers, people playing on older machines may not be able to connect with people playing on a different system. Players must also ensure they have updated their games to the newest edition to increase the chances of cross-play compatibility (Scianca, 2025).

Video games have frequently been subject to moral panics and have been blamed for causing social isolation, antisocial behaviour and even school shootings (Ferguson, 2008; Puri & Pugliese, 2012). Despite little evidence that video games cause such issues, this

discourse ignores the many positive elements that can come from playing video games. Beyond improving reflexes and hand-eye coordination (Rosenberg et al., 2005), video games played a crucial role during the COVID pandemic in maintaining social connections (Ballard & Spencer, 2023; Marston & Kowert, 2023).

Not just mindless entertainment, video games have the potential to facilitate play-based learning (Ritterfeld & Weber, 2006). Since the 1990s, “edutainment” has emerged as a process to improve engagement in learning settings. Play-based learning has broad implications for how video games can be adapted to multiple settings to improve learning outcomes (Kenwright, 2017). This process can also be flipped to great effect. That is, employing “gamifying” elements to tasks can improve engagement and increase the chance of people entering a “flow state” (Chan et al., 2019; Guerrero-Puerta & Guerrero, 2021; Nicholson, 2015).

### *Trialling the Minecraft Tree of Life with John*

John, a 12-year-old boy, was referred to our service because had been refusing to go to school over the past few months. In the referral it noted that he was struggling with “anxiety” and would often shake if he was near the school. When I met John, I did our standard intake process (asking about his family, community, school etc.), but John responded to nearly all my questions with a shrug and “I don’t know”. I wasn’t sure if John would return, but when I called back the following week, I was told he was looking forward to working with me. Our next session was similar, in that any questions I asked John were met with a shrug of the shoulders and him saying he wasn’t sure. The exception to this was when we spoke about video games. John went into depth about the game Fortnite (Epic Games, 2017) and the friends he had met online through playing. John also spoke about Minecraft and how a group of online friends were working together to finish the game.



Figure 2. Using signs to mark the various parts of the tree John created in Minecraft

Seeing John’s passion for video games, I asked if he would be interested in doing a session using Minecraft. I described the Tree of Life methodology and, as I was not overly familiar with the game, asked if he would help me trial the process within Minecraft. John agreed, and as we sat down at his computer, he showed me some of the world he had been playing in with his friends before generating a new world for us to work in. Once this had loaded, I asked John to find an area where we could “build” a tree. He noticed a relatively flat area with sunflowers growing on it and flew down to begin building.

I explained that the first thing we would need to build was the root system of the tree. John was initially unsure whether to build these underground or above ground. He settled on having “wavy roots” that were partially above ground. Once he had built out a number of roots, I explained we would need to label them in some way. John then showed me two options for signs: a hanging sign and a signpost. We settled on attaching the hanging signs to some of the above-ground roots.

I asked John to use the signs to name places that were important to him. John then labelled the roots with “Croatia”, where his extended family had moved from, alongside various local areas and some locations from video games. John told me

about the “battle bus” from Fortnite, which had been an important online meeting point for his friends through COVID. John also named San Francisco, which he said was for his favourite basketball team, the Golden State Warriors.

We then moved away from the roots and John installed signposts on the ground. I asked him to write on the signs any activities he currently engaged in or enjoyed. John named basketball, Minecraft, Fortnite, handball and drawing. We spoke about John’s interest in basketball, and he shared that his dad was a fan of the sport and that it was something they watched together. When I asked about drawing, John got up excitedly and said, “I have a whole binder full of drawings”. John began looking for the binder but soon sat back down saying he would try to find it during the week to show me. I said that I would love to see his drawings and asked some questions about what he liked to draw. John said, “anything really”, and then noticed that it had turned to night in the game. He quickly built a bed and “rested” his avatar in it to return the Minecraft world to daytime.

John then built up the trunk of the tree from the roots and placed some more hanging signs around it. I asked John to label the trunk with his values, skills and abilities. John noted first that he was creative. I reinforced this by noting his love of drawing and the way he used creativity in Minecraft. John also noted that he was caring and competitive. I asked John when he was competitive, and he said that it was video games and sports where he would see his competitive side show up.

As we built out the branches for the tree, the game world again turned to night. John dropped to the ground briefly to fight away some skeletons that had appeared around the area before putting his avatar to bed to return to daytime. John initially said he didn’t have many hopes or dreams “at the moment”, but after thinking further, he began labelling the branches with “travelling”, “getting better at Minecraft”, and “getting better at Fortnite”. When I asked John about where he would like to travel to, he said he mainly wanted to visit San Francisco to see his basketball team play.



Figure 3. John used picture frames to represent “fruit” on his Minecraft Tree of Life

As we moved out to the leaves of the tree, John named various family members and some of the friends he had made through video games. When I asked John how we could put “fruit” on the tree, he was at first unsure. John then showed me that he could place on the tree a “picture frame”, which could display any item in Minecraft. John set some frames along the branches and inserted pictures of apples within them. John hung signs from these frames and recorded some of the gifts he had received like his love of basketball, the support he had received from his parents, and friendship from the people he had met through gaming. We finished that session with me thanking John for his help in showing me how the Tree of Life could be done in Minecraft. I asked him how he found the session. John said he found it made it easier to talk about his life and that it was fun.

For our next session, we used John’s love of drawing to externalise anxiety (which was represented as a large wave named “Mr Wave”) and began unpacking some of the effects of the problem. This included drawing on metaphors for waves: that as you swam past a wave you would be able to reach a calmer part of the ocean. By engaging John through his interests in video games and drawing, I was able to begin exploring the values and skills John already held and help him to discuss his experiences.

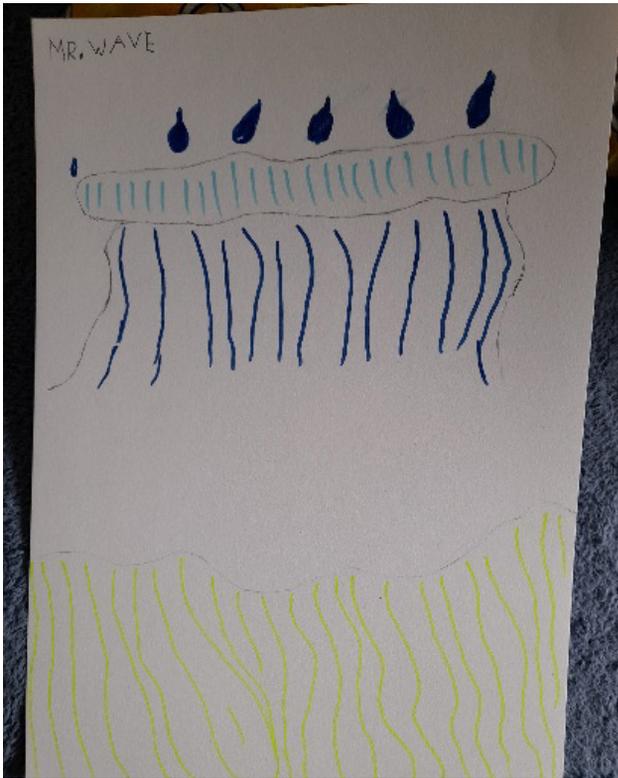


Figure 4. "Mr Wave"

### Using Minecraft for Tree of Life groupwork in a school

After the successful process with John, I spoke to the chaplain of a school we regularly work in and asked if they would be interested in running a digital Tree of Life program. The chaplain had a few young people in mind and began setting up a group to engage in the process. We ended up with a group of six young people who were both skilled with computers and interested in being part of the group. Their names were Tony, Dan, Benny, Chris, Sam and Bob. The group met for six weekly one-hour sessions, with our final session consisting primarily of a celebration.

In our first session, I described my limited knowledge of Minecraft and Tony stepped up to help. I asked if it was possible to set up a single world that all the members of the group could have access to. Tony immediately set up a "flat infinite world" and invited the others into the server. After explaining how the group would play out over the next few weeks, I invited the young people to make the world their own and play around. Within minutes, Dan had built a

house surrounded by a moat made from lava, while Chris had built "a laser beacon to shoot into the sky". I acknowledged their skills and asked questions that invited all the young people to assume the role of expert in Minecraft.

We moved into creating the roots of our trees. Benny created a flying tree with roots made from "glowing obsidian". He noted that he wanted his tree to be "like a futuristic thing". The young people used signs to list places that had played important roles in their lives. Benny spoke about the Big Banana in Coffs Harbour, which had been a holiday destination when he was younger. This led me to reflect on the Big Oyster that had been in Taree when I was younger. The other young people spoke about the many "big things" around Australia that they would like to visit. Dan named his love for the local skate park and how he had met many of his friends there, which led into discussion about important friendships (and spending time at their houses). These discussions moved quite naturally into the "ground" section of the Tree of Life process, where we discussed activities such as skating, drawing and playing video games.

As we discussed the values, skills and abilities that would populate the trunk, Bob spoke about the value of "being free" and how when given more freedom he tended to "do the right thing". As we were speaking, Dan hollowed out the inside of his trunk to create a cubbyhouse. This allowed us to discuss how one could choose to "live inside" one's values and the protective qualities they could have. All the young people in the group listed "creativity" as a skill, which



Figure 5. Benny's futuristic tree



Figure 6. Dan's tree-trunk cubbyhouse

I reflected was apparent in the creative ways they were approaching the Tree of Life process.

As we moved on to creating the branches of the tree and discussing our hopes and dreams, we spoke about the height of the branches, and how the higher branches could be used for more "important" hopes. Tony decorated his branches with white blocks, which he said were "like teeth". When asked what the teeth represented, Tony said, "Nothing really, I just think they look cool". Tony spoke about his goal of "getting fit". We discussed how he had recently signed up to the gym and the skills he was using to pursue that goal.



Figure 7. Tony's "Teeth Branches"

Bob said that his dream was that his sister who had died at a young age would come back to life. We spoke about how hard it was to lose a young family member, and this allowed for the use of re-membering questions (Russell & Carey, 2002; White, 2007). My co-facilitator and I discussed ways we could bring Bob's sister into the present, how she might feel knowing she was so cared for, and the role Bob played in her life.

Moving on to the leaves and the fruit of the tree brought many great conversations. Benny said that a "gift" he appreciated was his phone. When asked who gave him the phone he said, "I got it myself, with my own money". We unpacked this further, discussing how his aunt supported him with pocket money and the ways his aunt had cared for him. Bob and Dan spoke about how their brothers had introduced them to riding bikes and scooters. As we expanded on this, we spoke about the ways riding bikes had helped Bob and Dan form many of their friendships (including with each other).

Minecraft provided many options for creative ways to collectively explore "when the storms come" (Ncube, 2006, p. 12). From the menu in "creative" mode, we were able to change the weather. This allowed us to create a strong visual representation of storms arriving, with additional commands allowing us to create lightning flashes. The game also has its own metaphors for problems in the form of "mobs" like zombies, skeletons and creepers. As we used these metaphors to speak about the hazards people can face in life, Bob described a period when he and his family had been homeless. Bob said his family was able



Figure 8. Chris's tree with a hopscotch area and laser beam to the side

to get through it by reaching out to others (namely his aunt and grandparents). I asked further re-remembering questions about what it meant to those family members to be able to care for Bob's family.

When asked about the experience of completing the Tree of Life in Minecraft, all the young people said that they had enjoyed the process. Bob and Dan noted that it had been easy to identify the similarities between their lives and the trees. I also thanked all the young people for sharing their Minecraft skills, and the group agreed that the program had been a positive experience for them all.

## Observations

Minecraft is a computer game, and even within a setting of flat grass, there remain distractions that may take away from the process. For example, Benny wanted to show me how to make an "ender portal", which forms part of the optional storyline of the game. Once through the portal, the player must defeat an "ender dragon" before they can return to the "overworld". This distraction derailed Benny's engagement for roughly five minutes before we could return to the Tree of Life process.

Due to the world being infinite when set up, it is possible for participants to get lost and be unable to locate their tree. When a person starts creating their tree, it would be helpful to have them make note of its coordinates on the map so they can easily return to it. Coordinates can be set to show up in the bottom left of the screen. With the coordinates in hand, players can use the "teleport" command to return immediately.

Just as drawing a Tree of Life creates ways for people to express their inner worlds through metaphor, Minecraft offers the same affordances while drawing on skill with a mouse and keyboard rather than a pen or pencil. Controlled digital environments can provide safety for sharing stories, with players able to decide on private or public expressions, and in turn, what elements of a story to share within these spaces.

Throughout the group program, there developed a true sense of collaboration and community building. The participants continually shared tricks and tips for each other's constructions, and the free-form creation that came with Minecraft meant there was no competition. All the participants were building this world together. Due to negative discourse that surrounds digital media, creating a space where skills with technology were affirmed helped to form second stories around the young people's interests and to form bonds across the group, which in turn had the effect of turning feelings of vulnerability into feelings of teamwork and connection.

The wide range of materials available in Minecraft allowed many opportunities to customise a tree, like Benny's use of glowing obsidian and Tony's inclusion of "teeth". There is potential to explore the choices made when building trees. For example, sections of the tree made from different materials may hold additional meaning. We might ask: "What does it mean that you chose to represent this section using that material?"

## Possible future developments

My best hope for this work would be the creation of an online server that anyone could join to create their own Tree of Life. I imagine that people from all over the world might access the server, not only add to the "forest" but also to walk around and experience all the rich stories others have shared. I believe this would create a powerful living document and instil a sense of community among all who contribute.

