

Graduate Certificate in Narrative Therapy

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Final written assignment

“Co-operation between therapist and consultant against sexual abuse and its effects: finding justice in treatment.”

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Abstract

The content of this written assignment is a therapeutic work with a child that was a victim of sexual abuse. Narrative practices were used in order to create a safe context for the child and build a personal agency against abuse. Narrative practices, such as externalizing conversations, re-authoring conversations and collective documents are presented at this project. Ethic issues are also introduced at this paper and the acts of resistance of the therapist against the injustice of the law system.

*The name of the child at this paper is pseudonym.

Key words: sexual abuse, childhood, law system, injustice, narrative practices

The project took place at a primary school in my practice as a psychologist with a 7 month contract. My faculties were to acknowledge and evaluate children with special needs in the learning and behavioral sector as well as to empower the school system, doing interventions and health promotion strategies to the family and the community as well. During my practice I cooperated with a social worker doing team work in order to have an interdisciplinary way of evaluation.

The School Context

In the Greek educational system it is not a common practice to include psychologist at public school systems and as a result neither the children nor the school staff are familiar to the presence of a psychologist. It takes time to build a strong relationship with the children as well as with the teacher so as to co-operate successfully covering the educational and psychological needs of the students.

In order for the students to know us (the social worker and me) we made groups with each class talking about ourselves and things that each child would like to share.

It was the third day of my work at school and the director called me to see a girl that asked to talk to me. Ria is an 11 years old girl. As the director informed me, she is a very dynamic girl, the youngest child of a 5 member family and as she called her “spoiled” and very self confident. She has great grades at school because of her being so clever. He warned me that Ria is manipulative and it “is the last child in the earth that needs support”.

