

Final written Assignment

Marylise guillou

“Inspiring people”

Graduate certificate in Narrative Therapy

Dulwich centre, Australia

E-learning program

Athens 2017

Contents

A few words

Maria

Our first interview: giving a name to the problem

Exploring the effects. Evaluating them

Justifying the effects

Unique outcomes, sparkling moments

A dynamic and funny person

“I knew it was a good text”. The relevance of questions

Maria who “goads and arouses” looks forward to the future

“Giving myself priority over others”

“Teasing” Maria.

A few words before conclusion

Conclusion

A few words

The issue about the nature of the help a therapist can give to a person seeking therapy was for a long time part of my concern. What does mean ‘to get better’? What does mean, for the therapist, helping people to “get better”. Does it involve a step in ‘normality’? And, besides, what is normality? What is a healthy relationship, a good mother and so on? Those were some of the main questions I struggled with when I met narrative therapy.

The honesty in the attitude of the therapist when he remains close to the words of the person; the fact that therapy is not anymore about a story between experts and the effectiveness of the practice of externalization -which seemed immediately obvious to me- were some other issues I got in agreement with and provided me with a sense of relief concerning the work I am calling to do as a therapist.

I had the opportunity to realize that some concepts required a great effort of repositioning but reassured by what M. White wrote, that “therapists who are unfamiliar with the maps [...] may initially find them awkward, unnatural, or unspontaneous to use”(p.6) I decided that I could attempt to take a “journey into the unknown” (White, 2007 p. 7).

I chose to make this Journey with a ‘client’ I will call Maria for reasons of confidentiality¹, in a spirit of collaboration, openness and respect. Being aware of the risks inherent to the therapeutic practice (power due to the position of the therapist) in my work with Maria I tried to bring a constant care to “establish therapy as a context in which the consciousness and the knowledges of the person [...] are at its centre” (White, 1995 p202)

I met her in one of the Medical Centers that were born from the crisis we live in Greece since several years and where all workers are volunteers. I am one of them.

I sought permission to my ‘client’ to take notes during our interviews. These notes -I would give her the next meeting- would provide me some reassurance that I was staying close to her words and to her reality: I was hoping they would serve as a reliable safeguard against personal interpretations and misunderstanding, as she could indicate me potential errors in the next interview. They could be consulted by her as a document/summary of main ideas and issues that were developed in our meetings. Some of them were constructed as a double listening document: what she told me which was part of the dominant story, and hints of a potential alternative story (Morgan, A. 2000). Moreover, I saw they were very helpful to me when, resorting to them, I could remark some directions I didn’t notice in the ‘heat of debate’.

At the beginning of our meetings I did not feel comfortable with these notes I was supposed to take. My concern was that Maria may be wouldn’t feel listened to. I

¹ All names and some data have been changed for reason of confidentiality

believe that a kindly look on behalf of therapist can make some difference. Has this worry completely disappeared? I don't know. I just hope that with practice I will become adroit enough to be more succinct in taking notes, for being more present to the person.

Based on the principles of narrative therapy which wants the therapist de-centered but influential (White 2000) I kept in mind to try not to be an authority who brings knowledge in the therapy room but rather to be a co-worker 'with skills in facilitating her [...] project' (Freedman & Combs, 2002).

Our first interview. Maria

Maria is a woman in her early thirties. She was born in an important provincial Greek town and she was now living in Athens for the last few years. She was an excellent student and always attempted to support her father. From a young age, she refused to burden him financially with private lessons as many other children in Greece. Since she reached working age, she saved money (tutoring pupils and then students) for the purpose of helping her family in case anything happened to him. I felt connected to that little girl who was telling me that she had carried on her shoulders the weight of a whole family from her earliest years. Caring others was a value she considered as important in her life but it also was very anguishing for her. All along her studies Maria had a stipend. But she was now facing unemployment and for first time in her life was in debt.