In the work described in this paper, I used creative mode when the young people were constructing their Trees of Life. There is potential to expand this practice into survival mode, in which building a tree would not only require more effort and time to gather materials, but also be exposed to the risk of having "enemies" destroy it. This may deepen understanding of challenges that people face and provide a strong visual metaphor for problems.

The use of Minecraft in this way provides an opportunity to enrich distance therapy sessions. As Thompson (2024) noted, video games offer exciting new options to integrate therapy approaches in a fun manner. I hope that this paper will help practitioners add this approach to their work and more readily integrate narrative approaches into their distance sessions.

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# Reclaiming the Tree of Life: Collective storytelling, re-membering and legacy in later life

by Helena Rose



*Helena Rose is a systemic psychotherapist, supervisor, narrative practitioner and clinical psychologist working in the UK. Since 2013 she has worked in the National Health Service with people who live with distressing unshared experiences, voices, visions and sensations – also known as psychosis – and their families. She is also a lecturer in family therapy and systemic practice at the University of Leeds.*  
*[helenadrose@gmail.com](mailto:helenadrose@gmail.com)*

 ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1624-1320>

## Abstract

This article describes a storytelling group with older people living in a nursing home in the UK, developed in collaboration with creative activity workers as part of a diploma in narrative therapy. Grounded in collective narrative practice, including the Tree of Life, the group created experiences of connection, dignity and legacy among residents (many of whom were living with memory loss). The project reconnected the author with the social and political roots of narrative therapy, creating space to resist ageism, individualism and marginalisation through shared storytelling, witnessing and community rituals.

**Key words:** *storytelling; Tree of Life; groupwork; older people; aged care; dementia; collective narrative practice; narrative therapy*

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Author pronouns: she/her

This project began with a conversation over coffee in the initial aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. I learnt that my friend's niece was a creative activity worker in a nursing care home for Jewish elders. During the pandemic lockdowns when residents were unable to see family and loved ones or go out into the community, the workers in the care home had persevered in offering reading and poetry groups. I was later invited to meet some of the residents to learn about these groups and what they meant to them. After a morning spent talking with the residents and activity workers about their lives, interests, hardships and loved ones, they expressed an interest in forming a new group – a *storytelling* group – which we might go on to create together.

## Collective narrative practice: Roots and philosophy

Narrative practice emerged from within social movements that challenged taken-for-granted authority and put forward alternatives in mental health services (C. White, 2011). Collective narrative practice emphasises naming injustice, double-storied accounts (of both hardship *and* the ways in which people resist or survive hardship – including through holding on to their values), and linking lives through witnessing and collective documentation (Denborough, 2008; M. White, 2003).

During the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, we heard repeated remarks from powerful political figures about the virus being “nature’s way of dealing with old people”, that older people should “accept their fate”, and “let the young get on with life and get the economy going” (Weaver, 2023). Discourses of frailty and vulnerability in later life became cemented by these comments, perpetuated by neoliberal economic ideologies that prioritise productivity and competition in society (Freedman & Combs, 2020).

Collective practices have the potential to unsettle such discourses by fostering mutuality and shared purpose (Freedman & Combs, 2020). Barbara

Myerhoff’s work with Jewish elders, for example, showed us how public rituals, ceremonies, protests and performances offer opportunities “for being seen and, in one’s own terms, garnering witnesses to one’s worth, vitality, and being” (Myerhoff, 1982, p. 105).

I had noticed that my day-to-day practice as a systemic psychotherapist and clinical psychologist had become limited to clinical spaces that were dislocated from the communities we were meant to serve. My re-engagement with Myerhoff’s work deepened my appreciation for the potential of collective practices *within* communities. Moreover, I revisited the idea that these practices might also act as means of resisting neoliberal fatalism (Freire, 1999) – the kind of despair that is felt when “solutions” to social problems cannot be found in conventional places. I was therefore moved to explore collective narrative practices in new and unfamiliar places.

## The storytelling group

The residents who were interested in joining this storytelling group met in the nursing home’s coffee shop – an established space for music, visitors, celebrations and everyday chats. Our group was made up of eight to 10 residents, between 83 and 98 years old, with a regular attendance of two men and six women. We met once a fortnight over a period of eight months. At least five of the group members had some kind of memory loss (generally referred to as dementia) that affected short-term memory more than long-term memory. Some members experienced disorientation about time and place. Each session was a new experience for them. Sometimes they forgot that we had met or what we’d talked about previously. I was grateful in these early meetings for Bobbi Rood’s (2009) work with groups for older people. Rood highlighted the importance of varying method and materials, pacing, using objects and photographs, adapting questions, and the importance of repetition and consistency.

We began with informal storytelling activities: our names, neighbourhoods, recipes, favourite songs

and precious objects. I found that these supposed “warm-ups” quickly opened up alternative stories of identity and took us to some unexpected places. We heard how one woman changed her surname to a more “English” version to disguise her Jewish heritage and protect her children from antisemitism. Another member brought a newspaper cutting from a paper she worked for as a journalist and spoke about her pride in doing this work as a woman back then. These early conversations assisted me to re-engage with how we *listen* in narrative practice: paying careful, close attention to residents’ unique words and meanings, and as Lynn Hoffman (1998) has suggested, being “never ... more than an inch from [their] experience” (p. 152).

## Introducing the Tree of Life

I had been considering introducing a collective narrative methodology such as the Tree of Life (Ncube, 2006) to offer a consistent, tangible, visual framework for our conversations in line with Rood’s (2009) suggestions. As a non-Western, culturally grounded approach, the Tree of Life also creates opportunities to recognise social and systemic issues in people’s lives, such as racism and poverty. Tree of Life groups have been conducted with refugee youth (Stiles et al., 2021) and survivors of gun violence in the US (Hill & Soprych, 2024). Chow and Fung (2021) developed a Tree of Life group for Chinese older people living in Hong Kong where they highlighted and reconnected with stories of wisdom and dignity.

I hesitated, however, because over time this practice (in the UK at least) had become more familiar to me as a task at corporate style “away days” and team-building exercises. I have noticed how readily it is requested, suggested and taken up as a prefabricated worksheet or template. It has even made its way on to my social media feeds, promoted as part of a brightly coloured, visually appealing generic therapy resource bundle that can be downloaded (for a price). Rendering the Tree of Life as a standardised, printable, replicable *resource* in this way decontextualises and depoliticises it. I had therefore been left

feeling sceptical and with a sense that its origins in Ncazelo Ncube-Mlilo’s community work in southern Africa with children orphaned by HIV/AIDS, and the inspiration from the work of Paolo Freire (Denborough, 2008), had been lost in the service of more Eurocentric, individualising aims and purposes.

However, I also learnt about the significance of trees for the residents. The abundance of trees in the local area gave them a feeling of peace and calmness, particularly in the context of the confusion or distress some felt at not being “at home”, moving somewhere unfamiliar, or no longer living with family or loved ones. They also told me about *Etz Chaim* (the Tree of Life) being associated with wisdom and vitality.<sup>1</sup>

I began to feel that the Tree of Life could offer us something more in keeping with its founding philosophy and purpose. We spent a session talking about trees and their meanings; I shared an example of the Tree of Life with the group, and they expressed interest in using this as a foundation for our storytelling activities.

## Adapting the Tree of Life methodology

Traditionally, a Tree of Life group invites members to create individual trees that later form a collective *forest of life* to explore how we weather life’s challenges together (Ncube, 2006). However, I felt that this approach risked excluding some members who may have difficulty participating in their preferred ways. I decided to ask each of the group members what they would prefer – to make their own trees or collaborate in creating some kind of collective tree to document multiple stories in one place. This approach allowed for diverse forms of participation, including nonverbal expressions and practical assistance from activity workers. It meant that we were gathered around the table together, talking and listening as a group. It also enabled the creation of a large-scale artwork that the group wanted to display in the coffee shop.

Echoing Rood's (2009) recommendations, I adopted a decentred and influential position (M. White, 2007), introducing the Tree of Life framework and its categories of inquiry to create possibilities for the group to tell and witness stories of love, loss, struggle, survival and legacy. As we got to know each other, we developed our own rhythms and rituals for meeting including making our coffees, asking how each other's day was, and then engaging with a particular part of the tree. I listened, made notes, asked questions, invited responses, asked questions about these responses, and invited group members to ask questions of one another.

### ***The roots: Exploring origins***

In our session about "roots", group members shared stories of their origins: their countries of birth, familial heritage, what they did for a living and their hometowns. These stories reflected pride as they spoke about vibrant cultures and communities that had shaped their identities:

"It's a very 'go ahead' kind of place."

"A fantastic city."

"Great music!"

One member asked us to play some music by a famous performer of the time. The group all recognised the song, and they sang along together – I had not heard the song before, but I did my best to join in and keep up!

### ***The ground: Daily life and sustaining practices***

Our conversations about the "ground" focused on the here-and-now and what sustained us in daily life. Some residents spoke about life at the care home and their relationships there. Others spoke about how they missed their "own place", how there had been confusion about where they were going and what this place was at first. They described how difficult it had been living under the visiting restrictions of the pandemic, and talked together about making friends and the importance of friendships in feeling more *at home*.

### ***The trunk: Skills, abilities and qualities***

We used the session working on the "trunk" to talk about group members' skills, abilities and personal qualities. Here, the conversation became even more of a shared practice. When group members were initially unsure about their abilities, other residents made rich and detailed contributions. We learnt about one of the men who was an engineer – how this led him to be very focused, calm and patient. He spoke about how he brought those skills to being a father. We heard from another man who said, "I dedicated myself to my wife over a lifetime". We learnt that she lived a distance away due to needing specialist nursing care, and they had not been able to see one another for some time. We later heard that, following the session, he had drawn a self-portrait and posted this to her. We were all affected by this story; some members of the group shed tears and remembered people they missed, who had died or who they were no longer in touch with.

### ***The branches: Hopes and wishes***

The "branches" provided opportunities to talk about hopes, dreams and wishes. I noted that group members had less to say about hopes for themselves. I reflected on how we ask people about *hope* at different stages of life. Some elders may hold hopes for a future they might no longer be present for yet have contributed to and created. An adaptation of the "branches" conversation is to talk about hopes for people who matter to you, rather than hopes for your own life (Ncube, 2006). The group spoke at length about this:

"For my children to have a good life – to be healthy."

"To have good fortune in life."

They also expressed their hopes for the other group members:

"For the people here to be happy and healthy."

### **The leaves: Significant relationships**

The “leaves” were used to represent people who had been important in group members’ lives, past and present. Many of the members spoke about their mothers.

“She was the best ever – she worried about everyone, and she laughed about everything.”

“She was soft – she had a lot of love to give.”

Others spoke about their memories of family and wartime evacuations, with one member recalling:

“I was their only child, they kept me with them during the war, they couldn’t bear to send me away.”

One woman told us a story about moving cities to live with her brother and his wife (against her father’s expectations of marriage) to meet her “true love” to whom she was married until he died.

### **The fruits: Gifts received**

The “fruits” provided an opportunity to talk about gifts – both tangible and abstract – that the group members had received. Again, they often spoke about their family and loved ones, gifts of qualities or skills that they had received, as well as spiritual practices and rituals that they continued to practice in their daily lives.

### **Flowers: Cherished memories**

Our conversation about the “flowers” explored cherished memories. This was a lively session with one woman recalling meeting her husband at the local dance hall. She enjoyed telling us how he waited for her each week until she decided to speak with him. One of the men in the group recalled going to North Africa with his work – how this had opened his eyes to different ways of life. For most group members, cherished memories were about family, cooking or eating together, and important celebrations. We learnt how one of the women made her daughter’s wedding dress, as her mother had done for her.

### **The Birds: Legacies and future contributions**

The “birds” on the tree told us about the group members’ legacies – what they hoped would be carried on from their lives into the lives of others. This was a tender and moving conversation. There were echoes of re-membering conversations (M. White, 2008) when group members spoke about the influence that they hoped they might have had on the lives of their families and loved ones. For example, one man told us about his nephew who was “born disabled”. His nephew had cerebral palsy and had set up a charity supporting young people with disabilities to access sport in the community. We heard that, when his nephew was growing up, it was him, his uncle, who spent time playing football with him and noticing his different abilities. We asked what he hoped his nephew learnt from this, and he said it was “having a good attitude towards himself”.