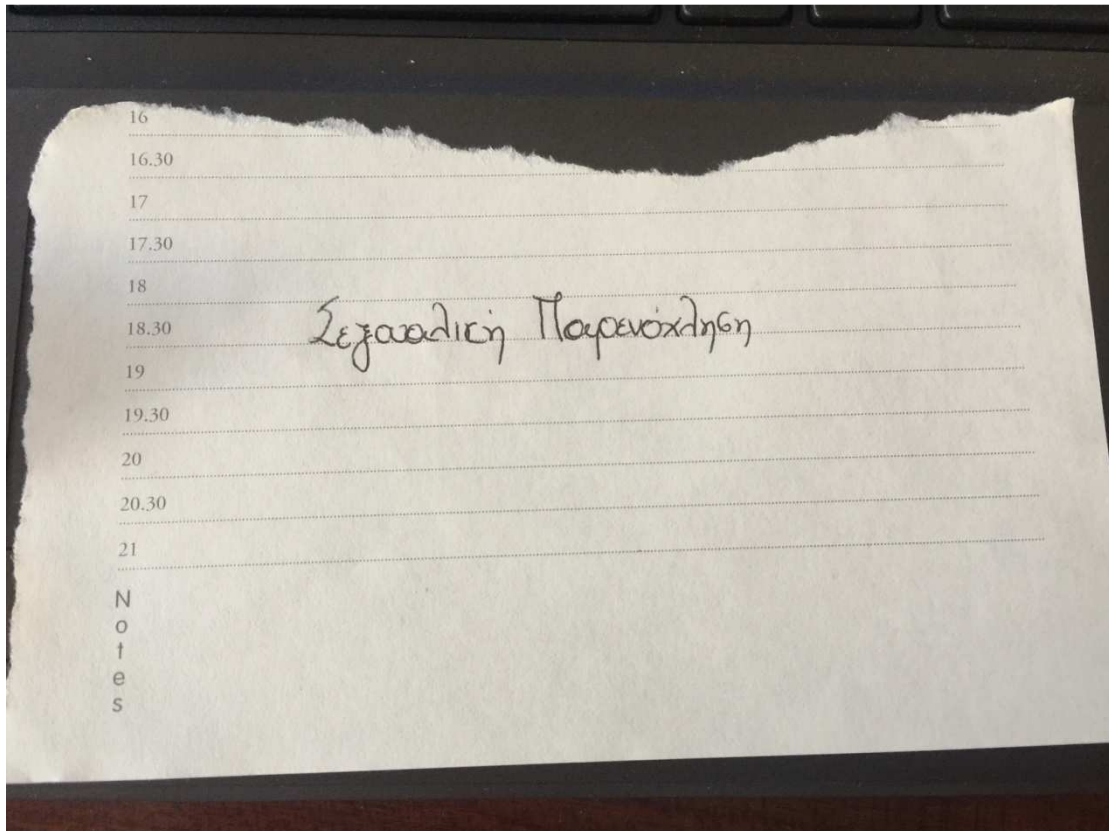
Externalizing conversations

“Externalising is linked to a particular way of understanding, a particular tradition of thought, called post structuralism. This way of understanding places a considerable emphasis on language, questions of power, and the ways in which meaning and identities are constructed. A key element of externalizing conversations involves exploring in detail the real effects of the externalized problem on the person’s life and also all others who are being affected by the problem.”

When the girl sat next to me I asked how I could help her. She was trembling and had no eye contact. She answered then (after about 5 minutes of silence), that she had a lot of anger against her friends and family, she didn’t want to talk to anyone and that she wanted me to help her with her feelings. She emphasized to the fact that she wanted to quit school, “take a break” because her attitude is so bad that no one would want to have her as a friend anymore. So, she didn’t want any more to be angry. Through our first 15 minutes conversations she didn’t mention why she is angry, and the answer to my question about that was “I don’t know”. I made her some externalizing questions about the anger she felt.

- E. Could you let me know about the anger? It is here with us now?
- R. Yes. It is here. I feel it every day.
- E. And when did that anger first come in to your life? When did you recognize him as disturbing?
- R. Few months ago.
- E. Is it something you recognize that helped anger enter your life?
- R. I think it is me. I did it. I am not sure but I think that I did it. But I want it now to stop. I don’t want to be angry with people anymore.

- E. Would it be ok if we gave anger another name, a shape or draw it in a paper? How would he look like?
 - R. No I don't want it.
 - E. Ok... If this anger was to enter this door, if we called him to join and deal with him in order to leave you alone , what would he look like and how would he listen?
 - R. He is tall, with short hair, very thin, limping... He has a name, a real name. I want to call him now, fear. But I don't want him to come here. I am afraid.
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- E. What were the affects of this fear in your life?
 - R. Can I have a piece of paper? I cannot say it loud.
- (written) Sexual abuse.



(sexual abuse)

Legal Procedures - Acts of resistance of the therapist

After knowing that a child had been sexual abused by her aunt it was my duty to follow all the procedures needed. At the first session with the girl, despite my fear and anxiety because it was the first time I was dealing with such a difficult issue, I tried to be honest with her and inform her that her parents should have known what was going on. Although she denied, because of the fear of rejection from her parents (they will not believe me) we talked about how significant is the sexual abuse to stop and that all actions against people's dignity should stop. I said her that it is my ethic code to protect children and that if this would have happened to me I would be angry and full of fear, like her and I would like to stop it with a person that I trust. She agreed.

The next step was to inform my director with the essay that I wrote about the incident. He advised me to tear the paper because the parents of the child had political power and a very high sociopolitical level and "maybe I will never find job again".

My values as a therapist and as a human being lead me to notify my testimony at the prosecution of minors.

The sociopolitical context

In the case of sexual abuse there is a protocol that must be followed. According to the law, a teacher or staff of a school, which has a suspicion or certainty of abuse (sexual/ physical/ psychological) must denounce it to the prosecutor's office. So, first of all I had to write the incident, inform my director and go to the court so as to give my statement. The prosecutor, according to the law system in Greece had to call the parents, then the child to take a testimony and physically examine her and then proceed to the cross-question and if the facts are true, then arrests the abuser.

The actions of justice system

None of the procedures were followed. The district attorney decided that “to close” the file without examining the child or taking a testimony of the person who did the sexual abuse because of mental health problems and Multiple Sclerosis. There was a meeting with the parents and me at the prosecutors’ office where the parents gave their testimony. She warned the parents that in case of a similar situation the procedure will also charge them and then said goodbye...

Unique outcomes

Trying to make a new context in our work dealing with the lack of punishment of the person who did the abuse, I had a thought to give special meaning and emphasis to what Ria has done. The fact that she came to me and shared her problematic story was the idea to begin my therapeutic plan. This, I thought, was a sparkling moment for the child and I asked her if it was ok to talk about that.

