



Responding to trauma and hardship: Stories of psychological and social resistance The use of collective narrative practices

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Ten themes of collective narrative practice

1. As we listen to and seek to respond to the stories that individuals and groups share with us, we can conceive of these stories as representing not only personal experience but also the effects of broader social issues.
2. No matter the degree of hardship, trauma or desolation, individuals, groups and communities will be *responding* to the situations they are in. There will be initiatives they are taking to try to reduce or redress the harm and/or to care and protect others.
3. Rather than bringing our own initiatives to work within these communities, our role instead can be to create contexts in which people's own initiatives and healing knowledges are noticed and more richly described. This includes unearthing the skills, values, hopes and dreams that are implicit in people's responses to hardship, and the histories of these in the lives of individuals, cultures and communities.
4. Once these local initiatives, skills and values are acknowledged, we can seek out a relevant audience to whom these will be resonant. Usually, this involves other individuals/groups who are experiencing similar or related hardship, others who are affected by similar social issues.
5. It then becomes possible to enable those who are struggling with the effects of hardship to make a meaningful contribution to the lives of others who are also struggling. In turn, this experience of making a contribution to others can lead to an increased sense of personal/collective agency.
6. It can be particularly significant when opportunities are created for two-way inter-generational contributions and inter-generational honouring. When it can be acknowledged that the skills and values of younger generations are carrying forth (in unique ways) the legacies of those of older generations, this can provide an antidote to the inter-generational dislocation that collective trauma often causes within communities.
7. People's responses to hardship and trauma are forms of local social action. By acknowledging these, by more richly describing them, and by creating an ever increasing sense of personal/collective agency, this makes it possible for people's initiatives to become linked, and for further actions to be taken. These actions may be in relation to reclaiming their lives from effects of trauma/hardship and/or in relation to preventing further harm or injustice to themselves, their community or others.
8. The generation and performance of 'local folk culture' can reinvigorate local healing knowledges and local social action. If rich descriptions of people's skills and knowledges in dealing with hardship can be transformed into local cultural mediums (written word, spoken word, song, film, dance, poetry, celebration) this makes many things possible. It can enable people to perform, witness and share within ceremonies of re-definition of identity. This process of cultural creativity can also contribute to the sustenance and reinvigoration of the language of inner life. When engaged with collectively, this process can be sustaining of what Victor Turner described as 'communitas' and importantly, of local social action.
9. Throughout this process we can deliberately work for what Paulo Freire referred to as 'the invention of unity in diversity'. There is a constant responsibility to ensure that the generation of connectedness or 'communitas' is not accompanied by the development of new norms and normalising judgement. These approaches seek to resurrect diversity in everyday life by consistently acknowledging the rich diversity of people's skills, knowledges, values and hopes for life.
10. Following Freire, we can approach this work with a broad view and a long time-line. Our task becomes to generate possibilities for those affected by social issues to make meaningful contributions to others also affected by these social issues, in ways that provide relief from the effects of trauma *and* that build both personal and collective agency.

(Extracted from Denborough, D. (2008): *Collective Narrative Practice: Responding to individuals, groups and communities who have experienced trauma*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications)

Collective narrative methodologies:

Dulwich Centre Foundation is committed to generating a range of new narrative collective methodologies to assist practitioners in diverse contexts to respond effectively to individuals, groups and communities who have experienced significant trauma/hardship. These methodologies are based on narrative therapy idea and principles. They are especially designed to be accessible and relevant in contexts of collective trauma and hardship and where there may be few material resources.

These collective narrative methodologies include:

- Collective timelines
- Maps of history
- Collective narrative documentation
- Rituals and ceremonies of definition
- Exchanging messages between communities
- Songs of skills and knowledge
- Narrative checklists of social and psychological resistance
- The Tree of Life: a collective narrative approach to working with vulnerable children
- The Team of Life: offering young people a sporting chance
- The Kite of Life: strengthening relations across generations in immigrant/refugee communities

Is our work creating the conditions that make local social movement more possible?

- Are the people I am working with experiencing an increased sense of agency? Are they becoming more knowledgeable about their own skills, knowledges, abilities that can be put to use in addressing the difficulties that they (and others) are facing? Are they experiencing putting these into action and seeing the results in their own lives?
- Is our work linking people together around shared concerns and also around their skills, knowledges, and abilities?
- Are the people we are working with being enabled to experience making a contribution to the lives of others?
- Are the broader, social, historical, cultural factors that are influencing the strength of the problem they are facing becoming articulated and named? If so, is this generating a dissatisfaction with the status quo?
- Are the people we are working with becoming linked with stories, histories and knowledge about how local initiatives, skills and knowledge can bring about changes? In other words, are they experiencing increasing hope in contrast to fatalism?
- Are there ways in which those with whom we are working are becoming actively engaged in the creation of collective folk culture (music, art, drama, literature) around themes of addressing the difficulties, injustices, being faced by themselves and others?
- Are there ways in which they are experiencing acknowledgment and celebration of these expressions of local culture?
- Are we taking care to ensure that metaphors of healing are not precluding metaphors of local action?
- Are we inviting rigorous critique and questioning of our work about ways in which we may inadvertently be replicating the status quo, or normative ideas in relation to gender, class, race, sexual identity and so on?
- To what degree is our work inviting people to re-engage with personal/social history and to what degree is it inviting a re-arrangement of the current social world?

Further reading

- Denborough, D. (2008): *Collective Narrative Practice: Responding to individuals, groups and communities who have experienced trauma*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications
- Denborough, D., Freedman, J. & White, C. (2008): *Strengthening Resistance: The use of narrative practices in working with genocide survivors*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Foundation
- Denborough, D. (ed) (2006): *Trauma: Narrative responses to traumatic experience*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications
- White, C. & Denborough, D. (2005): *A Community of Ideas: Behind the scenes. The work of Dulwich Centre Publications* Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- White, M. (2007): *Maps of Narrative Practice*. New York: W.W. Norton
- Yuen, A. & White, C. (2007): *Conversations about gender, culture, violence & narrative practice: Stories of hope and complexity from women of many cultures*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications