

# Reflecting Teamwork as Definitional Ceremony revisited

by Michael White

Chapter 4 from: White, M. 2000: *Reflections on Narrative Practice: Essays and Interviews*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.

<http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/reflectingarticle2.html> accessed June 14 2009

The focus of this essay is the definitional ceremony metaphor and the shape that this gives to reflecting-team work. I have written this to complement two other pieces on this subject (White, 1995, 1997). It is not my intention to reproduce significant aspects of these two pieces here, or to provide a summary of them. Rather, I wanted to write an essay that would complement what I have previously written on this subject, so that the three pieces might be read together.

At the outset of this essay, I discuss the structuralism/poststructuralism distinction. I believe a grasp of this distinction to be essential to an appreciation of the workings of definitional ceremony, and of the contribution of definitional ceremony to identity formation. I then touch on the emphasis that narrative therapy has always given to the identification and recruitment of audiences to the preferred developments of people's lives. Following this, I visit some of Barbara Myerhoff's contributions to an understanding of the workings of definitional ceremony, before further mapping out some of the reflecting team practices that are shaped by this understanding. Last, I focus on some of the issues that reflecting teams invariably wind up grappling with as they engage with these practices.

## **TRADITIONS OF THOUGHT AND PRACTICE**

The practices of narrative therapy are informed by poststructuralist or non-structuralist understandings of life and of identity. My purpose in emphasising poststructuralist or non-structuralist understandings at the outset of this essay is to call attention to the significance of traditions of thought in regard to implications for therapeutic practice. And I am emphasising this at the outset of this essay about reflecting-team work for several reasons. First, I believe there to be an inseparable link between thought and practice, and not to draw distinctions around different traditions of thought can have the effect of tying us, in the name of therapeutic endeavour, to the unquestioned reproduction of the taken-for-granted and routine habits of thought and action of contemporary western culture. When this is the case, it is more likely that therapy will reinforce the dominant modes of life of this culture, rather than present options that might contribute to the questioning of these modes of life.

Second, I draw this distinction because many of the practices of narrative therapy contrast significantly with the practices of therapy that are derived from structuralist understandings of people's expressions of living. But an appreciation of this is often lost. In this present era the premises of structuralist thought are so spontaneously assumed and so deeply ingrained in the culture of counselling/psychotherapy that many of the proposals for practice that are subsumed under the umbrella of narrative therapy are regularly taken to be a revisioning of the well-known and familiar structuralist ideas and practices – for example, they are often taken to be a recycling of humanist approaches to counselling.

Third, I draw this distinction here because the reflecting-team practices which are the subject of this essay are informed by poststructuralist or non-structuralist understandings of life and of identity. I believe that to discern the structuralist/poststructuralist distinction in the exploration of therapeutic practices, including those of the reflecting team, contributes to an appreciation of the specificity of these practices. This discernment also provides a basis for us to join with each other in the further development of these practices – to extend on the limits of what is known about them.

### **Structuralist understandings**

I believe that it would be helpful to the subsequent discussion of reflecting-team work to take pause to draw out this structuralist/poststructuralist distinction just a little. So, first a word about structuralism. Without doubt, what might be referred to as the ‘structuralist project’ has been spectacularly successful. After four or five hundred years of development of structuralist understandings of life, structuralist thought is now pervasive in contemporary western culture – so much so, that it has become rather difficult to think of life outside of these understandings.

One characteristic of structuralist thought is the surface/depth contrast. It is within the terms of this contrast that people’s expressions of living are taken to be behaviours that are surface manifestations of particular elements or essences. It is generally accepted that these elements or essences can be discovered by plumbing the depths of people’s lives. They are envisioned as the building blocks of identity, and are considered to be at what is conceived of as the centre of personhood – a centre that is invariably referred to as the ‘self’. In western culture it is now routinely accepted that everybody has one of these ‘selves’, and it is generally taken for granted that self and identity are inextricably linked – that identity is a product of, or is synonymous with, the self.

What are some of the implications of this structuralist tradition of thought? If the actions and the experiences of people’s lives that bring them to counselling/therapy are understood to be expressions that are surface manifestations of deeper ‘truths’ – for example, of certain elements or essences of a self that is to be found at the centre of identity – then these expressions require expert interpretation. This requirement leads to the production of theories, to the construction of systems of analyses founded on these theories that can be laid over people’s lives, and to the development of professional techniques of remediation that will fix whatever it is that is amiss at the centre of their identity.

### **Poststructuralist understandings**

Despite the wide and unquestioned acceptance of the link between identity and self, historians of thought (for example, Michel Foucault), cultural anthropologists (for example, Clifford Geertz), and others from disciplines as apparently disparate as literary theory and science, have drawn attention to the fact that the habit of associating self with identity is a relatively recent phenomenon. But more than this: they have demonstrated the extent to which the idea that there exists such a thing as a ‘self’, that resides at the centre of personhood, and is a source of meaning and action, is, in the history of the world’s cultures, a remarkably novel idea.

Poststructuralist understandings account for identity as a social and public achievement – identity is something that is negotiated within social institutions and within communities of

people – and is shaped by historical and cultural forces. In exploring the mechanisms that give rise to identity within these contexts, the structure of narrative frequently comes under scrutiny, for people routinely negotiate meaning within the context of narrative frames – they attribute meaning to their experiences of the events of their lives by locating these in sequences that unfold through time according to certain themes or plots. And more than this: it is in this ‘storying’ of experience that people derive identity descriptions that are filed into the identity categories of modern culture – motive, need, attributes, traits, properties, and so on. According to this poststructuralist take on life, it is not one’s motive that shapes action, but one’s account of one’s motive that has been socially derived in narrative negotiations that does so.