- E. What did you feel that day? Was it something that enabled you to talk to me?
- R. I don’t know.
- E. It happens sometimes, you know, to share things with people that we don’t know well but we recognize their intentions. Did you see that I was there to help you?
- R. Mmm... yes I think. I shared my story with a girl that I don’t know well and it was ok. And I have heard that a psychologist help people. And you were smiling to me.
- E. What did you think about my smile?
- R. Can I draw it?



(The responsibility of unethical actions)

- E. What about that?
- R. That I had a clever idea to talk to you. There was something unethical and it was clever enough to share it with you. This is a lamp. Don't you see?
- E. Yes indeed. It is a sparkling lamp! What does this sparkling lamp means to you? How is it connected to your hopes and beliefs for the future?
- R. That no matter if you are afraid and angry you can use your mind to find a way out of the problem. They say that I am clever. You know I don't read very much at school but I always get ten and I know almost all the answers. I think and answer. That's what I did with you. I saw you and decided to talk.

Double listening- seeking 2 stories

As we continued our sessions with Ria, I felt that there were more than one story to talk about. It was not the sexual abuse or the absence of punishment but that story that enabled her to talk. It was my intention not to re-traumatize her and make her remember the harm that her aunt did to her. On the other hand, it was a dilemma for me. Her parents didn't show any attention to the changes she had the last few months, they didn't asked what was going on. But would it be ok for her to talk about her trauma?

- R. Am I going to get through this? I think that this will be stuck forever in my head and make me angry. Now it is done, but I think of it every night and sometimes at day.
- E. What is it that you do at the day and you don't think of it so much? Is it something special?
- R. I don't know.
- E. Do you remember a moment that you recently had and it didn't come to mind?
- R. Ok. Yes. It was when I was doing gym.
- E. And what about that time? How did you feel? Who was with you?
- R. I felt safe, I was with my friends, laughing and playing and I knew that he couldn't hurt me.
- E. You tell me that when there is a safe place for you, you have your friends and there is happiness, it is ok. You choose happiness, safety and protection. It is something that you choose, by yourself!
- R. That's right.

I realized that stuck ideas can contribute to the maintenance of the traumatic effects. Bringing the child to a second story, the one that is preferred and thickens it with multiple actions of happiness and safety can reduce the anxiety of trauma.

Building upon responses to trauma

Discovering responses and actions against abuse

- R. I was sitting on my grandma's couch and suddenly he came next to me and started doing things on my body. It was a horrible thing.
- E. What did you do to protect yourself? How did you react against that horrible thing?
- R. I run. Really fast. My friends always say that I am a good runner. So I run.
- E. Is it the running that keeps you safe? Have you recognized something else that makes you protect yourself?
- R. Stairs. I go where there are stairs. I run to find a place with stairs. My home has stairs. So, I run to my house. I am not supposed to go alone because everyone is missing but he cannot climb up the stairs. And I am safe.

Making links of responses to their knowledge's and skills (meaning making skills)

- E. It seems that your skill to run worked well. It protected you.
- R. Do you know what I was thinking and run really fast? My friends call me "The flash". Do you know "the flash"?
- E. Is it the superhero with the red uniform that runs really really fast?
- R. Pffffffffffffffffffffssss.. Yes this is it! Well, flash is the person who runs so fast in order to protect people. Isn't in great? A man with a superpower that uses it to fight the bad ones.
- E. And why is it the flash that your friends call you? Is it only because you run so fast?
- R. No, not only that. It is because I get mad when there are bullies. And I go when there is someone being yelled and protect him. Have you seen Mario? He goes at the third grade. Because he

wears glasses and speaks a little weird his classmates make fun of him and take many times his lunch. So I “flash” and protect me. Isn’t it funny? I am a girl and there are boys that are afraid of me. They shout “Oh shit... she is coming” (laughs)

Making links of skills to preferred ways of being - Personal agency

- E. I think it is great for your school to have a superhero!!! A person that protects vulnerable children and bring justice. What do you think this would tell me about you? About what is important for you as a person?
- R. Well, I don’t know.
- E. It’s ok. I was just wondering how flash would have introduced himself. What he would say about who he is. Remember the script? It begins with an introduction about him. Do you want to try the same?
- R. (she stands up) I am the female flash. I run fast. I hate injustice. I want a better world without crimes. Sometimes people hurt me but I am very strong, I have good and clever friends that heal me when I am down and in danger.