According to narrative approach, people often believe that their problems are internal to their self or the selves of others, that they are the problem. (White 2007)

The way Maria was talking about her identity refers to what M. White writes about highly negative conclusions that people infer from the dominant story of their lives. I experienced it as if she was unloading a slew of labels: "I don't stand for myself", "Generally speaking, I can't argue", "I internalize a lot" and "I don't know how to be angry". She continued: "I am a little bit hypochondriac". I "have no self-confidence" and "I feel I am incompetent (when asked, she added: as a specialist in my field (linguistics), as an (amateur) actor, as a poet!)", "People hold me in esteem much more than I value", "I am a fake: I believe that I am deceiving people and that they will understand it one day".

Narrative therapy consider that stories are a framework within which meanings may be given to our experience (Denborough, D. & White, C. 2007). For some reason Maria had understood herself as an incompetent and problematic person. The single-storied way she presented herself was lacking in any benevolent aspect. She would tell me later that it was also the attitude in life of her father.

Nevertheless our first interview was not characterized only by talking about suffering, she also mentioned the relationship she was living with her current boyfriend. For first time she was feeling good in a relationship, especially in the sexual area. A few later

she would temper this, mentioning a dilemma which had arisen to her: for first time she felt she was “desired as a woman” -and that was very important for her- but she didn’t know if she really wanted to stay with him because of their different values in life.

Trying to come up with an experience-near definition of the problem (White 2007) I encouraged her to give a name to her problem. She first called it “Rake” because, sometimes, she felt it physically in her head, but soon she was speaking about negative thoughts which were tormenting her. She decided to tell it “Negative thoughts”.

Carey and Russel (2002) say that when problems become an entity, people can get a relationship with it and see more clearly that they are products of history and culture. I hoped that circumscribing the problem regarding to time would assist her to see more tangibly the problem as separated from her. We drew five circles divided in 2 parts. One part would represent the space that the problem got and the other the space which is free of it. They represented: nowadays, 5 years ago, 10 years ago, when she was at school, when she was a little girl. As a matter of fact, as we looked further back, the problem was shrinking. It was easier for her to see that the problem varied according to time and seemed not either having the same strength. This was a first rift in the intellectual build of internalization.

We closed our first meeting by a conversation about how she felt about the interview. She was a little surprised but she told me she was feeling good.

The words limitation prompts me to emphasize only on the main issues in the presentation of the other 11 meetings we had. At the end of this work, I will shortly refer to some others issues she talked about. In the next meetings we continued the externalizing conversations (White, 0072) we had initiated previously.

By taking the decision to reinforce the objectification of the problem (White, 2007 p 9) through its personification, my hope was that she could better face this problem. I proceeded with a range of questions -I will state below- to assist her to describe those negative thoughts which influenced her life. She associated these negative thoughts to a man.

How does this man look?

When does he show up?

What techniques are used by him?

What does he say? What does he hate upon you?

What are his intentions for you?

How far is he willing to go to harm you?

He was wearing “a suit” and seemed “very strict”. “He points a finger to my face. His face is stilted, without emotions”. “He appears each time I am starting something and when I feel happy”. He was very censorious and malevolent: “When I am with my boyfriend he asks me: Do you really have a good time with him? He is not a man for you!” He undermined her morale: “He tells me that if I accept to publish my thesis, I will make myself a fool”. “He makes me feel guilty”. “When I want to go forward he holds me back”. She told me that his intentions were very bad, that he wanted “me to undermine my successes and to be in doubt about my capacities”. According to him she always “could make better” and he didn’t want to see her feeling good: “doesn’t want to feel at peace with myself”. He hated when she felt “carefree and glad”. He detested when she succeeded “to acknowledge something on myself or when others acknowledge something on me”. His project was to make her “do anything that would get me out of stress”. “He wants me to give up”.

Exploring the effects

With reference to narrative theory, the interpretation made by the person about problematic events in his life influence the effects of the problem.

When I asked Maria how the problem influenced nowadays her life, she answered that she was always trying to please everyone: her father, her professor, the theater director, her friends, forgetting her own needs and wishes. She had built “different Marias”: Maria the good girl, Maria the good student, Maria the good friend but she told me that “deep down I feel it’s a fake”. It also had an impact on her health because she often felt in her head this “Rake” hurting her brain. It mainly affected her sense of self and her mood. Another effect was that she felt she never took initiatives, even if it was about “where they are going to have a cup of coffee”. It made her wanting to isolate herself, avoiding socializing: she said “I withdraw into myself.