## *Solidarity, transport and linking lives*

I learnt from the activity workers that, in the time in between our sessions, the group members

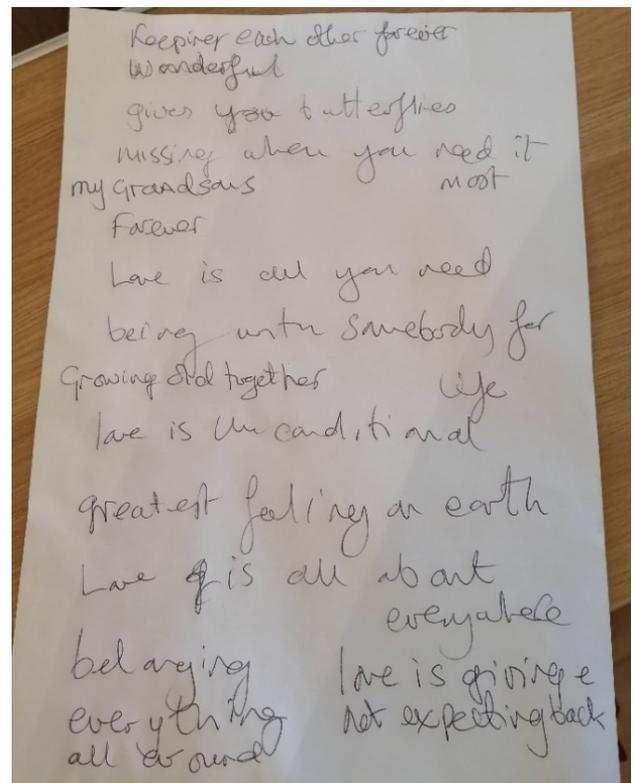


Figure 1. Collective poem about love

had become engaged in their own documenting and artmaking following on from our themes. For example, they created a shared poem about love after our “leaves” session (Figure 1). It included the phrases “growing old together”, “the greatest

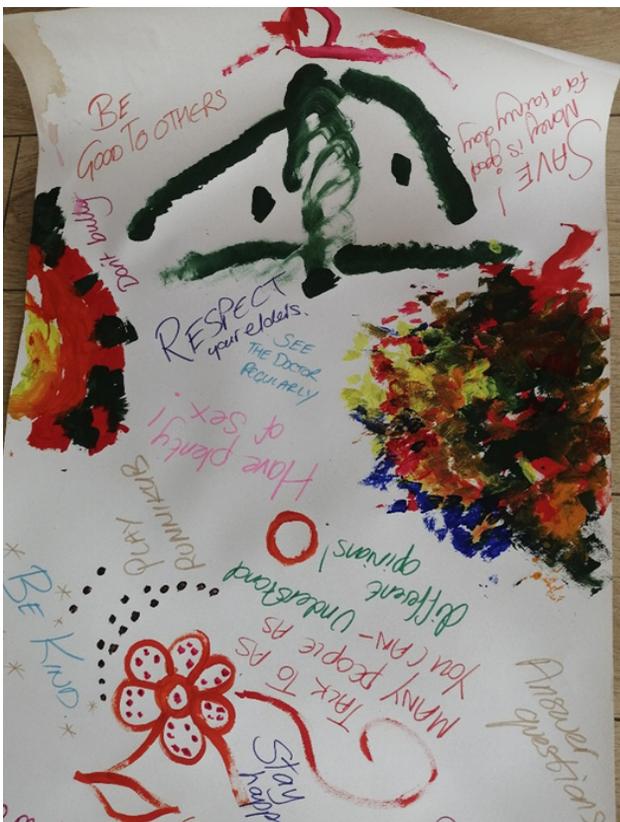


Figure 2. Advice for future generations

feeling on Earth”, “belonging”, and poignantly, “missing when you need it most”.

After the session about the “birds” – our legacies – they created a collective artwork with advice to future generations (Figure 2), which highlighted the importance of talking and listening to others, having fun, not raising your voice, “respecting your elders” and having “plenty of sex!” This was displayed on the coffee shop wall for other residents to see and talk about too.

In her documentary film *Number Our Days* (Myerhoff & Littman, 1976), Barbara Myerhoff looks at the camera and tells us, “Someday, I will be a little old Jewish lady”. Spending time with our group invited me to think about where I will be when I am older, how I will be telling the stories of my life and to whom. These are not always easy or comfortable questions to ask ourselves. A theme from the group was about stories being carried across generations, the hopes that members had for those who knew about them, and what others might learn from them. A *futured* form of re-mem-bering, engaging with the stories we would want to be told about us, may assist us to bring such meaning and purpose back into our present:

Think of a story that you would want to be told about you or recounted one day in the (near or distant) future:

- Who already knows about this story? How do they know about it?
- What does it tell them about what matters to you?
- What would you want people who hear it in the future to appreciate about you?
- What do you hope they might take, learn, or hold onto from it?
- How would you hope it might contribute to their lives?
- Is there some part of this story that you might like to revisit, keep onto, or hold in your own heart right now?
- What do you hope it might make possible for you?

The activity workers and care home staff reported that relationships within the group began to change. The group members themselves spoke about how our sessions had created opportunities to get to know one another in new and different ways which they took with them – eating dinner together, talking with one another outside of the group and having coffee together. The group members themselves spoke about growing feelings of friendship among them, of feeling closer to each other, and feeling more in touch with one another's lives *beyond* the care home or the here-and-now. They described feeling connected to important people in each other's lives who they had not even met in person. One of the women said that "It's like there's an army of people behind us now!"

### *Practice notes:*

#### *Collective storytelling, memory and holding identity in later life*

In our storytelling sessions, group members seemed to (re)discover resourcefulness and creativity while reconnecting with intergenerational narratives that may have been overlooked or forgotten. I noticed that the more abstract parts of the tree required careful scaffolding – a clear and detailed location within the landscape of action and a more gradual movement from the "known-and-familiar" to the "possible-to-know" (M. White, 2007) to adapt to different cognitive abilities. Conversations proceeded slowly to avoid outpacing some group members. However, this had the advantage of creating opportunities to "loiter with intent" in the stories that people told (Winslade & Hedtke, 2008, p. 75), allowing rich description and opportunities for responses, questions and witnessing in the group.

One of the women mischievously told us about a favourite memory from her childhood – how her parents and grandparents spoke in Yiddish so that the children couldn't understand them, and yet she *could* understand Yiddish and so always (secretly) understood what they were saying. She would

often tell this story, sometimes several times during a session, but instead of moving on ("We've heard this one before ..."), the group would always respond with raucous laughter and enthusiastic approval. I noticed that it did not seem to matter, to anyone, whether this story was linear or consistent – each time it brought joy and opportunities to make more connections and meaning.

Anne Basting's collective storytelling practices with people with dementia (2009) have demonstrated that the creation of an imaginative, improvisational and relational space matters more than "factual accuracy" or linear narratives in this respect. This resonates with what happened here in the group: stories did not need to be consistent or chronological to affirm identity, spark joy or strengthen relationships. Collective or community storytelling (as an alternative to traditional "reminiscence" therapy or "life story work") has been found to have a range of effects for people with dementia including recalling memories, expressing emotions and feeling more connected (Debnath, 2025). It can build connection and reduce isolation (Novy, 2018).

Lars-Christer Hydén (2017) has suggested that despite the often fragmented and nonverbal nature of dementia narratives, collaborative storytelling functions as an important social mechanism for maintaining relational identity within a wider social web. In this respect, listeners become active co-constructors who listen with a "third ear" to discern emotional intent and gesture over factual accuracy; their collective interaction shapes, holds and protects valued identities.

The Tree of Life group offered a practical method for *holding* identity in later life, as described by the feminist philosopher Hilde Lindemann Nelson (2009), with an emphasis on stories that reflect preferred identities, dignity and agency. The group also disrupted what Lindemann Nelson (2001) termed degrading or dismissive "master narratives" of ageing such as inevitable decline. I loved how the group chose to include "have plenty of sex!" on their spontaneous collective document – challenging the assumption that ageing brings a decline in sexual interest or desire (Vetere & Burton, 2019).

Salter (2020) demonstrated how group facilitators can support those who are in the position of being a witness (audience) to show appreciation, and to make connections to wider discourses that the story speaks to. Therefore, when we heard one woman telling us about going against her father's plans for her marriage, we reflected on how that was something unexpected for that time and how this made her brother's support for her even more significant. Through such conversations, we learn that we have things to say that others will listen to, that we tell *worthwhile* stories, and subsequently, that we are worthwhile people.

The Tree of Life has been used in family and couples therapy settings, offering a way to reinforce preferred identities and strengths as well as paying attention to cultural backgrounds and values (Chimpén-López et al., 2022; Méndez & Cole, 2014). If we are to consider the notions of collective storytelling and relational identity in the context of dementia, the Tree of Life has potential to create a foundation for families to offer one another what Hilde Lindemann Nelson has called "clumsy holding" – a form of holding that, although sometimes fragmented or chaotic, is an exercise of moral agency and persistent engagement with one another's stories, identities, meaning and purpose (Lindemann, 2009).

### *Practice notes: Ethics, accountability and learning*

I recognised the differences in power and privilege between myself and the group members and how this might affect authorship. Establishing permissions and consent took time at the outset to ensure this was a meaningful process. We talked about how the project would be written about and who might read it, potentially being something that might be published in a magazine or journal. Two group members had worked as writers or journalists and so had some ideas about what this might mean. We talked about being "visible" (i.e. identifiable) in the writing. Although some members were ambivalent, others preferred not to be identified, but all wanted their words and writings to be shared.

We also spent time talking about contributions – the freedom to choose whether or not to contribute at different times and in a variety of different ways. I took care to offer all members a chance to contribute and to be heard. Some group members were more verbally expressive than others. Some needed scaffolding of conversations (M. White, 2008) to feel that they had something to contribute. This was where loitering with intent, spending time in the landscape of action, and using prompts such as photographs or objects were particularly helpful.

I was also aware of times when some stories were readily afforded status (for example, stories about travel and career accomplishments), and it took time to afford the same kind of attention to everyday stories such as caring for baby brothers and sisters or working in a father's garden allotment. This was another part of the practice where being decentred and influential (M. White, 2008) was important, as it orientated me towards staying with the person's stories, knowledges and skills, keeping them as the focus.

The decisions about which stories the group lingered on, and how silence, discomfort or nonparticipation were handled, shifted over time as the group developed. One member (whom I will call Sylvia here) often expressed frustration about not being *allowed* to return home. There were times when she was upset or angry and others simply sat quietly. I admit that I felt uncomfortable in these moments, as if they disrupted the comfortable environment we had been creating. I questioned whether I was managing the process too tightly – perhaps even suppressing expressions of anger, injustice or protest. Were we becoming too cosy? That would surely contradict the philosophy of collective narrative practice (Denborough, 1995). I also wondered about the prejudices that might be at work, about older people as vulnerable, stoic or polite. Anger or protest is often framed as behavioural disturbance in this context; how much did residents feel pressured to uphold a "good resident" identity? (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000).

This became an opportunity to more actively negotiate the process with the group, making space for protest and resistance. When Sylvia raised her frustrations again, I invited her to continue. I asked what home meant to her and what it was like to have choices permitted or denied. The group listened and responded with their own accounts of dislocation and displacement, alongside how friendships and rituals created new notions of home. Although she often revisited these frustrations, Sylvia also began to join more regularly in other conversations, and I noticed how this created new opportunities for her to participate and to be witnessed. For example, during our “trunk” session exploring abilities and skills, another member told Sylvia that she was seen as “very tenacious and determined – seeing things that others don’t”. While this was a way for Sylvia to develop new stories of life and identity, I now wonder how much this recognition was a direct reflection of the frustrations she voiced, which created so much resonance for the others.

My concerns about the Tree of Life process being standardised or superficial dissolved when I encountered and witnessed the group members’ stories, but it also required more than this from me. I learnt about the importance of actively inviting and making space for discomfort, protest and resisting getting too comfortable or cosy in collective practice. I hope that this, together with working with locally meaningful symbols and embedding the practice within relational philosophy of narrative therapy, will help me to stay in touch with the social and political roots of the Tree of Life.

### *Concluding reflections: Re-membering and resonating with death and dying*

This group had deep personal significance to me because my closest friend, Anna, had died not long before we began meeting. As a social researcher, she had been working on a project about “living well with dementia together” (Austin et al., 2016)

and the resonances with the group were clear to see. Anna and I shared a love of talking about narrative ideas from our different perspectives and experiences, especially the idea of identity as a relational project (Freedman & Combs, 1996). She understood how people and communities “carry” the stories of their loved ones, seeing identity as something that is “distributed, performed, and fluid” (Combs & Freedman, 2016, p. 211).

When I spoke about Anna during one of our Tree of Life sessions, I wasn’t just mentioning her; I was purposefully engaging in an act of remembering that acknowledged her part in the group’s creation. Two members responded by telling us how being in later life had brought them closer together – that they were best friends. One of the women explained that her friend had died recently, three months before her new (and now best) friend moved in. We spoke about how the “rules” of friendship might change as we age, and how this might be particular to the lives of women, who often lived much longer than their husbands (Blieszner et al., 2019). I asked what they had learnt about making friends when you are in your nineties. They both laughed and said that if you like spending time with someone then “You should just tell them ... there isn’t time to be self-conscious about such things”.

During the group, and unbeknownst to its members, my father was in the last months of a terminal illness. I look back and wonder why I felt able to talk about Anna and not my father. Perhaps I was cautious about centring my own experiences. Maybe I held back from naming death so openly because I assumed it would cause distress or upset in the group, or perhaps I did not yet have the words. It was a tension I was holding throughout and was certainly influenced by, yet I remain unsure about my decision.

Narrative practice has much to offer around the continuation of relationships after death (Hedtke, 2000), in contrast to conventional Anglo-American grief psychology, which encourages us to “say goodbye”, “let go” and “move on” (M. White, 1988). Barbara Myerhoff found that when people tell stories about someone who has died, they are not

just reminiscing but are actively re-engaging with that person's voice and legacy. Re-remembering therefore has the potential to re-invigorate our own identities, creating meaning and purpose and carrying us into the future.

I began to see my own identity as something being *held* by the group. Although death and dying were not often named directly, we kept company with them throughout: talking about loved ones who had died, not having time to waste, thinking about those who will live beyond us. Witnessing and participating in the group members' storytelling gave me some courage to have some tender, final conversations with my father before he died, and this changed our relationship in ways that might

not have been possible otherwise. It is testament to the power of collective storytelling and re-remembering that my continuing friendship with Anna moved me towards this project, and my relationships with the group members transformed my relationship with my father before he died. As Michael White once said, "We get together with people for a period of time over a range of issues, and all of our lives are changed for this" (1995, p. 7).

