

Graduate Certificate in Narrative Therapy

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Final written assignment

**A Narrative Journey from the personal to the political
and vice versa:**

*A collaborative group work with women resisting norms
of personal failure/success*

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Introduction

As a way of opening this paper I would like to refer to my initial interest in the multiple ways and the varieties of the language that people use trying to express or to conceal an undercurrent sense of failure. These past few years, this interest has become broader as I have come to realize that many of my clients, especially women, talk about their difficulties, discernments and problems describing a kind of personal failure with an impressively internalizing language. An interesting point for me was the particular words which all these women use in order to explain the problem, not mentioning the word failure. So, it was possible to hear words such as inadequacy, inefficiency, ineffectiveness, mischance... but never to hear the word failure. Another perception I have had, listening to their histories of lives, was that they had a constant tendency to also internalize other options of what were experienced as a 'failure' around them, even if it had to do with the political, social, economic life in 'Greece on crisis'.

As this underlying feeling was persisting in our individual sessions without 'failure' being expressed openly, a great curiosity excited me, and I started to explore through our conversations not only this sense of personal failure as a narrative therapeutic practice but also issues of gender and culture which could be connected with this unpleasant sense.

After a longtime of thinking, I concluded to inviting some of these women in a series of at least four sessions, establishing a new context of group therapy. So, I addressed four female clients, all of which have already been working with me in individual sessions and I asked them to think about a collaborative work in a short-term group. Being aware of the fact that none of them had any prior experience of group therapy, I felt the urge to clearly describe right from the beginning the context of collaboration and transparency within which I was inviting them to work, ensuring, at the same time, the existing sense of security and trust.

So, the initial idea to carry out this co-research was the increasing frequency of the sense of failure as a common sense, especially among my women clients, in the context of contemporary Greek society of 'crisis'.

I, therefore, invited them to participate in this short-term group in order to actively co-research not only this sense of failure, which eventually is connected with relations of power, but by bringing their knowledge, , understandings, skills, values to the surface to

also inquire their acts of resistance. The therapeutic context of our work would be a narrative informed by feminist values. All four women accepted the invitation.

The group of women

Our group came together for the first session on the first week of March. We met regularly once a week for an about two-and-a-half hour session in my private office. All women came from almost the same socio-economic background and all of them were employed except for the youngest one who was still a student. Their ages were 21, 37, 48, 57 years old, a variety which proved to be a very interesting factor during those four sessions.

The women arrived at our first meeting being quite embarrassed and quiet. As they had never had a group therapy experience up until then and being complete strangers to each other, they went as far as to avoid eye contact. Referring to this very first meeting a few weeks later, during our last session, they said that they joined the group doubting the meaning and the effectiveness of the meetings but mainly being curious as to how four complete strangers would be able to trust each other or at least communicate, which is something difficult even in everyday relationships with the people who are close to them.

What proved to be a motivation towards them joining the group, which was far greater than their own doubts and my own assurance about the therapeutic value of the group, was their curiosity and wondering.

After the first introductions and the breaking of the ice, the women started asking questions about the way we would work; we were, therefore, given the opportunity to explain a few things about work within group in the context of narrative therapy as well as the merit of linking lives around shared themes, values and commitments. It was very important to introduce the members of the group not only to narrative practices but also to stress the fact that our work would be about women's lives, women's knowledge and women's descriptions of preferred identities; and finally, that this group would be an opportunity to build connections between women.

Addressing problems in externalizing and deconstructing conversations

Firstly, I introduced to them of those thoughts and ideas that inspired me into inviting them to join the group, explaining that I had been able to discern a sense of discontent, inadequacy, dissatisfaction and possibly failure in their individual stories. However, from then on I paid special attention to following their words and listening to them carefully as I tried to remain concentrated on the present process and not interfering with my own ideas, just because I had discussed some issues with them personally in the past. Another way that I used to build trust and safety for the members of the group was to assure our respect for their choice to discuss or not some personal details of their histories. These assurances privileged the persons' skills and knowledge and decentered me from being the knowledgeable or the expert.

Therefore, I suggested that we begin at the beginning as they had never met each other before. Firstly, I explained that externalizing is a therapeutic practice that encourages individuals to objectify and sometimes personalize problems they experience as oppressive. In this process, the problem becomes a separate entity and thus external to the individual or to the relationship to which it was ascribed (White, 1988).

