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Conceptualising Conferences as Community Events

By the late 1990s it seemed an appropriate time to try to bring narrative practitioners together and this was the impetus for hosting the inaugural International Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference in Adelaide in February 1999. Having decided to hold such an event, the key questions became: How could this conference be hosted as a community event? How could it be a way of bringing together a community which is linked through certain ideas and ways of working?

Over the last six years, we have been involved with many others in hosting six international conferences. The first three were held in Adelaide, Australia. The fourth was held at Spelman College, an African American women's college in Atlanta, Georgia, in conjunction with Vanessa Mahmoud, Vanessa Jackson and Makungu Akinyela. The fifth was held in Liverpool, UK, in partnership with Hugh Fox and Anita Franklin from the Centre for Narrative Practice, Manchester. While the sixth was held in Oaxaca, Mexico ,building upon longstanding relationships with Nacho Maldonaldo and Emily Sued and in conjunction with Instituto Latinoamericano de Estudios de la Familia, ILEF. Further conferences are planned for Hong Kong and Norway. Holding these community events has involved more challenges, dilemmas and learning than we would ever have imagined! Bringing together hundreds of people from a diversity of backgrounds and countries over a number of days involves complex

responsibilities. We hope that documenting some of our reflections on the process of organising these conference will in turn lead to more conversation, feedback and creativity about how such community events can be hosted. We would very much value your feedback.

Our hopes

In the lead-up to our first conference, we spent considerable time consulting with people about what sort of event they would most like to attend. We asked many questions about people's past experience of professional conferences. We also travelled to New Zealand to consult at length with Kiwi Tamasese, Charles Waldegrave, Flora Tuhaka and Warihi Campbell of the Just Therapy Team in order to consider what a conference would look like through their eyes and how we could take into account matters of culture, gender, class, sexual orientation and other relations of power. The Just Therapy Team have remained vital partners in the organisation of all the conferences we have held. Many of the learnings described here have come from the conversations we have shared.

Throughout these consultations we gradually became clearer about some of our hopes for the conferences we wished to hold. While knowing that we would make many mistakes along the way, the following ideals were what we were aiming for:

- to provide high quality presentations on the latest thinking and application of narrative ideas and to do so in ways that enable people of differing experience to be both engaged and challenged
- to enable people of different cultures, countries, genders, ages, class backgrounds, physical abilities[1] and sexual identities to come together, enjoy each other's company, and have a sense that the conference program and processes include their perspectives, hopes and ideas
- to use the conference as a chance to acknowledge and come to terms with the history of the land on which it is held
- to create an opportunity for participants to build a sense of connectedness and to contribute to the building of a community of ideas

- to provide the opportunity and support necessary for individuals and groups who have never presented before at conferences (and indeed may never have told their stories in front of an audience) to present the stories of their lives and their particular knowledges and skills in keynote addresses
- to create an atmosphere that is non-hierarchical, with no pronounced difference between presenters and participants
- to provide a forum for conversations that are expanding the field (not confirming it or simply reiterating what is already known)
- to de-centre the conference collective in both the lead-up and during the conference itself so that the focus remains on everyone's contributions to a community event

Alongside these hopes we speculated that our key publishing principles, that were outlined in Chapter Two, could equally apply to conferences. With careful preparation we hoped that we could ensure that presentations at the conferences: opened space for conversations; refrained from locating problems within individuals or communities; took care with the politics of representation; and were of direct relevance to practitioners.

In articulating these hopes, we do not mean to suggest that other organisers should think similarly[2]. Every event has its own aims, its own history, its own context. These were our hopes and we knew from the beginning that trying to host such events would stretch us to the limit and probably beyond. We knew that there would be sleepless nights and times of profound complexity. To organise any event that is genuinely inclusive of many perspectives quite simply involves a lot of hard work. We also don't mean to suggest that the events we have hosted have necessarily fulfilled all these hopes all of the time! And where these hopes have been fulfilled, this has been the result of collective efforts of many, many people – including all the conference participants.

Welcome to a community event

In conceptualising a conference as a community event, one of the key considerations involves making participants feel welcome and we have discovered that this can be much more complex than it sounds.

In order to create a context where people from considerably different perspectives, histories and cultures can come together to discuss stories that are heartfelt and meaningful to their lives, we have put particular energy into considering the experience of those participants who do not feel a part of the mainstream therapy world and may themselves have a history of not feeling included or welcomed at mainstream conferences. We are determined that our conferences are a different experience for these participants. This seems vital to us, because if these participants do not feel welcomed and included then this is a loss for everyone, as it immediately limits the possibilities for meaningful conversations across difference.

From the very first notices that we make public about a conference we announce a series of welcoming events for members of marginalised cultures and groups. These are opportunities for people to meet informally prior to the conference and to build a sense of connectedness. These events commonly include a women's gathering; a lesbian or queer welcoming dinner; a lunch or dinner for Indigenous people and/or people of colour; and at times Jewish and Muslim events.

Holding these events and, equally importantly, advertising these events as a key element of the conference process, makes a difference to who attends the conference and how it is experienced. We have been told a number of times by particular participants that the reason they made the decision to travel a considerable distance to attend the conference was because of these welcoming events and what they represent.

This process also enables us as organisers to build relationships prior to the conference with those who sign up for these welcoming events. In the past these relationships have then made possible presentations or informal talks within the conference which build on the skills, knowledges and perspectives of people from non-dominant groups. Without the welcoming events these presentations would not have evolved.

We should also mention, however, that sometimes we receive negative feedback about the prominence given to these welcoming events. They have at times been experienced by members of dominant groups as 'exclusive' or 'unwelcoming' of their experience. These are complex matters

and in response we have simply tried to be transparent about our thinking and our hopes. We have, at times, placed on our webpage some of the questions that we have been asked about this process and some short responses from our perspective as organisers. Here are some examples:

It seems you are putting a lot of energy into particular welcoming events for people of marginalised cultures. Why is this?

