

# **Outsider-witness practices: some answers to commonly asked questions**

**compiled by**

**Maggie Carey & Shona Russell**

The use of outsider witnesses is a therapeutic practice commonly engaged with by those interested in narrative therapy. This accessible paper offers an introduction to, and clarification of, some of the intricacies of this practice. This paper was created through a collaborative process involving well-respected therapists from Australia, the USA, Mexico, South Africa and the UK.

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## **1. What is meant by the term outsider witness?**

Within narrative practice, an outsider witness is an invited audience to a therapy conversation – a third party who is invited to listen to and acknowledge the preferred stories and identity claims of the person consulting the therapist. Outsider witnesses may be part of a person's existing community – family, friends etc; or they may be invited from outside these networks, in which case they may be professionals (and may constitute what many people know as a reflecting team). Alternatively, they may be invited from lists or registers of people who have previously sought consultation for similar difficulties and who have agreed to help out therapeutically with others whenever this may be relevant. Outsider witnesses may be recruited for a particular one-off meeting or, if they are a group of professionals who work together, may be regularly present at therapeutic sessions.

When there is more than one outsider witness, particularly when there is a team working together, members of the team help each other in making their reflections. For instance, after one outsider witness has spoken, another might ask some questions about what s/he just said, in order to make the whole process more meaningful. While the outsider

witnesses are speaking amongst themselves, the person who is consulting the therapist is listening.

Having someone witness therapy conversations can be very significant, especially if the outsider witness listens and responds in certain ways. For example, Georgie, who was thirteen, had been in a car accident some time ago and was still having a lot of trouble sleeping when she was brought by her mother, Ann, to therapy. In the second session, the therapist decided to interview Georgie while inviting Ann to act as an outsider witness. Gradually, Georgie was able to talk about some of the memories of the crash that were still haunting her, as well as describing the various ways she had tried, with the help of others, to leave this trauma behind. When asked to name what it meant that she had been taking all these steps, Georgie said that it meant that she was ‘determined’. Georgie also spoke about why she wanted the bad memories to leave her. This included not wanting to fall behind in her school work, not wanting to be a burden on her family (some of whom were also in the accident) and because she wanted to ‘live her life again’.

The therapist then stopped asking Georgie questions, and turned to Ann instead and asked her what were the things that stood out to her in Georgie’s statements. Ann replied that she was just so touched by her daughter’s determination and her commitment to ‘live her life again’. When asked further questions about this, Ann traced a history of determination throughout Georgie’s life. Ann could think of many times when Georgie had demonstrated determination from some of her earliest days, and how she would not let things stop her from living life to the full. When asked why this ‘determination’ was significant to her, Ann then told a story from her own childhood. When she had been a small child, Ann’s closest friend had been very ill with rheumatic fever for many months. Something about Georgie’s determination had reminded Ann of her friend and the ways she had reclaimed her life from the effects of serious illness. Ann had always admired her friend and they remained friends to this day. When asked what it meant to Ann to hear her daughter talk in these ways, and what it meant to be reminded of her friend, Ann replied that it put her in touch with some of the things she valued most in life. It also brought a sense of pride in Georgie. Ann said that she knew that these times were hard for Georgie, but in listening to her speak she also knew that together they would find a way through this.

When the therapist then turned back to Georgie, Georgie seemed intrigued by the story of her mother’s friend and how she had reclaimed her life from the illness. So much so that when Ann suggested they ask her friend to come to their next therapy session to talk more about this and to listen to all the things that Georgie was doing to recover from the car accident, Georgie thought this was a great idea. In this way, not only did Ann become an outsider witness to Georgie’s preferred story of determination to live life fully, so too did Ann’s friend. In time, the bad memories left Georgie alone and she began to ‘live her life again’.

Having Ann and Ann’s friend act as witnesses to the positive steps that Georgie was taking in her life and having them acknowledge the determined ways in which she was acting, made a difference to Georgie. It enabled her to feel connected to others, it reduced her

isolation and sense of worry, and the story of determination and commitment to ‘living life’ grew richer.

Enabling a person who is coming to therapy to invite friends or family members into their sessions as witnesses means it is much more likely that steps that a person makes in the therapy room can be translated into action in their daily lives. Outsider-witness practices enable a link to be made between what happens in the therapy room and the rest of a person’s life.

It’s relevant to note that outsider witnesses need to take care in what they listen for and what they say. In examples like this one, where the outsider witness does not have prior experience in these sorts of conversations, the therapist takes a special responsibility (through asking certain questions) to keep the reflections from the outsider witness on track. These sorts of questions are explored in more detail later in this paper.

## **2. Why is it important for there to be witnesses to preferred stories?**

In a sense, what is being ‘defined’ in narrative therapy sessions is a person’s preferred identity. For instance, Georgie stated that it was her determination that was helping get rid of the ‘bad memories’, and the therapeutic conversations involved thickening this story of ‘determination’. If our preferred story of who we are remains only a conversation in our own head, it will not have the sense of being ‘real’. This sense of ‘realness’ or ‘authenticity’ only comes when our preferred stories are witnessed and responded to by a significant audience (in this instance, the therapist, Ann, and Ann’s friend).