Right after this, I asked them if they were willing to work by externalizing the problem each one of them was dealing with at this time, which was in some way associated with or connected to this familiar sense of inadequacy, dissatisfaction or failure to face or resolve it.

I suggested that they could do so in a pleasant and creative way, by portraying the problem outside of themselves. They accepted with a feeling of relief and a playful mood and few minutes later they showed their pictures to the rest of the group and they explained what the problem was and what their stance was regarding the problem. Finally, I asked each of them to name their individual problems.

The process has been developing in a very interesting way bringing as much information as each group member wanted to give this time and consisting a perfect way of introducing oneself. Using externalizing conversations they separated the problems from their sense of selves and they noticed the consequences that the problems had on their lives but also a series of important issues which further inform us. For example, the colors they used, the positions and the sizes of the problems as these were depicted on the piece of paper, their own stances and sizes, the evolution of the problem through time, the limits and frames

they used around the depicted problem, joking with the problem etc. Moreover, by naming these problems they abandoned the individualized and internalized description of their experiences. It was so comfortable and helpful to have in front of us, on a little table, the figure of the four problems with a shape, a form and of course, a name.



Anna's "Restart" Electra's "Burning Anger" Zoe's "The little devils" Niove's "grey lake"

The women started talking about the stories of these problems and the effects that they had on their lives. The impressive fact was that in all these first narrations of their problems, which they had drawn, there was a kind of sparkling and optimistic detail:

These "little devils", the Grief and the Fear, are behind me now, I often laugh at them now' or 'I watch this "Burning Anger", I check what lights the fire, I try to be there and it calms me to see the blue horizon behind the fire', or

'This "grey lake" somewhere ends, anyway, I couldn't imagine all my life in grey!' and

The drawing that pictures a great fear that turns into panic bears the name, "Restart".

And later as we were listening to parts of the dominant stories of the problems, we had the opportunity to discover sides of the alternative stories. For example, the story of the Fear and the story about the lack of fear:

"I grew up in the countryside, surrounded by orange trees. We all knew each other. I was free to wander around all day long and play. I was strange little girl dressed rather as a boy and with a short haircut. Everybody would look after us as kids. I felt secure and free and I really enjoyed this state of mine. As our parents were working my only responsibility was to take care of my younger brother and I really enjoyed it. I've had a truly great childhood! I was never afraid of people and I am still not afraid of them.

I never felt that I was threatened by natural disasters. I was never afraid of Nature. The natural context is very important in my life. I adore the sea and I'm a certified skipper. During my training as a skipper I realized that panic is the greatest danger. This is when I believed and I still do that "I will survive no matter what". On the contrary, this very Fear can attack me in numerous ways and I cannot stop it; I cannot avoid it and it can cause me lots of damage; it can cause my body to suffer (skin problems, palpitation, vertigo). This is when I feel helpless, inadequate, lonely and Fear comes along with Panic. I give up on everything halfway through, whether this "everything" is a relationship, my house or my car and all I can always do well is my job.'

The above narration accurately reports Anna's exact words. This extract is a summarized account deprived of the interfering comments of the group members. Some facilitating questions that I asked by within the therapeutic context were:

- You're saying that this Fear has always been present. What do you mean? How far back in your life can you trace this Fear?
- It sounds like you're talking about a specific kind of Fear. What kind of Fear is it?
- When you say that the Fear attacks you, what do you mean by that? How does it do so?

'One of the key contributions of narrative therapy is the determination not to locate problems as internal to people, but instead to externalize problems and to understand that the ways in which problems are constructed and experienced are related to matters of culture and history' (Carey & Russell 2002; Epston & White 1990).

As problems are located outside of persons, it is more likely that matters of gender, class, culture, race, sexuality and ability are considered in therapeutic conversations.

Maybe, this Fear attacks Anna in a way that makes her feel '*helpless*', '*inadequate*', '*lonely*' and even physically sick. However, her previous mentioned narration can already tell multiple stories, if we really double listen. She therefore talks about the knowledge, the skills and the values that inspire her in her life (dynamism, independence, freedom, security, responsibility) and she expresses her views on gender characteristics and the grading of the fear as well as the grading of the effects, fear has on her life. Following narrative ideas, we are invited to hear both, the expression and what is absent from the expression but is implicit in its meaning.