We do put a lot of energy into trying to ensure that the conference is a welcoming place for people of diverse cultures, and for those for whom mainstream society and conferences often provide little sense of belonging. We consider that this benefits everyone because by doing so it allows many different peoples to come together. This is based on the experience that at most conferences, workplaces and professional settings there is rarely an acknowledgement that the status quo is far more welcoming to those of the dominant culture (i.e. in Australia this is historically a white Christian heterosexual culture) than those of other cultures and perspectives. By creating an alternative context, one that deliberately puts effort into welcoming those who often feel least welcome, this offers a chance for meaningful connection across differences. We see this as a prerequisite for 'coming together'. We believe that making the effort to welcome those who often feel least welcomed will contribute to this sense of coming together.

Why can't we just focus on what we have in common, in this case a way of working in our respective fields?

In our experience, acknowledging differences in perspective, history and thinking allows for much greater appreciation of what we have in common. In narrative terms, this generates rich descriptions of relationships rather than thin descriptions. By putting efforts into welcoming those who are usually least welcomed we hope this will then set the context for a joining together on what we have in common: the work and ideas and hopes towards healing. In the case of the conference, what everyone will have in common is an interest in narrative ideas, in finding non-pathologising ways of working, and in finding new ways of healing for those with whom we work.

What about members of dominant groups? Are you taking similar efforts to make them feel included?

As mentioned above, everyone is warmly welcomed. We see it as our responsibility to ensure that everyone feels welcome and so there are many ways in which we welcome all participants into the spirit of the event. We put a lot of effort into thinking through how best to provide everyone with a sense of belonging at the conference. This includes trying to create contexts for those who come to the conference alone (without friends or colleagues) to make meaningful connections early on during the conference events. At our previous conferences, far from anyone stating that they felt excluded, the overwhelming feedback we received was that these conferences have been unusually friendly, respectful and inclusive events. We think that putting extra care into welcoming those who are usually the least welcomed actually benefits everyone.

A broader commitment

This principle of welcome is carried over into all aspects of conference planning. It would be really incongruent to create diverse welcoming processes and then prioritise the dominant culture throughout the rest of the conference. Instead, the structures, content, space allocation, indeed all aspects of the conference, need to reflect a genuine attempt to create a community event of equal relevance and resonance to a diversity of peoples. This may necessitate establishing physical spaces within the conference venue for various groups to meet in (for instance, at various conferences, tents or particular rooms have been set aside as meeting places for people of particular groups). It may involve scholarships to certain individuals, organisations and/or communities. It always significantly influences the conference program and keynote addresses.

Building connections prior to the conference

Apart from the welcoming events, there is another key aspect of organisation in the lead-up to the conference which connects participants. This involves email correspondence and the conference website. These new forms of technology make it possible for us to build a sense of connection with participants long before the conference begins.

We try to regard each correspondence that relates to the conference as an invitation to build connection. It is now possible, at low cost (although considerable work) to send personalised emails at regular intervals to all participants. These emails enable us to let people know how the planning process is going, to share any news that may be relevant, and to invite them to re-visit the conference website to view updates. These emails are always friendly, open-hearted and up-beat. They express our genuine gratitude that people are interested and engaged in the conference and our hopes that the conference will be an opportunity to build relationships that will continue. In this way, the administration of the conference becomes community work[3].

On the conference website, apart from standard information about pre-conference workshops and practical information, we also include a section which describes the thinking that shapes the conference and that invites participants' reflections, ideas and comments. This represents transparency and also a wish to include participants in some of the hopes and dilemmas involved in conference organising. If we share with participants some of the complexities involved in organising these events (particularly around broader issues of culture, gender, sexual identity, class, etc.), we find that we can draw upon their ideas and experiences on these issues much more readily during the conference itself. By sharing the dilemmas and thinking along the way, we are not left isolated as organisers. Instead, we can draw upon the knowledge and skills within the community of participants to respond to events that may occur during the community event.

With some sense of connection already in existence by the time we gather together on the first morning of the conference, it is then time for the opening ceremony.

The opening ceremony ~ a welcome to the land

The following words were the first spoken at our inaugural conference. They were spoken by Uncle Lewis O'Brien, the Senior Elder of the Kaurna people of the Adelaide Plains, as he stood outside on a summer's morning facing 650 participants from many different countries:

Munara, ngai wanggandi 'Marni na Budni Kaurna yertaanna'.
Worttangga, 'Marni na budni Banda-banbalya'.
Ngai Birko-mankolankola Tandanyanku.

First let me welcome you to Kaurna Country.
Next, 'I welcome you all to the Conference
as Ambassador of the Adelaide people.
I used the word Banba-banbalya which means conference.
Our people ran conferences in this country for thousands of years.
I have an Uncle on tape telling how the Narrungas, Ngadjuri,
Nukuni and the Kaurna came together. You might say,
'So what?' Then I might put this to you: in Australia
there were 250 Aboriginal languages and 850 dialects,
and yet all the different groups had the Dreaming.
That to me shows a management educational achievement
that has not been done anywhere else in the world.
Ngaityo Yungandalya Ngaityo Yakkanandalya
Thank you my brothers, my sisters

The opening of any community event sets the context for all that follows. To be welcomed to the land by its Indigenous custodians is an honour. It is also an act that questions assumptions and taken-for-granted hierarchies. The purpose of this welcome is not to be educational (although it often is to many of us). It is instead to follow a protocol of respect and to acknowledge that it is not the place of the conference organisers[4], nor high status professionals in the field to speak first. This instead is a role that can only be filled by a representative of those people with the longest links to the land upon which we are standing.

Indigenous welcomes are now becoming more accepted throughout Australia before any major event. This is due, of course, to the generations of hard work of Indigenous Australians to raise awareness that Indigenous ways of being have existed in this land for thousands of years and that they continue to hold relevance and indeed reverence in the present day.

The Kaurna people have been dispossessed of their land and discriminated against within their own country and yet open-heartedly welcome us to the land. This is profoundly moving and also a powerfully political act. It demonstrates that Indigenous ways of living and links to land have survived and this in turn is connected to other political struggles.

For conference participants and organisers alike, to be welcomed to the land by its Indigenous custodians invites us all to remember that we are guests. It invites us to consider how we are linked to land and history. Perhaps more importantly, by demonstrating their generosity of spirit, the Indigenous people of the land set an open-hearted context for the conference which we, as organisers, powerfully appreciate.