In comparison to structuralist conceptions of life that are informed by the surface/depth contrast, a characteristic of poststructuralist thought is the contrasting of the metaphors ‘thin’ and ‘thick’<sup>1</sup>. In engaging with this thin/thick contrast, rather than reproducing the time-honoured therapeutic practices of interpreting people’s expressions of living through recourse to the expert knowledge discourses of the culture of therapy, and of remedial action on the part of the therapist (which contribute to thin description), the practices of narrative therapy assist people to break from thin conclusions about their lives, about their identities, and about their relationships. But more than this: these narrative practices also provide people with the opportunity to engage in the thick or rich description of their lives, of their identities, and of their relationships. As people become more narratively resourced through the generation of this thick or rich description, they find that they have available to them options for action that would not have otherwise been imaginable.

Some of the practices of narrative therapy that engage with this poststructuralist contrast of thick and thin are shaped by the ‘definitional ceremony’ metaphor. Definitional ceremony as poststructuralist practice will be the subject of the next section of this essay.

## **DEFINITIONAL CEREMONY**

In the literature on narrative therapy, there can be found various micro-maps for practice that can be taken up as guides in assisting people to break from thin conclusions about their lives and their identities, and that provide options for joining with people in the generation of rich or thick description of these lives and identities (for example, Freedman & Combs, 1996; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1996; Monk et al., 1997; Freeman et al., 1997; White & Epston, 1991; White, 1995, 1997). In this essay, I will focus on the map that is informed by the ‘definitional ceremony’ metaphor. The metaphor of definitional ceremony is one that contributes to the structuring of therapy as a context for the telling and the retelling of the stories of people’s lives. There is a specificity to these tellings and retellings that constitute definitional ceremonies – it is not a matter of ‘anything goes’ – some of which I have drawn out in pieces that have been published elsewhere (White, 1995, 1997). It is not my intention here to reproduce the content of these previously published pieces, but to describe some of the particularities of definitional ceremony at work in a way that will complement them.

But first some general observations about the structure of definitional ceremony. The definitional ceremony metaphor guides the structuring of forums in which certain persons have the opportunity to engage in a telling of some of the significant stories of their lives – stories that, in one way or another, are relevant to matters of personal and relational identity. Also present in this forum is an audience or ‘outsider-witness’ group. The members of this group listen carefully to the stories told, and ready themselves to engage in a retelling of what

they have heard. When the time is right, positions are switched – the persons whose lives are at the centre of the definitional ceremony form an audience to the retellings of the outsider-witness group. These retellings encapsulate aspects of the original telling. But more than this – the retellings of the outsider-witness group routinely exceed the boundaries of the original telling in significant ways, in ways that contribute to the rich description of the personal and relational identities of the persons whose lives are at the centre of the ceremony. In part, these retellings achieve this through the linking of the stories of the lives of these persons with the stories of the lives of others, around shared themes, values, purposes and commitments.

After these retellings, the members of the outsider-witness group step back into the audience position, and the persons whose lives are at the centre of the ceremony have the opportunity to speak of what they have heard. At this time these persons are engaged in the second of the retellings; that is, in retellings of the retellings of the outsider-witness group. In these forums, there can be other levels of outsider-witness participation, and further retellings of retellings.

The definitional ceremony metaphor guides the structuring of tellings and retellings of the stories of people's lives in uniquely convened social arenas. Within the context of these ceremonies, these tellings, retellings, and retellings of retellings are distinct. The achievement of these distinct tellings and retellings requires a disruption of dialogue across the interface between those in the audience position and those who are engaged in the tellings and retellings; that is, when the outsider-witness group is in the audience position, they are strictly in that position, and when the persons whose lives are at the centre of definitional ceremonies are in the audience position, they are strictly in that position. Conversation across this interface only occurs at the end of the ceremony, in the fourth and final stage.

There is a specificity to the retellings of the outsider-witness group: in that these retellings contribute very significantly to the rich description of personal and relational identities, they constitute 'regrading' ceremonies of definition. In the usual run of events of everyday life, not all retellings of audience groups achieve this rich description. In fact, many of the institutionalised retellings of the contemporary world contribute significantly to the thin description of personal and relational identity. Consider, for example, many of the routine and taken-for-granted ways of speaking about people's lives in the modern case conference – ways of speaking that are reducing and pathologising of people's lives through processes of normalising judgement. People usually experience a lessening of their identities on account of such retellings. Retellings that contribute to the thin description of personal and relational identities constitute 'degrading' definitional ceremonies.<sup>2</sup>

### **Audience identification and recruitment**

Although this essay has a primary focus on definitional ceremony at work in a relatively specific and formal sense – that is, on definitional ceremony in which the members of the outsider-witness group are drawn from the community of therapists and form a reflecting team – this by no means represents the limits of possibility for work that is shaped by this metaphor. There are countless opportunities available to therapists to engage with this metaphor in the structuring of their work with the people who consult them. The greater majority of these opportunities can be taken up in the convening of relatively informal forums for the telling and retelling of the stories of people's lives.

To this end, over many years, David Epston and I have emphasised the importance of giving attention to the identification and recruitment of appropriate audiences to people's

expressions of the significant and preferred developments of their lives. This had been a consistent theme of our own work. We have drawn these audiences from a wide range of contexts – from family and friendship networks, from school and work-place environments, from pools of acquaintances, including neighbours and shopkeepers, and from communities of people who are unknown to the persons who are seeking consultation. A significant source for the identification and recruitment of appropriate audiences is provided by what I refer to as therapists’ ‘registers’; that is, by lists of people who have previously consulted therapists about a variety of problems and concerns, and who have willingly made themselves available to participate in the structuring of definitional ceremonies for others.

