The Effects of Engaging Families in Externalizing Conversations about their Problems

These include:

i) a decrease in unproductive conflict between persons, including those disputes over who is responsible for the problem;

ii) the undermining of the sense of failure that has developed for many persons in response to the continuing existence of the problem despite their attempts to resolve it;

iii) paving the way for persons to co-operate with each other; to unite in a struggle against the problem and to escape its influence in their lives and relationships;

iv) the opening up of new possibilities for persons to take action to retrieve their lives and relationships from the problem and its influence;

v) a freeing of persons to take a lighter, more effective and less stressed approach to "deadly serious" problems; and,

vi) the presenting of options for dialogue, rather than monologue, about the problem.

Externalizing the Problem as a Counter-Practice

The practices associated with the externalizing of problems are counter-practices. They introduce an externalizing conversation around that which is experienced as problematic, rather than an internalizing conversation. In so doing, these counter-practices:

a) challenge the objectification or "thingification" of persons and the objectification of the bodies of persons, and establish conditions for the "re-appropriation of the self".

b) challenge the practices of division and exclusion that are associated with the practices of objectification, and establish conditions for a sense of co-operation, inclusion, and an experience of communitas amongst persons.

c) challenge the "totalization" and "normalization" of persons lives.

Externalizing Conversations, Private Stories, and Deconstructive Method

Externalizing conversations assist persons to separate their lives and their relationships from the private and problem-saturated stories that have been shaping or constituting their lives. In so doing, many familiar and taken for granted realities - those that are considered to be settled and unquestionable certainties - are rendered strange. Thus, to borrow a phraze from Bourdeiu, externalizing conversations "exoticize the domestic".

"The sociologist who chooses to study his (sic) own world in its nearest and most familiar aspects should not, as the ethnologist would, domesticate the exotic, but, if I may venture the expression, exoticize the domestic, through a break with his (sic) initial relation of intimacy with modes of life and thought which remain opaque to him (sic) because they are too familiar. In fact the movement towards the originary, and the ordinary, world should be the culmination of a movement toward alien and extraordinary worlds. (Bourdeiu, P. 1988: Homo Academicus. California: Stanford University Press, p.xi-xii)

One outcome of this deconstructive method is that these private stories are unravelled and no longer speak to persons of the truth of their lives - of their identity. This separation of persons from these private stories assists them to enter a space in which they might explore alternative stories about who they might be.

Reconstruction as Re-Authoring - The Structure of Narrative

Bruner (1986), in referring to texts, proposed that stories are composed of dual landscapes - a "landscape of action", and a "landscape of consciousness".

The landscape of action is constituted of:

a) events that are linked together in,
b) particular sequences through the,
c) temporal dimension - through past, present and future - and, according to,
d) specific plots.

In a text, the landscape of action provides the reader with a perspective on the thematic unfolding of events across time.

The landscape of consciousness is constituted of the interpretations of the characters in the story and of those of the reader. Many of these interpretations are arrived at through reflection on events as they unfold across the landscape of action, and relate to:

1)   the determination of the desires and the preferences of the characters,

2)   the identification of their personal and relationship characteristics and qualities,

3)   the clarification of their intentional states - for example, their motives and their purposes,

4)   the substantiation of the values and beliefs of these characters, and to

5)   conclusions about the characters "commitments" in life - about "life-styles" of choice.

Re-Authoring as a Process of Questioning

The unique outcome, or contradiction, provides the point-of-entry or gateway to the territories of alternative stories/knowledges. For an event to constitute a unique outcome, it must be judged to do so by the persons who seek therapy.

In this reauthoring process, the therapist orients him/herself to unique outcomes as one might orient to mysteries. These are mysteries that only those persons who seek therapy can satisfactorily unravel. In this unravelling, persons engage in the re-authoring of their lives according to alternative and preferred stories.

To facilitate this re-authoring of lives, the therapist asks "landscape of action questions" and "landscape of consciousness" questions. Lanscape of action questions encourage the situation of unique outcomes within particular sequences of events, across time, and according to particular plots. Lansdcape of consciousness questions encourage the articulation of alternative and preferred desires, preferences, personal and relationship qualities, intentions and purposes, beliefs and values, and of commitments and life-styles of choice.

There are various categories of landscape of action and landscape of consciousness questions. For example, landscape of action questions can include those that bring forth the recent history, distant history, near future and distant future of the unique outcomes, as well as those questions that contribute to the naming of the alternative plot.

Landscape of action and landscape of consciousness questions can be in the category of "direct experience" questions or "experience of experience" questions.

As persons begin to articulate preferred events in these alternative landscapes of action, and as they become more engaged in the arrangement or linking of these events in particular sequences through time, they can be encouraged to explicitly name the alternative plot or counter-plot that is suggested by this arrangement. The naming of the alternative plot or counter-plot is important, for it, among other things:

a)   contributes very significantly to a person's sense of their life going forward in preferred ways,

b)   makes possible the attribution of meaning to events or experiences that would otherwise be neglected or considered to be of little significance,

c) facilitates the session by session sorting and linking of the events that have taken place between sessions, and

d) provides for persons a sense of knowing what might be the next step in their preferred direction in life.

