

Cats Under the Stars: A Narrative Story

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This paper provides an introduction to Narrative Therapy. This post-structural approach represents a movement away from the dominant therapeutic approaches that privilege psychological or biological theories over the client's experience of problems. Distinctions are made between narrative ideas and traditional psychosocial points of view in the areas of what a problem is, how change occurs, and about notions of the self. Narrative ideas and practices are illustrated by presenting work done with a problem affecting a young man in a school setting. Narrative work involves experience and meaning; the paper is organised to provide this for the reader.

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Introduction

Narrative ideas and practices were pioneered by Michael White and David Epston in the late 1980s (White, 1988; White & Epston, 1990). White's original thinking (White, 1986) was influenced by Gregory Bateson who had previously influenced much family systems/family therapy theory (Bateson, 1972, 1979). Over the last 10 years, a number of books have been written on narrative therapy (Freedman & Coombs, 1996; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1996; Monk, et al., 1997, Smith & Nyland, 1997; Madigan & Law, 1998; Freeman, Epston, & Lobovits, 1997; White, 1995b, 1997b, 2000b) as well as a great many journal articles, mostly appearing in family therapy journals.¹ Nevertheless, narrative work has spurred much debate in these journals and in family therapy meetings. In even more mainstream domains, which are dependent on modernist or 'objective' scientific knowledge of how people operate (i.e., traditional, individually oriented psychology and psychiatry) the ideas might be misunderstood and/or dismissed as 'trivial', 'superficial', and 'not getting to the real problem'. Why such a fuss?

The thinking behind narrative work, located in post-structuralism (Foucault, 1979, 1980, 1984a, 1984b) represents a radical departure from the structuralist thinking that characterises most contemporary Western thought. Narrative work has also been located in post-modern and social constructionist ideas (Gergen, 1985). These points of view represent a challenge to the 'truthfulness' of certain ideas and practices that most take for granted. In particular, alternative understandings of what a *person* is, what a *problem* is and how *change* occurs are offered by these new ways of thinking. The effects of these alternative understandings is to create a very different clinical process than is created by traditional psychologies. In short, the work involves collaborative conversations with a client where: 1) Their experience (and the way it is languaged)

is privileged in deciding what the problem is (e.g., if the client calls the problem trouble, Trouble becomes the problem); 2) Questions are then asked that help the client to separate from the influence of the problem-story (point of view: problems exist in stories, not persons); and 3) Experiences, both current and past, that contradict the problem story are noticed, and questions are asked about the meaning of these experiences. Our goal is to co-author an alternative story with our clients and make it more influential than the problem story. All of this will be illustrated below.

It is our experience, however, in teaching this thinking that if it is described purely in a didactic manner, the reading will be influenced by the structuralist understandings already present and reacted to accordingly. In other words, given a radically different frame of reference from traditional psychologies, these ideas can be difficult to convey meaningfully in text. How, then, can such an article give a reasonable sense of this approach? What we would like to do is to create several experiences related to the clinical material. Our plan is to work back and forth from the clinical to the theoretical ideas that influenced our work with a boy in an elementary school. We will also include some of our dialogue. In addition, we hope you, the reader, will indulge us in a conceit; some questions for you personally about persons, problems, and change. We are doing this because narrative work involves the use of experience (yours, in this case) to create meaning.

We would like you to think for a minute about the following questions: Have you ever been in a situation where someone 'fixed' your identity as someone or something you knew you were not? Have you ever been made a problem in some situation or some relationship? Did anyone ever try to take charge of the direction of your life? Or knew best for you? Finally, what *effects* occurred as the result of any of these experiences?

Problem dominated versus preferred identities

Why the word 'identity?' How is it different from the 'self?' Let us introduce you to Herschel, an African American boy who at the time I (MNB) met him was 10

¹ Dulwich Centre Publications, headed by Cheryl White and located in Michael's centre, has been the other source.

and living with his single mother, a 14-year-old sister and a 5-year-old brother in a middle class household. He was in fifth grade and had been a student at the same small elementary school for the past 5 years. All the teachers knew him for his conflicts on the playground and warned other teachers in advance of the likelihood of 'having trouble with him' in the classroom. Herschel had been working with several psychologists and psychiatrists over the last 4 years on his behaviours and attitudes at school. Various medications such as Ritalin had been unsuccessfully used and were now discontinued. At the time he was referred to me (MNB), Herschel would typically get a disciplinary 'pink slip' almost every day for either pushing, kicking, fighting, cussing, lying, bugging, talking back, name calling, insulting, yelling and/or not doing his work. He had a reputation (which he hated) of being 'a bully', a 'trouble-maker' and 'a mean kid'. Herschel would often say that 'everyone was talking behind his back' and often angrily refused to make attempts at doing assignments stating that he 'couldn't do it anyway'. His mother was feeling discouraged and tired of the complaints.