At the end of our consultations with people who consult us, when soliciting reflections on the work that we have done together, we often ask them about their interest in participating, at some future time, in the sort of retellings of the stories of other people’s lives that might contribute to the resolution of their problems and concerns. The response to this inquiry has been consistently enthusiastic. At this time, people invariably volunteer to place their names on one of our registers. These registers provide a rich source of people who have insider experience and insider knowledge of the sort of predicaments and concerns over which people seek consultation with therapists.

I want to further emphasise here the importance that we place on the identification and recruitment of these audiences. I am aware that it is often assumed that engaging an audience to people’s expressions of the stories of their lives is a relatively peripheral practice of narrative therapy; that giving consideration to the engagement of these audiences is something that is tacked on at the end of the work, as an afterthought; that this engagement is a supplement to the central therapeutic endeavour. This has never been our conception of the status of audience identification and recruitment. This has never been peripheral to our practice. For us, audience engagement has been as much at the centre of our endeavour as have other known narrative practices. I emphasise this here, for in the following discussion I will be mostly focussing on the opportunity that is provided in being able to draw audiences from communities of therapists and/or other related professions. This convening of a reflecting team is an opportunity that is not generally available in the workplace, and I do not want my focus on this relatively restricted version of outsider- witness engagement to contribute to assumptions about this practice having a peripheral status in narrative therapy.

### **Barbara Myerhoff and Venice, Los Angeles**

As previously mentioned, there is a specificity to the outsider-witness group retellings of narrative therapy. Explorations of the sort of retellings that are more likely to contribute to the rich description of personal and relational identities are not informed by the ‘anything goes’ rule – these retellings of the stories of people’s lives are not just any retellings. These retellings are not about the evaluation, judgement, or diagnoses of persons’ lives through recourse to the expert knowledges of the professional disciplines or according to the premises of popular psychology. These retellings are not shaped by homilies or moral stories derived from the histories of the members of the outsider-witness group. And they are not shaped by the idea of treatment or intervention. Rather, these retellings are the outcome of careful listening and of efforts, on the part of the members of the outsider-witness group, to give expression to particular aspects of the stories heard and to extend on the limits of these stories in ways that are not imposing. In these retellings, the stories of the lives of the people who are at the centre of the definitional ceremony are frequently linked to the stories of the lives of others around shared themes, purposes, commitments and values. A primary mechanism of

these retellings is the powerful acknowledgement of people's expressions of their experiences of life. In the therapeutic context, these retellings of the outsider-witness group are usually transformative in their effects.

It is my plan, in this essay, to further describe and illustrate some of the outsider-witness group practices that have been shown, within the context of narrative therapy and reflecting-team work, to contribute significantly to this rich description of personal and relational identities. However, before doing this I will touch on the work of Barbara Myerhoff, as it was through her writings that I first became acquainted with the definitional ceremony metaphor. Myerhoff was a cultural anthropologist whose field work engaged her with a community of elderly Jews in Venice, Los Angeles. Many of the ideas and practices that I discuss in this essay are testimony to Myerhoff's contribution, to the contribution of the people of this community, and to the contribution of Maurie Rosen, an extraordinary community organiser who played such a significant part in assisting the people of this community to breathe life into their identity projects.

Because of considerations of space, my discussion in this section will be brief. However, there are several sources available to readers through which can be gained a greater familiarity with Myerhoff's fieldwork, and with the life of this community (Myerhoff, 1980, 1982, 1986). There is also a documentary film that details some aspects of the of the life of this community and of Myerhoff's fieldwork that is generally available from film libraries. This documentary is called *Number Our Days*, and it won an Academy Award in 1976.

Many of the elderly Jews of the Venice community had migrated from the shtetls of Eastern Europe to North America around the turn of the century. They had subsequently relocated to Los Angeles in search of a mild climate that would be kind to them in their retirement, and had settled in Venice where relatively inexpensive accommodation could be found. Many of the people of this community had outlived their children, and many had lost their extended families in the Holocaust. For them, isolation and invisibility was a primary threat – the threat of becoming invisible to the wider community, of becoming invisible to each other, and of becoming invisible to themselves to the extent that they would cease to have any sense that they existed at all.

In response to this threat, the members of this community, with great intensity and urgency, instituted and routinely engaged in activities that contributed to the production and reproduction of their own identities. These were not isolated singular and individual activities. Rather, in a multiplicity of ways, they devoted much of their daily lives to shared identity projects. A characteristic feature of these identity projects that caught Myerhoff's attention and captured her imagination was the unique self-reflexive consciousness that was expressed in them. The people of this community expressed a consciousness of their participation in the production of their own and each other's identities – they were conscious of the life-shaping effect of their own contributions to the production of their own lives.

I believe that the self-reflexive consciousness that is a feature of the identity projects of the people of this community reflects a non-structuralist understanding of personhood, and, of course, the Hasidism of their cultural history. This non-structuralist understanding of personhood is evident in the elderly Jews' awareness, lived out in so much of what Myerhoff recounts, of the extent to which one's sense of identity is dependent upon one's engagement with identity projects, and of the extent to which identity is:

- a) a public and social achievement, not a private and individual achievement;
- b) shaped by historical and cultural forces, rather than by the forces of nature, however nature might be conceived of; and
- c) dependent upon deriving a sense of authenticity that is an outcome of social processes that are acknowledging of one's preferred claims about one's identity and about one's history, rather than being the outcome of the identification of, and expression of, the essences or elements of the 'self' through introspection, however that self might be conceived of.