For many people, the predicaments and concerns they have about their lives contribute to a sense of isolation and disconnection from other people who may otherwise hold special significance in their lives. Outsider-witness practices challenge the isolating and individualising effects of problems, as Hugh Fox describes:

Narrative practice is founded on the idea that the stories that we tell about ourselves are not private and individual but are a social achievement. We probably all know that it is difficult to maintain an identity claim in isolation – we look for someone who will reflect back to us what it is we wish to claim for ourselves. An important part of our identity claims will be the values that we wish to live our lives by. In maintaining our connection with our values we probably have all experienced the power of sharing those values with like-minded people. Outsider witnesses help to meet these two purposes – acknowledging our identity claims as valid, and sharing stories about what is important to us in life. In this way the people we work with come to experience themselves and their preferred identity claims as part of a community of acknowledgement.

Fiona had suffered significant abuse by her step-father throughout her childhood. When the effects of this abuse caught up with her in her twenties in the form of nightmares and fears, she sought counselling. After a number of sessions, the therapist asked if it would

be okay with Fiona if she could ask some members of a support group for women who have experienced abuse to attend the next session. The therapist explained that she would ask Fiona some questions and then the women would talk respectfully about what it meant for them to witness Fiona's story. The women whom the therapist invited had fulfilled this role before and were experienced at listening for the unique outcomes in Fiona's story and on focusing on the alternative story. For Fiona, this preferred story was one of a loving connection with her brother which had sustained her through the abusive times. It was her brother who had noticed that Fiona was a kind-hearted and creative person, and these were the stories of herself that she was interested in getting more in touch with again. While Fiona no longer has much contact with brother (as he now lives overseas), she spoke about recently beginning to write a letter to him.

When it was the women's turn to speak, they described how moved they were to hear Fiona speak about the ways in which she and her brother cared for each other, the tenderness they displayed with each other even when they were being treated brutally by an older figure. Different women then spoke about why this was significant to them. Some spoke about the people who offered them solace during their experiences of abuse and how, because of listening to Fiona, they had decided to make contact with these figures from their past. Other women spoke about Fiona's descriptions of her creativity and how this reconnected them with their own creative pursuits.

When Fiona had the chance to reflect on what the women's group had said, she was in tears. She said that these were tears of company. She said that she had always felt so alone in her life, especially as her brother, the only person who witnessed what had happened to her as a child, was now so far away. But hearing the women talk, hearing them say that listening to her story had been significant to them, had changed this. Others now knew about her life and they said that hearing about it had helped them.

Fiona described that this sense of company then played a significant part in reducing the ongoing effects of abuse that had led her to seek counselling. Her nightmares and fears began to dissipate and she became, once again, able to determine the direction of her life.

### **3. What is the history of these ideas and ways of working?**

The idea of involving others to listen in to therapy conversations is not new. Within the tradition of family therapy, teams of professionals often listen to families from behind a one-way screen and then make various interventions depending upon the model of therapy. The work of Tom Andersen (1987) challenged the anonymity of these teams of professionals and began a range of explorations into the use of reflecting team work.

The use of outsider witnesses within narrative therapy is influenced by these developments in reflecting team work (2). It is also strongly influenced by the work of Barbara Myerhoff (1982, 1986) who introduced the term 'definitional ceremony' to describe

the process by which communities of people actively construct their identities. Michael White (1995) brought these ideas of definitional ceremony and outsider witnesses into the therapy realm. As we will discuss below, within narrative therapy, outsider-witness practices and definitional ceremony processes have now been developed in careful and particular ways. Different practitioners are creating their own forms of definitional ceremony and outsider witness work.

#### **4. What are definitional ceremonies?**

Sometimes, outsider-witness work occurs within what are referred to as ‘definitional ceremonies’. The term ‘definitional ceremony’ comes from Barbara Myerhoff’s (1982) anthropological work with an elderly Jewish Community in Venice, California, whose social life was enacted in a particular day centre. It was in this day centre that Barbara Myerhoff noticed the everyday ways in which the members of this community ‘made themselves up’. As immigrants, this group had no natural witnesses to their past lives and culture. They lived surrounded by a world of ‘strangers’ who ‘had to be told everything’. Through her close observations of this community, Barbara Myerhoff was able to draw out some of the processes and practices by which these people’s selves and identities are constructed in an ongoing way:

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. (Myerhoff 1982, p.105)

In Barbara Myerhoff’s words, Definitional ceremonies ... provide opportunities for being seen and in one’s own terms, garnering witnesses to one’s own worth, vitality, and being (Myerhoff 1986, p.267).

Following Barbara Myerhoff’s observations, Michael White brought the term ‘definitional ceremony’ to his work in therapy and began to focus on the role of outsider witnesses in authenticating people’s identity claims (1995).

Through specially convened definitional ceremonies (3), people who consult with narrative therapists are invited to tell and re-tell the preferred stories of their lives, and to do this with an audience present. The audience members act as ‘outsider witnesses’ and their role is to actively acknowledge the person’s preferred story in particular ways.

#### **Definitional ceremonies within narrative practice generally consist of four parts:**

Part one: The therapist interviews the person who has come for consultation, while the outsider witnesses listen. Often the outsider witnesses sit behind a one-way screen, although that is not a requirement (the session can be imaginary).