When I (JZ) first met Herschel 4 months later to do a follow-up interview (described later) he was sweet, responsive, and helpful. Indeed, at school he was becoming known as someone who was 'willing to make efforts and who cared about others'. Which was the *real* Herschel? Post-structuralist thinking suggests there is no *real* you, no essential self to be discovered or from which we operate. Instead, there are countless versions or identities, which are socially and culturally produced and maintained. *This idea runs counter to all of our understandings of experience, where we perceive ourself to be a coherent whole.* Others in our lives are also quick to point out how we 'are' (situationally, at least to them), adding to this experience. Post-structuralists argue that our culture (Western, technologically advanced) is so individually oriented that we are taught to experience our-self and others in this individual manner. We tend to embrace a dominant identity and seem blind to the way it is dependent on our current interactional network, which in turn is shaped by dominant cultural knowledges. We tend not to make sense of the other versions of our-selves that occur with less frequency in other social contexts. Furthermore, we tend to locate issues in individuals, as opposed to the cultural context shaping the individual's response.

Post-structuralists locate meaning in dominant cultural discourses, which are believed to shape all of our experience. From this point of view, individualism is a discourse that centres all meaning in the individual. Discourses are cultural frames from which we make sense of the world. They create assumptions that we believe are true. We have experiences and give meaning to them; this meaning is shaped by these discourses. For example, given individualism, if a problem is occurring, we and/or others attribute it to our-self. We then can become problem saturated (White, 1989), or have a problem-dominated identity. From our point of view, you cannot separate identities or problems from the contexts that produce or maintain them. In other words, the problem story about Herschel did not reflect reality about him, but actually created a 'reality' for him and others. One criticism of post-structuralism is its complex language... which you are now experiencing.

Herschel claimed he hated the identity that had been assigned to him. He much preferred the identity he had entered into when I (JZ) interviewed him. What made it so difficult for him to escape the problem dominated identity and move into the more preferred one? To answer this question, we must first understand how cultural contexts support problems and problem identities (from a narrative perspective). In Herschel's situation, school was the context where the problem was influencing him. Schools hold a certain version of persons as acceptable: high academic achiever, athlete, or obedient worker. What are the discourses that support this, what practices do they encourage and how do they affect students, teachers, and administrators?

Dominant cultural ideas and practices that affect schools²

1) *Comparison* (to developmental and social norms). Points of comparison might be about learning style, speed, or behaviour. They are often based on white, middle-class expectations (although many white, middle-class kids don't fit, either). Administrators and teachers are recruited into responding on the basis of these, while from them students make meaning about themselves. For example, Herschel preferred to focus very intensively on reading, and not be spread out over many things. This was interpreted as a general lack of interest in school. This interpretation based on individual comparison is an effect of the discourses of individualism referred to previously.

2) *Individualism* (as opposed to collaboration). Students and teachers are supposed to go it alone and are often placed in competition for rewards and resources. One effect of this is to clearly privilege self over relationship. Another is to begin to train kids for participation in dominant Western culture. Individual work and production is given the highest status. Herschel's emphasis was more on relationship and connection to others, and not individual response. Nevertheless, Herschel became identified as the problem, instead of him being seen as operating in relationship to others.

3) *Production or achievement* in certain domains is privileged, which puts pressure on teachers to reach particular goals in specified amount of time. This matches their intentions with some kids, but leaves some teachers not able to respond the way they might like to with others. Shrinking resources have exacerbated this problem. For kids, this orientation might fit better for some than others (particularly not for those who want fun to be a bigger part of their lives or see value in other marginalised areas). In this production oriented context, teachers and principals did not have the time to attend to Herschel's talents, aside from academics and the problems. In many ways, the school's narrow focus on these issues disconnected Herschel with his preferred ways, such as being caring (for which he was renown in his family).

4) *Evaluation*. A tool used to rank-order student achievement. This dominant structure with associated practices may encourage excellence for some people,

² For more discussion of these ideas, see Berndt, Dickerson and Zimmerman, 1997.

but often creates fear and anxiety for all (administrators, teachers, students). Those of us who teach, present at conferences, or do live clinical work in front of others, still know its effects. So do our students. Evaluation, particularly negative evaluation, eventually had the effect of discouraging Herschel from trying to solve maths problems (this was often interpreted as unwillingness, when it was, in fact, discouragement). In schools, evaluation only occurs from teacher to student; this requires a one-directional hierarchy.

5) *Hierarchical structure* (and use of the discipline model). Once again, this way of operating provides experience in a familiar structure in our culture, as well as creating 'order', yet it also creates a direction that has negative effects. Discipline and hierarchy maintenance often consumes teachers who get trained into responding as if this were the most important lesson in school. As a value, it is more of a fit for some than others and many feel that they would much rather interact with kids in other than punitive ways. Discipline thinking also directs administrators and teachers towards withholding resources, and to strategies of exclusion. This is in contrast to strategies of inclusion, which would engage children affected by problems in *more* activities. In Herschel's case, being constantly held back at recess and disciplined mainly had the effect of increasing the frustration and alienation he experienced in school, which conversely supported the problems. Hierarchy in schools often crosses over into adultism.

6) *Adultism* allows those in authority, adults, to act one way (disrespectfully for example), but kids are prohibited from responding likewise. This disempowers kids in general and marginalises those who have different relationships with adults outside of school. It also may force a more distant than preferred style of interaction for the adults. Adultism also privileges all things adult, from learning style, to daily schedule, to problem solving methods, to ways of being in the world. We believe this discourse to profoundly affect all structures children find themselves in. Herschel was almost never believed by adults when he would explain his version of an incident. Also, his knowledge in many areas of life was never given much respect.

When problems arise, these dominant ideas and structures provide the backdrop through which meaning is ascribed to students' behaviour. How did it happen for Herschel?