Myerhoff explored, among other things, the structures that the people of this community engaged with in their identity projects. One of these structures she refers to as 'Definitional Ceremony', and she provides an account of how this shaped forums of acknowledgement which were available to the people of this community for the purposes of making personal appearances according to their preferred claims about their identities:

*When cultures are fragmented and in serious disarray, proper audiences may be hard to find. Natural occasions may not be offered and then they must be artificially invented. I have called such performances "Definitional Ceremonies", understanding them to be collective self-definitions specifically intended to proclaim an interpretation to an audience not otherwise available. The latter must be captured by any means necessary and made to see the truth of the group's history as the members understand it. Socially marginal people, disdained, ignored groups, individuals with what Erving Goffman calls "spoiled identities", regularly seek opportunities to appear before others in the light of their own internally provided interpretation. (Myerhoff, 1982, p. 105)*

It was in these contexts of definitional ceremony that people's identity claims were powerfully acknowledged by the responses of others. It was in these contexts that these identity claims were authenticated by the retellings of the outsider witnesses. It was through this authentication, which is a social process, that an alignment of sense of self and these identity claims was achieved. It was through this social process of authentication that the elderly Jews of Venice were able to achieve the experience of being at one with their identity claims – that they were able to renew their sense of personal authenticity.

In the tellings and retellings of the definitional ceremonies described by Myerhoff, people's lives were 're-membered'. Re-membering refers to a special type of recollection:

*To signify this special type of recollection, the term 'Re-membering' may be used, calling attention to the reaggregation of members, the figures who belong to one's life story, one's own prior selves, as well as significant others who are part of the story. Re-membering, then, is a purposive, significant unification, quite different from the passive, continuous fragmentary flickerings of images and feelings that accompany other activities in the normal flow of consciousness. (1982, p. 111)*

As I have discussed this definition of Re-membering, as well as some of the implications of this definition for therapeutic practice, in some detail elsewhere (White, 1995, 1997), I will only touch briefly on this subject here. This definition of Re-membering evokes an image of a person's life and identity as a membered association or club. The membership of this association of life is composed of the significant figures of the person's history, and those figures of the person's contemporary circumstances of life whose voices are influential in regard to matters of the person's identity. Re-membering provides an opportunity for persons

to engage in a revision of the membership of their association of life. Myerhoff draws out some of the social mechanisms that contribute to re-membered lives:

*Private and collective lives, properly Re-membered, are interpretative. Full or “thick description” is such an analysis. This involves finding linkages between the group’s shared, valued beliefs and symbols, and the specific historical events. Particularities are subsumed and equated with grander themes, seen as exemplifying ultimate concerns. (1982, p.111)*

Re-membering, according to Myerhoff’s definition, contributes to the production of multi-voiced identities. The understanding of identity as a multi-voiced phenomenon is one that contrasts significantly with structuralist understandings that establish identity as a single-voiced phenomenon, as an expression of a self that is to be found at the centre of personhood. Re-membering practices provide for an alternative to the dominant subjectivities of contemporary western culture that are shaped by these structuralist understandings. In this production of multi-voiced subjectivities through Re-membering practices, self and identity cease to be synonymous. Another feature of Re-membering is that it is ‘requisite to sense and ordering’ in life. It is through re-membering that ‘life is given a shape that extends back in the past and forward into the future’.

Myerhoff’s contributions to an understanding of the workings of definitional ceremony have substantially influenced my explorations of reflecting-team work. Reflecting-team work as definitional ceremony is the subject of the next section of this essay.

## **THE REFLECTING TEAM**

The reflecting team proposal was first introduced to the family therapy field by Tom Andersen in his 1987 article ‘The reflecting team: Dialogue and meta-dialogue in clinical work’. This proposal has been hugely influential since the appearance of this article. It has been taken up into many domains in the family therapy field, and into other fields not just related to therapeutic endeavour, but also to community work and to organisational management. Reflecting-team practices are particularly prevalent in family therapy institutes around the world – these practices have become installed as primary mechanisms for the training of therapists.

Although there are similarities in the structure of the reflecting-team work that is practiced from place to place, today there exists no uniform approach to the emphases, content, themes and styles of team reflections. Neither is there a uniform approach to the relational particularities of reflecting-team work – there are no generally accepted guidelines for team-member participation with each other in the course of their reflections. There is also no consensus in terms of an understanding of the mechanisms at work in reflecting-team work in relation to its frequently transformative effects. I will not attempt here to summarise the multiplicity of approaches to reflecting-team work that have been developed in different contexts and in different locations, nor the various understandings of its workings that have been expressed in the literature. I lack a reasonable degree of familiarity with most of these approaches and understandings, and besides, there are now numerous sources of information available to those who wish to acquaint themselves with a variety of reflecting-team practices (for example, Friedman [ed], 1995, ‘The reflecting team in action: Collaborative practice in family therapy’). I will restrict my focus to explorations of reflecting team work that are informed by the definitional ceremony metaphor, and that fit more generally with my engagement with narrative practice.

There are yet further limits to the discussion that follows. I have intended this essay to complement the other pieces that I have previously published on reflecting-team work as definitional ceremony (White, 1991, 1995, 1997). In choosing to complement these other pieces, I have not reproduced here what I have already written about reflecting-team work, but have attended to neglected aspects of this work in response to questions that have been asked of it, and have reiterated other aspects in order to draw these out and to provide greater emphases where I consider this to be important.