Significantly, we understand that to be welcomed to the land in this way invites certain responsibilities of us as organisers and of all conference participants. It is a reciprocal process. Once conference participants have been welcomed to the land by the Indigenous custodians, we have a responsibility to maintain a consciousness of this welcome, and all that it means, throughout the entire conference. We have a responsibility for conversations throughout the conference to acknowledge certain histories that are spoken in the welcome.

The ways in which this occurs vary depending upon the context. Often keynote talks throughout the event are linked to the events of the opening ceremony. Presentations on related themes occur over the duration of the event. The very ways in which meetings and discussions are held during the conference also seek to remain consistent with the values described in the Indigenous welcome.

In Adelaide, the process of creating the welcome is relatively straightforward. The Kaurna people have clear protocols as to who is to offer these welcomes, and relationships are in place to enable this to occur. It was not so simple when we tried to think through what a welcome to the land would look like at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia – the venue for our fourth conference.

Spelman College – an African American context

Spelman College is an historically black women's college. It is a proud and vibrant African American institution and we were profoundly

honoured when Vanessa Mahmoud invited us to hold our 4th International Conference in conjunction with the Spelman College Counselling Department[5].

To hold an international conference in connection with others requires considerable trust and partnership. In order to understand more about the context of Spelman College and African American experience we began some thorough research, including travelling to Ghana with two African American colleagues, Vanessa Jackson and Makungu Akinyela, to visit the slave trade castles of the Cape Coast (Amemasor 2002). Hosting a conference at Spelman College was for us, in many ways, an invitation into seeing the world through different eyes.

When it came to considering the opening ceremony for the Spelman Conference, our Indigenous Australian colleagues, Tim Agius and Barbara Wingard (without whom these conferences would look very different), clearly and matter-of-factly stated that they would love to attend but that they wouldn't be able to do so unless they were welcomed by the appropriate Indigenous people of that land. And yet, we were concerned that to even raise the issue of the need for a welcome by Native Americans could be disrespectful to our African American hosts and possibly divisive between African American and Native American communities. At least, this is what we were told by various people. It did not, however, work out this way. Our African American colleagues at Spelman College embraced the idea and together we began what turned out to be quite a journey.

When we began to research who would be the appropriate Native American peoples of Atlanta, Georgia, it soon became pretty complex. It seemed that historically this was land linked to both the Muscogee and the Cherokee people. However, neither the Muscogee nor the Cherokee still live in Georgia. The Muscogee now live in Oklahoma many hundreds of miles away. What's more we soon learnt that there are now three Cherokee Nations: the Eastern Band of the Cherokee, the descendants of whom hid out and avoided the Trail of Tears and now reside in the mountains of North Carolina; the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma; and the Keetowah Band of the Cherokee who also reside in Oklahoma and are a smaller community. When we turned to our Indigenous Australian colleagues and told them about this and that it all looked pretty complicated they quietly but firmly

replied: 'You know what to do'. And so we set off to visit each of these Indigenous Nations to tell them the stories of our conferences and the meaning of Indigenous welcomes in Australia, and to ask their advice as to what a welcoming ceremony would look like in Atlanta, Georgia. We did not go alone. We travelled with our Indigenous Australian colleague, Barbara Wingard, who has since written up her experiences of this trip (see Wingard 2002). In visiting the Eastern Band of the Cherokee we were also accompanied by Vanessa Mahmoud. Far from experiencing the idea of an Indigenous welcome as disrespectful, the Spelman African American community embraced this with vigour. While the community had few links with Cherokee or Muscogee people in the present, very many families knew of Cherokee relatives and were quick to re-tell historical stories of acts of kindness and friendship between African American and Native American peoples – acts which often took place in the face of extreme hardship and persecution.

When we originally decided to hold conferences, we would never have pictured ourselves driving through Oklahoma on an extremely hot summer's day meeting with representatives of Indigenous Nations[6]. Perhaps we would have even wondered what on earth this could have had to do with hosting an international narrative therapy conference. It was only due to relationships of partnership with Indigenous Australian colleagues that we would even have considered such an idea. But this trip to North Carolina and Oklahoma radically altered the shape and spirit of the conference that eventually took place at Spelman College. Links were made, relationships formed and stories were shared that eventually led to representatives of the Muscogee and the Keetowah Band of the Cherokee speaking on behalf of their people at the opening ceremony and welcoming all the conference participants to the land. In this ceremony a song was sung in Muscogee by Joyce Bear. This was the first time in 150 years that this song had been sung on that land. What's more, Patrick Moss and Julie Moss of the Keetowah Band of the Cherokee became key partners in the conference and arranged for the Keetowah Band's Lighthorse Brigade (an organisation of young men which keeps the peace in the Keetowah Nation) to travel in a van hundreds and hundreds of miles across the country in order to preside over a traditional flag ceremony.

The opening ceremony also involved libations and welcoming speeches from African American traditions and dances from young African American women. And this all took place in the most beautiful Sisters Chapel – a building of powerful significance to the local African American community.

It is difficult to convey what this opening ceremony meant to those who were present. At its completion all conference participants were invited to place a painted hand-print on a banner that was circled by the following words[7]:

We honour
the many histories
of this land
and the peoples
who have lived upon it.
We honour
the histories of survival
that enable
Spelman College to exist
and for us
to come together here today.
And with our hand-prints
we record a determination
to play our part
in healing the
legacies of the past
and building legacies
of hope
for future generations.

It is a beautiful banner and many hundreds of people placed their handprints upon it. Two years on, it now resides on a wall within the Counselling Services Department of Spelman College.

The completed banner
Photograph by Suzy Stiles who is a community cultural arts development worker and who facilitated this project

Liverpool – a multicultural context

In 2003 the 5th International Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference was held in Liverpool UK, in conjunction with Anita Franklin and Hugh Fox. Anita Franklin chose the venue of Liverpool because of the ways its history links the lives of so many people. Liverpool is home to the oldest Black Community in the UK; the oldest Chinese community in Europe; and the second oldest synagogue in England. It was originally the home of the Welsh; is affectionately known as the capital of Ireland; and more recently has become the place of residence of an increasing Muslim population. It has an extraordinarily rich history, and this is before considering the links of the Liverpool ports to the slave trade and to the emigration of thousands of people to Australia, New Zealand, the USA, Canada, and elsewhere.