What is the problem?

As you can see, some of Herschel's preferences and practices did not meet the specifications outlined by the school related discourses. When this occurred, stories and interpretations were created by others to make sense of Herschel's difference from the norm (Bruner, 1990). For Herschel and the many others this happens to, the effect is an increasing level of alienation, frustration, and protest over time, especially since these interpretations often assume bad intentions (Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1994). Teachers, (like parents, with problems occurring at home) *inadvertently* contribute to the problem by using the prescribed methods of discipline to 'fix' the child, with poor results. Consequently, a story of Herschel being 'unwilling' or

'uncaring' became narrated, leading to more frustration and alienation for him. With time, the recurrence of the unwanted behaviours were considered to speak the truth about his intentions and identity as 'being bad'. As administrators, teachers, mental health professionals and parents consulted each other on ways of 'handling' Herschel, a problem saturated story (or bad reputation) became circulated.

As Herschel and others in the system increasingly came under the influence of the problem story, Herschel increasingly felt that no one understood him and it was hopeless to change either the bad reputation or the adult's negative ideas about his identity. As a result everyone, including Herschel, focused more and more on the events that confirmed the problem while neglecting any other experiences that didn't fit into this story about him. In practical terms, this also meant that he was excluded from certain games, rejected from teams, left alone to play or complete an assignment, isolated in the classroom, blamed or suspected for most problems, called names, was gossiped about, had fewer privileges, received less positive support, and had his accomplishments less noticed and commented upon. He went home with problem saturated summaries of the day to his mom who often felt exhausted, powerless and stigmatised herself with the constant reports on the inadequacies of her child. Eventually, Herschel came to consider that maybe he WAS 'bad' since everyone seemed to have thought so for so long. Why try then? Sadly, this is a common process for many children.

What is the Problem, then, at least for a narrative therapist? Ultimately (in our heads) it is the discourses that have the effect of specifying truths and narrow ways of being for people. The influence of these discourses may create problem meaning systems (or problem stories), experienced by you and I as truths about ourselves and others. It is this experience and the meaning we (clients) give it that gets focused on as the problem. Making the story the problem does not take away from the real effects of our actions, to which we all must be accountable. However, the villain becomes the story and its effects on the person, and not the person her/himself. Clinically, this means we will talk about the problem as being a separate 'thing' affecting one's actions. Talking this way has the effect of removing blame from the person, and thus *increasing* the likelihood of the individual taking responsibility for stopping the problem's effects. The practice of talking about the problem separately from the person(s) is called externalising the problem. And what that externalised problem is, is defined by the person based on *their experience* (no matter how we understand the cultural context in which it occurs).

Herschel's story I

In my (MNB) work with Herschel, the externalised problem was initially called 'Frustration', because that is how Herschel talked about it to me. In time, Herschel seemed relieved to progressively experience 'Frustration' as separate from himself and could notice the extensive negative effects it had on his life. The field of influence of the problem was explored with its impact on Herschel's behaviours, attitudes, relationships with relatives, teachers and friends, his feelings about

himself, the kind of person he would rather be, and so on. Further, Herschel began noticing times he did not engage in unwanted behaviours, successfully resisting 'Frustration' (these times are called unique outcomes). From a narrative perspective, these were openings for assisting Herschel in reauthoring his life in a preferred way.

Interlude 1: Authors' reflection (a metalogue)

JZ: I want to slow this down and catch up with the reader. First, I wondered what effect our discussion of problems and identities had on the reader. Have you (the reader) had any experiences a little like Herschel's? Has your identity been narrated in ways that didn't fit for you? Have you been in situations where you had some (non-hurtful) preferences that didn't fit the dominant specifications? How did you handle this? Were you made a problem or did problems overtake you? Marie-Nathalie, what are your thoughts here?

MNB: I think we've all had some of these experiences. Most people can remember a time when, for example, they felt perceived as uninteresting or aggressive. Ironically, when someone thinks of you in these ways, it has the effect of promoting these very characteristics in your behaviour, despite your best intentions.

JZ: Okay. Second, I'd like to ask you for more detail about the first session with Herschel.

MNB: When I first met with Herschel, I spent some time interacting with him separate from the problem. For example, I asked about what he liked to do outside of school. I also invited him to ask questions about me. Then, I asked him about his experience of the problem or problems. This is where he talked about his frustration. So I picked up this description and asked about all the effects of frustration in his life.

JZ: So in using what White (1998) calls the Statement of Position Map, you first brought forth his *meaning* and then explored the *effects*. You asked about how the problem affected many aspects of his life. This has the effect of externalising the problem for him.

MNB: Yes, and then I asked him to *evaluate* those effects. What did he think about them? Did he view Frustration as his friend or enemy, and so on. Herschel was clear about its negative effects.

JZ: At that point, I gather you felt the problem was beginning to be externalised. How did you know?

MNB: When I asked him why the problem was bad he was able to provide me with *justification*. He also spontaneously offered me some times the problem was not around, when it could have occurred, but didn't.

JZ: These unique outcomes are the stuff of narrative therapy. Noticing them and asking questions about their meaning represents much of what

happens in subsequent therapy sessions. Let's go back to Herschel's story and use it as an example for what goes into creating a context for change in narrative work. Some examples of the questions we ask will be included. I'd like to begin by discussing how Herschel responded to these unique outcomes.