Absent but Implicit – Name the value

As we were in the first session and even if we intended to have externalizing conversations, all the women would often refer to their problems using an internalized self-definition. Their expressions would describe but would not state personal failure and at the same time they had the potential to depress not only the speaker but also, all the listeners. For example, when Electra started to speak about the Anger, responding to my questions:

- What are you angry about?

'Anger is inextricably linked with my life. I get angry because I deprive myself of things that I as a kid had and which I cannot offer to my children; a good education, a big house... The family in which I grew up in may not have made it after all; we have grown apart from one another, my brothers are distant, my parents have been divorced and I don't have the financial comfort that I used to have in the past. I work in shifts for hours on end for very low salary and my children have to spend a lot of hours with their dad, without me. I miss them so much and when I get back home I'm so tired that I cannot take it anymore and I get angry.

- Tell me more about what makes that Anger familiar to you?

You want to know if this anger of mine is familiar to me. Of course it is. When my favorite grandpa immigrated to a big, unknown country without even speaking the local language, without having any money or any job, in order for him to have control over his life, he had to be authoritarian, he had to be angry... But for him, anger was a tool in his "survival kit".

- It seems that you are talking about a different kind of anger now. Are you?

'Yes. My anger is different. It's like a fire which you cannot control. It is usually like some kind of illness. I feel like I have some kind of incurable illness. I go online looking for information about what this may be (ADHD, other disorder). I love my children very much, I want to be a good mum but my anger won't stop even there... I go mad, I scream, I cannot stop'

- What were the expectations you had that you said you failed to achieve because of this Anger

It could be helpful, at this point, to give some information: When Electra was 16 years old, her relatives decided that she needed to see a psychologist. The only thing she remembers from that one and only meeting with this professional, is that he suggested that she see an expert in order to confirm that Electra probably had ADHD. Even if, his 'diagnosis' has never been confirmed, Electra still needs to get a confirmation that she is 'normal'.

An important question, in this field, is the way in which anger, rage or furiousness of young women and girls, is often pathologised, as it seems like a very classic, old and constant attacking of power.

Continuing our conversations, the group members had also questions, as:

- In which situations does the voice of Anger speak more loudly?

Eventually, yes, exhaustion 'feeds' my anger; it's the tiredness I feel and my anxiety as to how we'll make ends meet. This anxiety to make ends meet prevented me from studying what I wanted, from doing the job that I wanted. It prevents me from raising my children the way I'd like to and that's why I get angry. It's unfair, that's why I get angry'.

- What would be fair to have in life instead of anger? What sort of fairness is being violated that could give voice to such Anger?

'It would be fair to get some rest and some peace and quiet. I don't like this job. It destroys me, it makes me angry. My dream is to be able, someday, to have a house, even if it is a small one, by the sea. Just to can see the horizon and the sea.'

And later, during our session, she had the opportunity to respond to questions like these:

- What does this Anger say about the values that you are refusing to give up on?
- What might this Anger know about the hopes for your life that you stand for?

As she also referred to more things that she is realizing now how important they are for her: Staying home longer with the kids, family togetherness and family continuity in space and time. Once these precious values were named, they could be validated in a way that Electra calmed down and she was able to express in words what she really yearns for: ' I need a family house to show to my children. I want to take them there, tell them 'this is where mum was born'.

In the shadow of every complaint, the absent but implicit tells of what is precious to the person that has been lost or threatened. The intensity of the complaint is a testimony to how precious it is. When we are complaining, the complaint receives the focus of our attention. We may think that we want validation for our feelings, but this only justifies the negative. These absent but implicit conversations intend to bring into focus and acknowledge what is precious. (J. Aman, 2014)

‘Two Little Devils’ who go hand in hand and ‘The Grey Lake’

Zoe, the youngest of the group members, started talking about the two little devils she had drawn in the frame, namely Depression and Panic, shouting in a quite joyful way “we’re coming”, as if they were ready to attack her again. She commented that this frame – an idea that bothered me **a lot before I finally propose to the group to draw the problem within-** made her feel **safe and distant from the problem** and she referred to the history of the problem. She said how it tormented her in the past, how more relaxed she is now; she talked about her hope that in the future the ‘Two Little Devils’ will not annoy her again.

