

PARENT-TEEN CONFLICT DISSOLUTION: THE USE OF OUTSIDER WITNESS PRACTICES

Narrative therapy overview:

- People's lives are shaped by stories
- Importance of rich narrative story development to open possibilities
- Stories are co-authored in the context of people's lives, their relationships, and the social, institutional and power relations of culture
- Narrative conversations often contradict many of the socially constructed norms and shape action that challenge power relations of our culture
- An audience plays a powerful role in rich story development and verifying alternative personal narratives

Identity is:

- A public and social achievement, not a private and individual achievement
- Shaped by historical and cultural forces rather than the forces of human nature
- The outcome of deriving a sense of authenticity through social processes that acknowledge one's preferred claims about one's identity and history

Definitional ceremonies provide people an opportunity to:

- Experience an acknowledgment & authentication of the identity claims expressed in the significant stories of their lives
- Intervene in the shaping of their lives in ways that are in harmony with what is precious to them
- Appear / re-appear on their own terms in the eyes of the outsider witnesses

Ethics:

- People who are at the centre of the definitional ceremony must be fully informed of process & structure
- They have the option to speak to others who have experienced a definitional ceremony
- Asked if there are any subjects that they do not want to be interviewed about in the definitional ceremony
- Be informed that confidentiality will be respected
- Be informed that no information will be passed on to outsider witness candidates
- Audience can be chosen by either therapist or people at the centre of the ceremony

Outsider witnesses are invited to:

- Play a part in the tradition of acknowledgment that is particularly relevant to rich story development
- Engage in re-tellings that are the outcome of close listening and are composed of particular aspects of the stories that they are drawn to
- Express these re-tellings in ways that will not be imposing
- Respond personally in speaking of their understanding of what they are drawn to and about how this has affected them
- Step back from the common ways that people respond to the stories of the people's lives, including from giving opinions or advice, making judgments, theorizing, etc.

Structure:

Stage one: the telling of significant life stories by the persons at the centre of the definitional ceremony while the outsider witnesses are the audience and listen carefully

Stage two: the structured re-telling of the story by the people invited to be outsider witnesses while the persons at the centre form the audience

*Stage three: the person at the centre of the ceremony engages in a re-telling of the outsider witnesses' re-telling

Stage four: the people at the center of the ceremony & the outsider witnesses have an opportunity to discuss the process

*This interview is conducted according to the same four categories of inquiry, except the focus of the second category of inquiry (image) remains on the images of the person's life and identity rather than on the images of the life & identity of the outsider witnesses.

Categories of response:

The retelling of the outsider witnesses is structured according to the following four categories of response: expression, image, resonance and transport.

a) Identifying the expression:

The focus is on the expression and is particular and distinct – 'As you listen to the stories of the lives of the people who are at the center of the definitional ceremony, what did you hear that stood out to you, were there particular words or expressions that caught your attention / interest? Which ones captured your imagination? Which ones struck a cord for you?'

b) Describing the image:

The focus is on the image – 'What sense does this give you about the person's life and what might be important to them? Did any mental pictures come to mind as you listened to these stories? What images of people's lives, of their identities, and of the world more generally, did these expressions suggest to you about these people's purposes, values, beliefs, hopes, dreams & commitments?'

c) Embodying responses / resonance:

The focus is on personal resonance – ‘Do you know what you were drawn to in this? What is it about your own life/work that accounts for why these expressions caught your attention or struck a cord for you? Do you have a sense of which aspects of your own experiences of life resonated with these experiences and with the images evoked by these expressions?’

d) Acknowledging transport:

The focus is on transport (katharsis*) – ‘Did being present to witness these stories open up any ideas for you? Where have you been moved to or taken to in your thinking by what you have heard? What does this say about what is important to you? Where has this experience taken you to? What place might you be in right now that you were not at the beginning of these conversations?’

*Outcome of katharsis enables one to: achieve a new perspective on one's life & identity; reengage with neglected aspects of one's own history; reconnect with precious values and purposes for one's life; make new meanings of experiences of one's life & skills of living that one was previously barely aware of; initiate steps in one's life otherwise never considered; think beyond what one routinely thinks.