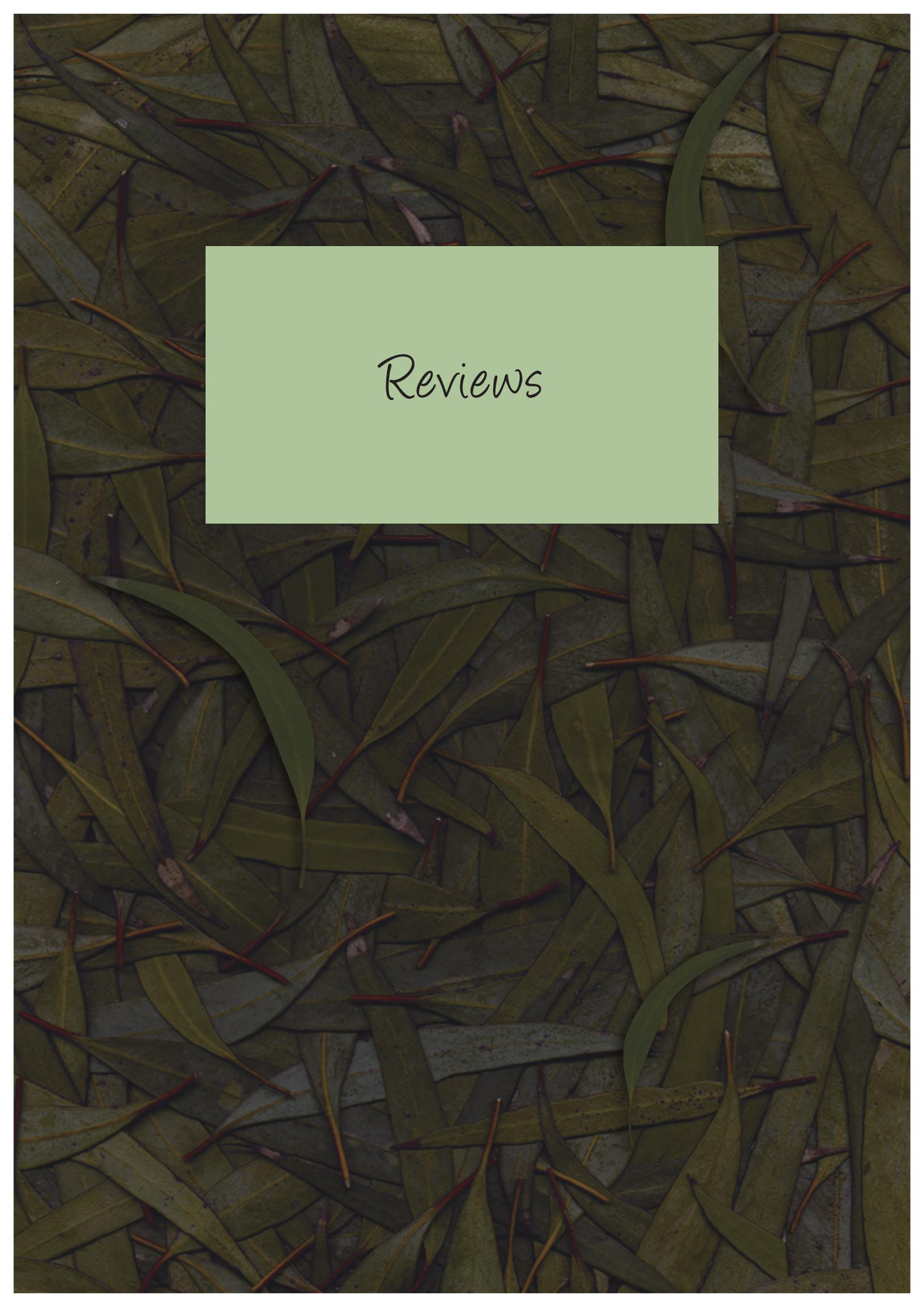
## Note

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that applications of the *Etz Chaim* symbol diverge significantly across various Jewish communities and theological traditions.

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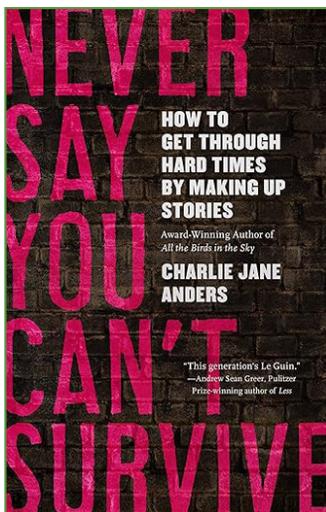
# Reviews



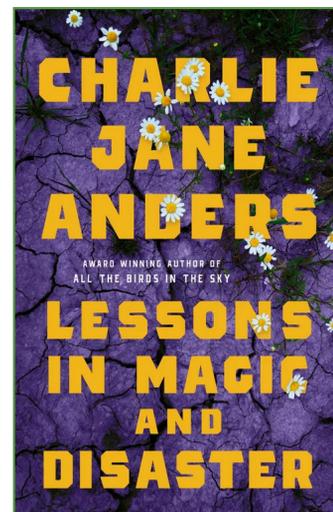
Reading Charlie Jane Anders'  
Never Say You Can't Survive  
and  
Lessons in Magic and Disaster  
together at a time of rising hostility to trans folks,  
a review of the books and the process

by Tiffany Sostar, Aakhil Lakhani and April Wick

With contributions from Maile Grace, LJ Boyes, KJ Wiseheart, Evren Salja and Heather Moore



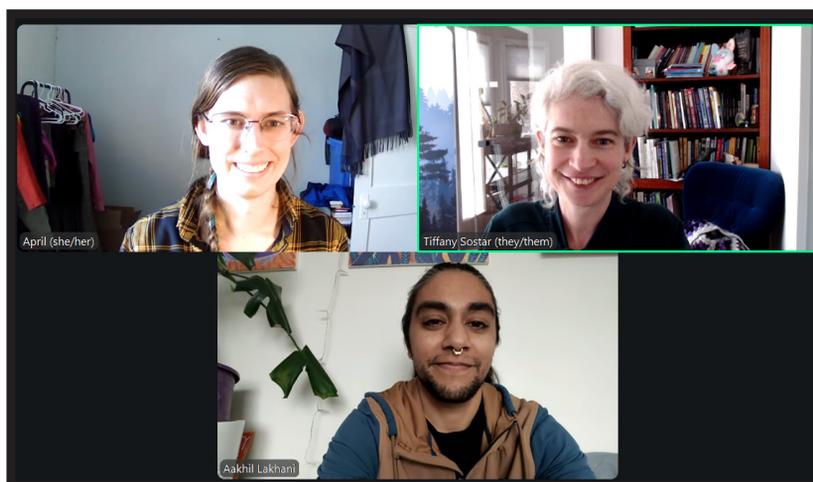
Charlie Jane Anders



Sostar, T., Lakhani, A., & Wick, A. (2026). Reading Charlie Jane Anders' Never Say You Can't Survive and Lessons in Magic and Disaster together at a time of rising hostility to trans folks, a review of the books and the process. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), 150–158. <https://doi.org/10.4320/FXRD8766>

Author pronouns: Tiffany Sostar: they/them; Aakhil Lakhani: they/them; April Wick: she/her





*Tiffany Sostar is a bisexual, nonbinary, neurodivergent, disabled narrative practitioner and community worker. They love collective narrative practice and documentation, making zines, reading speculative fiction and romance, and being in community. They live as a white settler in Treaty 7 territory in Mohkinstsis (Calgary, Alberta, Canada). Tiffany is undertaking a PhD program researching narrative practices in support of trans lives. tiffanysostar@proton.me.*

 ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9443-096X>

*Aakhil Lakhani is a disabled and neurodivergent, queer and trans human currently living in amiskowacyi waskahikan (Edmonton, Alberta). Their family comes from Gujarat, India, by way of Kenya, and Uganda. Aakhil is an avid reader who especially loves sci fi and speculative fiction.*

*April Wick is a genderfluid trans woman with a background in small nonprofits, cultural studies and bicycle repair. She is a white settler in Montreal/Tiohtià:ke, on the unceded territory of the Kanien'kehà:ka. April is an enthusiastic reader with a particular fondness for romance, SF/F and other genre fiction.*

## *Abstract*

A group of friends reviews Charlie Jane Anders' (2021) nonfiction book *Never Say You Can't Survive: How to get through hard times by making up stories* and her (2025) novel *Lessons in Magic and Disaster*, and reflects on the process of reading these books together. We found it sustaining to be in community with each other, engaging richly and intentionally with the vibrant work of a trans author, as a group of mostly trans and nonbinary readers, at a time of rising hostility to trans folks. We found significant resonance between narrative therapy and the practices outlined in *Never Say You Can't Survive* and meaningful opportunities for therapeutic conversations sparked by the characters and story in *Lessons in Magic and Disaster*.

**Key words:** *book clubs; trans; transgender; book review; narrative therapy; narrative practice*

It seemed like no matter the state in which I came into the conversations, I felt uplifted afterwards. There's something joyful about spending this time together doing something that is value aligned, sharing time and space for this collective purpose, that was really rejuvenating. –Aakhil

Between June and December 2025, a group of us got together in video calls and a text chat to read Charlie Jane Anders' books *Never Say You Can't Survive* and *Lessons in Magic and Disaster*. Most of us in the group are trans or nonbinary, and are concerned about and affected by the current political context of rising fascism and hostility to trans people<sup>1</sup> and others who are being targeted by legislative and state violence and hostile dominant discourses.

Reading books by trans authors at a time like this can be a political act. When the world is presenting a thin and dehumanising story of what it means to be trans and restricting access to possibilities for trans life, intentionally engaging with books by trans authors is a way of refusing to accept that dominant narrative as an unexamined truth. But reading books by trans authors is also just *enjoyable*.

As Kai Cheng Thom and Maya Deane write about trans women's books specifically:

Trans women's fiction is weird, funny, endlessly inventive, nothing like the eat-your-vegetables morality plays that so many readers expect. Those who know how to read it love it. It's neither alien nor unrelatable; it's gorgeous and human, and since it had to overcome the headwinds that keep trans women out of publishing, it tends to be very good. But you have to make an effort to see it, to read it, to encounter its surprise and delight. (Deane & Thom, 2024)

We are an international group, with readers in the United States, Canada, Australia and Portugal. Some of us had known each other for years and shared space in many different contexts, and other people met during the book club.

Participation in the group was flexible. Some people attended every call and participated in the text chat, while other people attended only a few calls, or engaged with the chat but not the calls, and other people read the books but didn't participate in either the video calls or the chat. After each video call, Tiffany wrote up a brief recap of the conversation and shared it in the chat. This flexible participation format was an intentional effort to make the group a welcoming space.

Reading these books together allowed us to acknowledge and talk about the current political context, without our focus being narrowed to the dread and despair that can overtake us sometimes.

It made a difference, being in a space where we're engaging with work by a trans author, reading complex stories that are not *just* about the trans experience but are inclusive of trans experience. The politics are there, but they're not the only thing. And we're doing that together, so the politics can be part of our conversations as well. Reading the books together had me thinking about my own life, my relationships, thinking about my values and what I care about in new ways. As I was reading the books, I was thinking about [the book club members] and what you might be thinking about it. Our conversations stayed with me. –Tiffany

Just having a group of people that you're reading with, you end up reading something different than you would, or you analyse it differently. There is value in that community. –April

I will admit that [*Lessons in Magic and Disaster*] is not a book that I would have otherwise picked up and read. It's quite outside the genres that I tend to read, and that turned out to be a lovely thing. Exposure to a new author that I really appreciated, some excellent writing and also widening my own criteria for how I might consider choosing a book to read. –Aakhil

## Never Say You Can't Survive

Visualizing a happier, more just world is a direct assault on the forces that are trying to break your heart. (Anders, 2021, p. 2)

Imagination is always a form of resistance to domination and oppression, and we've all been saved by other people's stories one time or another. (Anders, 2021, p. 6)

We started with *Never Say You Can't Survive: How to get through hard times by making up stories* (NSYCS).

We read one section each week and then met to talk about that section and do some of the writing exercises together. Each of the five sections includes personal anecdotes from Anders' life as a writer, with a focus on how creative writing and storytelling has helped her get through hard times. There is a strong focus on politics, and how imagination can be a critical tool in resisting injustice and hardship. We also appreciated the way Anders resists thin and totalising ideas about representation and the politics of telling other people's stories – this is a book that helped us strengthen our own skills in solidarity and collective care.

Some of us are narrative practitioners, and we found significant resonance between NSYCS and narrative practice<sup>2</sup>, even though it's not a narrative therapy book.

When I think of narrative therapy being tied to ideas of justice and social activism, I think of defying and recreating and irreverence to dominant discourses and ideas. So much of my work is heavy and intense, and [I appreciated] being able to interact with a book that did not shy away from serious and important topics, but there was never a moment where I felt that heaviness, it felt so uplifting. It feels so important to have joyful things that bring us together and are still doing this important work. –Maile

One of the first things Anders does is what Vikki Reynolds might call “people-ing the room” (2011),

and she continues to do this throughout the book. Anders writes about some of the relationships that have shaped her own life as a writer, especially her relationship with Ms Pennington.