She also talked about the effects the problem has had on her life during her childhood and adolescence and she referred to the ways in which, back then, Depression collaborated with Panic against her. They also had an ally, which was the fact that she would not speak. She said that ever since the effect of the problem has diminished, there have been changes not only in her way of thinking and feeling but also in her body. She, therefore, feels strong faced with the challenge of remaining in Greece and keeping trying, regardless of the fact that her father had left a few days before to go abroad in search of a better professional future. The ‘I do not speak’ sentence was heard loud and clear in the group meeting, as all the members felt and stated how honored they felt by the fact that she was talking to them...

Niove used only one color in her drawing. She drew, within the frame of the problem, a grey lake and placed herself, colored in grey, too, outside the frame. It was easier for her to name the problem as follows: “A grey lake”; and more difficult for her to define the effects that the problem has in her life: concern, anxiety, frustration? One thing is certain, like she says, that *‘I dive into the problem and absorb it, I get discolored by it, I become grey too.’* She consciously decided not to fill the frame of the problem with the grey picture; she stopped in the middle of it because as she said: *‘I could not imagine that this would last for the rest of my life’.*

In this first session, my concern was to have only an influential role, asking questions that could probably facilitate an 'experience near' description of each problem. Listening carefully to their stories and looking at their pictures in front of us, the problems were becoming increasingly particular and unique.

On the other hand, through their narrations of the known, dominant and problematic story, they had the opportunity to also share some ideas and perceptions which made them bond with each other.

For example, one thing that all four stories had in common, and which came up spontaneously, was the particular positive and calming effect Nature has on them. In their narrations, they talked about their connections to Nature and all agreed that, whenever they seek comfort or feel the need for some positive energy, they somehow 'return' to Nature or somehow 'address' it! *'Fortunately, our Greek sun is there for everyone! One does not need much. All you have to do is go out'.*

It is thanks to their connection to nature that they emphasized their choice to remain in Greece, in spite of all the problems and hardships...

From the personal sense to the political context¹

After the first experience of group members on narrative practices of externalizing conversations and the idea of the absent and the implicit, it came more naturally to the women to talk about the history of each problem, their own relation with the problem, the effects of the problem on different aspects of their lives. They also referred to the usual allies of the problem.

Talking about factors that strengthen the problem, their first comment was about the socio-financial crisis in Greece and its huge effects on their personal predicaments. One by one they started to talk about this generalized sense of

¹ The phrase, 'the political is the personal' represents one of feminist's key theoretical contributions. This phrase represents a commitment to understand people's personal experiences as influenced by broader relations of power. In this way, a woman's personal experiences are not solely her own, they are linked to other women's experiences, they are linked to a broader politics.

frustration and insecurity and when I asked if this political situation, titled by the media as the 'Greek crisis,' affects in any way their personal problem, I felt that I had opened the door to a hurricane.

New stories came up, filling in gaps of the storylines of the women's previous narrations:

They talked about intense political action they had taken in the past and which has now been betrayed, about the lack of trust in any form of power and about their disappointment when their efforts, achievements and patience lead nowhere at all. They referred to stories the new situation created in their lives: stories of guilt, rage, pessimism. It seemed as if they were experiencing a sense of failure, which despite not being personal, burdens their lives. Some of the words they used to illustrate this burden were: responsibility, shame, abjection, defeat, deceit, rage, uprooting...

What is obvious in many ways is the fact that each – originally – personal problem is connected with and intensified by the political context and the hard times the country has been going through. While referring to the political context the group member had the opportunity to further bond with each other and exchange words of support and comfort and a little later **when I asked if there was a kind of resistance against 'crisis'**, all of them somehow referred to the ways they eventually respond to the adverse social reality:

-I have relatives and a house abroad; I could have already left the country. But this is where I met my husband and gave birth to my children, and I want them to grow up in this country and when things get back to normal, I want to be here to experience it...

-My father left the country and went abroad a few days ago in the hope of finding a better professional future. He might have left so as to ensure that I have a better future. However, he trusted me and I will try to stay here and I will be happy to see him returning.

-I work in the field of finance, every day I read all the financial papers, I could see it coming. I could have left early on. I chose to stay and be subjected to it.