Next step was to ask Maria whether she was or not ok with these effects. Realizing that asking such a question can confuse someone who has precisely come to free himself from problems, I explained to Maria that, in doing this, we invite people to “*pause and reflect on specific developments in their lives. For many this is a novel experience, for it is very often the case that this sort of evaluation has been mostly undertaken by others*” (White, 2007 p 44). She answered with a half-outraged half-ironic: “No. of course, I don’t want it!”

Justifying the effects.

When I encouraged Maria to justify her response, she told me that she didn’t want these negative thoughts in her life because she wanted to live a “carefree”, a more easy-going life. And she definitely wanted to live her “aspirations, not the desires of other people”.

I invited her to explain what “carefree” meant to her and she answered that she wanted not to be always afraid to speak, and to be able to say what “she is and wants

and feels". She wished to stop "leaning on others' thoughts and always denying her own". She wanted things happen "naturally" and without "her taking so much into accounts" the wishes of others.

My intention was, through the process of justification to lead her to take a stance on her problem. *A. Morgan (2011 p 68) writes that it helps people to move from the problem saturated story to a field of their life that is more in agreement with what they value in life.* As a matter of fact, Maria had just given a clear picture of what she wanted for her life, in this moment.

In our first interviews Maria spoke about a lot of issues. In accordance with my decision not to take the attitude of an authority, setting aside my first thoughts about what seemed relevant to me, I endeavoured to let Maria lead us to the point which seemed important for her at the present time.

Unique outcomes, "sparkling moments"

Despite the use of the word 'unique', narrative therapy believes that these exceptions we call unique outcomes are linked to others and that it is vitally important to link them into a story-line according to a theme or plot. A person's life can be seen as multi-storied (White & Epston, 1990). In a whole life, a problem cannot be totally successful. In accordance to M. White, there are always some sparkling moments that will contrast with the dominant story. Re-authoring conversations prompt people to continue to develop and tell stories and invite them to incorporate "some of the more neglected but potentially significant events and experiences that are "out of phase" with their dominant story-line"(White, 2007 p 61).

A dynamic and funny person

On the ground of the principle of double listening (White 2004) which opens spaces for the telling of both the negative and the alternative story, all along the conversations we had, I tried to locate some hints which would lead me to some stories where the problem was not so strong; to events that had existed but had been erased or to which had been attributed no significant and positive meaning. I would consider these sparkling moments as entries to new alternative story.

In one of our interviews Maria mentioned a story she had lived some days ago. In a four days journey she had just made with her boyfriend, she told me she "had a good time". As prescribed by M. White, I began my question with a little editorial (White, 2007 p 45) "You have told me previously that it is very difficult for you to put away negative thoughts and to feel relaxed, may I ask you something about this?" After she gave me her permission I said: "Was this 'having a good time' something different for you or do you know it well?" (Carey & Russel (2003) She answered that she rarely felt like that. Answering to my questions for more details about this week end, she told they had taken walks, photographed doors in a Greek countryside's village, and simply enjoyed each other's company. As *Freedman & Combs write "the very act of*

re-authoring requires and demonstrates personal agency [...] We go a step further in making personal agency apparent by asking [...] how people have accomplished what they have” (Carey & Russel (2003 p 33). Thus, I asked her how she had managed to relax, what words may be she told to herself to be able to do that, she answered: “I simply said to myself: let’s take a short break, take a deep breath, there will still be time to do things that are waiting to be done when you’ll come back home!”.

I wanted to know if she had lived this carefreeness or something resembling in the past and this brought us to another story which had occurred after her doctoral thesis defense. She had been able to live for a long week end a carefree life. She told me that it was like if she was “in another world”. After asking questions about the context of this event, I heard Maria describing the atmosphere of the camping near the beautiful beach, her joyful spirit whereas her friend Kate (with whom she went on holiday) was feeling “really depressed”. Asked how she prepared herself to live this, Maria answered: “I don’t know. I simply said ‘I will do it! May be because I was in a different context, I had no much to study!” Maria added that it was this week end she met her current boyfriend. When asked what she believed that this new behavior said about her skills and preferred way of behave she answered she had shown how dynamic and funny she could be.