Herschel's story II

These unique outcomes were initially associated with joy, pride, hope and motivation. I (MNB) would ask questions such as: Do you recall a time today when Frustration could have got you in trouble but it didn't? What was going on? What kind of things was 'Frustration' inviting you to do? What was the first thing that you did to resist it? Was it hard? How did you come up with this idea? Were you holding on to someone's image in your heart? Were you thinking of anything in particular when you were doing that? How did it feel? Is it a good thing that you were able to do that? What effect did it have on your teacher? What could have happened if you had listened to 'Frustration?' Did you know you could be so strong? What does that say about you? What will your Mom say when she hears that story? What do you want to remember about this incident? What would you call this strategy? and so on. These questions gave meaning to moments of victory that would otherwise remain invisible and helped Herschel to observe the preferred effects these acts of resistance had on his life. These are also examples of the kinds of questions we always ask about 'unique outcomes'.

Despite the initial excitement around these developments and the effects of those questions, Herschel was mostly discouraged by the lack of acknowledgement he was receiving from the rest of the community. He resentfully came to realise that, despite his best efforts, he remained under constant surveillance from the school staff, and was suspected, blamed and disciplined for most troubles. My 30 minute weekly meetings with him, our family meetings and his mother's support in the evenings somehow could not counterbalance the full days spent in the classroom with teachers and other students or the long periods spent punished (often unfairly because he had become the number one suspect whenever any trouble occurred) in the principal's office. Conversations with teachers and invitations to them to notice the new developments or understand the process of restorying were also unsuccessful. 'Frustration' was recruiting them as well, and most of the time the accumulated resentment towards Herschel prevented them from offering any positive feedback. Even attempts to invite his main teacher to notice just one instance per day when he had resisted 'Frustration' was in vain as his teacher, overwhelmed with 30 other kids, would report that there was never any. The history of difficulties and the feelings associated with them were not dissolving automatically because of Herschel's small signs of progress. This struggle eventually had the effect of making Herschel very bitter and hopeless about his situation. It supported 'Frustration's' fundamental message that Herschel was 'bad and disliked', and he was powerless to make this change.

As a result, Herschel would now angrily state that he 'hated school', 'hated all teachers', 'hated the class', 'hated to be alive', and that 'everyone hated him too'. Hating and negativity took over everything at school and especially Herschel's own narrative of himself. Herschel was now considered a 'very angry and negative' child and was punished even more for his increasingly frequent and violent refusal to engage in reading and mathematical assignments. At this point, a school break, a new teacher and a new classroom were of no avail. Herschel could not see the problem as externalised anymore and felt that there was no 'Frustration', that it was 'just' him 'being very bad' or 'possessed by the Devil' (the only way he could make sense of the problem given his good intentions and his desire to be 'good'). More serious and frequent offences and suspensions from school started to take place, especially since the problem was convincing Herschel that if he was already in trouble, it was not worth trying to control 'Frustration' any longer. 'Frustration' had to be renamed into a bigger monster called 'Trouble' (his word).

As the situation was now worse, it became clear that interventions needed also to focus on the community as opposed to solely on the child's story of himself. The community needed to revise the narrative they held about Herschel and open space for the performance of a new narrative at the same time Herschel was bringing forth his preferred story of himself. The performance of the preferred story needed to be noticed and circulated in the system.

Change

A narrative therapist's expertise is not in solving problems or in knowing how people 'should' live their lives. It is in creating a context for change. What does this involve? We have given some examples of this already, using language in a way that the problem becomes externalised. One effect of this process is to create space for the person and those around him or her to notice other already occurring practices, or to engage in new ones they define as more preferred. In other words, the problem identity no longer speaks the truth about them. Implicitly (and often explicitly), the cultural discourses that support the problem are also externalised, allowing for conversation in which persons' preferred values/goals/commitments guide them instead. These values or goals might be similar or different from the ones suggested by dominant discourses. For example, many of Herschel's preferred ways of relating actually did fit well in the school context. Once the problem is named (co-created through language by client and therapist) and the preferred story indicated (by the client), experiences are attended to by the therapist that may fit the preferred story. If a client acknowledges that they do fit, then meaning is made of those experiences (in ways we gave examples of), through questions that are intended to make the preferred story more visible. It is the telling and retelling of these experiences that thickens the new story. There is much to say about the kinds of questions that will facilitate this process, and we encourage those who are interested to read more of what has been written. In brief, these are what Michael White (1988) refers to as

landscape of action questions, which get at the what, when, where, and how of the developments, and landscape of identity questions, which address the why. Identity questions involve asking about the meanings of unique outcomes, what they say about a person's motivations, values, and identity. Let us be more specific by discussing some examples of work with children.

My (JZ) work with 'ordinary' problems (e.g., acutely occurring fears, tempers) of young children usually lasts two to three sessions. We can imagine what some readers may be thinking: 'You've not got to the real problem.' And we might hear this and think, 'Well, you are under the influence of structuralist thought and think in terms of a surface and depth metaphor.' How do we bridge these points of view? Perhaps to suggest that at the end of these sessions, kids are making different meaning of themselves and their problems and so are the parents. When they stop sessions, they are still evolving away from the problem, they just no longer need our help to do so. Still, what gets me this far, this fast?

