

Graduate Certificate in Narrative Therapy  
Dulwich Centre, Australia  
E-learning program

# THE SUITCASE PROJECT

A Journey beyond the mindsets

28/6/2015

Supervisor: Poh Lin Lee

Writer: Polikreti Maria

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores notions of what it means to be an immigrant into Greek Society and maps the implementation of Narrative Techniques in an attempt to reconstruct the affected identity, as a cause of diversity and rejection. A first option to deconstruct the effects of immigration in the perception of the self and others was the “Externalizing and Remembering Conversations Maps” implemented in Narrative practice, through which the problem is mapped, and the preferred stories of identity are being explored and enriched. Conversational extracts included in this paper come from the Narrative Conversations with Kate, a fifteen years old girl, whose origins come from Egypt. In a second level, the option for reconstructing the damaged identity was the “Protocol of Suitcase Project” through which was attempted to enrich the preferred identity in a safe place, where the bad effects of rejection and feeling of failure were not mentioned, before the self agency was efficiently constructed so that to protect the experience of re-traumatisation. At last but not the least, was the attempt to discover the domain plot beyond these daily practices that were affecting negatively the perception of herself and her life. The option for this deconstruction was the combination of “Failure Conversation Map” and “Mapping the journey process” that is included into the protocol of Suitcase project. These Narrative techniques gave us the chance to investigate the origins of the problem and the affects of normalizing gaze both of East and Western Culture’s Discourse to her position as a woman into society.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT.....	4
THE SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT .....	4
<b>THE THEORITICAL CONTEXT.....</b>	<b>5</b>
Children's Culture .....	6
Safe Place .....	6
Subordinate Stories .....	7
Self Agency.....	7
<b>THE PROTOCOL AND NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES .....</b>	<b>8</b>
The suitcase project.....	8
The Methodology .....	8
<b>Part 1: Constructiong the suitcase .....</b>	<b>8</b>
Thickening the Alternative Stories.....	9
<b>Part 2: Treasures in Suitcase .....</b>	<b>9</b>
Developing Stories.....	10
Deconstruction.....	10
<b>Subordinate Story: Mapping the journey .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>ReAuthoring .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Decentered Practice.....</b>	<b>13</b>
Deconstructive Listening.....	1Error! Bookmark not defined.
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>14</b>

# **THE SUITCASE PROJECT: A JOURNEY BEYOND MINDSETS**

## **THE ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT**

This paper attempts to present the application of Narrative Practices in a context of empowering and supporting families of immigrants that have migrated in Greece the last decades. This practice took place in a structured context of a Non- Governmental Organization, during my voluntary work. The primary services of this program were aiming on the integration of these people and the empowerment of communicative and interpersonal skills so to achieve the enrichment of resilience and socialization against daily troublesome –marginalization, rejection, disqualifying and so on. Under these priorities, were organized Personal Growth groups and Individual Counseling sessions.

In a purpose to be outlined both my first experience of espousing Narrative Techniques in my counseling practice and the route of personal development that was sought collaboratively with consultants, below will be described some extracts both of group and individual counseling, that were included in our Narrative Conversations.

## **THE SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT**

### *Current socio-political conditions*

In recent years, economic crisis in Greece has affected the daily life of citizens in many and varied ways. Austerity measures and unemployment are the main factors that affect negatively the territory of personal identity for each individual, causing the presence of feelings of helplessness, fear for the future and anxiety.

### *The immigration component and current conditions*

A secondary affect of economic crisis into Greek society's consistency was the raise of extremist right wing groups, which outlined major aggressive attitudes against both minorities of immigrants and representatives of them. However, effective actions emerged from Humanitarian Organizations and autonomic groups offering supportive services to vulnerable population. Having been in contact with several people who have migrated to Greece from the Balkans, Africa and Asia, it is obvious that the Political Discourse that has been developed and reproduced at European level referring to immigration issue often creates feelings of insecurity and lack of acceptance within society.