Maria had just mentioned two stories that were at variance with the dominant story she depicted at the beginning and seemed so strongly anchored in her life. At this moment I was thinking that this inquiry may have helped to render a little more significant an erased or rather a ‘watermark story’ which had shade off aspects of her life.

In our next meetings we continued to speak about Maria’s life, often ‘falling back in old routine’ of internalizing. I felt that it was not possible to always ‘correct’ her without disturbing her or cutting the coherence of her discourse. In this, I felt helped by the summaries I gave her where I could reposition her words mentioning negative thoughts.

“I knew it was a good text”. The relevance of questions

At the end of some interview, Maria mentioned a humoristic text she wrote about a word which linked up her academic work and the car of her parents. She had then published it on a social network. Before even receiving very good feedbacks from many people, she said that she “knew it was a good text!” I was impressed by Maria who seemed very sure about that, by Maria discovering the ability of recognizing what was good in what she produced. She named it “Ouf” because she had not been afraid of reject and it had been a relief for her. Pressed for time, but mainly because of my lack of experience, I was not able to take the opportunity to ask more relevant questions about the kind of action she had taken. Instead of asking for instance: “Maria, you just said that you have the ability to know what is good in what you product, do you think that this fit with what you have told me about your sense of

being fake and incompetent in your field?” and “How can you be sure it is good? What make this certainty possible? I asked a general question and she answered that she feels like that when she dance, letting her body free or when they were improvising at theater: she could there do anything she wanted without thinking of others. I realized at this moment how much the appropriateness of questions therapist asks can, instead of giving openings to new richer development, impoverish it.

Numerous other issues were brought by Maria in our meetings: she talked a lot about the anxiety she was experiencing with the threat of unemployment and her dread of the scholarship Committee of Control. This was an example of how negative thoughts could make her life miserable. In a meeting, she told me that the anxiety had gone at last when she heard some of her colleagues saying that they had done much less she had with the amount allocated.

Maria who “goads and arouses” looks forward to the future

Narrative therapy incites people to speak about their identity in terms of intentional states of identity (W2001b). If we seek out the values, hopes and dreams that are guiding someone’s actions, there are ways to trace the history of these, to link them to the hopes and dreams of other people, and forecast what future actions will flow from this commitments (Carey & Russel 2003).

When we were speaking about problems she had when she must expose herself to the public, she suddenly said that she likes to “inspire others”. This was something very important to her: “I enjoy inspire others, when my actions have a beautiful impact on others it delights me, it fulfills me”. Unpacking what she meant with “Inspiring others” she said that it was about “helping people to think differently”. She liked to “goad” and to “arouse others”. She decided to give this name to this story “Maria who knows how to goad and to arouse others”. To the question: “If you could keep with you this desire to inspire others and your personal ability to ‘goad and arouse’, what could you do in a future activity? She had a lot of ideas about how a class can be attractive, how she could make a course interactive. This immediately brought another story: some time ago, she taught for a while in an American college. She could see her students, under her leadership, being very much involved and participating to her class with great enthusiasm. At that point she looked thrilled and I thought that this realization must have been important to Maria. She did assure me that it was the case, and asked the reason she answered that “being useful to someone” was extremely important to her.

As M. White writes about personal agency (White, 2007 p103), people can live out “their lives according to intentions that they embrace in the pursuit of what they give value to in life”. In this interview I witnessed emerging Maria’s skills of goading and arousing and her desire to “inspire people” which was in accordance with her value of “being useful to others”.