-I had left beliefs and I thought that the world could change. Now, I don't believe in anything; it takes a lot of courage to find a new meaning.

When I asked how they would name the above described behaviour, remaining in the country trying to develop their skills, defending their values, two words came up at the same time

-Resistance, stubbornness...

Another dimension appears next to what feminists meant by the phrase 'the personal is political'. A feminist understanding considers 'politics as central to our very beings, affecting our thoughts, emotions and the apparently trivial everyday choices we make about how we live... treating what had been perceived as merely 'personal' issues as political concerns '(Kitzinger, Perkins 1993). In the case of this group of women, personal concerns had been affected by a burdened political context in a negative way, and on the other hand, political concerns, national and international politics, and major socioeconomic problems seem to provoke and challenge a personal kind of resistance, changing their ways and their minds.

In this space of multi-storied conversations the group members found the opportunity to speak of the effects of whatever it is that they have found troublesome and to express the distress that is associated with these experiences. They also had the chance to step into alternative identity conclusions that challenge those negative accounts of identity that have been constructed in a context of underestimation and failure.

At this point of the process and as we were in the second session, externalizing conversations had now been applied to a wider range of purposes, assisting the group members to situate their problems in the political, cultural and socio/economic context of their lives. As a result, the concept of failure appeared again, however, now it was clearer what kind of 'personal' failure we were talking about; where this 'personal sense' comes from, and how perceptions of what is 'normal', 'healthy' and 'successful' can marginalize not only individuals or groups of people but also whole populations.

In this case, it is important to emphasize on the wide-scale impact of neoliberalism as dominant narration in western societies. So, talking about 'normality' or 'success' we firstly have to explore the effects of neoliberal economic policy on contemporary life and behavior (V. Berdayes, J. Murphy 2016).

Obviously, neoliberalism is not referred just as an economic policy but as 'a mode of existence' which brought enormous political dimensions into being (Saad-Filho 2010). As M. Foucault argued almost thirty five years before, 'the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of *our days* is not to liberate the individual from the state and its institutions, but to liberate ourselves from the State and the type of individualisation linked to it' (M. Foucault 1982)

As M. White mentions referring to Foucauldian modern power 'the dramatic growth of the phenomenon of personal failure is associated with the rise of a distinctly modern version of power that establishes an effective system of social control through what can be referred to as 'normalizing judgment'(M. Foucault 1973,1980).

At this point of our conversation, as women were listening to one another's stories they started to realize how much strict and critical all of them were with themselves. They mentioned that they had found normal to criticize themselves, however they couldn't accept or explain the way that the other women insisted describing sides of their lives related to experiences of personal failure. As they were listening to such kind of short stories of personal insufficiency, they started to look at one another and smile meaningfully. In this way, they invited me to explain some more things about the 'modern power' and the 'normalizing gaze' using examples of their own life stories.

Right after these conversations , it was more clear for the group to perceive the intended meaning of the way that 'participating in this normalizing judgment , people are active in the policing of their own and each other's lives and are deeply implicated in the mechanisms of social control that are characteristic of modern power' (M. White, 2004).

In this way of thinking, 'normal, used to be a measure of geometry, now it is used to measure people. It means that perceptions of what is 'normal' can marginalize

individuals and populations and can also give great power to those who live their lives within its boundaries (J. Hutton, 2008).

Talking about norms, normality and normalizing judgment during our session, all the women of the group, knowing very well what it means for a woman to be 'a person of worth' in our culture, agreed that they had always been trying to harmonize their personal lives with these norms. They thought that they knew the truth: success will be the present for shaping and discipline of their identities according to these norms. This political crisis turned their lives upside down and it offered them 'new knowledge of life and practices of living that were to be found in the shadows of failure' (M. White, 2004)

In these conversations, the stories of their lives started to become more evidently multi-storeyed as they selected events of their lives which I asked to link with specific values which reflect of what is important to them, with their expectations in the future and finally, what this suggests about their own identities.

Conversations that Highlight the Influence of Dominant Culture and the Gender Ideas

During our deconstructing conversations, the women realised that the initial externalised problems are not bond only with the socio-economic and political context and that sense of collective failure that they have been experienced last years living in Greek society but also with the concept of 'normality' which had been informing their expectations and standards for a life time.