### *Socio-economic crisis' effects in Young People's Identity*

*"...The steps that people take in the midst of trauma, and in its aftermath, that are invariably disqualified or diminished, are founded on knowledges of life and on practices of living that have been developed in the history of the person's life, in the history of their relationships with others. In our work it is possible to create a context whereby these steps, and the practices and knowledges which they represent, can become known and richly acknowledged..."*

In a second analysis field the economic crisis seems to be even more discouraging as the new generations, are disapproved of planning a future where desires and dreams could be fulfilled. This social condition comes in conflict with the Western Culture's Discourse that young people should occupy a high working position in society after their studies and obtain a recognized job. These normalizing concepts lead to an adverse perception of the image of identity for young children and makes everyday life more difficult, establishing a sense of frustration and inability to cope with the country's difficult situation.

*"...When their territory of identity is so reduced, it becomes very difficult for people to know how to proceed in life, to know how to go forward with any personal project or with any plans for living."* Michael White

### *Effects of "Social Discourse" for Immigration in Deficit Identity*

Through my involvement in personal development groups with couples and people who have migrated to Greece, there have been distinguished some components through externalization conversation maps combined with socio-cultural perceptions that contribute to the plight of an immigrant.

The indications that can cause a sense of frustration, marginalization and deficit identity is bilingualism, the different mentality that includes different concepts, clothing habits, religious beliefs, etc.

Considering the effects caused by unemployment, poverty and deprivation combined with modern practices of social control to recruit people like the problem itself, the infected identity is not missing guilt and fear of people migrating from other countries to integrate into society and to network, to unfold their desires, their dreams and aspirations with greater flexibility. The conditions are even more difficult for parents, when their efforts are rarely recognized, in spite of their major dedication to raise their children with principles and values.

All the concepts above were gathered through narrative conversation maps, including the map of externalization, through inquiries of describing richly the problems, their effects and the positions of individuals in relation to the problems. The construction of group conversations was also based and the procedure of definitional ceremonies, through which, each member had the chance to share its experience and respond to the witnesses' reflections, by retelling.

In the case of the individual consulting, the consultant was a young girl, with origins from Egypt. Her first notion of problem was about the "dead end" she was meeting in her life because of the tensions and conflicts in her family environment. The most part of this paper will be focused on the single case of Katy's Story.

## **THEORITICAL CONTEXT**

Because of the fact that my consultant was a young girl in the age of fifteen, I was inspired thoughtfully by the implements of Michael White regarding the Children's Culture and the Self Agency. Michael White is gradually mentioning= the importance of avoiding the Re –traumatisation of the identity territory and re-experiencing the negative effects of traumatic experience. The route that is recommended from Narrative theory to keep on in this kind of situations suggest the establishment of a safe place that it will offer the acceptance to the child and the recognition of his own acknowledgements and commitments. Inspired by this way of thinking I was provided with the purpose to establish creatively such a space where the child would be able to unfold her unique values and dreams, the sentient security and acceptance and gaining a unique and safe place in her life.

### **CHILDREN'S CULTURE**

*“There are times when children give their parents notice that certain parenting actions are unacceptable. [...] In making these observations about children's contributions to parenting practices, I am aware of the significance of the power imbalance in the parent/child relationship [...] the magnitude of this imbalance varies significantly from one relationship to the next, from one household to the next, and from one wider context to the next. Some parents use their position of authority to abuse and to exploit their children, and some others who do not explicitly do this nonetheless establish the parent/child relationship as a virtual state of domination for the child”* Michael White

### **SAFE PLACE AND REPOSITIONING**

Knowing many times that a conflictual family context or an unstable state of communication between parents and children could be efficient factors to disrupt the balance of a children's life and so on the perceived identity of self, the primary aims of this project were to establish a metaphorically safe place, through which all these disrupted effects could be investigated and re-interpreted, during our conversations, by not re-experiencing the damaged self-identity.

Through this safe space the children will be able to actively explore the skills and knowledge which until today have kept them intact, despite the conflicts and tensions power relations evoked in the family context.

*“...even in those situations where parents have used their position of authority to abuse and in other ways exploit their children, and even in those situations in which parents have established these virtual states of domination, I invariably find that children have found effective ways of modifying some of the actions of their parents despite the risks associated with doing so.”* Michael White Children's Culture

*“...The second of these considerations has to do with children’s solution knowledges, and the importance of identifying these and richly describing them in the context of therapeutic conversations.”*

Recognizing these skills and resonating them with significant moments and significant people, is being established that context through which the traumatic conflicts will be reproduced by not provoking re-traumatisation.