### **Practices of acknowledgement**

The outsider-witness retellings of the reflecting-team work of narrative practice contribute significantly to the rich description of personal and relational identities. One of the mechanisms that contributes to this achievement relates to the practices of acknowledgement that are associated with, and that give shape to, these retellings. These practices of acknowledgement are not what they are often taken to be; that is, the contemporary practices of applause – pointing out positives, praising, giving affirmations, providing positive reinforcement, offering congratulations, and so on. This rendering of the contribution of the outsider-witness group is, I believe, an outcome of a very significant narrowing, through recent history, of the regular habits of acknowledgement in our communities. Habits of acknowledgement that are more considered, thoughtful, and more specific in the sense that they are expressed in ways that are unique to the events that they refer to, are increasingly giving way to ready-made and general-purpose responses (which I refer to as the practices of the applause) to the significant events of people's lives.

In including these reflections on practices of acknowledgement, it is not my goal to cast a shadow on the positive intentions or the personal commitment of therapists who participate in reflecting-team contexts in the hope of providing people with healing experiences. Often therapists participating in reflecting teams engage with the practices of applause in their efforts to break from and challenge the routine pathologising of personal and relational identities that is pervasive in the culture of psychotherapy – to break with and to challenge the normalising judgement of people's lives. Pointing out positives, praising, giving affirmation, providing positive reinforcement, and offering congratulations, often seem attractive and ready-made options to this pathologising of people's lives, and furthermore, can easily be read as providing antidotes to this pathologising.

However, these practices of applause do reproduce normalising judgement. For example, congratulatory responses are informed by conclusions that someone has done well by certain measures, and the utterance of such responses is inevitably associated with the assumption that the person expressing congratulations is in a position to make a judgement about another person's performance, and has the means of, or instruments for, assessing this performance. In this critique of the practices of applause – in drawing out the intimate relationship between these practices and normalising judgement – I am not suggesting that the practices of applause do not have a place in everyday life, that these practices inevitably have negative effects, or that there are not occasions upon which their effects are positive.

But in contexts in which there are relatively fixed power relations – as in therapeutic contexts – the normalising judgement that is reproduced through the practices of applause is particularly hazardous. It can contribute significantly to the subjugation of those whose lives are the focus of reflecting-team responses. It can shut the door on the exploration and rich description of knowledges and skills of living that do not fit with the constructed norms of

contemporary life. And more than this: expressions of applause can risk alienation – in therapeutic contexts many people experience these practices as patronising, as efforts in persuasion, as reflecting of a lack of general understanding, and as exposing a failure to grasp and to appreciate the circumstances and conditions of their lives.

I believe that engaging with the sort of poststructuralist understandings that I discussed at the outset of this essay can assist reflecting-team members to avoid the reproduction of the practices of applause in the name of acknowledgement. It is with these understandings that team members are more able to stay on track in their intention to participate with each other in contributing to the rich description of the personal and relational identities of the people seeking consultation. When equipped with these understandings of life, team members are better placed to play a significant role in the development of the thick description of the knowledges and skills of living that have been generated in the history of the lives of the persons seeking consultation. It is with these understandings that team members are more able to break from habits of thought and action that encourage them to ‘make interventions’ into other people’s lives. It is through an appreciation of the extent to which a person’s identity conclusions are shaped by the stories of their lives, and of the extent to which people live by the stories of their lives, not by the exceptions of their lives, that reflecting-team members are freed from a whole range of considerations. These are considerations that would otherwise make it impossible for them to prioritise being with each other in the generation of retellings of the stories of people’s lives that are regrading of their personal and relational identities.

### **Conversation, not monologue**

Just as the outsider-witness practices of definitional ceremony are not a reproduction of the contemporary practices of applause, they are also not a reproduction of the sort of pronouncement about other people’s lives that is often present in monologue. Although monologue is not necessarily pronouncement, it always risks pronouncement, even when all intentions and efforts are to the contrary.

To undermine the risk of pronouncement, and to contribute to a context which will be generative of the rich retellings of the stories of people’s lives, the outsider-witness practices of reflecting teams engage its members in conversations that evolve over the course of these retellings. This interactive or conversational mode is often shaped by the questions that team members have of each other in response to their different contributions to retellings. Reflecting-team members can set a context for this by reaching some agreement that the act of contributing to retellings signals a preparedness to be interviewed about this contribution by other team members. As part of this agreement, there can also be an understanding that, in response to being interviewed in this way, team members can ‘pass’ on any questions, or request that these questions be returned to when they have had more time to consider them, or when, for other reasons, they feel more ready to respond to them.

There are many options for the team members to interview each other, and I have detailed some of these options elsewhere. I will not review the scope of these options here, but will again touch on the subject of what I refer to as ‘decentred sharing’, and emphasise the part that team-member interviewing of each other plays in achieving this.

There are several purposes for engaging in decentred sharing. These do not include purposes like ‘self-disclosure’, but purposes like ‘embodiment’ and ‘acknowledgement’, which I have

discussed in ‘Reflecting team as definitional ceremony’ (White, 1995) and in ‘Definitional ceremony’ (White, 1997). To embody one’s interest in other people’s lives is to situate this interest in the context of those people’s expressions, in the context of one’s own lived experience, in the context of one’s imagination and curiosity, or in the context of one’s purposes. When one’s interest in people’s lives is embodied in this way, it is unlikely to be taken as academic or to be experienced as patronising. To embody one’s interest in the lives of other people is also to acknowledge the ways in which the expressions of these people have touched one’s life, and, more specifically, in the case of outsider-witness practices, to acknowledge the way in which these expressions have contributed to the possibility for becoming other than who one was.

During outsider-witness retellings there is a range of questions that can be asked by team members of each other in their efforts to address this objective of embodiment. For example, team members can ask questions of each other regarding the understandings they have about (a) why their interest has been aroused by particular events of people’s lives; (b) what images of people’s lives and relationships these events evoke; (c) the sort of identity conclusions that are supported by these images; (d) which of the expressions witnessed are sustaining of these identity conclusions; (e) what these images touch on in the history of their own work and/or of their own lives more generally; and (f) the effects or the potential effects of this ‘touching’ in regard to the rich description of, and/or possibilities of action in, their own work and lives.