Once again the personal was illuminated by the political and this time culture and gender was the issue. Some aspects of their lives that had been seen as purely personal was now received as political concerns and had come in our conversation to value feminism.

- **Women's care, worry and responsibility**
 - *I was the older child, I was a girl, I had to take care of my little brothers*
 - *I was the girl of the family, I was capable and careful, It was obvious that I could be responsible without asking for recognition or respect*

- *When my brother got seriously sick, I did everything to save him, I failed and he was lost*
- *I am so busy with my kids that even my anxiety of death has to stay back*
- *It is easier for a man to abandon, to withdraw, to leave. We have to stay, to take care, to live more because of our duties...*
- **Normality and ageism**
 - *There is a normality about the correct age that a woman has to get married and to have children (parenthood appears as a matter of duty whereas as a choice)*
 - *it is not normal for a woman, If she is “too young”, not married and have children, or, if she is married but “too old” to have children*
 - *An old woman, traditionally, has not computer skills or Facebook, my mother has...*
 - *There is a normal age for a woman to seek therapy, under these circumstances, we usually are too young or too old to seek therapy*
- **Women and Their Bodies**
 - *I used to be a tomboy as a child, I was a rather fat teenager, my dream to be a ballet dancer never came true*
 - *It is normal for my body to be oppressed in order to stay young, to get pregnant, to compete men, to be patient...*
 - *Emotions attack my body and I get sick!*

Other Women as an Audience of Outsider Witnesses

As we were in the third session, the women had already been connected in multiple ways. After our conversations about modern power, normality and the reason why this “normal model” fails to satisfy them or to fit with their own life experience, their interest to share stories of their lives was reinforced. So, when a new collective value of taking care and sustaining other people was named, I felt that they wished to talk more about this, so I invited each one of them to tell a story about how this value was connected with other instances of knowledge, feeling, thought or person in their

lives and also, how it prompts actions of resistance in the personal and political sphere.

‘A key theme of narrative practice involves a focus on *story* and the effects of telling particular stories, in particular ways, in particular contexts’ (White 2001).

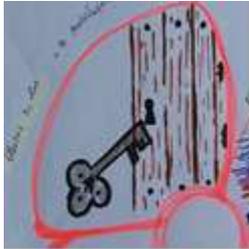
In this group, this choice ‘fits with the longstanding feminist commitment to enabling women to tell the stories of their lives and experiences with supportive audiences in order to make new meaning out of them, and in order to lead to transformation of experience’ (Laird 1989, 2001).

Initially, I explained the role of definitional ceremonies in narrative practice, as rituals that acknowledge and “regrade” peoples’ lives (White 2007). In our group, the audience of outsider witnesses would be, each time a woman talks, the other three members. I asked them to listen carefully to the stories and every time a story would be told, each one of the outsider witnesses would listen for expressions or thoughts that would struck a chord for them. When the story would be completed, I proposed that they could respond to the story with a drawing and a title to each drawing. They could be inspired to do this by possible purposes, values, hopes, dreams and commitments that they heard in each story.

The group members agreed with the idea and one by one took a place at the center of the ceremony, experiencing the acknowledgment and the respect of the other group members. The whole process took place in the two last sessions. Four life stories moved us on account of witnessing these expressions of each one woman’s life and twelve drawings with the shape of flower petals were offered to each other. However, the most important offer of this resonant rituals was the fact that all the women referred to their personal experience of loss making new meanings of these individual experiences which were not previously understood. This process helped them to reengage with neglected aspects of their own identities.

The ‘titles’ of the four life stories and the offered drawings of the group members

- Zoe: -'While Depression and Panic go away, isolation stays by me: A story of loss and disconnection. When I finally talk to other people this is my resistance'



The Unlocking

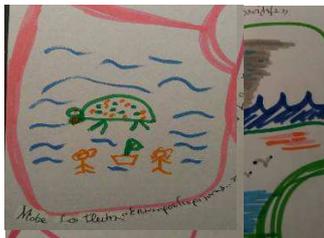


I don't speak either



New course of action

- Electra: -'Am I overqualified for normality or addicted to anger? : Criticism and control instead of safety and trust. Joy is my resistance'



Towards the Sun

The Burden

Redefining

- Anna: - 'Where is my house? Losses cut my life in two. Time to choose which side I am going to live on. Dynamic 'restarts' are my resistance'