*“...Children have a know-how that is relevant to the negotiation of many of the complexities that they face in the different contexts of their own lives.”*

For accomplishing this, it is necessary through repositioning of identity for the child to acquire a strong sense of self agency and only then safely narrate a traumatic past experience without revive the wounded and fragmented identity of itself.

*“...Unfortunately this know-how that children often have at their fingertips can easily be disregarded by parents and others who are concerned about the actions of these children.” [10-11-12]*

### **THE MEANING OF SUBORDINATE STORIES**

During our first conversations with Kate, her conflicts with her parents into family context were being described as traumatic moments for the perception of herself. At this point I was inspired by Michael White’s question:

*“How can we ensure that children are not vulnerable to an experience of re-traumatisation in the context of speaking about what they have been through?”*

According to Michael White sometimes when children's lives and sense of identity is overstrained, it is important to activate the double-listening for seeking entry points so to construct Subordinate Stories.

*“As these subordinate storylines are developed, they provide an alternative territory of identity for children to take recourse in speaking of experiences of trauma.” Michael White*

### **PERSONAL AGENCY**

Regarding the position of young Kate into the conflictual context of her family, and at the same time her disappointment of finding someone to truly understand her, I was delighted by the critical meaning, as Michael White mentions, of the restoration of personal agency into subordinate stories.

*“The restoration of this sense of personal agency provides an antidote to the sort of highly disabling conclusions about one’s identity that features perceptions that one is a passive recipient of life force’s” Michael White*

In other words seeking firstly to strengthen the active role of the person in shaping his own life, this provides us differentiated conclusions for self-identity through which the unfolding of traumatic stories will be managed in a more safe and de-traumatised way.

Considering these basic theoretical components of Narrative Consulting with Children, my route of constructing my inquiries was inspired by the protocol of Suitcase Project.

Although my work with groups was based on more abstract narrative techniques, as mentioned above, my work with the young girl was mainly based on a more structured procedure that would include creative tasks like drawing and making collage.

## **THE PROTOCOL AND NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES**

*“There are three stages of development in narrative work: construction where information is revealed to the counselor, deconstruction where the counselor unpacks the cultural assumptions that form the base of the client’s issues and demonstrates the effects of various forces on the client’s life, and re-authoring or reconstruction, whereby the client’s narrative is given a construction that is more meaningful to the client.”*

**Robert C. Chope**

## **THE SUITCASE PROJECT**

The project methodology is made up of five parts:

- 1) Making Suitcases
- 2) Treasures in my Suitcases
- 3) Carrying my Suitcase along
- 4) Making a banner
- 5) Certificates

### ***Part 1: Making Suitcases***

*Making Suitcases helps to create a safe distance between children and the problems they could be experiencing. It is also about inviting happiness, fun and creativity. It allows alternative stories of children’s lives to brought to light.*

*During this part of the process we used a box which we decorated creatively by drawing or making collage pictures which were symbols of important and favorite moments of her life.*

## **THICKENING THE ALTERNATIVE STORIES**

**Have you ever met any moment of your life that this dead end was not present?**

“Yes, sometimes.”

**Is there any person who accompanied with you during this exception moment?**

“Yes! My cousin. I usually speak with her for hours, with honesty and respect. She doesn’t judge me. She understands me!”

**What special you found in that moment, that was different from this dead end?**

“I was not thinking of anything, I was feeling free with no worries, because she said me let’s stop talking about problems and just draw.

### ***Part 2: Treasures in my Suitcase***

*This part of the methodology helps children to reconnect with their hopes and dreams, important values, connection, their history and their skills.*

At this step of the methodology, the alternative stories gave us the entry point to justify all those important hopes, values and commitments for her life.

**At that moment that you talked honestly to your mother, was there something to your relationship that you found it compatible to your hopes?**

Yes, it was important for me to be honest, because this is how I would like people treat me and this reminded me the old times when we used to have a better understanding of each other.