Part two: The outsider witnesses come out from behind the screen and swap places with the therapist and the person who has come for consultation. The outsider witnesses now talk with each other about what it meant to hear the initial conversation in part one.

Part three: People swap places again and the therapist asks the person who has come for consultation about their experience of listening to the outsider-witness group.

Part four: Everyone comes together to talk about the experience and can take the opportunity to ask the therapist why they asked certain questions.

While these definitional ceremonies are often used in therapy, they can also be used to structure therapeutic community gatherings (4).

## **5. What sort of responses do outsider witnesses make?**

This is an important question and here we'll focus on two different metaphors that are currently informing ideas about outsider witness responses. The first involves 'curiosity and mystery' and the second involves 'acknowledging resonance and transport'.

### **Curiosity about unique outcomes – extending the therapeutic enquiry**

Many people who have been trained in the last decade in narrative practice through the experience of being part of a reflecting team, would have become familiar with an orientation to outsider-witness practice that focuses on joining, mystery, alternative landscapes and deconstruction regarding the developments in the life of the person interviewed by the therapist (see White 1995). For instance, outsider witnesses might ask questions like:

Carol: I noticed that Jim has really moved a long way with lessening the influence of Anxiety in his relationships, and now I'm really curious about how he got himself ready to do that. I wonder what steps he took before he was ready to resist Anxiety's influence?

Bernie: Yes, and I am interested in what it says about Jim that he was able to do that. What do you think it took for him to do that resisting?

These sorts of responses concentrate on inviting the person at the centre of the conversation to resurrect or generate alternative stories of their lives and/or relationships. These sorts of questions extend the narrative therapeutic enquiry.

In order to ensure that the person at the centre of the conversation does not experience the curiosity as academic, or as imposing of 'truths', team members are carefully invited to de-construct or situate their comments in their own personal experience. For instance, Carol might take care to say that the reason she is curious about how Jim has managed to prepare

himself to resist Anxiety, is because in listening to Jim she's been reminded of how paying attention to small steps might assist her in addressing certain difficulties in her own life:

Bernie: Carol, why is it that you are interested in the preparations Jim made to resist Anxiety?

Carol: Well, in listening to Jim, I've been realising some things about the ways in which I respond to challenges in my own life. For instance, whenever I speak in front of a large group, I get very nervous. But in listening to Jim's thoughtful approach to addressing the Anxiety in his life it's given me new impetus to think about I might go about facing some anxieties of my own. I'd be interested in knowing more about the preparations Jim took, the small steps he took before he began to resist the influence of Anxiety in his life, because I suspect that it is in this realm of small steps that I too might be able to take some actions over difficulties of my own.

When outsider witnesses respond with curiosity and enquire as to the development of the alternative stories of the person's life, and when they ask questions about what these developments might mean in terms of the person's identity, this can contribute to the further rich description of these alternative stories. The person whose life is being discussed can be left with many further questions and avenues to explore.

### **Acknowledging resonance and transport**

Over the years that outsider witnessing has been practiced, the people who have been at the centre of these conversations have consistently reported that what has been most powerful for them have been the comments that outsider witnesses have made about how they have been touched or moved by hearing their story, and especially when this is explained in terms of events in the witnesses' own lives or work.

When outsider witnesses acknowledge how they have been moved by what they have witnessed, when they explain why this is so, and when they explain how their lives will be different as a consequence, this is often powerfully therapeutic. In response to these sort of outsider-witness comments, the person who is at the centre of the conversation might say things like: 'I'm glad that what I've been through is not for nothing, that my story can be useful to other people', or 'I'd never thought that others might benefit from the telling of my story'.

Where once the primary orientation in outsider-witness practice was one of curiosity, now metaphors of resonance and transport are being prioritised. Rather than extending the therapeutic enquiry, outsider-witness work is now seen as a chance for the linking of lives around shared themes and values.

We have included here Michael White's (2002) 'map' of outsider-witness practice in relation to these metaphors of resonance and transport. This 'map' describes four categories of outsider-witness response:

### **1. Identifying the expression**

As you listen to the stories of the lives of the people who are at the centre of the definitional ceremony, which expressions caught your attention or captured your imagination? Which ones struck a chord for you?

### **2. Describing the image**

What images of people's lives, of their identities, and of the world more generally, did these expressions evoke? What did these expressions suggest to you about these people's purposes, values, beliefs, hopes, dreams and commitments?

### **3. Embodying responses**

What is it about your own life/work that accounts for why these expressions caught your attention or struck a chord for you? Do you have a sense of which aspects of your own experiences of life resonated with these expressions, and with the images evoked by these expressions?

### **4. Acknowledging transport**

How have you been moved on account of being present to witness these expressions of life? Where has this experience taken you to, that you would not otherwise have arrived at, if you hadn't been present as an audience to this conversation? In what way have you become other than who you were on account of witnessing these expressions, and on account of responding to these stories in the way that you have?

Let's consider another example. Ed has come to therapy because he is worried about his relationship with his 18 year-old son, whose life was being taken over by drugs. The therapist who Ed is consulting works in a context in which her colleagues often act as outsider witnesses to each other's therapy sessions. In this instance there is a reflecting team of other therapists acting as outsider witnesses.