Keep Walking

The Missing Piece

Acceptance - Life Continuity

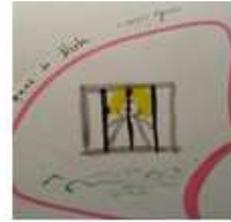
- Niove: - 'A grey ordinary routine throttles my prospect: To work hard or not. Living life is my resistance'



Passage

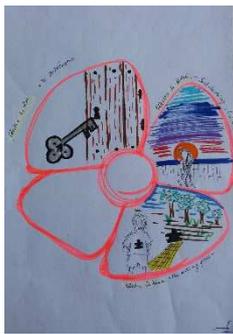


Soul Searching



Wordless

All the women offered their pictures to the person in the center of the ceremony, retelling what mostly provoked their fascination and presenting the title that they gave to their picture. The person in the center, said how she felt when she was telling her story and referred to her emotions after the “retellings” of the other women...



Electra's drawings



Zoe's drawings



Anna's drawings



Niove's drawings

This relieving response to witnessing powerful expressions of dramatic parts of life, expressed in theory by the concept of katharsis², ‘helped group members to find appropriate ways of acknowledging that these powerful expressions have shaped our own lives and that we have become someone other than who we would have been if we had not been present to witness these expressions’ (M. White, 2007).

² A phenomenon particularly associated with one's response to the performance of Greek tragedy. An experience is kathartic if one is moved by it—moved not just in terms of having an emotional experience, but in terms of being transported to another ... (M. White, 2007:195)

I will try to shortly present the great impact which this practice had on Anna's life, taking also into account how much the story of her life influenced and moved –with all the meanings- the other members of the group.

As Anna was the third woman who took her place at the center of the ceremony, she had the opportunity to listen carefully to the two other women before her. She was so impressed by their expressions of trust and confidence which resonated with her own experiences of life that she drew a little flower for Zoe with the title 'I don't speak either' and she announced to the group that she had changed her mind and she wanted to speak too during this outsider witness process.

Later, listening to Electra's expressions of difficult childhood she said how much she acknowledged her perfect childhood, she also said how much Electra's story of life helped her to realize that people and families can be separated not only because of loss, and witnessing these expressions she felt lighter than before. She talked about that new feeling and she drew a boat full of ballast with the title 'the burden' for Electra, suggesting that she throw it away.

After that, she was ready to walk to the center of the ceremony and to share her story of life, with all its dramatic parts, with the group. Almost for one hour the three other women were listening with respect and emotion another woman's story which resonated with aspects of their experience of life and drew for Anna their drawings explaining that after they had listened to Anna's story, they felt that they had become different to who they were before. Anna confessed that never before had she narrated her 'story' in this way and having the previous experience at the place of the outsider witness she could experience and realize this sense of contribution. Since Anna had listened to the two other women, she knew that it wasn't just a therapeutic technique or an event. She realized that she wasn't participating in a ceremony where people just tell their stories aloud or listen to other people's stories. She told us that before she started to talk she knew that she was entering into a more profound process where not only the listeners but probably the story tellers co-create opportunities of preferred change.

After this process had been completed, the group members were so moved, connected with each other and 'speechless' in a way, that we agreed to continue with the last fourth ceremony in the next fourth session.

This not so common kind of ‘moving’ had a direct effect on the ordinary life of the group members as it contributes to possibilities for change. A vivid example of this ‘moving’ was Anna’s real moving back in to her house, after having spent one year at her friends’ house because of the Fear and Panic, who brought the Vertigo to her life. She arrived late to our fourth session, carrying four poetic albums from her work as a gift to us. However, the most significant action for the group was that she managed to drive her car again, which she had not done for the last six months.

‘When expressions of psychological pain and emotional distress can be understood as units of experience and meaning that are shaping or constituting of life, the door is open to an inquiry that is identifying of the richly describing of where these expressions are taking people in their movement through life’. (M. White 2005)

Collaborative, Collective and Poetic Documentation

Acknowledging how important it is to use people’s language and phrases, I have tried to stay close to what exactly had been said each time, taking into account that our conversations were in Greek and that I had to report and also to translate them. As ‘there are differences in the ways that people experience and use language in conversation and language in the written form’ (D. Newman, 2008) and as all group members speak English, I sent an e- mail to present the written text, and to ask the permission to use their words and drawing, under a pseudonym³ for this paper.