**Despite the fact that your father speaks to you hardly, have there been any moments that he really showed you that care you are seeking from him?**

Only once, when I returned from my vacations. When I arrived at home he hugged me strongly and he kissed me.

**Was this moment including an expression of care that you are wishing for?**

Yes.

## Developing Stories around the themes

During our conversations with Kate sometimes the problem was coming on surface because of recent conflicts and tensions. However, instead of negotiating a negative conclusion for her identity, she admitted that something was and described one new realization:

“I feel like there is a new home inside me! It is like I have changed the building of my life.”

At that point, we collaboratively investigated the way this new situation was affecting her life, and which were the knowledge and actions she had activate to rich at this point.

These kinds of metaphorical expression were usually critical entry points to revise and unfold the structure of her personal agency.

### Part 3: Carrying my suitcase along: Mapping the journey

In this part of the project children are invited to bring to their minds pictures or representations of their journeys and also to highlight important experiences that helped them to make important decisions.

At this point, it was time to deconstruct the field of the problem and explore the stories of resistance that helped Kate to travel through her difficulties and keep them safe.

For this process were used inquiries of externalizing the problem, and influential questions that were positioning the problem in a wider political/ societal domain plot.

## DECONSTRUCTION

### «*The mindset*»

After several deconstructive questions about the time, when the problem appeared, and the elements that was affecting her life beyond the family context, she came with a single word, that she seemed to really have been connected with.

“It is that Mindset!”

She described me that mindset, as a Discourse, full of rules and indications about the way that women must speak, get dressed or communicate with men.

“This way of thinking remains the same for thousands of years.”

“**So, this mindset is something that you disagree with?**”

“Yes, totally. It doesn’t give you the freedom to communicate with someone else truly and honestly. It makes you be shamed and suspicious for everything.”

**“What would you say that is your intention beyond your resistance to this way of relationships?”**

“My need is a real connection with people. I don’t like to do whatever the others want me to do. I prefer them to explain me their thoughts but not just making orders!”

**“Is there any person in your life that would acknowledge this right moment, your way of thinking?”**

“Yes, Ron, the last time he told me not to talk with other boys, and I asked him why. I want to talk, and this doesn’t mean that this should be naughty. He smiled to me, and he told me that he trusts me. That was really important to me.”

Through these deconstructing questions were gathered enough treasures so that to thicken the subordinate story that was including alternative stories of the preferred identity, intentions, hopes, dreams, commitments but also her skills, knowledge and talents that were empowering her willingness to commit strong and trustful relationships with people, by not being afraid of expressing herself.

## **SUBORDINATE STORY**

**“The other Mindset”**

In our sixth meeting with Kate, she came to our consulting room with a really bad mood. After a big conflict with her parents, she was determined that she doesn’t belong to her family context anymore.

*«Instead of goals, we tend to speak about projects or directions. [Goal-setting, Narrative couple therapy, p.21].»*

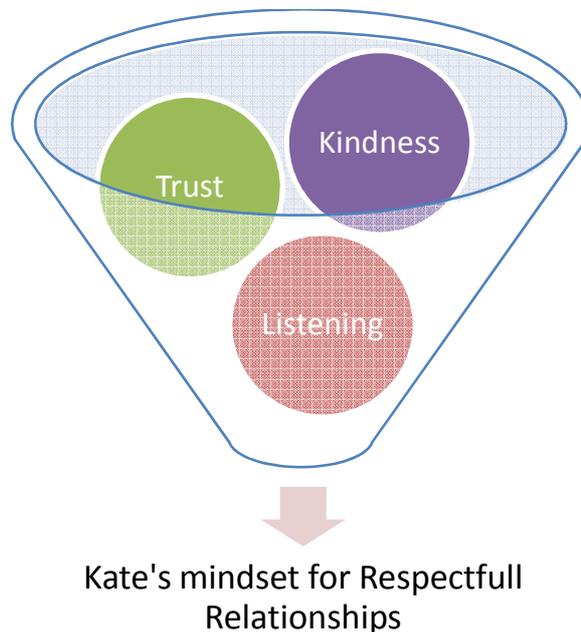
*‘Folk psychology’, as described by Jerome Bruner (White, 2001, p.8): Shapes our endeavour to come to terms with the unexpected in life, provides a basis for our efforts to address obstacles and crises, and makes it possible for us to come to terms with a range of predicaments and dilemmas that confront us in everyday life.*

**What is, that you think you are really missing from your presence in family?**

I need personal space, I need a chair in my family, this is how we call *respect* in my country.