I believe there are two critical practices that make a difference. First, having the child describe the problem from her or his own experience. This allows me to have conversation with most kids on their terms. They, in effect, have me right on the mark. They guide me instead of the alternative. Second, after they are clear about being against this problem, I interview them carefully about the strategies they use to manage it during the times and places they do so. For example, 'How did you get a hold of anger enough to stop the tantrum?' Or, 'How did you manage the scary feelings and calm down once your parents left school?' Often, they have no answer at first, or say, 'I just did it' (which I suggest is the 'Nike' strategy). Through persistence and giving possibilities (e.g., Did you trick it or use some special power against it?), they begin to make meaning and come up with strategies that wouldn't necessarily make sense to an adult (which doesn't matter given that the child is the one who relates to those strategies). Once I've established the how, what, when, where, of what unique outcome I can begin to ask questions about what this means about the child. Often, responses from the child and parents (both are in the room) involve things like 'strength', 'bravery', 'creativity', and these versions of the child become the focal point of their conversation at home, instead of the problem-dominated ones. My further questions reveal that this new identity was really one that existed previous to the problem.

I usually finish up this kind of work by having a ceremony or giving a certificate. I invite the child to make a brief videotape of how they beat the problem (I pay \$5.00 for their knowledge) and ask if they are willing to be an on-call consultant to other children (Epston & White, 1990). They receive a copy of the tape if we make one. These practices have the effect of honouring the kid's knowledge and creating a bigger audience (even though virtual) to their preferred identities.

Work with big problems, ones that have been around a long time (over 4 years with Herschel) or have accumulated a lot of inadvertent support (i.e., a reputation at school) follow the same ideas, but takes much

longer. More effort goes to structuring the noticing of the new story, given the powerful effects of the old one. For example, efforts must be made to connect the child with those that support his/her preferred version, both virtually and in their day-to-day life. We who do narrative therapy tend to spend time asking questions about the past of the *new* story as opposed to the past of the problem story, trying to develop a foundation for the new story across time. This may involve bringing people into a session, or just asking about what certain people (from the past) would have to say about the current developments. This anchors the new story in the past, present, and future (i.e., hopes, dreams, goals, and what they say about the person). Finally, we might also use a reflecting team/outsider witness group (example given later) to watch a session and then raise questions for the client, sharing what it means to them.

Herschel's story III

The problem was now renamed 'Trouble'. Discussions around 'Trouble's' effect were kept to the minimum necessary for Herschel to once again externalise the problem. The effects of the problem were acutely felt and distressing enough, and did not need to be further discussed. The therapy goal was now mainly to focus on Herschel's desire to escape 'Trouble' and to bring forth publicly every attempt at resisting the problem (unique outcomes). The idea that Herschel was already supported by an anti-trouble team, with him at all times in his heart, was also introduced. Virtual teams not only break the alienating feeling of isolation but also allow individuals to hold on to preferred ways of being by mentally recreating the experience of being with supportive people (Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1996; White, 1997c). In Herschel's life, this team consisted of his mother, myself (MNB), and his favourite animal, the ostrich. The ostrich's participation became very meaningful when Herschel was given a photograph of a group of four ostriches that he kept with him and cherished for some time. Ostriches were discussed as being very fast, very tall and equipped with a powerful beak that could easily injure 'Trouble'.

Herschel was then invited to create a chart entitled 'Herschel's resistance to Trouble chart' and to document every time he could have listened to 'Trouble' but didn't. Herschel was enthusiastic about the idea and spent a lot of energy tailoring the chart that he then chose to post on the front blackboard of his classroom. His mother was encouraged to ask about those acts of resistance daily and to minimise conversations about 'Trouble'. Our team was going to attend to the experiences that fit with whom Herschel wanted to be and refuse to be an audience for the problem-saturated story. We now discussed *only* the acts of resistance and none of the 'pink slips'.

Invitations for teachers and the principal to notice his progress were intensified, including asking them to help him with his chart and sharing with them the latest success. This sharing would also have the effect of challenging individualistic notions that Herschel could change in isolation by inviting everyone to collaborate in the creation of a more supportive and appreciative context that would promote his preferred identity.

Specifically, every time Herschel resisted 'Trouble', we would either write it in a note to his teacher and principal or simply walk to the principal's, administrative assistant's and the nurse's office where Herschel would repetitively explain what he did and what strategy he used. Those strategies were eventually all compiled into a list that consisted of ideas or thoughts that Herschel found useful when resisting 'Trouble'. Examples of such strategies included: 'remembering the consequences', 'remembering his Mom', 'thinking about the ostriches', 'keeping distances when Frustration was around', and 'substituting words instead of cussing'. Herschel had now resisted 'big trouble' for 3 weeks and had documented six official acts of resistance.