In the initial therapeutic conversation (part one of the definitional ceremony), Ed talks about the sense of loss he feels as a father at not being able to share conversations in the way that he once had with his son, and there is some exploration of why it is important to Ed to stay connected to his son regardless of the way that the drugs might try to interfere with this.

Ed and the therapist then swap places with the reflecting team. In listening to Ed, one member of the reflecting team, Harry, has been touched by the image in his own mind of Ed standing close to his son while the drugs (which he sees as a dreadful creature in this image) try to manoeuvre their way to separate them. Harry is not completely sure why he is so moved by this image. He has two sons of his own and figures it must have to do with his relationship with them though he's not sure how. When it is his turn to speak, he offers his description of the image tentatively to the group conversation, adding that he wanted to do so because of the strength of the emotion that he felt. Mandy, who works with Harry and knows how important his relationship with his sons is to him, then asked Harry a series of questions, as Ed and the therapist listen.

Mandy: What was it in particular about what you heard Ed say or do that connected with the image that came to you?

Harry: Well, I guess it was noticing how firmly Ed was standing his ground against the awfulness of the drug's influences that really grabbed me. Like he said one phrase that I'll remember for a long time, he said 'I'll never let them (the drugs) convince me that he's not my boy'.

Mandy: And what was it in your own life that connected you so strongly to this aspect of Ed's story?

Harry: Well, you know that I have two sons round about the same age as Ed's, and although drugs are not a big part of their lives in the way that they are for Ed's son, I just know that I would want to be able to be as clear as Ed is, that they would always be my boys no matter what way they went through in life and no matter the heartache that this might cause. And I guess I was just realising what it can take to hold onto that sense of connection through something like the influence of drugs.

Mandy: What do you think it's taking on Ed's part to do this?

Harry: Phew! Lots. I guess openness to his son. Not judging him as a bad person but being clear about taking a stand against the drugs. Love. Lots of love, and I guess some knowledge that his son can get through this, but that he needs support to do it. All the things that I guess are so important to me about being a dad.

Mandy: And what difference do you think it will make to you and your relationship with your sons now, having heard and witnessed these things in Ed?

Harry: I reckon there's an image there that I will draw on whenever times get tough between me and my sons, and that image will have me making sure that whatever the issue is, that I stay in touch with this belief that my boys are my boys and nothing will come between that.

When Ed was given an opportunity to speak about what the reflections from Harry and other team members had meant to him, he said he now felt more confident about the

decisions that he was making. He spoke of how he was proud that something about he and his son could still offer something to Harry, and that it had been a long time since he had felt this sense of pride. He knew that he would be leaving this session with renewed sense of hope and that in some way it was his job to hold onto this hope while his son was going through these difficult times. He said that hope would be easier to come by if he remembered Harry's words.

When outsider witnesses are giving their responses, a central consideration is that what they are saying is for the benefit of the person who is consulting the therapist. While outsider witnesses often speak about aspects of their own lives as explanations for where a particular statement has moved them and why, it is the responsibility of the outsider witnesses as a group to ensure that the conversation continues to come back to the person who is consulting the therapist. In the example above, Mandy continued to take care that what Harry was saying was directly related to the things that Ed had said.

When outsider witnesses respond in these sorts of ways, they are in effect making links between their lives and the life of the person who is consulting the therapist. These are not just any links, but deliberate links around shared values and commitments. For example, Harry linked his life to the stories told by Ed in relation to certain commitments to parenting, certain ways of relating as a father. In the first example in this paper, links were made between Georgie's determined ways of being in the world and her mother's friend's similar commitment to being determined to heal from a childhood illness. Building these links around shared themes powerfully contributes to richly describing alternative stories and identity conclusions. For instance, Georgie's sense of determination gained a history and links to others. This sustained and assisted her in her efforts of recovering from trauma. And Ed's sense of himself as a caring father was more richly described. Hearing Harry's reflection was a powerful acknowledgement to Ed of how his actions were related to what he stood for as a father. This too was sustaining.

In summary, when thinking about outsider-witness responses in terms of resonance and transport, here are the sorts of considerations to keep in mind:

- What touched or moved me?
- What is it about my own life or experience that meant that I was touched in this way?
- Where have I been moved to in my thinking or experience of life?
- How is my life different for having been moved to this new place?

When a therapist has invited people to be outsider witnesses to a certain conversation, these are also the sorts of questions that s/he will ask the outsider witnesses to consider in order to keep their reflections on track.

## **6. What are some of the common hazards of outsider-witness practice and how can these be avoided? Do you have any helpful hints about these?**

There are a range of skills involved in outsider-witness practice. Depending on the experience and training of the outsider-witness group, either the therapist may take responsibility for preparing the outsider-witness group and then interviewing them to scaffold helpful responses, or if the group is more experienced, members take responsibility for each other and for the process by redirecting less helpful responses and asking questions that lead to more helpful responses.

Here are some helpful hints in relation to the issues that people engaging in outsider-witness practices often initially struggle with. These have been compiled from different therapist's responses.

- **Avoiding applause**

Sometimes I have to remember that while outsider-witness practices have everything to do with acknowledging the knowledges, skills, values and commitments of those who consult therapists, they are not about applauding these. I find it easy to slip into pointing out positives or congratulating people about steps they have taken. While my intention in doing this is good, I have come to see that sometimes applause can be experienced as condescending or even patronising.