The welcoming ceremony in Liverpool obviously needed to involve many voices. Representatives of the Liverpool Black Community, the Jewish community, the Chinese Community, the Muslim Community, those of Irish descent, and the Welsh, each welcomed us to their city and linked us to the history of their people. After they had each spoken, a Welsh harpist filled the room with delicate melody. Throughout, the people of Liverpool were simply marvellous to us – kind, generous and genuinely funny! To give you an idea of this, we have included here an extract from the welcome speech offered by Ged Smith, on behalf of Liverpudlians of Irish descent:

Ireland is the only country in Europe whose population now is less than it was 150 years ago. Liverpool is the only city in Britain with a Catholic majority. These points are intimately connected. For over 200 years now there has been a move of Irish people to the British mainland; to build the roads, the railways, the canals, and to fight the English wars when it suited. People flee their homes for two major reasons - to escape poverty or to escape persecution. Liverpool has received many immigrants for both these reasons, but never more dramatically than in the years 1845 - 1852 for these were the years of what has come to be known as The Famine, or The Great Hunger. There are different versions of stories about what happened during this period, but what is agreed is that there was a potato blight which resulted in the deaths of over 1 million Irish people and the migration of over 1 million more. The role of the English in this is debated by people still, as is the role of the landlords who owned the land the people lived on. For some this disease was visited upon the Irish by God to teach them a lesson, shake them from their slothfulness, and to civilize them. Some say the English allowed the Irish to starve in a way that was not meted out to the Scots when there was a Scottish potato blight a few years later. The Poor Laws were certainly changed to enable the Irish seeking refuge to be sent back home more easily. Some say it was simply a natural event outside of politics, power, or the subjugation of one people by another. And some call it an Act of Genocide.

My history is a Catholic Irish history, traceable in part to Connemara, but mostly lost in the chaos that saw five thousand Irish people arrive in Liverpool every week in what were known as "coffin ships" due to the large numbers of deaths during the voyage. Liverpool was then a small Lancastrian town of about 80,000 people, and through its geographical location received over 300,000 Irish

people in 1847 alone, and similar numbers over the seven-year period. This caused The Home Office to issue a statement to the city stating "Her Majesty's Government regrets the inconvenience to which Liverpool is being subjected". Other places like Glasgow and Cardiff were significant ports of entry for the Irish but Liverpool received the most, and the incoming Irish were dumped in the courts of Everton, making that area, where I was born over one hundred years later, into one of the most overcrowded, diseased slum areas of Europe. Liverpool became known as "the city of the plague", receiving some 300,000 Irish people each year, of whom almost one third died upon or soon after arrival. This was the impact on this city, and while half of those who arrived here continued on to America, and many others dispersed around Britain, many thousands stayed here to change everything. Everything. Liverpool was never to be the same again, and became known, then and now, as the Capital of Ireland. The Irish culture and heritage is visible and tangible here, and it affects all of us. All four Beatles are of Irish heritage.

With this came a massive increase in the power of the Catholic Church and particularly of the priest. The priest became the arbiter of what was good and bad; acceptable and unacceptable; and who among the poor was deserving and undeserving. In my own youth I remember the power of the priest well. Growing up a devout Catholic and Altar Boy, the priest's visit to our house was the only time we would all be in the same room without arguing. This change also resulted in a growth of anti-Irish feeling in England. The Irish were considered to be lazy, lawless and stupid. John Beddoe, president of the Anthropological society said in 1889; "All men of genius are orthognatheous, in that they have a less prominent jaw. The Irish however are prognatheous and the Celt is closely related to Cro-Magnon man, who in turn is related to the Africanoid." I wonder if John Beddoe, wherever he is now, ever got to hear about Oscar Wilde, or George Bernard Shaw. Or WB Yeats, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Sean O'Casey, Edna O'Brien or Seamus Heaney.

Anti-Irish feeling was further exemplified by the growth of Irish jokes whereby the Irish were made out to be stupid. This happens in most cultures where the dominant group tries to demean and diminish those they subjugate. Gramsci coined the phrase Cultural Hegemony, whereby oppressed people add to their own subjugation by joining in, and it is certainly not unknown for Irish people to be heard telling anti-Irish jokes. The only Irish joke I like is the one about the Irishman who goes to a building site looking for a job. The foreman asks him if he

knows about building, and he tells him "Sure I do, I've worked on building sites for years." So the foreman asks, "well can you tell me the difference between a girder and a joist?" Our Irishman responds; "yes, one wrote Faust and the other wrote Ulysses."

At the 150th anniversary of The Famine in 1997 there were calls from many for an apology to be issued by the British Government. Conservative Governments had always refused to entertain such notions, forgetting that during this so-called famine, millions of tons of oats and barley were exported from Ireland to England while one million people died of starvation. In 1997, the then new Labour Prime Minister, Tony Blair, said:

'The Famine has left huge scars. That one million people should have died in what was then part of the richest and most powerful nations in the world is something which still causes pain as we reflect on it today. Those who governed in London at the time failed their people through standing by while a crop failure turned into a massive tragedy. We must not forget such a dreadful event.'

Great Hunger Commemoration Committees were set up in Ireland and across Britain at this 150th anniversary, with memorials erected in various formats where they were allowed or paid for. There was dispute in Northern Ireland about the effects of the Hunger on Ulster and, although there is no doubt that many Ulster people died, many Protestants there opposed any such commemorations lest they give credence to anti-British, pro-Republican sentiments. In Liverpool, a stone monument was erected in Hardman Street marking the Hunger which so changed this city. At last the story was neither forgotten nor denied.

Liverpool life, culture and heritage are enriched by its importance as a port and its influx of peoples from many parts of the world escaping poverty or persecution. Many cultures have settled here and enriched this city but it is the Irish diaspora which has had by far the biggest single impact here. And it is the treatment of those people, us people, by the establishment, those with the powers to oppress, which has contributed to the irreverence towards authority, which is tangible as you spend time here. This is noticeable, for example, if you can bring yourself to enter McDonald's restaurant (sic) where you will not be greeted in the usual manner, or asked, in accordance with the corporate spiel if you would like fries with your meal. More likely you will be asked, in a cavalier way, "what d'ye want?"