One day, however, Herschel tearfully shared with me (MNB) that he had discovered that his teacher was using our meeting times to talk to the classroom about him. She had asked students to be tolerant and understanding because 'Herschel had a lot of problems but he was working on them.' Herschel was very upset by this talking behind his back, felt marginalised and believed his entire classroom was gossiping even more against him. Although the teacher was well meaning, this gesture had the effect of strengthening the experience of marginalisation, isolation and problem identity that Herschel was desperately fighting. As a result, it became clear that the classroom needed to be quickly invited to notice the preferred story. Upon my request, the teacher agreed to provide me with a few minutes of her class time to have a conversation with the whole class. After introducing myself, I shared with the students that I came to inform them that they had a hero in their classroom, a boy who had been fighting a big battle with a 'Trouble' habit and that his experience was comparable to fighting a giant dragon that keeps on coming back at you even when you think you have got rid of it. Moreover, I said, fighting Trouble's habits is often very hard because people, even parents, don't notice that children are trying very hard to do their best. Did any of them have that experience of trying to change and no one noticed their efforts? (hands were raised). I added that despite these difficulties, Herschel was becoming an anti-trouble expert and that if any of them needed advice, that Herschel could probably help them deal with their struggle. Students were then told that they probably had not noticed how Herschel had improved because it would have required extremely good observation skill. Nevertheless, in case some of them had that highly developed skill, I asked if anyone had paid attention to Herschel's progress. To my great satisfaction, hands were raised and students started sharing some of the new developments they had observed. Students had specifically noticed that Herschel was 'a better sport', 'more respectful of the teachers', 'had a better attitude', 'hit other students less frequently', 'stayed away from fights', 'cussed less' and 'co-operated more in games'. Herschel, in the back of the classroom, seemed stunned in amazement.

This experience profoundly affected him. The teacher reported that he was agitated for the rest of the day but remained 'undisruptive'. When Herschel was questioned about his experience, he shared mostly how surprised he had been at hearing other students share

positive feedback about him. He never expected this kind of response and admitted that he had been fearful that the experience would confirm his worst ideas about his reputation. Instead, these comments honoured his progress, encouraged him to pursue his efforts and opened possibilities for additional steps in this preferred direction.

The teacher was also very impacted and shared how impressed she was with the students' observations. The experience invited her to reconsider her own story of Herschel and create space for new developments. A few weeks later, she reported that since the classroom intervention, Herschel had 'stayed on task', 'persevered more in challenging assignments', 'had more internal control', 'accepted reprimands more easily', and 'complained less often that it was unfair'. She also started noticing that there were times when she expected 'Trouble' (during field trips) and it didn't occur. Her sharing of these moments with other teachers invited them to be curious and pay attention to these new developments as well. Later she accepted the invitation to treat Herschel as an anti-trouble expert and did on one instance consult with him on how to improve a situation. She even retained 'pink slips' (instead of sending them to the principal) on a couple of instances, which had the effect of instigating hope in Herschel that he was being given another chance to be the kind of person he wanted to be in her eyes. Herschel felt that his teacher was moving from punishing him to being hopeful and helping him fight the problem.

In my (MNB) individual sessions with Herschel, I felt the time was right to begin to bring forth a 'past' to this new story. When I asked who in his family could have predicted that he would one day escape the 'Trouble' lifestyle, Herschel spontaneously mentioned an adoptive aunt that he hadn't seen for a long time. Herschel shared that this aunt had always believed in him and supported him, and so we decided to invite her to a meeting. The goal of this meeting was to explore what the aunt had always known about Herschel's abilities to succeed and continue to thicken Herschel's preferred story of himself. This meeting proved to be highly rewarding. This aunt was able to share how Herschel had always been an extremely affectionate child and related examples of how he used to 'write lovely notes and cards' to herself and his mother. She shared how he was 'responsible, loving, compassionate and caring' with his little brother whom he often protected from 'Trouble'. Memories of how Herschel used to be one of the best and most appreciated player on a soccer team were brought forth with numerous examples of moments of 'courage', 'teamwork' and 'gentleness'. Herschel was glowing with happiness to hear these anecdotes shared about him. It provided him again with the opportunity to enrich his preferred story from the perspective of another whom he loved, trusted and respected dearly. It is with great pride that he then proceeded to tell her his most recent successes at resisting 'Trouble'. The meeting was concluded with a discussion of the aunt's ability to discern and support Herschel's special talents as well as what he now needed from her to continue his journey on that preferred path.

Interlude II: Authors' conversation

JZ: Marie-Nathalie, I wanted to discuss with you the process by which change occurs. I'm sure whatever form of therapy someone does they run into a certain similarity of process.

MNB: You mean the pace of the work, the way people move forward and then back some? The setbacks that are inevitable, and that it is helpful to prepare the receiving context for them?

JZ: Yes. For example, how did you deal with the inevitable expectations for Herschel's behaviour and the pressure that they must have put on him? My experience is that when someone is under the influence of a problem story for a long time, you want to be clear that they aren't expected to leave it behind too quickly.

MNB: I did run into this. As Herschel moved forward, there was less tolerance (again) for the inevitable re-emergences of the problem. They were now interpreted as 'intentional', as it was thought of by the system that he 'could control himself'. I met with the principal, teachers, and Herschel to discuss the change process. I also borrowed an idea from Michael White (1995a) and had Herschel make a chart guessing at the curve of his forward movement and including the backslides in the chart.

JZ: What was the effect of this?

MNB: It took the pressure off Herschel and opened space for tolerance again. Shortly, the new story exceeded the influence of the old and we could move forward using other ways to thicken it.

JZ: Let's see how.