Re-positioning:

“Think of a time where you felt strongly acknowledged, profoundly heard or significantly accepted by someone. It is very important that while witnessing your partner / adolescent’s conversation that the ways you imagine this figure might be listening, the skills this figure might be using, the values & beliefs that would be guiding this figure be available to you. You will be asked to step back from your position as a partner / parent during this conversation. This would make it possible for you to hear & respond in ways that you might not otherwise be able to. When you are ready, I am going to ask you to introduce me to this figure in some detail.”

- Describe the figure’s words, actions, gestures at this time.
- Of the words that the figure used, which did you find particularly acknowledging?
- What was the tone of the figure’s voice when s/he was speaking these words?
- What was it about her/his responses that conveyed a strong sense of understanding?
- Which of her/his movements: gestures, facial expressions, posture, actions or whatever, were particularly congruent with these words /tone of voice?
- What was it about the timing of the figures expressions that were so validating of you?
- What values were expressed in these words, in this tone, in these movements & in this timing?
- What was is about her/his responses that provided you with a sense of how the figure was touched by you?
- What does the figure’s responses suggest about what s/he wanted for you & about what s/he hoped for you?

Outsider- Witness Group Exercise

Think of an image or symbol that reflects something that is important in your work.

In small groups, chose one person who will be in the center of the exercise, while the others will be in the listening position & prepare to respond according to the categories of the definitional ceremony.

1) The member at the center opens the exercise by discussing why she/he chose the image or symbol picked & how she/he sees this in their work/life (3 – 5 minutes).

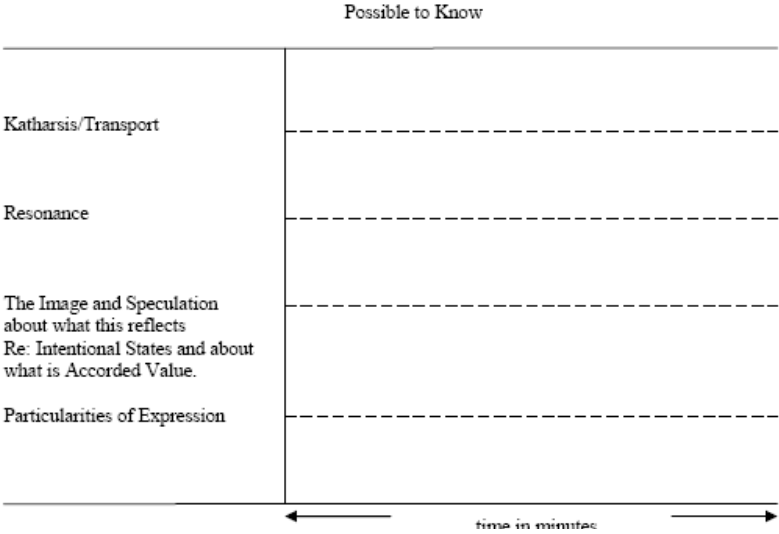
2) The outsider witnesses ask each other the following questions while the person at the center is listening attentively (5 – 8 minutes each):

- **Identifying the expression:** What caught your attention or stood-out for you in what you heard? Identify the *particular* words or phrases you heard as the person spoke?
- **Describing the image:** What images or pictures of this person's life or identity came to mind as she/he was speaking? What is your sense of what this person values, holds dear?
- **Embodying the responses:** Discuss what it is about your life/work that accounts for why these images came to mind, what did they connect with that's important to you?
- **Acknowledging transport:** What might you remember from witnessing this conversation and what difference might this remembering make to your life?

3) The person at the center feeds back to the other group members how the experience of listening to the re-telling of their story was for her/him following the four categories of inquiry (3- 5 minutes).

4) Finally, there is open dialogue between all the group members.

Mapping Outsider Witness Re-tellings



(Michael White – Workshop Notes / Dulwich Centre)

Prepared by Ninetta Tavano
www.thenarrativeproject.ca
06 / 2010