I saw then the opportunity to initiate a remembering conversation (White, 2007). *Narrative perspective assumes that “identity is founded upon an ‘association of life’ rather than on a core self, (White 2007 p. 129). This association is composed with significant figures of a person’s life which influence our experiences of ourselves.*

I asked her who she thought could have noticed or wouldn’t be surprised to hear her speaking in that way about this commitment to ideas about education which seemed so important to her and these skills she had mentioned above. She named her professor who had distinguished her as a very special student. She explained they had a really good relationship and how much he supported her. I encouraged her to reflect on what meant her teacher’s contribution to her life and on what that might say about who she was in his eyes (White 2007 p 130). In response to my question: “What do you think he values on you, you cannot recognize or you overlook?” Maria said that he often said how much he appreciated her work and that he hadn’t chosen her by accident. In his opinion she was remarkable and did an excellent work in a number of areas (writing, analysis and so on). To my question about the importance she thought *her* presence could have in *his* life, she answered that it was not impossible she had contributed to his life as a teacher. She thought she was a good collaborator and practically she helped him (for example with new technologies: about this, she added in a next meeting that if it was to collaborate again with him, she would put limits to his tendency to require too much from her). He often complained about the level of his students and for him as a teacher it may be important to have a student like her whom writing was, in his words, ‘sensual’²

She seemed touched about her own references to her contribution to other’s life. I noticed she hadn’t really shown hesitation in saying about her capacity to be a good collaborator; I had supposed that some more scaffolding would be necessary to become knowledge to Maria about her contribution to her life’s teacher. In this way, I believed she was on the way to a reconstruction of her sense of worth. Nevertheless, if it was to remake this conversation may be I would develop questions about further reflection about her contribution to teacher’s understanding of what his life was about (White, 2007 p132).

Giving myself priority over others

In some of our meetings Maria mentioned that the past week she had said “No” to the members of the literary magazine she was collaborating with. She was feeling lost with so many things she assumed responsibility for and so tired that she had refused to be part of a project the members suggested to do. At their insistence she said she had something to do (her boyfriend wished they spend some time together and she wanted too). She had previously mentioned her difficulty to refuse what people demanded from her and she wanted things happen without to “take so much into

² In Greek ‘ερωτικά’ doesn’t refer, in this case, to sex but it is a colourful expression he gave to her very beautiful writing

accounts” the wishes of others. To my question: ‘What have you done this day, what sort of act was this? She told me: “I gave myself priority over others’. In doing this, what was your intention? “I thought it was important to be really good in whatever I do. I said to myself ‘Do one thing and do it well, instead of putting too much on your plate”. I asked: “Have there been other occasions when you have managed to “give yourself priority over others?” she answered that she couldn’t remember. However, in next meeting, she gave an example of this skill she was discovering. One day, whereas she was expecting for our appointment, she had resisted to give her turn to the next woman who was complaining she was very stressed and had got her appointment mixed up. She told to herself “It’s my turn!” It was important to see herself not giving so much importance to others and recognize, in this case, her right.

In this interview, I was thinking that all along our meetings, Maria had begun to develop some familiarity with aspects of her life she had experienced but not acknowledged as meaningful as other stories. Another story would reinforce this impression.

“Teasing” Maria.

The following story happened a few days before an interview. The past week end, they had made an excursion with her friends of the theater. She described me the journey in the car, returning to Athens, the good atmosphere between them. She had started to sing old Christian songs she learnt in her early years: “I had a great success and I felt so lighter and so carefree!”

Here too, the problematic story of Maria dominated by negative thoughts which hate when she feels free and makes her feel isolated was counteracted by a preferred story. The latter was meeting her wishes of carefreeness, relaxation and ‘things happening effortlessly’. I took the opportunity to ask some questions about her identity. “Maria, you beforehand said that you have difficulties in socializing and that to “expose yourself to the public” is for you very hard. But this time you succeeded to do it, what do you think people who saw you doing that thought about what you are as a person?” She answered: “I think that they saw a communicative person, who likes meeting people”. She also said “and who is a teasing person”. She remembered that in the past she had the reputation, among her friends, to be a “teasing, mischievous and funny person”. She added that “she missed her old self”. Engaging in a new remembering conversation, I asked who, in her opinion, must know that about her. The answer was: “My friends Katerina, Margaret and my boyfriend whom I met on these 3 days holidays after examination. And Amelia! I am the one who helped her to meet her future husband, by being very teasing and by imagining a lot of situations to make them meet “. In saying this she was both moved and amused. When asked she said that, for sure, this meant a lot for her friend because she had really changed something in her life.