I was this heedless daydreamer, a mumbling oddity who slouched around the schoolyard making up stories in my head instead of talking to other kids. I had imaginary friends, and imaginary adventures, and a whole imaginary life. Ms. Pennington turned my tendency to daydream into a tool for getting me to learn. And in the process, she made me into a lifelong storytelling addict. (2021, p. 53)

The first chapter is about imaginary friends and what makes an interesting and engaging imaginary friend. Although these friends may go on to become characters in a story, that's not the main point of this chapter. The point is a reflection on how useful it can be to have “an imaginary posse” (p. 18) on our side.

These ideas for how to create or get to know an imaginary friend, and the potential value of these friends, have significant resonance with Michael White's idea that “it is possible to work with people around the invention of an invisible friend, and at times it is even possible to resurrect people's relationships with invisible friends” (1995, p. 137).

For narrative practitioners who want to bring White's ideas about the value of invisible or imaginary friends into therapeutic conversations, Anders' book has some great ideas for how to go about it.

The focus on relationships continues throughout the book. It resonates with narrative ideas about relationships being critical to a person's sense of self (in both dignifying and degrading ways, depending on the relationship) and being shaped by the context within which the relationship exists. Anders writes about the relationships she has with her characters, the relationships she writes between her characters, and her relationships with the characters of other writers. One of the most interesting relationships that she writes about is

the relationship with readers. She describes the inner imaginary reader and the value of writing to someone particular.

Especially if you're from a marginalized community, thinking of yourself as writing a story to, and for, other members of your community can keep you from worrying nonstop about what so-called "mainstream" readers will think. (2021, p. 64)

A strong theme of the book is noticing, naming and deconstructing dominant discourses. Anders writes, "we need fiction that interrogates the layers of privilege and dehumanization that make some people seem to others like fair game for abuse" (p. 75).

Anders also spends a lot of time questioning normality and escaping from failure (see Denborough, 2014, pp. 171-174). She writes, "I strongly encourage you to find the definition of success that makes you happy, rather than encouraging you to be miserable" (p. 27).

She brings in the idea of writing as a way to make a contribution to community, and the collective nature of this – the way writing (and sharing our imaginations in whatever form that takes) is a collective creative act.

When the world is on fire and the people you love are at risk, what should you write about? Whatever you feel able to write. Whatever will make you feel like you can keep living and fighting. Write that thing that you're ready and excited to write – not the thing that you feel the moment calls for, or the story that you think will fix every broken thing in the world. (2021, p. 73)

This is good advice for fiction writers, of course. But it is also good advice for collective narrative practitioners, or any of us who are trying to figure out what to do in response to the world on fire.

The past is always alive in the present, and the stories we tell about it matter. (Anders, 2021, p. 142)

In one of the first writing exercises in the book, Anders reminds readers that "a good character usually has as much story behind them as ahead of them. We might only need to glimpse their past, but we should know that they've already been on the journey before the story even begins" (p. 18). What a precious reminder for people going through a hard time: that we have useful and interesting histories to draw on, that we have skills and values and dreams, and that we have already been on a journey. What an important note for therapists and practitioners who might be hearing a story of struggle, particularly at a time of increasing hostility and threat. The people we are speaking with have already been on a journey, even if this particular moment is new and terrible.

I found myself shifting the way that I think about other people's behaviour towards me, based on the idea that people react based on their experiences and their past. I feel like that's allowed a little bit more space in the world for me, in experiencing other people's actions as something other than directed at me or a product of our interaction in the moment. Allowing the people in my life to also exist as characters that have rich backstories that inform the way they show up. –Aakhil

I keep thinking back to that first exercise we did, to fictionalise a scenario from your own life. I think KJ was the one who was like, "I wrote it from the perspective of one of my [tabletop roleplaying game] characters", and I was like, oh, that's a good way to fictionalise. I keep coming back to that, thinking about my own life and thinking about what I might want to write. You know, how am I going to process this experience through a character's reaction to it. –April

We noticed how a lot of the character exercises that Anders offers have parallels in narrative practices of externalising and getting some distance from a problem in order to find a different perspective and different possible actions.

I [appreciated] the exercise we did, changing the narrative voice and re-writing the same small scene. And it was so powerful how much that really shifted what things were brought to my attention in the scene in my mind. It reminded me about the ways that shifting the narrator might also help us shift our interpretations or stories about the things that are going on in our lives. Really bringing thought to the idea that the details that we pay attention to ultimately inform the [way we understand the experience].  
–Aakhil

Our conversations were structured so that we discussed the book for the first half of our time together, and then we wrote for the rest of our time, with the opportunity to share either our just-written work or to talk about the writing process before we ended for the week.

The practice of writing together during our video calls was significant for us.

I loved the longer format where we had space to talk about things and then write together, in the same allotted time/space. So often, there is discussion without building in a practice portion. –Evren

We learnt together what was useful and what was less useful, which of the prompts from the book would work well in a co-writing session and which might be too broad or too complex.

Lots of us want to be writing more than we are, lots of us have doubts about our writing abilities, or we have held dreams of being a “real writer” for a long time. The book, and our practice of writing together, gave us each permission to try out different ideas without committing to anything grand. To “go on lots of first dates with story ideas” (2021, p. 46).

The conversation we had in week two around not being so precious about our own writing is something that I still think about. –LJ

I appreciate the body doubling element of it and the scheduling, the specific time period in the calendar. I would not have done the

writing exercises [on my own] but realised the great benefit of having the community be around for that time that we were writing together. It made the process feel more approachable, and much less scary. And then the availability of that debrief space afterwards to sort of reset the barometer when there can be a lot of self-judgement about oh, this isn't good, or I didn't do what I was supposed to do, or any of those things, to relate to others in the group who are similarly experiencing things that I was or have. –Aakhil

The book gave us permission, over and over again, to just make up stories, even if they never become books, even if they never get shared. Anders kept bringing us back to the value of storytelling and how it can help us get through hard times.

Anders writes, “We are shaped by our communities, for good and bad, and our communities define the worlds we belong to. Community is going to save us in real life – and in fiction, stories about communities joining together are going to be a lifeline” (2021, p. 8).

This is such an example of what reading and writing to get through hard times can feel like, can look like, and also maybe some sort of proof of concept that we are indeed living through these unprecedented hard times and that this was incredibly soul filling, nourishing as a process. It allowed me to engage with ideas that might have felt too enormous or difficult to approach on my own, as an individual doing the reading and the writing. To have that companionship through the journey, the sounding board and the safety of the container in which we wrote and read together was significant. –Aakhil

It was really cool to hear about other people's experiences and readings and what it made possible. It opened up other avenues that I would not have considered only by myself. I also did writing with you all. I did not do any writing when I read it first [on my own]. The fact that I did any writing was a huge win for me. –Evren

I have never thought of narrative practice as something that is held in expert hands by narrative therapists. You would not need to be a therapist to use this book in therapeutic ways, to be using these exercises to deconstruct discourses or to retell your stories. You could use this book to help you write fantastical stories that get you through it, or you could use it like some of us in this group have to just think about how we are thinking about our own lives and narrating our own lives to ourselves. – Tiffany

Part-way through reading NSYCS together, some of us agreed that we would like to continue on to read *Lessons in Magic and Disaster*, inspired by one of Anders' newsletter references to that book.

If my writing advice book *Never Say You Can't Survive* is the theory, then my novel *Lessons in Magic and Disaster* is the practice ... I was writing first drafts of both books at the same time, during the very worst days of the pandemic. And I was very much thinking about the power of story, and how telling a story is in many ways like casting a spell: for protection, for strength, for family. I also was following my own advice, using *Lessons in Magic and Disaster* as a way to escape from the terrible things that were happening around me – but also using it to process some stuff that was going on. Everything I said in *Never Say You Can't Survive* about harnessing your emotions, including rage and the desire for human connection, went directly into the process of writing *Lessons in Magic and Disaster*. The section of NSCYC that talks about how powerful it can be to write about people wanting something is basically me drawing a roadmap for *Lessons*. (Anders, 2025b)

## *Lessons in Magic and Disaster*

Have I truly read a book, if you are not here to discuss it with me? (Anders, 2025a, p. 94)

We were a smaller group for reading *Lessons in Magic and Disaster* (LIMAD), and we decided to

read LIMAD three chapters at a time, rather than all at once and discussing the book as a whole. This was a significant shift in the way that most of us engage with fiction, and we found it useful.

The most notable part about reading it together the way we did was the combination of pacing and focus. I don't normally read at that speed. I'm normally dashing through a book, and to be taking my time with just a few chapters each week and focusing on looking at, "Okay, how does this relate to what we've been talking about last week? How does this relate to what other people have been saying?" was helpful in seeing more of the detail and nuance in the writing. – April

I also appreciated the difference in pacing from what my normal consumption of fiction looks like. It offered the opportunity to savour the build up at parts and really experience the timing or cadence of the book. I appreciated the shared speculations. And also, I found that the details that I latched on to and remembered were often different but similar to those that others did. It offered more of a complete picture than I feel I would have derived from reading it on my own. – Aakhil

I found that the way that I was thinking about the chapters changed during our conversations. The close reading, which was not just close reading on my own, but bouncing off of what each of you was bringing to the conversations, changed my experience of those chapters. One of you would say something that stood out to you, and it would bounce off what I had been thinking about something in a different way. I think even if I slowed down and read a book at that pace on my own, it wouldn't be that same experience. – Tiffany

At the heart of the story is Jamie, a trans woman, PhD student and witch (three identities that are all important to the story), and her mother Serena. Serena and Jamie are both still grieving the loss of Serena's partner, Mae.

One of the things we most appreciated about LIMAD is how richly layered and complex it is as a narrative. Through the lens of NSYCS, and knowing some of the values and intentions that Anders may have held as she wrote the book, we were able to see the ideas put into practice. We could especially see the focus on relationships, and the care for nuanced and thoughtful engagement with politics and power. This gave us rich material for our conversations, particularly when it comes to thinking through how we think about harm and community responses to harm.

The book moves between three time periods, and is told in a variety of genre styles, from the contemporary urban fantasy of the “present” chapters, to the literary fiction of the near-past chapters, and the wide range of styles in the distant-past chapters, which include fairytales and letters and snippets from books. Many of the quotes used are from actual historical documents, except for the letters and the book that Jamie is studying.

The three time periods are woven together and the relationships that are important in each have resonances and parallels with the relationships in the other time periods. Throughout the book there are queer characters facing hardship and experiencing joy and love. They grapple with systemic issues and interpersonal issues, and they try out a range of responses. These are richly human characters, with quirks and flaws and hopes and skills. They are treated with incredible dignity, and it was heartening to read. In each time period, the social context is different, even though there are echoes and throughlines. By including all these different time periods and grappling with identity and relationships in each, Anders makes space for a conversation about how identities are co-constructed in the specific context of the time and culture.

Serena and Mae used to say they’d joined together using words that nobody would understand anymore. Serena had been a “soft butch,” Mae a “stone femme,” and the two of them had formed a “domestic partnership.” These things had mattered,

not just as labels but as statements of intent and fealty. (Anders, 2025a, p. 71)

There’s a significant focus in the novel on the effects of people’s actions, and how we might respond to harm. The book invites us to consider what it means to show care in community contexts, how to respond to the harms that are inflicted by unjust systems and the people being influenced by hostile discourses, and also the harms that happen within relationships of care and love. We were invited to think about what our roles might be in responding to harm and showing up for each other. These are important topics to think about at a time like this, when so many communities are facing escalating threats and when it matters more than ever to have skills for navigating conflict and complexity.

I have also found myself thinking about how acting or being in opposition to harm might appear materially differently than being supportive of those affected by harm and the way in which those can lead to very different outcomes, though we can sometimes conflate them. –Aakhil

I do think there is potentially significant therapeutic value in reading fiction together and talking through where does this take you and what does it mean? What does it have you thinking about? Some of our conversations about the book helped me understand what I care about in different ways. Particularly the conversation about how characters who cause harm, either intentionally or unintentionally, are responded to in community. Those conversations were really useful for me. They were fun but also generative. –Tiffany

Although external and malicious harms are a significant part of the book, it’s the interpersonal relationship ruptures that are most interesting.

One of the lines that Anders returns to a few times through the book is something Serena said to Jamie when Jamie was young: “You cannot mess up so badly that you will not be loved”

(pp. 12, 113, 294, 344). Near the end of the book, Jamie says to Serena, “Mom. You will always be loved, no matter what. You will always be loved. You cannot mess up so badly that you will not be loved” (p. 520).

Throughout the book, this doesn’t mean an absence of consequences for hurtful or harmful actions, and it doesn’t mean an easy dodge of accountability. It means that there is relationship possible on the other side of harm, and that’s something worth carrying forward in hard times.

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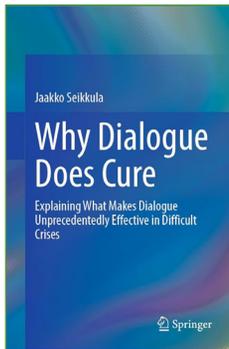
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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Some examples include legislating us out of public spaces such as bathrooms (in an example from the United States, as of September 2025, 20 American states ban trans people from using public bathrooms aligned with their gender – see Movement Advancement Project, 2026); reducing access to transition-related medical care (in an example from Canada, as of December 2025, Alberta has prohibited doctors from providing gender affirming care to trans youth – see Alberta Medical Association, 2025); banning trans people from sports (in another example from Canada, as of September 2025, trans women and girls are banned from competing in school, university and sporting clubs, and in an example from the United States, as of April 2026, USA Hockey will have banned all trans people from participating in hockey programs – see Kennedy, 2026).
- <sup>2</sup> We thought that it would be pretty interesting to map the book’s ideas alongside the (draft) Charter of Storytelling Rights (Dulwich Centre, n.d.). We didn’t manage to get that done for this review, and we would love to hear from you if you do take up this idea!