When I am offering congratulations or applause, it's like I am still deciding what is a positive step, as if I am somehow in a position to decide what is the right way. When I applaud someone's behaviour it is a form of judgement. I am judging a person's performance as good. But this implies some standard against which I am judging the behaviour. It also implies the possibility that the person may fail to reach this standard. Maybe another time I will either be saying that they have done badly, or by my silence implying it. This may have the person striving to please me and to reach my standards or values. This can even inadvertently invite people into practices of self-judgement and self-monitoring in relation to my standards and values.

Applause also carries with it a message about my position in relation to them, that I am in a position to judge their actions and therefore I am in some way placed above them; applause may therefore be read as patronising and as an expression of superiority. This is what I have found hardest about being an outsider witness, remembering not just to be congratulatory but instead to talk about what it has meant to me to hear someone's story, to talk about why, and to describe how it has moved, touched, encouraged or inspired some aspect of my life or work.

Obviously applause has its places: a pianist ending a recital would be somewhat disheartened if there were no applause. However, in the context of therapy, and in most other

contexts, I am now trying to avoid applause and to seek to enact different practices of acknowledgement – acknowledging the positive effects others’ lives have upon my own and why. In turn, I’ve found that the people around me are more accepting of acknowledgement (often praise tends to be quickly dismissed) and this acceptance fits better with how I like to be in relation to others. But it is still a challenge sometimes. It is something I continue to work on. Whenever I’m on a reflecting team I just ask other team members to ask me some questions if ever it sounds as if I am slipping back into applause.

- **Stepping out of giving advice**

If I am not careful, I find myself wanting to give advice to the person who has just spoken, or trying to ‘solve’ the problem at hand. Sometimes I can even phrase my advice as a question, such as ‘I wonder if Jane has thought about doing this ...?’ but this is not really a question, more a statement of ‘I think Jane should do this ...!’ I’ve worked out that I am more likely to do this when someone has told a story that I really relate to. That’s when I’m most likely to offer advice. It’s as if, because I might have been through something similar, that I’ve suddenly thought that I know what would be best for the person! But I don’t want to set myself up as an expert on the life of the storyteller. Now, whenever I witness a story that is particularly powerful, I remind myself not to give advice but simply to talk about why I found it moving. I know I can also rely on other team members to ask me further questions about this too.

- **Attending to alternative stories**

It is the role of outsider witnesses to orientate especially to the preferred stories, the alternative stories of someone’s life. If a person has described some difficult times, and also some unique outcomes, then it’s our responsibility to focus our energies on the emerging alternative story. While this doesn’t mean that we ignore the difficulties, it is important that we find ways to significantly acknowledge these, it means that we need to be conscious not to get bogged down in only reflecting back about the problems. I’ve been known to do this sometimes, but I’m getting more attuned to this lately!

- **Building teamwork**

As in any context, it can take a while to develop teamwork as outsider witnesses. Sometimes everyone wants to make their point rather than contributing by asking questions of other team members or trying to build a conversation among the team.

If you have a large team, there often isn’t time for everyone to have their say. While initially I was always bursting to make my point, I’ve found that recently I’m more interested in ensuring that collectively we give a good outsider-witness response. This means I’m more conscious about building on other people’s comments, asking questions, trying to generate a bit of a conversation. I’m also more aware that as long as I am attending with interest, then my presence is significant. My individual contribution is not as important as the collective one.

- **Taking care with how much I talk**

When I'm nervous I sometimes talk too much. I get into monologues, and going on too long is never a good idea when you're an outsider witness. It's so easy for a long speech to sound like you know it all and that you are telling the person what to do. To undermine this risk of talking too much, I always set it up so that if I am going on a bit, one of the other outsider witnesses can interrupt me, they can ask me a question and so the reflecting process is more like a conversation than a series of different speeches.

- **Getting carried away in my own story**

I remember one time when the person being interviewed spoke about their experiences of loneliness as a child and, when it came to our responses, I lost my way! I went on and on about my own experiences of loneliness and what these had meant to me. But I wasn't relating to the person's alternative story, and I wasn't really even saying how I had been transported by what the person had said. I was just telling my story and somehow it had become central. In hindsight this is pretty embarrassing, but it's quite common. It's something I now always speak about to training groups. It's the responsibility of the whole outsider-witness group to ensure this doesn't happen. If someone is getting a bit carried away in their own story, which can happen, then it's up to the other members to ask some questions to bring the focus back to the person whose life we are there for.

- **Remembering history**

Some of the most powerful things about therapeutic conversations involve tracing histories, the stories that explain why certain things are important to us in our lives. Simply praising someone for their actions doesn't explain in terms of history why their statements have meant something to me. I try to remain focused on the role of history in making us who we are. I try to remember to link what I am saying about my histories of life to the important things that the person who is consulting the therapist has said.