A few words before conclusion

In the beginning of our interviews we had agreed that we would make 10 meetings. In our 9th interview, I asked her what was her intention. She asked me if it was possible to continue and I agreed with great pleasure. But in our 12th meeting she informed me that she had just received an offer of work in her native town. She was both pleased and anxious because she would have a very short preparatory period.

All along our interviews, Maria spoke about some other issues she was struggling with we didn't really develop. Her relationship with Kostas created for her a dilemma. His way of being relaxed and their good sexual relationship helped her to feel more confident but she disagreed with his stand in reference to drugs, to women and his political convictions. At the outset of our meetings, she wondered if she must separate from him. Her sense of honesty made her feel she had to decide rapidly what would happen with their relationship. Nevertheless, in the last meetings she felt more peaceful. She had realized that she had not to bear alone the responsibility of this relationship and that she could afford to take time and space. She said: "He is an adult, straightforward, who knows what he says and what he wants". She also told me that she was thinking of having with him a more free relationship and that she could try to meet other men.

In preceding interviews, when I had intended to suggest her some meeting with Kostas, she told she did not feel ready because she was afraid of what she was "going to hear". Moreover, my attempt to open a conversation about the idea if partners must "expect to find in each other the totality of whatever it is that is to provide the foundation for their existence" (Freedman & Combs 2002) had no result. I believed that we would find a more propitious occasion to open such an issue but we didn't have this occasion because of her departure.

Thus, even though malevolent thoughts came back disturbing her now and again, she had begun to take more initiatives.

The 'false Marias' she presented to please people were not so present in her life. She had some ideas of how she could manage to keep this alive in her professional and personal life.

She was beginning to be more relaxed in her relationships and to behave in a preferred way, sometimes 'giving herself priority over others'.

For the beginning of her new life she had some aims: to dedicate herself to her field of study (linguistics), her activity in the field of art to be nearer her own desires, and to 'act as an adult'. She told me: "I can do it, I have opinions and viewpoint". She also added that she felt reconciled with the idea that it was "not necessary they all like me".

In our final meeting, I proposed her to make a document. The suddenness of her departure had not enabled me to really help Maria to prepare herself to this new exercise. She finally decided to make this little report.

My benefits of this experience

It helped me to 'deconstruct the compact'.

I now have a basis to create something and to see the other side.

I know what I enlarge

I feel I can better handle things: from making a lecture until cooking

Conclusion

Our endeavors to help Maria to rediscover some knowledge and skills she owned went through richly drawing subordinate storylines. The evocation and thickening of them made her, at the end of our meetings, a little more competent to do choices in harmony with themes that had been arisen and that were more congruent with what she valued in life - commitment to education, helping others and her dream to live a more carefree and socializing life. As Carey & Russel (2003) wrote re-authoring doesn't occur only in the therapy room. When the therapist and the person have co-created "the possibilities for the generation of alternative, preferred stories of identity [...], then the person concerned will have a foundation to continue to link events and meanings around this new story" (p 38).

References

Carey, M. & Russel, S. (2002). Externalizing – Commonly asked questions. *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*.

Carey, M. & Russel, S. (2003). Re-Authoring: Some answers to commonly asked questions. *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*

Denborough, D. & White, C. (2007) Workshop: Toward collective and community practices: Narrative ways of working with groups and communities, Toronto: November 1st and 2nd.

Freedman, J. & Combs, G.(2002). Narrative Couple Therapy. In *Clinical Handbook of Couple Therapy*. Gurman & Jacobson's. New York: the Guilford Press

Morgan, A. (2000) *What is Narrative Therapy*. Dulwich Centre Publications.

Russel, S. & Carey, M. (2002). Remembering: Responding to commonly asked questions. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*.

White, M. Epston, D. (1990) *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. W. W. Norton and Company

White, M. (1995) *The Ethic of Collaboration. Decentred Practice*. In M. White, *Narrative of Therapist's lives*. Adelaide, South Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications

White, M. (2000) *Reflections on Narrative Practices: Interviews and Essays*. Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

White, M. (2004). Working with people who are suffering the consequences of multiple trauma: a narrative perspective. *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*.

White, M. (2007) *Maps of Narrative practice*. New York: W.W. Norton