### **Katharsis revisited**

Within the context of definitional ceremony, the retellings of the reflecting team are shaped by an appreciation of the poststructuralist sentiment of contributing to options for people to become ‘other than who they were’ at the outset of the ceremony, rather than according to a structuralist sentiment that would determine this as a context for people to become ‘more truly who they really are’. The extent to which definitional ceremony contributes to options for people to become other than who they were is demonstrated in the extent to which it makes it possible for people to:

- a) think outside of what they routinely think, to extend on the limits of their understandings;
- b) stand in territories of their lives that are associated with their preferred claims about their identity;
- c) experience a multi-layered and multi-voiced sense of identity;
- d) engage with knowledges and skills of living that were previously barely traces to be perceived in their histories; and
- e) take up options for action in their lives and relationships that would not have otherwise been available or even visible to them.

By this account, it is through engagement in definitional ceremony that people are ‘moved’. Here I am using the word moved in a more literal or practice sense than is common. While the expression ‘I am moved by this’ is usually a signifier that the speaker has had an emotional experience of one sort or another, to be moved in the sense that I am referring to here is the outcome of engaging in a practice – it is to engage in practices that have the effect of transporting people elsewhere, and frequently into territories of life and identity in which they could have never been predicted they would find themselves.<sup>3</sup> I referring to the potential of definitional ceremony to move people, I am referring to the members of the reflecting team as much as those whose lives are at the centre of the ceremony. Not only are these definitional ceremonies transporting of persons who are seeking consultation, they are also

transporting of the members of the outsider-witness group. As the members of this group come together as an audience to some of the significant stories of people's lives, and actively engage in rich retellings of these stories, they become other than who they were on account of this. It is my understanding that to be moved in the witnessing of expressions of life, in the sense that this is transporting, can be defined as a kathartic experience in a classical sense of this word. And for the members of the outsider-witness group to be together moved in this way evokes Victor Turner's (1969) 'communitas' – that unique sense of being present to each other in entering liminal circumstances, betwixt and between known worlds.

The contemporary version of catharsis is one of many revisionings, through history, of the classical senses of this word. I believe this revisioning to be linked, in part, to historical developments in both hydraulic and steam-engine technology, and with the associated construction of an 'emotional system' that is informed by these metaphors – the modern emotional system is constructed as a sophisticated part-hydraulic system and part-steam engine in which there are certain pressures to be discharged and energies to be moved, and certain valves to be turned which provide for certain forward movements in life.<sup>4</sup> My preference is to relate to the idea of katharsis in its classical sense – people being moved in the sense of being transported to another place, where they could not have otherwise been, as a result of witnessing a performance of life that is 'gripping' of them.<sup>5</sup> I have consistently found that to evoke katharsis in this classical sense, and within the context of communitas, has been invaluable to team members in orienting themselves as a community of outsider witnesses to the tellings of the stories of people's lives – in their preparation for engaging in outsider-witness retellings, and in their reflections on the constitutive effects of these retellings in regard to their own lives.

### **Outsider-witness orientation**

Earlier in this essay, I touched on the pervasiveness of normalising judgement and its contribution, in therapeutic contexts, to thin conclusions about personal and relational identity. I proposed that poststructuralist understandings of life and of identity provide options for therapists to break from habits of normalising judgement. However, so routine are these habits that the task of breaking from the discourses of normalising judgement can be difficult despite the very best of intentions. For example, as outsider-witnesses to conversations with families, reflecting- team members can find themselves hard-pressed to resist contributing to the construction of 'relational dynamics'.

One antidote to these sorts of structuralist activities is for reflecting teams to engage in explorations of the history of thought and practice in the culture of therapy. In regard to relational dynamics, a historical appreciation would contribute to a questioning of the taken-for-granted status of these 'things' – for example, it would establish the fact that relational dynamics have not been around for all that long, that relationships used not to have these (relationships have only been spoken of in these terms in recent times), and that it has only been over the past few decades that the idea of such 'dynamics' has been popularised. To understand, in this way, that things like relationship dynamics have not always been accepted as fact contributes to options for reflecting-team members to question the unquestioned – for example, to question whether it is a good idea for relationships to have dynamics, to question the real effects of constructing relationships in this way, and to question the place of such constructions in the therapeutic endeavour.

However, achieving a degree of success in the deconstruction of these structuralist understandings can leave therapists facing something of a predicament. So routine is the theorising of life, so accepted is the formal analysis of people's expression of living, and so taken-for-granted are the practices of interpreting the events of people's lives according to the expert knowledge systems of the professional disciplines, that to refuse to participate in this can have the effect of leaving reflecting-team members wondering what is left for them to do. In response to this predicament, in response to a frequently stated desire for structures of listening that might limit engagement with the discourses of normalising judgement, and in response to requests for guidelines about preparing for outsider-witness retellings, I have often proposed that reflecting-team members consider questions such as these:

As you listen to the stories of the lives of the people who are at the centre of the definitional ceremony, which of their expressions do you find most gaining of your attention or most capturing of your imagination?

How are you to understand the particularities of why it is that your attention is called to the particular expressions that it is called to?

What images of people's lives, of their identities, and of the world more generally, are evoked for you by these expressions?

In what ways do these images implicate your own life, and in which domains of living do they do this?

What reverberations into the history of your own experience are set off by these images? (This can include your personal and relationship history, the historical trajectory of your work, and the history of conversations with the people who consult you.)