## Reflecting on the healing potentials of dialogue:



A review of *Why Dialogue Does Cure: Explaining what makes dialogue unprecedentedly effective in difficult crises* by Jaakko Seikkula

Reviewed by Tom Strong



Tom Strong is Professor Emeritus in Counselling Psychology at University of Calgary. He writes on the collaborative, critical and practical potentials of discursive approaches to psychotherapy. Among Tom's books are *Medicalizing Counselling: Issues and tensions* (2017); *Patterns in Interpersonal Interactions* (2014, co-edited with Karl Tomm, Sally St George and Dan Wulff); and *Social Constructionism: Sources and stirrings in theory and practice* (2010, co-authored with Andy Lock). He recently co-edited *The Routledge International Handbook of Postmodern Therapies* (2026). <https://wpsites.ucalgary.ca/tom-strong/> [strongt@ucalgary.ca](mailto:strongt@ucalgary.ca)

 ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5965-0401>

### Abstract

Open Dialogue (OD) was developed in Finland as a family- and community-based response to psychiatric emergencies. Central to OD's development have been the conceptual and research contributions of Jaakko Seikkula. I review and reflect on Seikkula's recent book on OD's development that shows how dialogic ideas, research, and client and collegial feedback have come to inform OD as he advocates it be currently practiced.

*Why Dialogue Does Cure: Explaining what makes dialogue unprecedentedly effective in difficult crises* was published by Springer in 2025. 169 pp. ISBN: 978-3-031-91293-1.

**Key words:** *Open Dialogue; Jaakko Seikkula; family therapy; book review*

Strong, T. (2026). Reflecting on the healing potentials of dialogue: A review of *Why dialogue does cure: Explaining what makes dialogue unprecedentedly effective in difficult crises* by Jaakko Seikkula. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), 159–162. <https://doi.org/10.4320/QBTW6235>

Author pronouns: he/him



Dialogical practice creates a new image of the human, in which the best care is to accept people's emotional experiences rather than to eliminate psychological symptoms or change the family. (Seikkula, 2025, p. 35)

For Jaakko Seikkula, dialogue is as important as breathing. Refining what being dialogic in therapy means, and what it can accomplish, has focused his practice-based inquiries for more than 40 years. Seikkula uses the medical word "cure" in his title, which might raise an eyebrow for narrative therapists and community workers who read this book with postmodern sensitivities. His involvement with Open Dialogue (OD), however, has entailed straddling the modern/postmodern institutional and professional divide: embracing the linguistic turn in therapy while using research to show how OD makes a difference and can be further enhanced. Given that OD was developed to respond to psychiatric emergencies, garnering evidential support for its therapeutic use has been no small challenge. Thankfully, Seikkula and a growing community of OD practitioners are making significant in-roads in convincing mental health researchers and administrators that there may be effective alternatives to a medication-only response to psychosis and other extreme emotional health concerns (Mosse et al., 2023).

My interest in OD goes back 30 years to a brief chapter (Seikkula et al., 1995) that exposed me to its then premises and practices. Collaborative and postmodern approaches to practice had been central to my own evolution as a practitioner. Then I became an academic focused on researching and writing about these approaches. OD was and remains highly collaborative and postmodern, addressing the needs of people having extreme experiences that too often translated to lifelong involvement with antipsychotic medications and the mental health system. However, while OD was joining an exciting group of recent therapies (e.g., narrative, solution-focused) this was also a medicalising time when evidence-based practice

tethered to the use of DSM diagnoses was increasingly expected of therapists (Strong, 2017).

Seikkula, for the last 30 years, has been establishing OD's own evidence base, while using his research to enhance the therapeutic effectiveness of OD. His book chronicles those efforts, informing readers of how OD draws on the ideas of literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and other dialogic thinkers like John Shotter, Tom Andersen and Lev Vygotsky. I was drawn to OD's exploration of collaborative practice, how its practitioners learnt (from those they helped) to make their dialogues more responsive and inclusive for families and networks of supportive people at extremely vulnerable and challenging times. Seikkula was also using his research to have OD considered a viable, evidence-supported alternative to the continuing standard practice of isolating clients (think padded cells) and prescribing antipsychotic medications. My ongoing curiosity has been with how participants share therapeutic experiences and decision-making in ostensibly collaborative processes, as OD purports to offer (Ong et al., 2023).

While not a "how-to" text on OD (see Seikkula & Arnkil, 2006), *Why Dialogue Does Cure* guides readers through Seikkula's account of OD's conceptual and research developments. The story begins with his exposure to and adaptations of rapid changes occurring in family therapy in the 1980s (the Milan approach's adoption of Bateson's ideas, the democratising of therapeutic dialogue via reflecting teams, and therapy's linguistic turn). His practice and research setting was community-based mental health services housed in Keropudas, a remote hospital in the Finnish community of Tornio. While the treatment orthodoxy of the day was antipsychotic medication, Seikkula involved families and community members during "psychiatric emergencies". Conversational encounters when the client was experiencing extreme states seldom succeeded to bring that client over to the professional's linguistically

constructed version of reality, nor those of the family and community members. But, from the outset, it was clear to Seikkula and others that the client sought responsiveness from the team, family and community members – and this became OD's clinical and research challenge. Dialogic responding differs from practitioners thinking of themselves as intervening or taking initiatives in therapeutic conversations.

Already intrigued by family therapy's focus on the conversational patterns in family interactions and the flattened hierarchies (between clients and professionals) used in reflecting team dialogues, Seikkula and his colleagues explored ideas coming from the linguistic turn then occurring in the humanities and social sciences. Specifically, the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin (e.g., 1984) on dialogue and polyphony helped to make sense of how experience could be voiced in more than one narrative or linguistically constructed understanding. The notion that interactions between therapists and clients in psychiatric emergencies were to occur solely on the professional's linguistic terms often exacerbated an already troubling circumstance. Needed were new ways to be dialogically responsive to, and welcoming of, otherwise unheard voices grounded in different experiences than the professional conversation seemed to foreground. There was no focus on identifying a problem to be addressed or a narrative to deconstruct and reconstruct; the aim was to open dialogue to what needed discussing by all members.

Seikkula uses striking examples of work with clients and their family/social networks to show how OD practitioners learnt as they developed their approach. For example, he describes vertical and horizontal voices in dialogues – those heard in the dialogue (vertical) and those which could be invited into the dialogue (horizontal) – for all participants, practitioners included. Diagnostic understandings came to be seen as foreclosing on other relevant understandings coming from the embodied

experiences of OD participants. This view, of course, came to clash with the predominantly medicalised approach used to treat psychotic patients elsewhere, and this clash is central to OD's emergent story. It also came to clash with the conventional expectations therapists had of themselves. Unexpected surprises from these dialogues needed to be welcomed, treatment plans sidelined given where and how participants took the dialogues, and rethinking was needed around how central therapists had been in a client's change efforts. What mattered was what was taken up and expanded on as worthwhile by participants in dialogue.

As Seikkula makes clear, research has been central to OD. Where one focus has been to use research to legitimise the use of OD as an alternative to a medication-only approach to addressing psychosis, another focus has been on reconceptualising what it means to participate in dialogue. One large study – the Relational Mind Project (University of Jyväskylä, n.d.) – shows how new questions and forms of inquiry have spun off from curiosities raised by participating in Open Dialogue meetings. The Relational Mind Project has been exploring the embodied ways participants engage in couples therapy, including their embodied physiological responses, synchrony in responding to each other verbally and nonverbally, and so on (e.g., Kykyri et al., 2024). To be dialogic, in the relational mind sense, is to decentre emotions, thinking and acting from their usual psychological centrality. We are instead invited to consider these "psychological" features on relational terms, as responses to how we are being responded to, interpersonally and circumstantially. This can be vertigo-inducing research for brain-centric practitioners to read and contemplate. As for legitimising OD through research, a large-scale project is now under way in the United Kingdom comparing participation in OD to "treatment as usual" for psychosis (UCL, n.d.)

*Why Dialogue Does Cure* will be considered an academically oriented text by many readers of this

journal. Its central narrative interweaves clinical experiences with philosophical and research-acquired insights used to keep enhancing OD. It is also the story of working with people undergoing extreme emotional circumstances, learning from them, and refining subsequent efforts to be helpful. Bringing family and relevant community members together to address such circumstances through open-ended dialogues can seem a relatively unstructured way to provide service, particularly because there is no focus on “treating the patient” as is the case in conventional therapy for psychosis. Different sensitivities and sensibilities are asked of OD practitioners than of narrative therapists, as Seikkula points out in several places throughout the book. Though not a book targeting practitioners, he does offer a chapter near the end of the book

entitled: “Simple steps to develop dialogical skills to be present in the moment”. I appreciated reading this book for how it reminded me of the innovativeness that can come from continuously being curious about clients’ experiences while engaging with new ideas and ways of practice. Michael White (1994) said at a conference I long ago attended that good therapy is about the rigorous application of preferred ideas. Narrative therapists and community workers will find Seikkula’s recounting of OD’s development interesting for its rigour in adapting therapeutic ideas and practices shaped according to participants’ dialogic responses to them. They will also be intrigued by the great lengths OD practitioners have gone to make therapeutic experiences as collaborative as possible.

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## Power, not panic:

*Community organising and narrative practice at a time of anti-immigrant violence,  
an interview with Susan Shaw*

*Susan Shaw interviewed by David Denborough*



*Susan Shaw is community worker in Northern California, USA.  
sshaw@sonic.net*

*David Denborough is a community worker, writer and teacher  
at Dulwich Centre and The University of Melbourne.  
daviddenborough@dulwichcentre.com.au*

 ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3041-3135>



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Author pronouns: Susan Shaw: she/her/ella; David Denborough: all pronouns welcome

## *Abstract*

In this interview with David Denborough, community organiser and narrative therapist Susan Shaw reflects on more than three decades' work with communities in the United States, exploring the rich connections between narrative practice and community organising. Central to Susan's approach is the belief that those most affected by injustice are the experts on their situation and the possibilities for change. Through conversations that name shared experiences of hardship, participants connect personal stories to broader social forces, opening pathways for research, collective analysis and action. As experiences of suffering are externalised and linked to their structural causes, this creates space for grief, solidarity and a renewed sense of possibility. Against a backdrop of intensified immigration enforcement and public hostility, Susan shares grassroots responses grounded in mutual aid and solidarity. Guided by the phrase "power, not panic", community members form support networks, resist fear-driven narratives, and circulate stories of resistance that are often absent from national media coverage. Storytelling becomes a strategic and ethical practice within organising – one that strengthens collective identity, communicates shared purpose, and amplifies the knowledge and leadership of those closest to injustice.

***Key words: community organizing; social movements; mutual aid; undocumented; immigrant; collective narrative practice; narrative therapy***

In recent months, the Trump administration in the USA has unleashed relentless and deadly violence against immigrant communities and those seeking to protect them. The most vivid examples of this violence to date have occurred in Minneapolis. Across the USA, immigrant communities themselves, and those acting in solidarity with them, have responded to this state aggression in courageous and skilful ways. The responses in Minneapolis have been vividly described by long-term prison abolitionist and organiser Andrea Ritchie:

Minneapolis has met escalating state violence — part of a larger strategy of targeting Democrat-controlled cities and states ahead of this year’s midterms — with courageous, leaderful, decentralized, skilled, and adaptive resistance at scale, rooted in decades of Black and Indigenous resistance, and in the rapid response and mutual aid networks built during the first months of the COVID pandemic and in the 2020 Uprisings.

- Wherever there is an ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] vehicle, multiple cars and bikes follow behind, sounding the alarm with horns and whistles.
- Staff, parents, and community members are guarding blocks, schools, childcare centers, and apartment buildings.
- Noise demonstrations are mounted nightly outside of hotels housing ICE agents, hotel workers deny ICE access, and people book out hotel rooms to make it harder for ICE to find anywhere to sleep.
- Mutual aid networks are supporting people who can no longer leave their homes.
- Organizers are pushing the state to issue an eviction moratorium to protect people who are afraid to go to work for fear of ICE.
- Rank-and-file health care providers are organizing to defend their patients from ICE assaults and violations.

And so much more. Pre-existing networks are being reformed and renewed; while people without prior organizing or community defense experience are picking up whistles and joining rapid response chats. Together, they are creating hyperlocal, block-by-block, neighborhood-by-neighborhood networks of community defense. When no one is a leader, everyone is, and the ubiquitousness of resistance is its strength. (Ritchie, 2026)

To gain a greater understanding of the history of these highly significant responses, and also to explore links between community organising and the field of narrative therapy and community work, we reached out to Susan Shaw who has been involved in both community organising and narrative therapy in the USA for over three decades. Despite Susan’s reticence to speak of her own experiences as the work has been so collective, we greatly appreciated her agreeing to an interview and to meeting with students in an online session of the Master of Narrative Therapy and Community Work (University of Melbourne and Dulwich Centre).