The trick for us Liverpudlians –"scousers" as we are known- is to escape the victimhood mentality we have sometimes been guilty of; to escape the stereotypes of being good at nothing except football, music, humour and crime, while holding onto our healthy sense of irreverence which makes us something of an intriguing mystery to other parts of Britain. In this spirit I am delighted to welcome such a fantastic, cosmopolitan gang of yous (for here we do have a plural of you) to our city. I hope you have a chance while here to discover some aspects of this diverse place. Welcome.

The reason we are describing these opening ceremonies in such detail in this article is because they are of vital significance in shaping the conference events. We spend a considerable amount of energy before the conference researching and building the relationships that will make these opening ceremonies possible. The reason that we do this is that they contribute to making the entire conferences congruent. If we can build relationships to an extent that all conference participants can be genuinely welcomed to the land on which the conference is being held then it changes the conference from simply a professional event, to a community gathering on a particular land.

Oaxaca, Mexico

We learnt an enormous amount about creating a context of welcoming from our Mexican colleagues and participants at the Oaxaca Conference which took place in July 2004. Prior to this event we were concerned about how a bi-lingual conference, in which some participants would not be able to directly communicate with others, would be able to generate the sense of connectedness which had been created in previous years. With our co-hosts at Instituto Latinoamericano de Estudios de la Familia (ILEF), Jorge Perez Alarcón, Barbara Amunategui, Emily Sued, Adriana Segovia and Maribel Najeraat, we thought a lot about this. We decided to hold welcoming events each evening of the pre-conference events and to develop an opening ceremony for the conference itself that relied more heavily than usual on music and song.

While these plans played their part in creating a connected context, it was the Mexican hospitality and practices of inclusion that influenced

everyone's experience of this event. The vitality of our co-hosts' welcoming singing, the kindness demonstrated throughout the city of Oaxaca to participants, as well as the attention paid to the aesthetics of everyday life, ensured that participants felt cared for, welcomed and excited to be there. We consistently heard from participants that they felt embraced by the local people of Oaxaca in ways that transformed their experience of the conference.

More broadly, participants from Mexico expressed genuine pride and pleasure in welcoming those from overseas especially as keynote addresses reflected themes of Mexican experience. For those conference participants not from Mexico, the entire conference involved being immersed in a culture other than their own and a significant de-centering of their experience. It is this de-centering of dominant cultural assumptions which brings with it a great potential for questioning taken-for-granted ideas and is most exciting for us when co-hosting conferences with colleagues in other nations and cultures.

As with previous conferences, matters of cultural protocol were explored and followed. Through a series of visits to Oaxaca with key Mexican colleagues, Emily Sued, Lynn Tron and Mercedes Martínez, and with considerable assistance from Patrick Moss, we began to make links with the Indigenous people of the region. After following various protocols, we were introduced to a group of Indigenous Traditional Healers who were very interested in participating in the conference. They saw the conference as relevant to their work and wished not only to welcome participants but also to offer consultations throughout the event. Lynn Tron personally raised the funds to enable a group of approximately twenty healers to travel to the conference from different parts of the state of Oaxaca[8]. This group made a significant contribution to setting the tone for the conference when they conducted a traditional welcoming and cleansing ritual during the opening ceremony. The welcoming ceremony took place in a magnificent 500 year old stone building and a sense of history was present not only within the words spoken and songs sung, but also within the very architecture.

Reflections on welcoming events

These welcoming events provide an opportunity for an engagement with history. Through welcoming speeches, representatives of

certain peoples invite us to consider the histories of the land upon which we stand. These are not lectures or even educational talks, they are invitations to consider history from the viewpoint of certain people, certain cultures whose perspectives rarely feature at the centre of professional conferences. The fact that this takes place in a context of welcome makes a significant difference.

Acknowledging in the opening ceremony the stories of the land and the peoples who have lived upon it in this way provides a context for the entire conference to question what is often taken for granted in professional contexts. It places our work in a broader historical and social context. More than this, because the stories of people's lives are told in particular ways in these opening forums, we are all invited to consider our own lives and work differently. We are invited to step into a conference context which will value rich descriptions of diversity. Other aspects of the conference structure and content seek to continue these themes throughout the duration of the event.

Hazards

It seems important to mention that hosting these welcoming ceremonies involves considerable energy, hard work and various hazards! It is not enough to try to balance the speakers in relation to different communities and their historical links to land. For instance, we must also consider relations of gender. In Liverpool, we also needed to find ways of acknowledging and including more recently arrived communities – as it happened, these communities became involved in the closing ceremony of the conference. And it is also important in some contexts to include replies to the welcoming speeches so that a rich tapestry is created that acknowledges the cultural diversity which is present[9]. A more recent dilemma has involved the fact that these welcoming ceremonies are often powerfully spiritual for those doing the welcoming (and indeed for many people being welcomed). It can be somewhat complex to enable the significance of these events to unfold whilst also trying to ensure that they are not described in religious language – for not only could this lead to a marginalisation of alternative spiritualities, but it could also be disrespectful to those of us who may not be at all religious.

No matter how much preparation we have done, we are always nervous before the welcoming event. Even though we have taken care to plan everything that we could think of, there are sometimes unexpected events when working with many different cultural viewpoints and vastly differing experiences of life. For instance, at two of our conferences we have stood dumbfounded as someone whom we have never met suddenly appeared on stage – because they had been invited by one of the speakers in the opening ceremony. In both situations, cultural protocols had to take precedence over our organisers' 'agenda' and also over time-limits! Different cultures have different understandings of time and also different understandings of the purposes of opening ceremonies. As organisers, we are very fortunate that those who attend our conferences are generally generous hearted and flexible! In the feedback we have received about the opening ceremonies, a small number of people always state they wish it had taken less time, but very large numbers say that it was one of the highlights of the conference and that they will never see Adelaide, or Atlanta, or Liverpool, or Oaxaca in the same way ever again.

The conference structure

With the welcoming ceremony complete, it is now time for the conference program to unfold. Within our conferences, we create a number of different forums throughout the three days in which a variety of conversations can take place including: keynote addresses, one hour formal workshops, two and a half hour practice-based seminars, small groups discussions, evening workshops, and informal outside sessions. In Adelaide summers these informal discussions take place in tents or under trees and create an almost festive atmosphere.