- **Taking care in relation to not imposing values**

One of the things I find that I need to really remain aware of, is to ensure that my reflections are not inadvertently reproducing the 'norms' of our society, rather than responding to what the person has actually said about their own values. What I mean by this is that sometimes it is easy to make an assumption that the person would be pleased about a particular event, or that they would be hoping to achieve a particular goal, when actually they haven't clearly said this. I need to always remember that we all have different ways of living our lives. If I assume that someone wants what I would want, or is dreaming about what I dream about, I can make a big blunder in my outsider-witness responses. It takes a lot of practice to keep

deconstructing the assumptions by which I live my life, but to do so really helps my work as a witness to other people's lives. I become more determined to only be referring back to the values and hopes and dreams that the person has spoken about, or at least not to assume about any values that they haven't articulated.

- **Avoiding comparing reflections**

When the person at the centre of the consultation has a chance to reflect on which outsider-witness responses were most meaningful to them, I've found it important to remember that this isn't about a valuation or judgement of the worth or skills of the outsider witnesses. As outsider witnesses, we simply won't know which images or links will be most meaningful to the person whose stories we are witnessing. This is part of the unpredictability of the process. The therapist will ask questions about why certain outsider-witness responses were significant to them, and this is part of the ongoing process of re-storying the person's life and identity. While there are certainly skills to learn and maps to follow, I try to remember that it's not helpful for us as outsider witnesses to get caught up in competitiveness or comparison about the relative worth of our reflections!

- **Thinking about what to listen for**

When I am sitting behind the one-way screen, sometimes there seems to be so much going on that I get confused as to what to listen for. I have found really helpful a series of reminder questions that Marilyn O'Neill has developed. Now when I'm behind the one-way screen I try to ask myself these questions:

- What do I most appreciate (or not appreciate enough) about what it might take to live the story that is being told and in the context in which it has been lived?
- In what way does this story challenge me or move my life forward?
- In what way does the narrators living of their story touch me, encourage me, inspire me?
- What is there about the development of this story (demonstrated values, intentions, principles) that I would like to appreciate more or even step more into in my own life?

These questions are helping me to orientate to the story that is being told in order to prepare for offering my reflection.

- **Confidentiality and privacy**

The question of confidentiality and privacy is one that we have thought a lot about at our workplace. Historically, there has been the thought that anything spoken about in a counselling session ought to be kept confidential (except perhaps from supervisors or in the

case of potential harm or self-harm). However, in realising the value of a wider audience or witnesses to the preferred stories, the alternative stories of people's lives, we have had to reconsider this. In our work with young people, we have come to see the significance of having outsider witnesses listen to the stories of these young folk and how this is powerfully acknowledging of their skills, ways of living and also of their hopes and dreams.

When a young person has made some very positive steps in their life, for instance in learning new skills, or in reclaiming a relationship that had suffered because of substance use or any other factor, we are interested in finding ways for this 'good news' to be widely circulated – through outsider-witness practices, through art, through video, through song. Conventional understandings of counsellor confidentiality could limit the distribution of these 'good news' stories.

Where we are up to now is that, before any outsider-witness practice, we take care to negotiate what will and what won't be talked about after the session. Because outsider witnesses' own lives are touched by the conversations they take part in, often they may want to be able to refer to the conversation with others in their lives, so we discuss how this can be done while avoiding identification and protecting people's privacy. There can be numerous repercussions and reverberations from a single outsider-witness session. The person at the centre of the conversation will hopefully have new directions to pursue and may want to share what has been spoken with other family members and friends. The members of the outsider-witness group may also have come to new conclusions about their lives, their histories and about what is important to them, and they too may wish to speak about these to those they care about. It may be decided that the names of the people will be kept confidential, as will any identifying details, but that the themes and results of the conversation can be shared more widely.

These are often valuable conversations that take place at the start of the conversation and also at the conclusion when what has emerged through the talk can be reflected upon for its potential relevance to all those involved and to any wider audience that people may wish to consider.

## **7. What are the different contexts in which outsider-witness work takes place?**

As mentioned earlier, outsider witnesses may be professionals, friends, a lover, a parent, or a child of the person who has come to consult the therapist. Alternatively they may be students or trainees. There are many ways and contexts in which the practices of outsider witnessing can be engaged with. Here we have tried to offer a glimpse of the range of ways in which outsider-witness work is practised.

- I appreciate the joy that often accompanies outsider-witnessing practices. I recall a little girl I was working with. Her name was Pearl, she was four years old, and was having trouble controlling her 'extra tears' (the ones she had decided she could do without). On the

day that she decided she wanted those bothersome tears out of her life, I remembered another girl of the same age, Millie, who had faced a similar problem in her life. While Pearl and her mother were in my office, I asked if they would like me to call Millie on the phone. Surprised, they listened on the speaker phone as I told Millie what was happening with Pearl. Millie was a caring outsider witness, and I also asked her some questions so that she could tell her own story of how she had addressed a similar problem in her own life. We could hear the excitement in her voice at being able to offer something to Pearl. This turned out to be a turning-point for Pearl as well as the beginning of a friendship between the two girls. They now regularly send drawings and notes to each other.