The following piece was generated from the interview and the meeting with narrative therapy students. In addition to David Denborough (DD), Tanya Newman, Toni Murphy and Tiffany Sostar also asked questions.

DD: Susan, we’ve all been watching in horror at what’s taking place with Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids, abuses and even killings throughout different communities in the USA, but we hear far less about how those communities are responding, and even less about the histories of community organising in those communities. That’s one reason why it’s great to be able to speak with you today, because I know that for decades you have been part of community organising and community relationships and community solidarity in California and Mexico and with links to the rest of the North American continent. It’s also significant

to speak with you because you were one of the first people in North America to become interested in narrative therapy and community work – even before it was known as narrative therapy. I think you and colleagues at Sonoma State University hosted the first solo workshop that Michael White taught in North America. This was back in the 1980s. So, you are both a narrative therapist with decades of connection to narrative ideas and a longstanding community organiser. Do you have a sense of where we should start this conversation?

Susan: I want to start with something from chapter 11 of your book *Collective narrative practice* (Denborough, 2008) because it meant a lot to me. Is that okay if I read a paragraph? In the last chapter there's a list of themes of collective narrative practice and this intersects greatly with community organising. And then later, I'll add one caveat.

DD: Go for it.

Susan: "People's responses to hardship and trauma are forms of local social action. By acknowledging these, by more richly describing them, and by creating an ever-increasing sense of personal/collective agency, this makes it possible for people's initiatives to become linked, and for further actions to be taken. These actions may be in relation to reclaiming their lives from effects of trauma/hardship and/or in relation to preventing further harm or injustice to themselves, their community, or others" (Denborough, 2008, p. 199). So well said.

DD: How does that link to your history of community relationships and community action in your part of the world, Susan?

Susan: As was true for many young people of my generation, it was within the movement to end America's military destruction in Vietnam that I started to try to learn about

community organising: about how people can take collective action to prevent the harmful policies and practices that come out of our government and impact the rest of the world, and from then on becoming part of movement work, wherever I lived. At the same time, I was on a path to becoming a family therapist. In the areas where I worked, the families were highly impacted by dominant practices and policies within my own country, and I also gradually became more aware of what the United States was doing in Central America, in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. In 1993, our family moved to Chiapas, Mexico, during a year-long sabbatical. On January 1st 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement took effect, and the Zapatistas launched a revolution for land reform, Indigenous rights and democracy.<sup>1</sup> We were involved, at the request of the communities, in investigating the torture, murder and disappearances of members of Zapatista communities. We were supported by Centro De Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, Physicians for Human Rights and Human Rights Watch.

DD: Can you tell us a little more about your relationships with people from Central and South America within California? Because I know that it's been those relationships that have led you to be connected with so many people responding to the current raids and deportations.

Susan: In the 1990s, we moved from living in the city of Santa Rosa into a rural area of California, and in that area on the road every day were men walking up and down, and in the night, they were sleeping in the rough. We soon learnt that these men were going to this little town near where we lived to look for work. After the North American Free Trade Agreement between Mexico, Canada and the United States passed, it effectively instituted a further,

larger economic apartheid between the United States and Mexico, and led to many people, mostly men, leaving their Mexican communities to look for work. This area had been a traditional place for men to stand on the street corner and get hired for agricultural and construction work, and so they came here. They didn't have anywhere to sleep, they didn't have places to live, so they were sleeping under bridges and living on the edge of a vineyard. In the winter this was a swampy area, but in the spring and summer it was dry and people were staying in there. These men were walking up and down the road every day, going to the little town to seek work. At the same time, the town was gentrifying, so there was a lot of conflict between some of the new people who were moving into the town and those who had been coming for over 50 years.

It was in response to these circumstances that I got involved in a community initiative and we then formed what is called a labour centre. People joined this centre as members. We held assemblies twice a week, and they made all the decisions about the process and whatever else they needed. This collaborative process and centre, which was directed by the members, brought dignity to the work seeking. In time, doctors from a clinic started coming to the labour centre and providing an opportunity for people to access medical services. There were also various classes and trainings, like English, work safety and workers' rights.

We were connected to a national organisation called the National Day Labor Organising Network. Many of the key folks from this network were from El Salvador and were using Paulo Freire's pedagogies (Freire, 1970, 1972, 1994). We all trained in Freirean approaches, and we connected with others who were organising day labourers in San Francisco and other parts of California.

From that, we realised we didn't have enough power as day labourers and domestic workers. In a broad community effort, begun by David Walls, we started to develop a bigger organisation in order to collaborate with congregations, unions and conservation organisations. We formed something called the North Bay Organizing Project, which linked these different organisations specifically to build power so that we could effect policy and structural change.

From that point onwards, we started winning policy changes as we worked together. It's our belief that the people who are most affected by the problem know the most about it and know how to identify solutions. Our members, the people most affected, were identifying which issues were most problematic and leading research about these issues. In turn, the findings of this research enabled us to take action. Some of the early campaigns that were successful included ensuring that all of law enforcement would accept government matricula identification cards from Mexico, El Salvador and other Central American countries as valid forms of identification.<sup>2</sup> This campaign was sparked by a community event in which a couple of people were essentially kidnapped off the street by local police and detained in the local county jail and then given over to what at that time was called La Migra – now Immigration and Customs Enforcement. So, we went to meet with the local chief of police about this, and he said that the reason people were being taken to jail was because the police didn't have any way of knowing who these folks were; they didn't have any way of verifying that they are who they say they are. One of our leaders started talking about the matricula ID from his country of El Salvador, and that led to a nine-month-long process of

working with the county sheriff, building community engagement and creating outside pressure. The sheriff then sent his assistant sheriff to the Mexican Consulate in San Francisco to research how they give out these IDs. The sheriff led meetings with all the police chiefs in the county, and they then decided to accept these IDs countywide. It reduced the number of people being taken off the streets by 90%, and it also dramatically reduced the numbers of people who were being turned over to ICE detention, reducing the numbers of deportations by 90%. This also coincided with the beginning of statewide campaigns that resulted in new laws that limit local law enforcement collaboration with ICE in order to protect immigrant communities.

These changes occurred after we had formed an immigrant defence task force. Something important about this task force was the collective storytelling forums in which people could share their experiences with each other. One person would share their story about their experience with the police and another person would say, "That also happened to me" or "That happened to my child in school". Within these collective settings there were opportunities to talk about what was traumatic and creating suffering in a way that was externalised. The collective would clearly state, "Let's put this where it belongs. This is not about you and anything wrong with you. This is about these particular policies. This is about the sheriff behaving in a certain way – it's against the law what he's doing". These conversations would lead to problems being named and then all kinds of research would get done to work out what was happening and what could be done about it. These conversations and this researching changes the person who first told the story. It also changes those of us listening and changes our relationship to what's happening.

DD: I recall other significant achievements too, including campaigns in schools. Can you say something about these also?

Susan: Yes, we also created an education taskforce that took on the practice of discipline in the Santa Rosa City Schools District. At the time, the Santa Rosa school district was fifth in the state in relation to the rate of expulsions – the number of kids being expelled from schools. This has major implications in the lives of individuals, families and whole communities as there is a huge connection or pipeline to incarceration when you've been expelled from school. Many parents whose kids were experiencing expulsion and wrongful detention cited profiling at school. They came together in the education taskforce. The task force did a whole lot of studying, talking to people in the school district, talking to attorneys, working with other groups of students and parents, and eventually they compelled the board of directors of the school district to adopt restorative discipline in schools. This implementation of restorative discipline practices reduced the number of people being expelled by over 90%.

David: Wow, that's a huge achievement with significant intergenerational effects! That is a huge issue here in Australia and in many parts of the world. Sounds like we could learn a lot from that campaign alone. These stories and histories give us a bit of a glimpse of the rigorous grassroots relationship-building and organising approach you and your communities have been involved with. You mentioned the approach of Paulo Freire, and in those storytelling forums you just mentioned, I could sense a little of the influence of storytelling or narrative approaches. Before we focus on some of the responses to the current crisis, can you say a little more about how your training and experience as a narrative

family therapist was influential in the roles you have played in community organising? You've mentioned the collective storytelling forums that are involved, but in many community organising traditions, particularly those of Saul Alinsky, one-on-one conversations also play a key role (Alinsky, 1971; Walls, 2015). Can you say more about these and how your narrative family therapy skills are linked to this?

Susan: Yes, sure. "One-on-ones" are the individual conversations that are a part of building relationships that then build broader community actions. As a community organiser and a collective narrative practitioner, we are always very interested in finding more people who might like to join others in taking action. We are constantly looking for anyone who's yearning, who's looking, who's interested in wanting to do things to change what is happening for them, their families, their community. Someone may have come to an initial public meeting, or we may have met them in another way, and I would always be inviting people into these one-on-one conversations. And in a one-on-one, what we look for is what is really alive for the person in their life that has drawn them to come to the first meeting or to express interest in participating in something that's bigger than them. These conversations are precious to me. As therapists, we know it's an amazing gift to be able to sit with people and to hear about what's going on in their lives and how they're being affected by the things that are going on. I really appreciate how the Just Therapy Team refer to these conversations as sacred.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, they are also very diverse! Generally speaking though, we ask someone for a one-on-one, sit down with them and start to enquire about their experience. We ask them about what was bringing them to these meetings, what did they care about, what they are

angry about, what's happened in their life that's connected to their values. We also ask about what they are hoping for and looking for. And then ask, "What is it that you want to do?" And we look for links between what has happened to them, what they have experienced, what they care about, and links to particular social actions that they want to take. We ask: What are you looking for in terms of creating community with other people? What are you looking for in terms of action that you want to take linked to your own hardship and suffering? Of course, we weren't just asking one question about hardship and suffering. We are really listening to what it is they want to talk about and what they want to share.

And I have to say that people don't often have the opportunity to have this kind of conversation where someone is really interested in them. They might be sitting in meetings with someone or going to church with them for 20 years but there will be things they've never gotten to talk about. These kinds of conversations have their own sort of power. They can be incredibly rich and moving. These conversations hopefully open a little door into where a person's pain and suffering and their desire for social action might have a home.

DD: That's an incredibly beautiful way of putting it. I remember when we talked a few years ago, you were very clear that this one-on-one conversation was often the first chance folks have had to talk about their suffering, so in no way did you rush over their experiences of hardship or suffering. Can you say a little more about that? Obviously, you were also then finding ways that this conversation could be generative, but can you just say a little bit more about how the ethos that might accompany you in a therapy room perhaps also assisted

you in knowing that there was something very important about honouring the hardships and the suffering that folks were talking about for the first time?

Susan: You're actually saying it really well, David. These were not therapy conversations and so the invitation and my responsibilities are not the same. But these conversations are an opportunity to ask more questions and to find out what it is that people did about the suffering and hardship that they experienced, and that's where I feel like narrative practice really informed these one-on-ones. I always felt that within the Alinsky model of organising, what was missing in the one-on-ones were questions that elicit buried stories, alternative stories, and that explore what people are doing to overcome hardships and trauma.

In the one-on-one conversations we are a part of, the hardships people had experienced weren't just acknowledged with "Oh, that sounds really hard". Instead, we had the chance to ask more questions about what it is they did to mitigate their suffering and how they did this. Or what it is they did to protect others and what was important to them at the time. And then how these experiences connect them to a larger desire to take social action that will lead to other people not having to go through the same things. In these conversations, we're creating a window for agency.

DD: I really appreciate that concept – "a window for agency". At the same time, I have a sense that in these conversations, whether the one-on-ones or the collective forums, you are also very deliberately trying to make visible the broader operations of power that have caused suffering and are continuing to produce injustice. Can you say a little more about this?

Susan: That is definitely part of the one-on-ones because there has to be an acknowledgment of what the person has experienced and what the effects of dominant practices and policies have been on their lives. That becomes part of the conversation. There has to be an acknowledgment of the role of what one might call "dominant power" in their lives and the lives of their family. In the collective meetings and trainings, we facilitate people having these kinds of conversations with each other.

DD: What Freire (1970) would refer to as conscientization/conscientização?

Susan: Yes, and when someone's speaking about their experiences of hardship and in the conversation this is connected to what's actually causing the suffering, it brings a particular sort of resonance and an externalisation. Sometimes this creates room for further expression of grief, but it can also bring a sense that there's a way out of this. Especially when people then embark on research in collective processes. We ask: What's holding up the problem? Why does the problem exist? For instance, we managed to get free student bus passes for local transportation, and addressing the problem led us to research about where the funding for local transportation actually comes from and how it works. We learnt that money comes from the federal government to communities through a nine-county regional government agency, and that's who makes decisions about who gets money for what. Those are political decisions.

It was an incredible research journey when we started to look closely at any of these issues. There wasn't very much money needed to make bus transportation in our local county free for college students, high school students and middle school students. It was something like

\$5 million. Once we figured that out, then we discovered the levers of who makes this decision and how can it be made. That involved meeting with a lot of the transit people – both the city transit people and the county transit people – and our local elected representatives. This also always involves forming new relationships. Our leaders and these folks who didn't necessarily make the policy could give us information that we could then take to the people who made the policy. We gathered different groups' and people's support along the way, and we won the campaign.

DD: Let's come to the present, when the communities with which you have been in solidarity and in relationship for so many decades are now under renewed attack. I know this is not the beginning of attack, this has been happening for a long time, but there's now a renewed hostility, violence and horror taking place. Every day on our screens we see ICE raids and arrests, and abductions, detention and deportations. I know people are responding in so many different ways, but these are less known to us. Please can you tell us whatever you think would be important for us to know.