Rich description of responses

- E. A world without crimes? Without injustice? How great to hear it from you. How this is important for you? How did you know? Is it the flash you told before?
- R. Yes, it is something about the flash and being a good person and a good friend.
- E. What does it mean to you being a good person? How do you recognize what a good person does?
- R. It’s about not hearting people, telling the truth and being a good friend.
- E. Is there a story about that? Where did you see that and had meaning for you?

- R. Have you seen the movie “San Andreas”?
- E. No, not really. What this is about?
- R. It’s about a disaster that is going on. There is a girl that tries to escape from the disaster with her step father. Her father is afraid and he is leaving her alone, trapped in the car, in order to save his own life. Do you believe it? An adult leaves a child! And then the girl’s friends come and save her. Guess what! The father dies because there is no one there to rescue him. He dies alone.
- I understand that friendship is a very strong feeling for you.
- Yes. If you don’t have friends you are done! It is so relieving to have people to protect you. But there is something more. If you do something bad there is a way to pay. This is justice...

Re-authoring conversations

i. Landscape of actions

Beginning our session Ria was smiling. She seemed satisfied about something but when I asked her what about her smile she said “nothing, just smiling”.

- E. What about your week? Is there anything that you want to share with me?
- R. I had a football game, I put 3 goals and my friends were really happy with me!
- E. Oh, that's great.
- R. But I forgot my water at home and I was really thirsty.
- E. Ok...
- R. My grandma's house was next to the football court. You know it is forbidden to go there. It is my uncle's house too. But I was really thirsty. And I went...
- ...
- R. He was there. I entered the door and he was there.
- E. Did the anger or the fear we were talking about came again?
- R. No! At that time I felt so strong and I was thinking that if he was trying to touch me I would stand my foot up and kick him. Kick him hard. I could protect myself. I know how to protect myself in the future. So I drunk water and closed the door.
- E. Ria, how did you recognize that you had to protect yourself?
- R. Because no one has the authority to touch my body. Nobody. And I am sure about that.

- ii. Landscape of identity: the personal agency of the child was empowered through actions. She felt that she was strong enough even though she was a child, felt sure about the value of privacy and protecting her own existence (body). Her body, even though it suffered by trauma, was willing to cooperate in order to

protect her. The identity of a strong young woman was mirroring in her smile.

Collective documents as a response to trauma

Beginning our session I asked Ria if it would be ok for her to collect some of her skills and knowledge's of her experiencing the resistance against abuse. I shared with her my thoughts about our work and how I appreciate the way she was thinking and acting through this time. I explained how collective documents in the practice I was working with her all this time and asked if it would be ok to write them down and use them to other girls that face sexual abuse and its effects. Her first reaction was "Oh, I hope no one ever gets through that but if it is going to happen it would be nice to give it to a girl". So, she we spent our time about how this document can be written and that she were free to build it in her own way if something didn't suit her. We talked about ways of resisting, skills, any story that could be helpful for someone facing a hard time.

"When a friend or your parents ask you if you are ok, probably you will say an excuse because everything you are going to say will be lye. If this happens, then you feel bad. You must tell someone because this will ruin you inside. You will be self-destructing. If you tell a friend, a small burden will go, but it will not mean that you are ok. Those days you will be angry and get mad to significant people of your life. But if they know, your parents, then you will be protected from the person that does something bad to you but from yourself too. You only have a life and you will live it with your way. You decide for you and for your feelings and not the others. In any case it's not your fault so don't think like that. It doesn't matter how long it happens. The thing is that when this passes, to feel like it never happened! If you hold this letter in your hands, I wished not to have this because I would never want this to have happened to you.

Ria <3 "

and discover multiple actions, multiple responses to the injustice rather than making statements which imply that the trauma will never close (or injustice will always exist in our society) but exploring responses how we can get through it. There is always a place that is safer than the traumatic area. It is the “not knowing” way of working that made me understand the faculties of a person to externalize his/her own skills rather than built new ones. There are beliefs about the field of psychotherapy that create paths, find solutions for people’s lives. I realize know better now that it is people’s lives that give solutions. It is people knowledge’s about themselves and their resistance that resonates to thickening the preferred story of being and acting. The therapist is curious to find out. He/ she don’t know what is good for a person’s live. He listens. “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”. That is what I learned from my experience with Ria. It is possible for the world to be unfair but there is always space for hope, justice and kindness. And that is a knowledge I remembered I was keen on and I will keep vivid in my daily practice and way of living.