Herschel's story IV

Herschel and I (MNB) agreed that when he accumulated 10 acts of resistance against 'Trouble' (a goal that he decided for himself), his mother, the principal and his teachers would be invited to a certificate ceremony. The situation was set up so that these guests would need to regularly check with Herschel as to how he was doing with his resistance in order to predict when they would need to reserve time for the ceremony in their schedule. The chart was filled within 2 weeks and the ceremony scheduled. By that time Herschel was starting to make friends in his classroom and therefore also invited a peer, which happened to be another student who was just starting to work with me. The ceremony took place and consisted of Herschel explaining all his 10 acts of resistance and his strategies to the audience. He was then offered an official certificate entitled 'Anti-Trouble Certificate' granted to 'Herschel (last name) for his success at resisting Trouble 10 times'. This ceremony was then followed by a lunch in Herschel's honour.

Three considerations were taken into account when crafting the certificate. First, it was written in such a way that it underscored the *number of successes* that could not be taken away from him, whatever happened, as it was concrete and implied that the work was in

progress. This choice of language was important as calling it a *Victory over Trouble Certificate* (for instance) would have set the stage for excessive performance expectations. Second, in addition to the number of successes at resisting the problem, the certificate emphasised preferred self-descriptions as indicators of progress (such as... *Herschel has demonstrated great courage and determination in choosing to take these actions*). These statements publicly established that Herschel was truly making efforts and had good intentions that the school staff had not necessarily noticed, given the recurrence of problems. Third, it also included a reference to others' new perceptions of Herschel in order to emphasise the validity of these changes and involve the community in the celebration (*his peers have noticed that Herschel is a better sport...*). This way, Herschel could be himself through others' eyes and appreciate a new view of himself.

The certificate ceremony was very affirming for Herschel who had never been honoured for anything related to school. It had the effect of a ritual that acknowledged turning points in his life and publicly marked a new beginning. Herschel and his mother could experience the teacher and principal as smiling and caring human beings, as opposed to the usual experience of them as harsh disciplinarians. Conversely, the teacher and the principal could experience Herschel and his mother at their best, proud and happy of their accomplishments. This event inspired Herschel's mother to create a home file entitled 'Herschel's Achievements', in which she placed the success chart. She also framed the certificate and displayed it in their living room for everyone to see. These documents became symbols of the preferred story and they would support all involved in the pursuit of its co-creation.

Herschel was also paired with some other boys I (MNB) began working with to help them notice their victories over the problem. This group was called 'Success Spies' (see Beaudoin, 2001, for more details). This collaboration had very strong anti-problem effects for all the boys.

Bringing it all back home

I (MNB) thought it would be useful to have Jeff interview Herschel and have a team of therapists be an outsider witness group. My hope was that the experience would strengthen the existence of the preferred story by another retelling of it, increase the number of members on Herschel's virtual team, and deepen his own understanding of his anti-trouble strategies by explaining them to others. Herschel, the other Success Spies, and their parents, were invited to a meeting at our centre (Bay Area Family Therapy Training Associates). I (JZ) interviewed them about their strategies for handling the problems, their knowledges, and their new understandings about themselves. I also asked questions of their parents and about their experience of being involved in the therapy. I asked for advice and feedback on the work and how it was done. The outsider witness group (interns, staff), watched the discussion behind a one-way mirror. After the interview, they switched places and had a conversation about what they observed. They raised more 'reauthoring' questions for the participants, and shared what they would take back from the

interview into their own lives and why. [For more on reflecting teams or outside witness groups see White, 1995c, 1997a, 2000a, and Zimmerman and Dickerson, 1996.]

Later on, the boys reported that they very much enjoyed listening to the team. They were very excited about this process, not only because of the unusual aspect of the one-way mirror, but also because of the process of hearing 'strangers' comment and question their stories. It was reaffirming for them to experience that all these adults would be interested, and respectfully curious, about their achievements. The boys recalled several of the comments made about their strategies and about team members' own life experiences. One thing we would like to underline about adults 'taking back' ideas was its challenge to adultist structures, as in this context children were the knowledgeable experts teaching adults. This invited further beliefs in their own agency and their abilities to contribute to others' lives, a sharp contrast with Herschel's earlier experience of being 'worthless' and 'wanting to die' when he felt powerless to change adults' negative view of him.

One therapist, who knew Herschel in the earlier days of his being captured by Trouble, wrote a letter to Herschel, sharing that he had recommended Herschel's strategies to another person who had found them very helpful. Herschel was delighted. The discussion of the letter opened a whole new area as Herschel shared that he had been increasingly helping other kids stay out of Trouble. Finally, as this interview was videotaped, it also provided the boys with additional documentation of the preferred developments and an opportunity to show the video to others, extend the audience beyond the therapy room and reflect further on the experience of the interview.

What does it all mean?

We have tried to write this article in a form that embraces narrative ideas and practices. We hope it stirred your interest, even if your work is situated in other ideas. We feel strongly that therapeutic work, regardless of the setting, should address the effects of dominant cultural discourses. Our classroom and school efforts challenged the contextual restraints that affect the setting in several ways: 1) it promoted collaboration and support between students, teachers, and administrators, which challenged individualistic ideas that one (bad) person is responsible for the problems alone and should change; 2) it emphasised that fighting a problem is difficult and created space for social victories to be celebrated, challenging the idea that only academic production or participation in traditional school activities should be honoured; 3) and, most importantly, it inverted the hierarchy that had been established from one where Herschel was a marginalised 'troubled' kid that should be excluded, to one where he would be admired for his knowledge and included more.