The days of our conferences are long! We start early in the morning and don't end until evening keynotes which take place after dinner. No one has ever complained that there was not enough input at one of these events. In fact, we go to some lengths to encourage participants not to try to attend every session:

Over these three days we'd like to invite everyone who is gathered here into considerations of care-taking. The issues that will be discussed this week include some of our most heartfelt and profound struggles. We would like to

encourage people to think through what good self-care would look like over the time of this conference. We have deliberately chosen the venue so that it is very easy to simply take time off and sit under a tree or take a stroll by the river. It is not expected that participants attend all of the sessions; in fact we strongly recommend that people take time to relax, rest and ground themselves between the sessions they do attend. Pick and choose the presentations to attend, take breaks, sit outside and talk with newly met friends and colleagues. We wish to place an equal importance on the formal and informal conversations that will occur over the three days. (an extract from the 1999 Conference news-sheet)

The conference program

In creating the conference program, there are a number of questions to which we consistently refer:

- How can we take care so that participants who attend the conference find the presentations that they go to engaging, accessible and thoughtful?
- How can we find a place for everyone who wants to be involved in the conference to share their work and ideas?
- How can we create a range of forums and styles of presentations which do justice to issues of class, culture, gender, age and sexuality?
- How can we invite people into a conference atmosphere which is not about performance, competition or attaining professional status but instead about being involved in interesting conversations, learning from one another and sharing ideas?
- How can we create a conference that is a lovely event for presenters, in which there is a sense of connectedness between the conference organisers and those presenting at the conference?
- How do we balance the number of presentations from local practitioners with presentations from other parts of the world?
- If it is a bi-lingual conference, how can we ensure all participants have access to the diversity of presentations?
- How can we make it possible for practitioners who may not have presented their work before to have opportunities to share their ideas and perspectives?

- How do we generate a conference program which offers the latest creative thinking in the development of narrative therapy and community work, as this is what participants will be seeking?

As organisers, we are aware that we have a responsibility to create a conference which stimulates and refreshes and also provides opportunities for participants to build upon their skills and therapeutic/community work practices. We endeavour to create a balance of presentations that will ensure participants have access both to skills-based workshops by experienced therapists, and opportunities to hear the perspectives of non-professionals, voices which are less often heard at conferences. There will, of course, also be presentations by experienced therapists whose lives are lived outside the mainstream. In the process of creating the program, ensuring the balance of types of presentation is a constant dilemma - but a nice one!

We have found that it works well to only ever have a relatively small number of parallel sessions at any one time. This, coupled with a determination to create space for the voices of those who are not usually represented at mainstream conferences, means that there are relatively few spaces available in formal sessions. However, we take care to provide opportunities for people to share their ideas and thoughts without making a formal presentation. Sometimes this may consist of poster sessions, informal discussions, or inclusion of descriptions of people's work and willingness to speak about it, in the conference newspaper.

While some of our processes are relatively standard (such as issuing a call for papers and then having an international advisory group make decisions as to which papers ought to be accepted), some of our other ways of working are less orthodox. For instance, we acknowledge that a routine call for papers is rarely going to attract the attention of those less used to academic or professional forums and so we go out of our way to approach community groups and individuals who are interested in narrative practice to come along and to share their work.

Transparency

Perhaps what is most significant in the process of creating the conference program is transparency in how the program is developed and by

whom. We create an international program committee for each conference and try to outline on our webpage the thinking that will determine how this group will go about deciding upon the program. The principles of publishing outlined in Chapter II significantly influence how the decisions of the program committee are made with regard to the need to balance high quality practice-based presentations, community work presentations, a range of different topic areas, and work from both local and international presenters. Having a transparent process and a degree of flexibility in creating informal opportunities for people to share their work does not remove the possibility of people feeling disappointed that they are not offered a formal presentation slot, but it does seem to reduce the degree of disappointment.

Another area in which transparency is important relates to the distribution of scholarship places. Again we establish an international scholarship committee and a clear process which people need to go through in order to apply for a scholarship. They supply certain information and then representatives on the scholarship committee from the country of the applicant offer their advice and recommendation. We try to be clear to all applicants what the criteria are for scholarship places, what can and can't be offered, and why.

Behind the scenes

One of the main ways in which our conferences differ from many events is the degree of connection and involvement which we have with presenters prior to the event. This varies greatly depending upon the presenters' own wishes, but we make it clear that we are available to meet up or talk on the phone with presenters and to discuss their work prior to the conference itself. In these discussions, we talk through presenters' ideas about what will make the conference work, their hopes and ideas, as well as any concerns they may have about presenting. We also try to share the responsibility in relation to any complex matters within proposed presentations so that presenters are not having to do all the thinking on their own. We make ourselves available for conversations about a range of matters including the politics of representation. If a presenter is hoping to speak about work that details the lives of certain communities or groups,

we can then explore together ways in which a representative of these communities could be present and participate in the presentation in their own right.

We especially feel a responsibility as organisers to know what is going to be spoken within keynote addresses, and we take collective care prior to these talks to ensure that they are experienced as respectful, relevant and engaging by the conference participants. Where this collective care is most relevant is in relation to presenters who are not used to speaking in public. We have always been determined that the majority of keynote addresses within our conferences are from voices not usually heard. We do not wish to simply replicate the situation of only the most well-known presenters offering these keynotes. Instead, we wish to provide a forum for community groups and individuals to share knowledges, skills and perspectives which are rarely given centre stage.

To prepare people to share some of the intimate stories of their lives in a professional setting to hundreds and hundreds of people requires considerable care, and to be honest, hours and hours of work. It is not something to be done lightly and it is in this area that we feel our responsibilities most heavily. Prior to the conferences, we are involved in months of preparatory work: building relationships, conducting interviews, editing transcripts, facilitating rehearsals and all the while taking care to ensure that what is spoken, and how it is spoken, is going to create the desired effects not only for the group concerned but also for the conference participants. It is a rigorous process and one that produces many of the clear highlights of our conferences.

Narrative practices are used to elicit and richly describe the skills, knowledges and stories that groups and individuals wish to share. Examples of the keynotes which have been created through this process and have been published over the years include:

- Stories from women about the way in which they live with hearing voices (Power To Our Journeys 1999).
- Stories from women about ways of addressing the effects of child sexual abuse (Silent Too Long 2000).
- Stories of immigration and seeking asylum (see Kamya 2001; Amir 2001; Spiric 2001).