Are you aware of any events from your own history that are beginning to resonate in relation to these reverberations? If so, what are the specifics of these resonances? What aspects of the history of your experience are these resonances lighting up?

In what way are you becoming other than who you were on account of this re-engagement with the history of your own life and work? In what way is this re-engagement contributing to options for action in your life that would not have otherwise occurred to you? How is your participation as a member of the outsider-witness group taking you beyond the limits of what you would routinely think?

What are the options for acknowledging this in your contribution to the outsider-witness group retellings that you are soon to participate in?

I provide these questions as a sample of some of the possibilities that are available for reflecting-team member preparation for outsider-witness retellings.<sup>6</sup> They by no means exhaust these possibilities.

## **Hazards**

As with all of the ideas and practices of the culture of therapy, those that I have drawn out in this essay not only bring with them possibilities, but also contribute to limitations and to potential hazards. One of these potential hazards is that reflecting team-members can find

their lives thinly described by the persons who are at the centre of the definitional ceremony – team members can experience a lessening of their personhood as a result of people’s responses to the outsider-witness retelling, and, needless to say, this is not a good outcome. As contemporary western culture is a culture of normalising judgement, if attention is not given to the potential for people to reproduce these practices of judgement in their responses to the outsider-witness retellings, then team members are engaging in a context that could be significantly disqualifying not just of their efforts, but also of their very personhood.

Before discussing this hazard further, I hasten to draw a distinction between the practices of ‘discernment’ and the practices of judgement. It is one thing for the people whose lives are at the centre of this work to discern which retellings, or what aspects of any retelling, were helpful and which were either unhelpful or irrelevant to them. It is yet another thing for them to engage in normalising judgement of the performance and identities of the reflecting- team members. While the discernment that I refer to provides an essential guide to the development of relevant and appropriate therapeutic conversations and contributes to a basis for shared research into what it is that constitutes rich description, and what it is that constitutes thin description, it is not helpful for team members to make themselves available to participate in contexts in which they will be subject to normalising judgement.

The people whose lives are at the centre of definitional ceremony are more likely to engage in normalising judgement of, or evaluation of the performance of, reflecting-team members if they live with, and/or have histories of, privilege and advantage. This is particularly so when these people have experienced the privilege and advantage that is associated with high positions in the institutions of our culture, and who experience everyday acknowledgement from those who are in subordinate positions in these institutions. In these observations, I am not casting doubt on the intentions or the integrity of these persons, but calling attention to the contexts that are more favourable to the development of habits of evaluation of the performance of others according to constructed norms – I am calling attention to the situated nature of the acts of normalising judgement of our culture.

There are others who are also prone to reproducing these habits of normalising judgement in definitional ceremony contexts. The lives of these people are often significantly shaped by an ethic of control, and expressions of this ethic are often linked to the power relations of gender. When this is the case, the assumptions of male supremacy and the reproduction of relations of domination are present in men’s evaluation of the performance of reflecting teams, particularly in circumstances when the membership of the reflecting team is composed substantially of women.

In response to expressions of normalising judgement that are diminishing of the identities of reflecting-team members, or in those circumstances under which the normalising judgement of the reflecting team is predicted, it is advisable for the interviewer to initiate pre-emptive steps. One option is for the interviewer to institute externalising conversations that encourage explorations of the potential effects of privilege or any of the numerous assumptions of the ethic of control. A preamble to the introduction of these externalising conversations can be helpful, for example:

*It is not the place of reflecting-team members to engage in acts of judgement of the lives of others. If any of the team members express what I or other team members understand to be statements of judgement, these will be directly questioned in the context of this meeting. After hearing the responses of the reflecting-team members, I plan to consult you about what you*

*have heard, and, as part of this consultation, I will be asking you if you detected any judgement of you as a person. Acts of judgement of the lives of others are quite pervasive. There are also occasions when the people whose lives are at the centre of the retellings of the reflecting team fall prey to habits of judgement in their response to the reflecting team's efforts. When this is the case, it is more difficult for us to understand what is helpful and what is unhelpful about these conversations. And judgement also becomes an obstacle to people hearing what they otherwise might hear, and considering what they would otherwise have the opportunity to consider. So if judgement looks like being an impediment to our work together, I would like to take up the option of discussing this here. Together, then, we might explore the potential effects of this on our work together, and ways of casting it to one side for the duration of our meeting. How does this idea sit with you?*

There are many approaches to this sort of preamble, and some of these can take up the externalising of privilege, advantage, the power relations of local culture (including those of gender), or any of the many assumptions of the ethic of control.

Before moving on to the final topic of this essay, I want to again emphasise the distinction that I have drawn around discernment and judgement. In the third stage of the definitional ceremony, the people whose lives are at the centre of the ceremony are engaged in a retelling of the outsider-witness retellings. At this time, as part of the structuring of this second retelling, these people are consulted about the outsider-witness retellings in a way that solicits the discernment that I have referred to. It is not judgement that is solicited at this time.

### **Apprehension**

It is not unusual for team members to feel a degree of apprehension as they prepare to contribute to outsider-witness retellings. Because apprehension is so often negatively valued in the culture of psychotherapy (for example, the expression of apprehension is sometimes taken by others to reflect a shortfall in the sort of personal confidence that is a requirement of task, or it is read by the person experiencing it as a confirmation of their doubts about their personal competence), it can be helpful to deconstruct this ahead of participation in reflecting-team contexts. It is in conversations that are deconstructing of apprehension that it becomes more richly described. For example, in deconstructing conversations, the expression of apprehension might be understood to be testimony to therapist commitment to modest therapeutic practice in the sea of immodesty that is the culture of therapy; it might be appreciated as a reflection of the sort of deeply ethical position that is the outcome of recognising the responsibility that therapists have regarding the consequences of what they say and do in therapeutic contexts; it might come to represent an acknowledgement of the privilege that is being granted to therapists by the people who are opening their lives to them, and of the gift of trust that these people are investing in these contexts; and so on. It is through the deconstruction of apprehension, rather than through the dishonouring of it, that it ceases to become a major hurdle to the participation of team members in outsider-witness retellings.