Susan: Well, I think one thing that has been significant is the creation of rapid response networks, and in our case, of the North Bay Rapid Response Network. After Trump was inaugurated in 2017, the vitriolic, cruel, hateful language that was coming out of the president and his people was terrifying for many people who lived in our county and all over the country. In response, groups of us started meeting and investigating what could be done, and one of the things was to develop a rapid response network. This was inspired by earlier groups including Migra Watch (ICE used to be called Migra). In turn, Migra Watch had been inspired by Cop Watch, which was created by the Black Panthers back in the 1960s.<sup>4</sup>

We took on developing the network, which had several components. First of all, we created a hotline that people can call and say, "ICE is at my door". Secondly, we started to get information out and did trainings all throughout the community about people's rights. And thirdly, we trained about 1000 people called legal observers. These are people who could then be called or texted, and on a minute's notice get to where they then videotaped and documented what Immigration and Customs Enforcement were doing. The dispatchers would also stay on the phone with the person to keep supporting them in the exercising of their rights. And then the documentation of these assaults would be sent to our attorneys regionally and nationally.

Our rapid response network was able to link up with rapid response networks all over the state that were forming, and together we formed the California Collaborative for Immigrant Justice.<sup>5</sup> Once this was in place, we were then able to have attorneys attend the processing centre in San Francisco where people were detained to help them understand their rights and give them legal advice about what they could be doing.

Importantly, this entire process was directed by a group of people who are most affected. They put together principles that we followed in our meetings, and then we could engage a huge number of allies who really cared about what was happening in their community. Alongside this, we also formed a cohort of people who would attend legal hearings with people. Further groups of people then formed to help people who did get refugee status or who were waiting to get their status to help them find housing and support them. This became a broader project besides the hotline in relation to showing up for people as they were being

attacked by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Crucially, we were building networks of people in all the different parts of our county. These small groups formed relationships with families and people who were under attack and assisted them. We saw this as a mutual aid endeavour, not a service project.

DD: So, these were all put in place after 2017. What has happened between now and then?

Susan: We used to call Obama the “Deporter in Chief”, because up to the point that Trump was elected for the second time, he was the person who had deported the most people from this country. But when Trump was put into office this time around, it became so much worse. The overt cruelty and power grabs are having a huge impact on our communities – and on all of us, actually. Our rapid response network is very active and growing. We have way more dispatchers and another thousand people have been trained as legal observers. That’s just a local example. The California Collaborative for Immigrant Justice has become much bigger. Many other organisations, like the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, are much more outspoken and active, and people are finding ways to draw courage from each other.

Our slogan is “power, not panic”. All our actions are about taking our power and supporting each other to not necessarily feel like we have to start hiding out or caving in. Those of us with more privilege and more safety are able to call out these dominant practices, fight them, and support each other to keep doing that. But it’s really, really difficult now in this country.

DD: I bet it is. Those histories of how the rapid response networks began seem really significant to me. I knew of the

current networks and the work that they are doing, but I didn’t know those histories. Can you say more about “power, not panic” and finding ways to enable courage in each other? These are devastating, terrifying times.

Susan: I agree with you that histories are important, and I want to acknowledge the long history of communities standing up to the police. I mentioned earlier that Migra Watch grew out of the Black Panthers’ Cop Watch. As we were building the rapid response network, we were learning from people from New York to California who had already built these networks.

DD: Aunty Toni, did you want to say something about this?

Toni Murphy: Yes. I love that reference to the Black Panther movement. They had a really big influence on my family members in Sydney. That shared knowledge helped Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here to stand up for civil and human rights and to create health services, legal services, and to keep the police away from our people. I was recently talking to one of my aunties about a reunion of the Black Panther movement throughout the world. So, thank you for mentioning the Black Panthers, it really brings back some good memories for me and my family. These histories still motivate me to be proactive in this space.

DD: Thanks, Aunty Toni. For those who would like to know more about the Black Power movement in Australia, we can include links to Uncle Gary Foley’s website and archives.<sup>6</sup> Susan, can we come back to what you said about your slogan being “power, not panic” and how at this time you are collectively finding ways to give courage to each other or spark courage in each other? In these disturbing times, those themes seem so important.

Susan: The circulation of accurate stories and stories of resistance is a big part of this. The national media doesn't circulate any of this, so our own connections to local media, and to media that is national but is of smaller size, are really important. We have a whole process now in which we try to confirm that Immigration and Customs Enforcement has either detained/kidnapped someone or is currently in the community. We circulate that information. We have a template that gets filled out and put on Instagram and Facebook. People can follow this network and access accurate information, which is crucial because there are so many rumours.

DD: And rumours, disinformation and confusion are a key part of the strategy of authoritarianism ...

Susan: Yes, so when there's a rumour, we can investigate it. If the rumour is found to be not true, we post that. When it's found to be true, we post that. When it's something in between, like we're investigating, we post that. This sharing of information helps a lot because people then have a way to find out accurate information.

Circulating the stories of resistance, the stories of powerful actions that people are taking, is also crucial. These stories really help us and help each other. They also communicate "power, not panic", and that we're stronger when we're together in community, we're stronger when we know about each other. It's incredibly heartening to be able to hear and see those stories. There are so many local actions that we broadcast and that people then turn out to. This includes national actions across the country and also local stories that are not covered accurately by national media.

Another key factor in "power, not panic" involves holding community events where people can come and eat food and dance

and have fun together: any actions that convey that we're not alone – that no-one's alone – make a huge difference.

DD: Thanks, Susan. We have a few questions from other folks now. Over to you, Tanya.

Tanya Newman: Thank you so much. I also come from a background in community organising and community development and am now really appreciating learning about collective narrative practice. I'd love to hear your reflections on what you see as the key similarities and differences, and whether there's any sources of friction you find between those different traditions in your work?

Susan: That's a great question and brings me back to the caveat I mentioned at the beginning of the conversation. One thing that stands out for me is that in community organising, there are the overt discussions about power and then organised actions to seek to address policies and dominant practices. The desire to take social action to mitigate or influence or make a difference in the lives of other people who might be experiencing the same problems, which is a key principle of collective narrative practice, doesn't necessarily lead into conversations about power that deconstruct the dominant policies and practices that are affecting people's lives. Contributing to the lives of others also affected by dominant power doesn't necessarily lead to collective efforts to directly tackle or address those dominant policies and practices – and that's the focus of community organising. The Just Therapy Team in Aotearoa have certainly combined therapy and research to seek to influence social policy in New Zealand, and I find that work very liberating.<sup>7</sup> So, I'm very interested in combining collective narrative practice and community organising. Perhaps that's also something you are interested in?

Tiffany Sostar: Can you say a little more about how the forms of community organising you have been involved with relate to the material realities of people's experiences and to mutual aid?

Susan: We have so much to learn about mutual aid from the communities who are most marginalised in any country. One example that stands out for me is how folks here in California responded to horrific fires in 2017. In the fires, 5000 homes were destroyed, large numbers of people lost their work, and so many people were displaced from their communities and fled from the fires to the beaches. It's actually very cold out on the beaches here, and people didn't have enough to keep them warm. The local community mobilised and provided blankets and food, but the broader material needs of people at this time were quite extreme and many of the folks most affected were undocumented, so they did not qualify for assistance from government agencies including the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). At this time, our organisation and a number of others<sup>8</sup> joined to create a mutual aid fund we called UndocuFund<sup>9</sup> to aid the undocumented community in disaster recovery. It's based on the principles of centring those closest to injustice to build power and identify solutions.

DD: That sounds really significant. I read in one of your reports (Lopez-Grady et al., 2020, p. 1) how you recommend empowering, sustaining and financing "culturally competent community leaders for mutual aid disaster response and policy development" and funding "community-driven navigation, preparedness, response, and recovery". It sounds like UndocuFund is a very different form of disaster-relief "agency" because it invests in community organising and mutual aid – it invests in local "agency".

Susan: Yes, and UndocuFund has become a prototype, and they are now all over the country.

DD: But the first one originated in Sonoma County. How did you begin?

Susan: During the fires, four organisations embedded in the immigrant communities met to talk through what was happening and what we could do. UndocuFund was born in that meeting. After the fires were out, our organisation, North Bay Organizing Project, was organising with undocumented people whose houses had burned down, had barely made it out with their lives, and with many who had lost their jobs. The first step involved them talking with each other, sharing experiences. From these conversations, they investigated, and from these processes they developed a series of demands: how they thought people should be treated by officials who supposedly "respond" to disasters. The group became very close through the sharing of stories and over the following year successfully won changes from the county in their emergency response.

We moved quickly before even the end of the fires, and once UndocuFund was established, every applicant was interviewed in Spanish and we only kept notes on a piece of paper. We couldn't create online files because this was right after Trump was elected, and we were terrified about people's identities being exposed and putting them at risk of being detained or deported. There were so many intricate solutions we had to find. I truly believe that there are myriad solutions to the problems we are facing in the world, but they're not going to come from the people in power. The place they're going to come from is people who don't have power. Consulting them and shifting power so that what *they* know can take up more space and be acted upon is a way

forward. I think it's those beliefs that are also what drew me to narrative therapy.

David: There's one other connection between community organising and narrative practice that I'd like to ask you about, and that's in relation to "personal narrative". Marshall Ganz (2009, 2011) has taught for many years about the public narrative framework (see Leading Change Network et al., 2014) within community organising. Can you say more about this?

Susan: Yes, there's been a lot of work about how community leaders and organisations can tell their own stories in public arenas in ways to strengthen campaigns, and at the same time, how to do this in ways that don't leave us more vulnerable after the telling. We do trainings in relation to this, and storytelling is actually a key element of organising. One of the things that we will say is, "If you don't tell your story, somebody else is going to tell it for you". It's often a definitional moment when someone decides they want to publicly tell their story – the story of how their life is connected to this campaign. But we take a lot of care with this. We offer training about ways of shaping and sharing personal narratives. When they do tell their story and this resonates with other people in the room, this brings collective richness. It can also be a very significant turning point for individuals as they step into leadership. I can still vividly recall the moment when particular people who now play key leadership roles as community organisers first told their personal narrative in public. For instance, I remember the first time that a young man who went on to lead the education taskforce first shared his personal narrative publicly and the thought and care that went in to those preparations.

David: Can you say more about these preparations and how you train and support people in relation to

telling or performing their personal narrative? I'd be particularly interested in how your experience in narrative therapy has influenced you in this.

Susan: In our tradition of community organising, we are constantly supporting *local* folks to step into leadership. This is different to some organising traditions in which outsiders to the community come in to lead the organising. Part of the work of constantly supporting new leadership involves working closely with them about how they want to talk about themselves and their lives. They are going to be leading meetings, or they're going to be leading a press conference, or they're going to be meeting with public officials. For each of these contexts, what they are going to share and how they are going to share it is planned ahead of time so that they have control over this. We hold workshops in which people break into small groups to work on their stories and to practice telling them to each other. This process of preparation means that folks are making choices about what to share and what not to. You're not just blurting out something that then could leave you feeling really vulnerable.

David: So, this is about having some control or autonomy and authority in relation to the personal narrative that you are choosing to share publicly. Earlier you were describing that in the one-on-one conversations, people often share with you some very significant experiences of hardship, and how narrative therapy practices have been helpful in eliciting people's *responses* to these hardships. It sounded like narrative arcs were being shaped in ways that were generating an increasing sense of personal agency. Are any of these sorts of considerations also at play in preparing for the telling of personal narratives in public places? I'm assuming

that narratives that are representative of *personal* agency may also generate resonances for collective agency.

Susan: Listening for submerged stories of how folks are dealing with things is a huge part of organising practice. Huge. I wasn't thinking about this in the same way when I was a younger organiser.

David: Susan, these considerations of story, narrative and community organising are multifaceted! Thank you so much for talking with us about all of this. We have such respect for the ways you and your team and communities are responding to the current horrors and degradations in your part of the world. We'll include some links so that folks can learn from you all, and/or join you in your efforts.

## Links

North Bay Rapid Response Network:  
<https://www.northbayop.org/nbrnn>

North Bay Organizing Project:  
<https://www.northbayop.org/>

California Collaborative for Immigrant Justice: <https://www.ccijjustice.org/>

UndocuFund: <https://undocufund.org/>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> To read about the Zapatista uprising, see Holloway & Pelaez (1998); Marcos (2022); Ross (1995).
- <sup>2</sup> Matricula ID is an official identity card issued by the consulates of Mexico, El Salvador and other central American countries to nationals living abroad.
- <sup>3</sup> The Just Therapy Team's three key values are belonging, sacredness and liberation (see Waldegrave, 2000).
- <sup>4</sup> To read about the history of the Black Panther Party, see Bloom and Martin (2016).
- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.ccijjustice.org/>
- <sup>6</sup> To learn more of these histories, see Gary Foley's Aboriginal History Archive: <https://kooiweb.org/foley/indexb.html> <https://www.youtube.com/@AboriginalHistoryArchive/videos>
- <sup>7</sup> To learn more about the work of the Just Therapy Team, see this free online course: <https://dulwichcentre.com.au/courses/just-therapy-team-free-online-course/>
- <sup>8</sup> These included the Graton Day Labor Center, North Bay Organizing Project, Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees and North Bay Jobs with Justice.
- <sup>9</sup> For more information about UndocuFund, see Lopez-Grady et al. (2020), Pho (2020), and <https://undocufund.org/>

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