Clearly, narrative therapists believe that both taking the larger discursive context into account and focusing on changing stories in interactional contexts is critical. Our theory and practices, however, are very different from the ones influenced by a family systems metaphor (a set of models the first author taught for years). For example, circular causality is not presupposed, there is

no imagined homeostatic structure or organisation, responses are not seen as information, and problems are not seen as symptoms serving some organisational function. Instead, here we have effects; socially constructed discourses have the effect of shaping the local contexts, and individual responses in this context have effects that might invite (not cause) other responses. Turning down these invitations, responding in preferred ways, and engaging others as audiences to these preferred ways is the (very different) interactional 'stuff' of narrative work. As far as problems go, they are just problems and nothing more. What they are is defined by the client's experience, which is always privileged over the therapist's interpretation of what they might represent based on some expert theory. Experience and meaning are the relevant variables, not information or behaviour.

JZ: We keep talking about experience, but I'm not so sure the distinctions between it, and say, information, behaviour, cognitions, or even feelings is clear.

MNB: Can I ask you some questions about this?

JZ: Sure.

MNB: What was your personal experience using family systems or interactional models?

JZ: I remember taking whatever the client(s) told me and filtering it through a coherent system of understanding that privileged my expert ideas over my client's experience. I felt in charge, responsible...

MNB: And the effect of this?

JZ: In the beginning, a sense of power in changing people's lives. Later on in my career, burden. For example, I remember a couple fighting with each other and me wanting not to be in the room, because I alone had to do something. I experience this somewhat differently now.

MNB: Yes, in doing narrative work I feel that the responsibility *is* experienced differently because the hierarchy between client and therapist is minimalised. The relationship is collaborative and this makes for a different sense of connection.

JZ: Doing narrative work, I feel the joy in a client's story about an experience of victory over a problem, or their pain when told a story about an experience of humiliation. I can be free to reflect on my own stories that are invited up in the process. At times, my experience is that they are leading and I am following.

MNB: I see it as co-leadership, where sometimes we steer the conversation in a certain direction that seems useful, while at the same time listening carefully to the client's experience. This process seems not only different from systemic work, but also from cognitive behavioural therapy.

JZ: Yes, people confuse what we do with that therapy, as well. Speaking of which, you did cognitive behavioural work – can you help with some distinctions here?

MNB: Let's discuss it in the text first, and then I'll make some comments.

The focus of narrative therapy is the meaning clients make of their *experiences*, and how it affects their knowledge and practices. All clients are assumed to be 'able' to function (to have the skills) in certain contexts, but unable to do so in others because of the restraining influence of a problem-story and the discourses that shape it. A cognitive behavioural approach assumes that most problems are caused by distorted *cognitions* and lack of skills. A fundamental premise is that maladaptive thoughts and behaviours are learned and may thus be unlearned or corrected by the therapeutic process. The cognitive behavioural therapist might have used various techniques, such as cognitive restructuring (to address Herschel's thoughts that everyone was against him, or that his teacher was unfair), role-plays (to help him develop problem solving and anger management skills), and modelling (to teach Herschel appropriate ways of responding to conflicts at recess with his peers). Some cognitive behavioural therapists might also have chosen to use a behavioural contingency approach.

In narrative therapy a context is created where the child him/herself becomes increasingly aware of the effects of the problem on his life, and decides her/himself to mobilise efforts against it. Herschel was not taught anything, but rather assisted in becoming more and more *his* preferred version of himself in an increasing number of contexts. This was done through conversations and questions about his experience that increased his awareness and sense of agency around his preference. Experience, not cognition or behaviour, was the variable of focus. Also, my (MNB) offer of certificates and organising a party was not used as a reward, but rather as a process of honouring Herschel's work and commitment in standing up to the problem. This meant that Herschel did not 'change his behaviour' to GET a tangible reward, but shifted his practices because he wanted a different and better life.

JZ: So your experience of doing narrative work is also very different from doing CBT.

MNB: Yes, in ways similar to yours, my experience of doing narrative work is dramatically different from doing CBT, especially in my conceptual set and my intentions. I believe the experience for clients is different, as well. Clients have shared, on numerous occasions, how they feel competent and honoured in this approach.

JZ: How do you see the distinction between cognition and experience?

MNB: Experience is shared in the form of stories or in the meaning someone has made, based on these stories. Stories are full of descriptions of behaviour, of thoughts the characters have and are laden with affect. In other words, clients give a coherent account of what happened and how they made sense of it; this account is their experience of the events that involve their feelings and their thoughts.

JZ: The effects of attending to preferred developments would be to 'reinforce' them...

MNB: Yes, and the attention is directed from a position of curiosity, and as an invitation to ascribe to it some meaning. This kind of response is different to 'deliver' than reinforcement, and different to experience (for the client).

What was it from our point of view (influenced by our perspective) that supported change? We believe it was the new meanings that Herschel was able to develop around his experience. These new meanings came from noticing and having different experiences, from the raising of questions about these experiences, and from invitations to reflect on his choices. This is a very different process from being told directly or in so many words which 'behaviours' were good or bad. It is much more convincing and significant to realise one's own preferences than to be told which ones are 'best'. Herschel defined what ways HE wanted to be and why this was important to him. For Herschel then, the key elements of the new developments were what these changes meant: 1) about him as a person (his identity), 2) about the kind of individual he preferred to be (values, preferences, etc.), and 3) about people's experience of him.

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