Completing the fourth session, all the group members had the intention to keep some precious moments from our conversations. I briefly explained how documentation works in narrative practice and we decided to share significant words and phrases of our sessions in a poetic form as Anna had inspired us with her gift to each one of us. Some of them are:

I need to forgive
But I can never forget
Love will help me heal

³ All names used in this paper are pseudonyms

All normal people are not fool
They are happy with this tool
I know I could break the Wall
But I am not happy at all...

People said I was too young
People say I am too old
Neither a woman, nor a girl
People! Back! I'll scream and yell!

Another kind of document emerged when I invited the group members to share their group experience with my client via Skype, Eva, a young Greek scientist and researcher, who lives and works in New York, struggling with isolation and low self-esteem and always wonders: 'Am I clever enough?'. Here is the short message that the group sent to Eva:

Dear Eva,

Having heard a few things about you, your successful career in science, research and in the arts, we took it for granted that you'd be proud and happy for this success. Yet, you are not. Then, we looked at each other and we realized that we do the exact same thing; we try and struggle adjusting our lives and expectations to the 'normal' and the normalities, facing the fear of failure on a daily basis. So, keep in mind that we consider you a member of the club, too.

We want you to know that we're proud of you, that we'll be happy to communicate with you as a group, to hear about the new steps you take and let you know about ours...

For the time being, we'll share our wish with you, which we exchanged and which we feel that we can make come true. So, we all wish you: 'Enjoy your courage!' and we're sending you our estimation and love.

Anna, Zoe, Niove, Electra

Epilogue

Completing this collaborative group work, we chose to close the circle and refer to the sense of personal failure which seems to remain as a threat while offering the group the opportunity to co-investigate and to implicate the unstated, the absent but implicit, longing for success and recognition.

The sense of failure the group members are faced with now is in relation to their familiar behavior to solve problems on their own. Their initiatives have always been directed towards meeting expectations, norms and standards about “success” which is connected with gender identity.

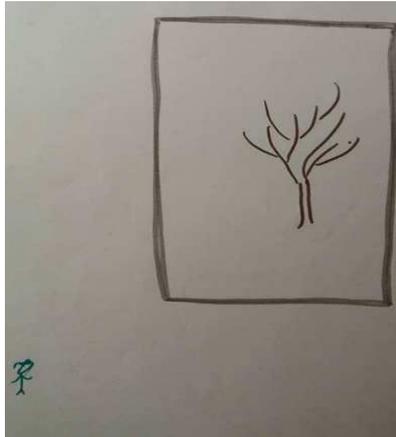
An action that could be considered as a refusal of these expectations, norms and standards, is their decision to seek assistance without the threat of incompetence or inadequacy. As a new platform of self-esteem, hope and trust had been established, significant values emerged. Courage, faith, wish for a joyful life drove them to take the risk and join the group. Finally, the group decided to continue our group sessions once a month. (. . .)

Almost two months after our last meeting, the group met again to start our new period of group sessions. I would like to close with the words that Zoe, the young woman struggling with loss and disconnection, responded to the group in our last session:

- *I would like to say how I've felt with the group these past few weeks that we worked together. I felt a strong connection. And because I like matching people with colors, I've been feeling for this whole period that we hadn't met that I wasn't alone; in my thoughts, Electra was an orange drop, Niove was a blue drop and Anna was a yellow drop, and my thoughts were colorful. As they were dancing in my mind in colors, I kept thinking that they too had me in their minds and I was aware that there were three other people, unknown to me before, who cared for me and for whom I cared too.*

“In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer.”

Albert Camus



Anna’s drawing (the problem expectations)



Anna’s drawing (5th session present expectations)

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Abstract

This paper attempts to present a collaborative group work which co-investigates the sense of personal failure, considering the political influence of the Greek context and of modern discourses of normalizing judgment which are present in instances of

gender issues frequently establishing negative identity conclusions. By drawing and sharing personal stories of loss and lack, the women have been assisted to acknowledge sides of their personal and political resistance and courage in a joyful perspective.

Keywords

Group work, personal/political, gender norms, externalizing, deconstruction, absent but implicit, outside witness, documentation