“The Norwegian counsellor, Tom Andersen (1995), suggested the term ‘linguagrams’, which draws on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s ideas about ‘language games’ and how the meaning of certain words change depending upon the contexts in which they are used. Linguagrams, as Elspeth McAdam (2001) describes, can be used to ‘explore in detail the meanings, actions, emotions, moral orders and intentionality’ (p.98) associated with significant words.” Anne Kathrine Loge

Inspired by this method, I decided to apply the linguagram with Kate in order to investigate her intentions, her hopes and her skills when she is seeking for some respect from the important people of her life.



## REAUTHORING

### Part 4: Mapping the Journey

From that point and over, after thickening her realizations about preferred identity and action through deconstructive enquiries, we tried to outline her intentions in relation to her family and her social environment.

Through this process it was obvious that her sense of the problem was not the same anymore. Instead of her primary conception that “I am the problem, sometimes I don’t even know why I am still alive”, she could now feel more relieved and her intention to explore new ways of collaborative communication was more vivid.

In our next meeting we created the basis of a map, where we outlined the route that she has followed until her recent realizations.

The main route of her map was her destination of life. Through this pathway we playfully located some signs, bridges or flowers to indicate the hardships, but also the new realizations and commitments for her life. It was really interesting that at times of disappointment; this metaphorical concept of her life gave her some motivation to continue exploring her future plans and hopes.

### **DECENTERED PRACTICE**

During my attempt to apply narrative techniques to my Counseling Practice, I tried to espouse with the De-centered theories of practice, which are based in a balanced power relationship between the counselor and consultant. Particularly, in order not to present myself as the expert and because of the fact that my consultant was a fifteen years old girl, I tried to induce my practice creative tasks, through which the girl could express herself collaboratively and describe me some pictures in alternative ways so that to build a relationship like co-investigators of those images.

My approach of this case was based on structured enquiries, based on narrative conversation maps, through which I attempted to construct and thicken her preferred stories of identity and from the other hand to deconstruct those domain plots that she was struggling with.

For accomplishing this journey it was necessary to activate a double listening counseling, during which I could follow her narratives, but also from the other hand I was investigating secondary elements, that could be the entry points for alternative points of view, or indications of those absents but implicit, that need further decontructive questioning to be mentioned and authenticated.

Regarding my position in relation to some personal beliefs and statements, I should admit, that often I was stressed about the route and the direction of my enquiries, because of the complexity of different cultural backgrounds and as a result of that, different perceptions of the normal or subnormal. Instead of this stressful way of thinking, I followed the process od de-positioning, by feeling more free to ask openly for some subtle subjects, and bringing them to the consulting room.

### **DECONSTRUCTIVE LISTENING**

“Have awareness of the change that can cause your own understanding of narratives in consulting and sustain continuous awareness of the other in relation to them. Finally keep giving the opportunity for choices, in order to actively participate in the meanings that hires you.” [Narrative Therapy with couples and a whole lot more!, Ch.2]

The experience of deconstructive listening offers a chance to broaden your point of view, by showing patience, trust and understanding to your consultant. This opportunity

can reveal new aspects of some narratives, or subtle changes in the meanings of words, that are being repeated but with a diversive meaning each time. This linguistic journey is possible to broaden the authenticity and the trustfulness we could engage in our daily little talks beyond the limits of routine screening.

## **REFERENCES**

White, M. (2004). Working with people who are suffering the consequences of multiple trauma.

Hutton, J. (2008) Turning the spotlight back on the normalizing gaze

Chope, R. (2004) A narrative Approach to Multicultural Carrer Counseling

Russell Sh. & Carey, M. (1968) Externalising – Commonly asked questions, Dulwich Center Publications

White, M (1995) Children,Children’s Culture and Therapy

Loge, K. (2007) Disarming the conflict and developing skills of collaboration