The alternative plot or counter-plot is often named quite spontaneously in the process of this work. When it is not, the therapist can facilitate this by asking questions that encourage persons to generate descriptions in juxaposition to the previously dominant plot. Through these questions, persons who have been concerned about "losing their relationship" (previously dominant plot), may determine that these developments in the alternative landscape of action suggest that they are on the path of "reclaiming their relationship" (alternative plot or counter-plot). A person who concludes that "self-neglect" has been highly influential in their life (previously dominant plot), may decide that the developments in the alternative landscape of action reflect that s/he has been engaged in a "self-nurturing project" (alternative plot or counter-plot).

Externalizing Conversations, Practices and Sructures of Power, and Deconstructive Method

Externalizing conversations encourage the "unmasking" of the practices of power and of the structures of power.

In regard to the practices of power, it is through externalizing conversations that persons are able to:

a) appreciate the degree to which these practices are constituting of their own lives as well as the lives of others;

b) identify those practices of self and of relationship that might be judged as impoverishing of their lives, as well as of the lives of others;

c) acknowledge the extent to which they have been recruited into the policing of their own lives, and, as well, the nature of their participation in the policing of the lives of others, and to;

d) explore the nature of local, relational politics.

Thus, externalizing conversations enable persons to challenge various practices of power, including those that relate to:

1. the technologies of the self - the subjugation of self through the discipline of bodies, souls, thoughts, and conduct according to specified ways of being, and;

2. the technologies of power - the subjugation of others through techniques such as isolation and surveillance, and through perpetual evaluation and comparison.

The Deconstruction of Knowledge Practices

The knowledge practices of the culture of therapy that are subjugating of persons can be identified. These are the ways of speaking that are considered to be rational, neutral

and respectable, emphasizing notions of the authoritative account and the impersonal expert view. These practices disembody the perspective and opinions of the speaker, and they:

a) establish accounts of knowledge considered to be "unitary" and "global",

b) mask the multiplicity of resistances to these unitary   accounts,

c) prevent dialogue over different points of view,

d) deny their own ethical and moral implications,

e) render the world closed, certain, fixed and permanent, and

f) disqualify other ways of speaking.

In the therapeutic context, these knowledge practices can be challenged by explicitly:

i)   encouraging those persons who seek therapy to assist the therapist in the quest for understanding,

ii) giving notice of the extent to which the therapist's participation in therapy is dependent upon feedback from these persons about their experience of therapy,

iii) inquiring about which ideas and developments that arise in therapy are preferred by those persons who seek therapy,

iv) encouraging persons to interview the therapist about the interview itself, thus contributing to a context of transparency,

v)   encouraging reflecting team members to interview each other, and the interviewer, about their comments in the presence of those persons who seek therapy.

A REFLECTION ON THE EXTERNALIZING OF THE PROBLEM

a) The externalizing of the problem is a means to the objectification of a familiar world, one that allows for a reappropriation of the self.

b)   In that it deconstructs familiar and taken for granted realities, the practices associated with the externalizing of the problem "exoticizes the domestic" and brings the world into therapy.   To quote from Bourdieu:

> The sociologist who chooses to study his own world in its nearest and most familiar aspects should not, as the ethnologist would, domesticate the exotic, but, if I may venture the expression, exoticize the domestic, through a break with his (sic) initial relation of intimacy with modes of life and thought which remain opaque to him (sic) because they are too familiar.   In fact the movement towards the originary, and the ordinary, world should be the culmination of a movement toward alien and extraordinary worlds".

FOUR CLASSES OF RESPONSE

1. Joining

a) Team members introduce themselves and explain their presence at the consultation, and provide brief details to locate themselves in the field (eg. workplace, projects etc)

b) Team members to acknowledge all family members, and give brief account of their understanding of the family's predicament.

2. Mystery

a) Team members respond to those developments that are judged by family members to be preferred developments, or those developments that team members believe might be preferred developments. In the second case, team members take care to identify the fact that speculation is providing the point of entry for their responses.

b) Team members respond to the preferred developments as one might respond to a mystery, one that team members can be curious about, but one that only family members can satisfactorily unravel.

c) The curiosity of team members provokes in family members a fascination with previously neglected but significant experiences or events in their lives.

3. Alternative Landscapes

a) Team members traffick in questions that invite family members to resurrect and/or generate alternative stories of their lives and of their relationships.

b) This is largely achieved through team members orienting to the preferred developments through "landscape-of-action" questions and "landscape-of-consciousness" questions.

c) This is a process in which team members actively interview each other - it is not a process that can be described as "pointing out positives".

d) Team members are careful to avoid the indicative and instead frame their responses to each other in the subjunctive mood of "as if", "maybe", "possibly", and so on.

4. Deconstruction

    a) Team members invite each other to embody their comments and their curiosity with, or to situate their curiosity and their comments in, their personal experience, imagination and their intentions.

    b) The transparency that is the outcome of this is authenticating of the team members' contributions - their curiosity is not experienced by family members as academic. Also as this embodiment of the responses of team members mitigates against the possibility that their "truths" might be imposed on family members, it provides for a more egalitarian therapeutic context.

    c) In situating their comments and their curiosity within their personal experience, team members take care not to enter into the expression of their experience for the sake of the expression of their experience, and also take care not to provide a "moral story" (which won't happen if the curiosity of team members is genuine).