- Stories of therapists whose family members had endured mental health struggles (see Russell 2001; Newman 2001; Cheshire 2001).
- The Peer Counsellors of the Irish Wheelchair Association and National Council of the Blind of Ireland (2003).
- The Hearing Voices Network (Williams 2003; Sharon de Valda 2003; Mickey de Valda 2003; Downs 2003; Bullimore 2003).
- Young People's keynotes (see Simmons Thomas 1999; Ralfs A.1999; Miers 1999, Cecily 1998; Adams 1999; Couzens 1999).
- The Anti-Harassment Team (Bruell, Gatward & Salesa 1999).
- Spiritualities (Hawthorne 2000; Ralfs C. 2000; Shalif 2000; Waldegrave 2000).
- Forever Able: stories from older people living with disabilities (Roberts, Francis & Eastham 1999).

A significant theme for other keynotes at these conferences has involved coming to terms with history. In Australia, this has involved presentations from both Indigenous Australians (Wingard 1999; Couzens 1999; Lester 2001) and non-Indigenous Australians (Ralfs A.1999). At Spelman College keynotes addressed the history of the South of the USA from the perspective of the Keetowah Band of the Cherokee, Africa-America and Euro-America[10]. In Liverpool, ways of coming to terms with histories of the slave trade and of colonisation in the Pacific were key presentations[11]. In Mexico, histories of Latin America, and of US-Mexico relations were considered, as well as the rich complexities of what it means to be Mexican[12].

At each conference, a special keynote session has also been dedicated to voices from Queer Families[13]. These have often involved powerfully moving stories. While in Australia, the USA and the UK it was relatively easy to invite local lesbian and gay practitioners to contribute to these sessions, in Mexico it was a little more complex. Prior to the Mexico Conference, Suzy Stiles and Beth Prullage travelled to Oaxaca and made connections with the local lesbian and gay community. Paulina Salas and Constantino Aragòn Rojas then generously agreed to host a queer welcoming event and introduced the keynote speakers. At each conference, Amy Ralfs has made an enormous contribution to these Queer Families keynotes when she has proudly spoken of her experiences of growing up

within a lesbian 'anti-nuclear' family. Amy was our youngest author at age thirteen when she first wrote for Dulwich Centre Publications. In Mexico, she gave her keynote in Spanish! In recent years, these keynotes have also included the perspective of Esben Esther Pirelli Benestad, who has delighted and challenged participants to consider the experience of bi-gendered and transgendered adults and differently gendered children and young people.

Narrative practice presentations

Having said all of this about presentations from voices seldom heard in professional contexts, it is also important to acknowledge that a very large part of the conferences consist of practice-based presentations by experienced narrative practitioners. It is their work and their willingness to share ideas that makes these conferences possible. We would especially like to acknowledge those therapists and community workers who have consistently offered workshops and/or other presentations at these events.

In each of the conferences, presentations have focused on a wide-range of practice themes, including: working with children, mental health issues, couple work, 'addictions', therapy with the survivors of violence and trauma, hearing from young people, eating issues, mediation, supervision, teaching/training, death and dying, working in schools, practices of witnessing, reflecting teams, family therapy, HIV/AIDS, reclamation of cultural healing ways, coming to terms with family histories, working with gay, lesbian and transgender experiences, introductory and advanced practice-based sessions, community gatherings, spirituality, adoption, social services, considerations of culture and gender in therapy and many more. A wide range of these practice-based presentations have been published in various editions of the *Dulwich Centre Journal* and the *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work.*

Creating a context of care

One of the key issues in creating a conference is how to ensure a context of respect and care for its duration, especially in relation to matters of class, gender, sexuality, culture and other relations of power and privilege. In all aspects of organising, we wish to invite participants and presenters into an ethic of honouring marginalised and indigenous cultures, honouring equitable relations between women and men, and so on.

The following questions act as a guide in the lead-up to each conference[14]:

- How can we create a context within a conference setting in which the voices, experiences and histories of women and people of a diversity of cultures are honoured and respected?
- How can we ensure that the norms, values, beliefs and ways of being of women and people from non-dominant cultures are fairly represented within the process, structures and the distribution of resources of the conference?
- What processes need to take place in the planning of the conference so that the voices of people from marginalised cultures and women are honoured from the beginning of the process?
- What needs to occur so that the appropriate welcomes, farewells and introductions are built into the conference?
- How can we ensure that the influence of diverse cultures' and women's ways of being are not limited to particular rituals, but instead influence the ways of speaking and relating throughout the three days of the conference?
- How can we prepare people for the inevitable differences of perspective when there are people of different cultures all talking about issues that are significant to them?
- How can the sharing of stories and the personal experiences of people from marginalised cultures and women be protected from analytical debate, and depersonalised ways of speaking?
- What processes will we need to ensure that issues of class are reflected upon so that working-class voices, experiences, histories and ways of being are honoured within the conference process?
- What processes and care can be taken to ensure that participants' and presenters' differing experiences of physical and mental health and ability are acknowledged and respected?
- What processes will we need to ensure that issues of heterosexual dominance are reflected upon so that the voices, experiences, histories and ways of being of gay, lesbian and bisexual people are honoured within the conference?

- Similarly, what will be needed to ensure that experiences of transgender, bi-gender people are acknowledged?
- And what processes will we need to ensure that the ways of being of young people are honoured, and that space is created for their voices to be heard?

While a great deal of time and thought goes into considering these questions prior to the event and this influences the structure, processes and content of the conference, these matters are highly complex and there is every chance that we will either overlook something significant or that an unexpected event may take place during the conference to which we need to respond.

These matters are far too complex for us as individuals or even as a conference collective to adequately address. And so, we invite all conference participants into these considerations through our webpage prior to the event, and through our news-sheets during the conference. Also, ahead of time, we establish a series of partnerships particularly around issues of culture, gender, sexuality and ability. We meet with these 'consultants' prior to the conference to talk through any issues we may be concerned about. Together, we try to pre-empt any matters which could be necessary to address and how we might go about doing so. This means that if an issue does arise during the conference, we have worked out processes that will enable quick and thoughtful responses. Just prior to our second conference, our key Indigenous Australian partner, Barbara Wingard, suffered a heart attack (from which she recovered) and was therefore unable to attend and offer her usual leadership around matters of culture. There were real effects of her absence. When an issue came up we were without her leadership, and her healing presence was sorely missed. This further clarified for us the importance of having these key partnerships in place and also establishing a back-up plan in case of unexpected illness, etc.

We have also learnt that it makes a real difference to have a number of consultants on each key issue. This seems important in order not to leave the responsibility of representation on one person's shoulders, and it also assists us as organisers to be able to quickly hear a number of

different perspectives on any issue. A list of those who have played these significant roles in our previous conferences is included in the acknowledgements section at the end of this paper.

Complex issues

There have been some very complex issues that we have needed to respond to in relation to the six conferences that we have been involved in hosting. And no doubt there will be more complex and difficult situations ahead.

Some of the most complex scenarios have occurred when various people have approached us with concerns they have about another person who is to present at one of our conferences. These concerns have related to views these presenters have expressed in other contexts which have been experienced by others as either hurtful or oppressive in terms of race, age, gender, heterosexual dominance, etc. In these situations the issue has not been about what these presenters were going to present at our conference. We knew about the content of these presentations and we did not have concerns about the topics on which they were to present. The issue was that we were approached by some people who thought that these particular presenters shouldn't present on any topic because of their statements about other matters (at another time and place).

We spent literally hundreds of hours trying to think through and respond to these situations. We were being invited as conference organisers to make judgments about events which we knew little about and also to step into positions of arbitrary top-down decision-making on highly complex matters. This did not fit for us in terms of how we wanted to facilitate community events. At the same time, we felt a considerable responsibility to contribute to ways of responding to these situations that could lead to good conversations, learnings and community connections. We also wanted to contribute to finding ways of addressing any hurt that had been caused and preventing further harm. Here are some of the questions we puzzled over:

- What is the role of conference organisers in these situations?
- Is it different if one knows the people concerned?

- Does it make a difference if the people concerned are presenting on topics very different to those on which their views have caused concern?
- How can processes be developed so that these issues can be constructively talked about with the people concerned?
- What are the appropriate mechanisms by which to address these complex issues in professional networks?
- How can care be taken to ensure that matters of culture, gender, class, sexual identity or other relations of privilege and dominance are taken into account?
- How can care be taken so that these issues do not cause conflict or anguish during the conference?

There is not room here, nor would it be appropriate, to detail the particular situations to which we had to respond. There were, however, a number of principles which we developed that were helpful to us. We are including them here, not because we think others should follow them, but just in case others might find them useful:

- to reach out and involve others in the process, so that it moves from a situation in which we as conference organisers are called to 'make a decision', to instead create a collective process;
- to involve the appropriate people in this collective process – those with whom we have a good trusting relationship and who would have most experience and/or insider knowledge of whatever issue is at the centre of the matter;
- to focus on developing an ethical process which will have integrity and then to prioritise this no matter how much work it involves;
- to develop a process to foster conversations that will draw out rich understandings of the dilemmas involved;
- to build and maintain connectedness with all involved - this may take a lot of time and energy, many emails, phone calls, and meetings with all relevant people;
- to seek to understand the experiences of all involved and the broader contexts which have given rise to these experiences;

- to articulate and name the ethical dilemmas and responsibilities which we are facing at every stage of the process;
- to articulate and name any fears, worries we may have, and face these;
- to be transparent to all involved in the process about our own ethical dilemmas;
- to explore and name what is at stake – this might include big picture issues as well as possible effects on certain individual's personal lives;
- to go at a pace that keeps people engaged with the process;
- to explore in detail how relations of culture, class, race, gender, sexual identity and other relations of privilege/dominance are influencing the situation.

This is certainly a work in progress and if others have had to try to respond to similar situations, we would really like to hear from you!

Closing Ceremony

Taking care in structuring the closure of the conference seems important, as by the end of three days of intense conversation many participants are often feeling a little tired. We try to ensure that the final hours of the conference are well planned and treat all participants with a high degree of care. We consider creating a grounded and generous closing ceremony as a key responsibility. These closing ceremonies are not a time for new input nor even for profound reflection. Instead, they involve a ritual closing and various forms of acknowledgement. Often this acknowledgement occurs through song. We are conscious of acknowledging all participants and their contributions over the three days. We also acknowledge the contributions of those whose work has occurred behind the scenes. At the conference at Spelman College, for instance, the farewell song highlighted the contributions of 'Hollywood', a local taxi driver who had offered so much to all of us, as well as the catering staff, the administrative staff, and the maintenance workers. Similarly in Oaxaca, all the workers at the venue where the conference were held came up to the stage where we sang to them.

Without these people's contributions the conference could not have occurred. The farewell song also deliberately invites participants to consider their return journeys to their loved ones. Here's an extract of the lyrics from the farewell song from one of the Adelaide conferences:

Farewell from Adelaide
From this conference gathering
That's gone on for days and days
If you're now leaving Australia
Well goodbye – I mean see you later
Oh won't you please remember
You're welcome back any day

We hope you found what you came for
From skills-based workshops
To meeting friends from afar
We're so glad you came
Next year if all goes well
Perhaps we'll see you here again
And now as you travel on home
With new stories to share quietly with your own
Please arrive in good shape
That way your loved ones will know that
Entrusting you to us was no mistake
Farewell from Adelaide

Last words

There are so many other themes that could be discussed here, for instance: the role of music and song in conferences; the significance of aesthetics; ways of seeking and responding to feedback; etc. With each conference that is organised we learn new things. It seems important to acknowledge that hosting conferences in these ways requires considerable hard work and the processes outlined here also have practical and financial implications. This approach does, however, make many things possible. The relationships which have formed through these conferences, the heartfelt

thoughtful ways in which participants have responded, and the generous feedback we have received, always seem to invite us to host just one more!

We are soon to head to Hong Kong, for our first conference in Asia, and further events are planned for Adelaide and then for Norway. We hope to see you at one of these events. We would also very much welcome your feedback on this chapter as it is only through continuing conversation that new ideas will emerge.

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Finally, we must make special mention of Amy Ralfs who has offered a keynote at every one of our conferences! Amy's talks have covered many topics and many have occurred within moving Queer Family keynotes in which she has proudly spoken of her experiences of growing up within a lesbian 'anti-nuclear' family.

DEAR READER

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