- We are currently trying to create an outsider-witness group of men who in the past have perpetrated violence and who are now actively seeking to live respectful and caring lives. While we are hopeful about where this will lead us, we are also taking time and care with it. We hope that one day there will be a group of men whom we can call upon to witness the steps that other men are taking in trying to cease acts of violence and abuse.
- Outsider-witness practices can be really creative. Sometimes on community gatherings that are organised around the definitional ceremony metaphor, it is possible for music and song to be a part of outsider-witness practice. The words that people use in conversations can be turned into lyrics and then sung and recorded. Community performances of these songs can then also occur. When the songs are really documentations of alternative stories, this can bring significant hopefulness and sustenance. As more people are invited to listen to the recordings, it is as if more and more people are able to witness the positive developments that are occurring. Video is another medium that can also be used for this purpose. (For examples of these practices see [www.dulwichcentre.com.au/CommunityProjects.htm](http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/CommunityProjects.htm))
- As a student, I have really appreciated the times when I have been able to act as an outsider witness as a member of a reflecting team. When outsider-witness practices are part of the learning, it is made explicit we are benefiting as well as the people seeking consultation. Being clear and open about the contributions that clients make to our understandings as counsellors is something that I have really come to appreciate. In every session that I've acted as an outsider witness I have learnt something about myself, about this work and also about being a good outsider witness. I am realising that there are skills to learn and to practice and that it is quite rigorous. I appreciate the chance to learn as part of a team.
- In my experience, the use of outsider-witness practices can sometimes interrupt conflictual conversations. For instance, when working with couples, it is possible to interview one member of the couple and have the other person act as an outsider witness. Then the next session you can do the same but with the roles reversed. This sort of thing can be very freeing. It means a conversation can occur with one person that unearths some of the relevant unique outcomes and alternative story. The other member of the couple then has a chance to speak about what was significant to listen to, and why this was significant to them. I have found that this enables some freedom from what may have become routine argument or disagreement.

- Outsider-witness practices and definitional ceremony structures can be used in many contexts – not just within the therapy room. For instance, if a workplace is experiencing difficulties, it may be possible to hold a number of conversations in which some workers are interviewed while others act as outsider witnesses. One group might be interviewed in relation to their role as a worker for the organisation, about their hopes and commitments for their work, about what might have been making it difficult, and about what has been sustaining them (5). These interviews could include some re-remembering conversations<sup>6</sup>. The other group of workers could be asked to listen to their colleague's stories and to consider what aspects of the stories might touch or connect with them. The second group would then speak their reflections in a conversation guided by the facilitator/therapist. Following on from this, the roles could be swapped, with the second group moving into the interview group whose conversations were listened to and reflected on by the first group. These sorts of practices and structures invariably create different sorts of conversations and enable colleagues to 'get to know' about each other's hopes, commitments, intentions and histories in new ways.

## **8. What do you enjoy most about outsider-witness practices?**

Here are some of the things we have heard said about why people enjoy outsider-witness practices:

- The most significant things for me are the responses we hear from families. Regularly I would hear people say things like:
  - I had no idea that my life could mean so much to other people.
  - They (outsider witnesses) listened so carefully to what I said and I can't believe that.
  - Hearing their comments makes me think differently about my own life.
  - I was so scared about talking about my life but now I know it wasn't for nothing. You've all helped me feel that what I have to say matters – I had no idea what I had to say could be so useful to others.
  - This was really different from what I'd expected. Sitting and listening to what they all said felt very special. It's given me more to think about.

More than this, though, I see the changes that people make in their lives after these sessions. I think it has a lot to do with the fact that the outsider witnesses contribute to the rich description of the alternative stories of people's lives. When at first someone may have recognised that they have been making small steps in reclaiming their life from the effects of abuse, after an outsider-witness reflection these small steps will seem far more significant, not because they have been exaggerated or romanticised. And not because the person has been made out to be some kind of hero, but simply because links have been made between the person's hopes for their life, and the hopes that other people have for theirs. Links have

been made between the stories. Rather than being isolated in making these small steps of reclamation, she is now joined with all others who are determined to live life in certain ways. There is an audience now to these steps, there are people to whom these steps have been significant, and they have explained why this is so, and what difference they will make to their lives and work. Quite simply, I enjoy the changes that become possible once small steps have been witnessed.

- One of the things I really enjoy is that these practices can take the focus off us as therapists. While the responsibility for ensuring it all goes well lies with us, and while we are certainly very actively involved both in preparation and in ensuring everything stays on track, there is something delightful about how de-centred we become in the process. This is especially true when the outsider witnesses are friends or relatives of the person who has sought consultation. Often in my work, an outsider witness is located through a remembering conversation. If we have identified a particular figure who would be celebratory of the steps that a person is making, or who would perhaps be the least surprised that the person was able to take these steps, then this is an ideal candidate to become an outsider witness. At times this involves some detective work! We might need to try and trace an influential figure in a person's life who they haven't seen for many years. Invariably these figures are delighted to be asked to be a witness to the steps that the person is now making in their life. And these consultations are often powerfully moving. In fact, I'd have to say that these meetings represent some of the highlights of my work.
- To me, an outsider witness is a person (or group) that listens for a particular history, a helpful history, and makes this more visible. I am intrigued by history, so meeting as a group to listen for alternative histories is a great pleasure for me. Every time it also makes me think about my own history differently. Because it is part of the process for me to identify why a certain image resonated strongly for me, this means I am constantly re-engaging with my own history, and importantly, with those aspects of my history that I appreciate.
- While I've heard some people say that involving outsider witnesses is a drain on resources – that you shouldn't ever have more than one therapist involved in a session with a family – that hasn't been my experience. In fact it has been quite the opposite! The changes that can occur as a result of one session with an outsider-witness group can literally be the equivalent of very many individual therapy appointments. What's more, acting as outsider witnesses can be very replenishing for workers. This way of approaching therapy can be, in my experience, an antidote to burnout! Far from being a drain, these sessions are enlivening. They lead to families becoming more richly resourced in terms of how they understand their lives as linked to certain commitments, ideals, and how these in turn are linked to other people's lives.
- Bearing witness transforms the telling of a story into an experience. Having an outsider-witness group, particularly within the structure of definitional ceremony, turns therapy a little more into a ritual or even a performance. It's not a performance where people are learning lines, or trying to be at the centre of the stage, but it is a performance of different stories, and we take care with how we do this. In some ways, as outsider witnesses, we are