It is in training contexts that I regularly join with other therapists in explorations of reflecting-team work that are shaped by the definitional ceremony metaphor. In these contexts, I usually inform therapists that, at the outset of our explorations, some expression of apprehension contributes to my experiencing a degree of confidence that the team's outsider-witness retellings will be regrading of the personal and relational identities of those whose lives are the focus of these retellings. Further to this, at this time it is also my habit to inform

therapists that strong expressions of confidence in their ability to engage in outsider-witness retellings that will be of considerable benefit to others makes me acutely apprehensive – I become concerned that I am about to witness a reproduction of some of the practices of immodesty that are relatively commonplace in the culture of therapy.

There are yet other options for addressing team-member apprehension about performance in outsider-witness retellings. In the team's presence, the people whose stories are to be the focus of these retellings can be told that it is not uncommon for there to be hesitation before team members begin to speak of their reflections, and that there may also be some silences along the way. These people can also be informed that this hesitation and any subsequent silence can be taken as an expression of the thoughtfulness of the team members and of their commitment to respond in ways that are not imposing and in ways that might contribute to the opening of new possibilities. In the fourth stage of these ceremonies of definition, reflecting-team members have the opportunity to speak of these hesitations and silences – to speak of the thoughtfulness and to any specific considerations that contributed to the hesitations and silences.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this essay I have revisited reflecting-team work as definitional ceremony. This has provided me with an opportunity to extend on the discussion of some of the ideas and practices of this work, and to emphasise some aspects of it that I consider to have been understated. This revisiting has also given me the opportunity to address some of the frequently asked questions about reflecting-team work as definitional ceremony.

But there is yet more to this story. In describing the mechanisms of definitional ceremony, Barbara Myerhoff includes an account of the performative aspects of the tellings and retellings of the stories of people's lives. And in her account of Re-remembering, she describes how 'all the accompanying sensations, emotions, and associations of the first occurrence are recovered and the past recaptured' (1982, p.109). These performative aspects that are associated with the tellings and retellings of definitional ceremony, and that are highly significant in the outsider-witnesses contributions to thick description, are the subject of a forthcoming essay.

### **Notes**

1. These metaphors are regularly taken up by poststructuralist cultural anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz (1973), Barbara Myerhoff (1982) and Renato Rosaldo (1992). Originally borrowed from Gilbert Ryle, the thin/thick contrast provides a thinking tool for poststructuralist inquiry.
2. For further discussion of this degrading/regrading distinction in regard to social ritual, see Epston (1989).
3. Defining the notion of being 'moved' in this way does not exclude acknowledgement of associated affective experiences, and the accounting of being moved as being transported invariably includes some expression of this associated affective experience.
4. I am grateful to Penny Revel for reminding me that in classical times catharsis was something that was often experienced in the context of community.
5. Modern catharsis is also shaped by the popular and general uptake of the 'confession' into the practices of psychotherapy (Foucault, 1984).

6. I have found Gaston Bachelard's work on the image to be very helpful in reflecting on outsider-witness orientation (1969).

## References

- Andersen, T. 1987:  
'The reflecting team: Dialogue and meta-dialogue in clinical work.' *Family Process*, 26:415-428.
- Bachelard, G. 1969:  
*The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Epston, D. 1989:  
'Guest Address: Fourth Australian Family Therapy Conference.' In Epston, D., *Collected Papers*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- Freedman, J. & Combs, G. 1996:  
*Narrative Therapy: The social construction of preferred realities*. New York: Norton.
- Freeman, J., Epston, D. & Loboivits, D. 1997:  
*Playful Approaches to Serious Problems: Narrative therapy with children and their families*. New York: Norton.
- Friedman, S. (ed) 1995:  
*The Reflecting Team in Action: Collaborative practice in family therapy*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Foucault, M. 1984:  
*The History of Sexuality, Volume I*. Great Britain: Peregrine Books.
- Geertz, C. 1973:  
'Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture.' In C. Geertz (ed), *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Myerhoff, B. 1980:  
*Number Our Days*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Myerhoff, B. 1982:  
'Life history among the elderly: Performance, visibility and re-membering.' In J. Ruby (ed), *A Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive perspectives in anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Myerhoff, B. 1986:  
'Life not death in Venice: Its second life.' In Turner, V. & Bruner, E. (eds), *The Anthropology of Experience*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Monk, G., Winslade, J., Crocket, K. & Epston, D. 1987:  
*Narrative Therapy in Practice: The archaeology of hope*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Rosaldo, R. 1992:  
*Culture and Truth: The remaking of social analysis*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Turner, V. 1969:  
*The Ritual Process*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- White, M. 1991:  
'Deconstruction and therapy.' *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, 3. (Reprinted in Epston, D. & White, M. 1992: *Experience, Contradiction, Narrative & Imagination*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.)
- White, M. 1995:  
*Re-authoring Lives: Interviews and essays*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- White, M. 1997:  
*Narratives of Therapists' Lives*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- White, M. & Epston, D. 1990:  
*Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. New York: Norton.
- Zimmerman, J. & Dickerson, V. 1996:  
*If Problems Talked: Narrative therapy in action*. New York: Guilford Press.