both an audience and a participant in the performance of the stories of people's lives. We are an audience to the positive stories of people's lives, but we are also involved in re-telling these stories, linking them to other stories. I am interested in this and how it contributes to new possibilities for those who are struggling with the effects of certain problems.

- Here in South Africa (6), outsider-witness practices seem to fit well with what is called 'Ubuntu' – a way of living that emphasises the relationships of care between people. We are very interested in how certain practices of witnessing can contribute to the creation of healthy communities. The more people engage in positively witnessing each other's lives, the greater solidarity and collective care is developed, and the less people become dependent on individual therapy.
- What I enjoy about this as a therapist is that I am not working alone. When I am talking first with the person who has come to consult me, I know there is a whole team behind the one-way screen who are also here to make this work. As long as I do a good enough job in creating space for the team to hear some unique outcomes and the beginnings of an alternative story, then it's very likely that their responses will thicken this story, that many links and images will be evoked. This is a creative and fluid process that I really enjoy. And I like being part of a team.
- I guess we are working with stories. That's what this is all about. As an outsider witness, I am an appreciative audience to the stories of someone's life. When I then offer my reflections, I am not expressing any knowledge I have about the storyteller (the person who is consulting the therapist) but I am offering tentative personal appreciations of the stories she/he has told to us. I love stories – their plots, characters, their twists and turns. I love seeing how so many different resonances can be drawn from a single story. Then it is up to the person at the centre of the consultation to decide what is more relevant and helpful for them. To work with stories in a way that is prioritising the experience of the person who has come to therapy is a terrific job.
- I think these practices also make a difference to the lives of therapists. They provide a framework within which we can acknowledge how consultations have real effects in our own lives and thinking without usurping the primary role of therapy, which of course is to attend to and in some way transform the experience of those people who have sought the therapy. When in an outsider-witness role, we as therapists can meet and join in collaboration with others in ways that acknowledge the stories of our own lives. This has been powerfully refreshing for me as a therapist.

## **Last words**

Well, that's about all for now. There is so much to say about outsider witnessing, as it can take place in many different forms. There may be just one outsider witness, perhaps a figure who was evoked in an earlier re-remembering conversation, or there can be a whole team. These practices can be used in therapy settings with individuals, couples and families,

or they can be engaged with in community gatherings and larger events. Outsider witnessing is a key aspect of narrative practice. It is not simply an add on. One of the key underpinnings of narrative practice is that our identities are formed in relationship with others. When someone is endeavouring to author new stories about their lives, stories that are free from the constraining effects of various problems, then witnesses will be required – witnesses who can powerfully acknowledge and authenticate the steps taken, the skills and knowledges this has required, the intentions and hopes involved, and who can make links between lives around shared themes. As Dean Lobovits once wrote, ‘It takes an audience to solve a problem’ (Lobovits et al. 1995, p.255). That’s how we understand it too. Outsider witnesses are the audiences required to solve problems.

### **About these questions and answers**

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1. See ‘Reflecting Teams Edition’ of *Gecko: A journal of deconstruction and narrative ideas in therapeutic practice*, 1999 Vol.2.
2. To read about the ways in which definitional ceremonies are structured, see White (1995 & 1997).
3. To read about the ways in which definitional ceremonies can structure community gatherings, see the further reading list at the end of this paper.
4. These questions and this example were offered by Gaye Stockell.
5. To read more about re-membering conversations, see White (1997) and Russell & Carey (2002).
6. This reflection was offered by Dirk Kotzé who lives and works in South Africa.

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## Further reading

### Reflecting teams in family therapy

- Andersen, T. 1987: 'The reflecting team: Dialogue and meta-dialogue in clinical work.' *Family Process*, 26:415-428.
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### Anthropological descriptions of outsider witnessing and definitional ceremony

- Myerhoff, B. 1982: 'Life history among the elderly: Performance, visibility and remembering.' In J. Ruby (ed), *A Crack in The Mirror: Reflexive perspectives in anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
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### Use of outsider witnessing within narrative practice

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### Use of outsider-witness practices on community gatherings

- 'Reclaiming our stories, reclaiming our lives.' (*Dulwich Centre Journal* 1995 No.1)
- 'Speaking out and being heard' (*Dulwich Centre Newsletter* 1994 No.4)
- 'Living positive lives: A gathering for people with an HIV positive diagnosis and workers within the HIV sector.' (*Dulwich Centre Journal* 2000 No.4)