

## Challenging Orthodoxy by Johnella Bird

*From the plenary address given by Johnella Bird at the Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference in Chicago USA, August 2003 - Part Only*

How is it that the innovative practices of yesterday become the orthodoxy of today?

How do we contribute to the innovative practices of today becoming the orthodoxy of tomorrow?

In this presentation I will articulate the position I take in relationship to the development of orthodoxy. If this position is different to the one you believe in, please attempt to place the ideas I hold, alongside the ideas which you hold. I am stating this because I have found that whenever differences are articulated, people can experience this difference as oppositional. This isn't the intention I hold. Whenever difference is constructed as an opposition to something, this is the breeding ground for orthodoxy. Orthodoxy is constructed whenever belonging is contingent on sameness. I ask you to listen to this presentation while holding the knowledge that I speak from a particular belonging place. The opportunity to speak to you all today carries with it a responsibility. This responsibility which I carry, is to use this time to make a difference. You might wonder, 'What sort of difference?' The difference is suggested in the title of this plenary, 'Challenging Orthodoxy'. Since 1990, I have consistently argued for creating innovation and fluidity by resisting the temptation to create therapies or models. I believe those therapeutic approaches which draw on post-structuralist ideas, while also generating a 'post-modern' therapy or model are creating an inherent contradiction. Models come into existence through textual means. The textual definitions of the significant ideas and technical application of these ideas forms the bones of what a therapy is and what it is not. Once the bones of a therapy are set, established, defined, textually referenced and re-referenced, how possible is it to discover through innovative therapeutic practice a difference or a change to the established metaphoric body? I believe the possibilities are extremely limited. This limitation occurs when the metaphoric representations of the therapeutic work which don't adhere to the textually defined therapy are positioned as in opposition versus beside or simply different from the set or established therapy. Hence, the contradiction - multiplicity cannot and does not exist within the structural boundaries produced by 'therapies' or models. Instead of creating models of therapeutic processes, I prefer to emphasise the development of processes where discovery is privileged. In privileging discovery we are positioned to:

- negotiate and contextualise meaning across gender, culture, time, for example, respect
- remain sensitive to, and develop strategies for negotiating meaning within the power relation, for example, the silencing effect of the good intentions of the dominant group;
- experiment with processes which bring that which isn't known into a known place;
- acknowledge the teachers who guide and influence the development of an individuals clinical work in preference to an acknowledgement of a detached therapeutic model which inherently privileges the textual representation of this 'model'.

An analogy I have used for many years when teaching others is:

- The ideas and technical skills I have developed and use, resource me to travel with people. I never know the destination which we (therapist and client) will eventually arrive at. Even though I carry a knowledge of reaching many destinations with people.

- As we travel together, I carry the skills for navigating difficult terrain.
- I have some knowledge of the preparation and resources needed to embark on the journeying process.
- I carry the hope that as one path peters out another will become apparent to us.
- I believe the person I'm travelling with knows more about this journey than they appreciate and in the journeying they will discover what it is they now know.
- I believe this knowledge which they are discovering and creating in the present moment, is critical in determining the journey we take and the destination we reach.

Similarly I believe the therapeutic ideas and practices we use and discover and rediscover through the actual practice, are a travelling resource. A guide rather than a destination. How do we maintain this attitude? What are the structures which we can put in place to privilege travelling? I believe these questions need to be at the forefront of the critical review of all psychological/therapeutic work/community work theory and practice. This critical review process is a responsibility we must all be committed to if we are interested in both avoiding orthodoxy while taking up a social justice position. The discovery I have made over many years of practice, teaching and living is that the structures and metaphors which sustain and create dominance are being ongoingly reinvented for the benefit of the dominant cultural group. This reinvention is often performed through the co-option of the linguistic metaphors used to shape a social justice position. Through this plenary I hope to share with you the processes I use to reflect on these questions. I am going to begin by reviewing the implications of developing a Narrative therapy. In the introduction to the book, 'The Heart's Narrative', (1, ppix) I articulate the position I hold in relation to the construction of a Narrative therapy by writing the following:

I have been frequently asked to define my therapeutic work and ideas using a model. I am loath to do this because I believe the development of therapeutic models is very dangerous. The danger lies in our desire for certainty. Within the professional classes certainty provides comfort, privilege, belonging and access to a commodity. The Narrative way of working has provided a challenge to those therapeutic models that adhere to fixed psychological truths. However the very construction of the term, 'Narrative Model' or therapy creates an environment of inclusion and exclusion. Instead of engaging with ideas and practices that are described as Narrative, there is a temptation to replicate certain templates of the ideas and practices, and this replication encourages imitation, together with definitiveness about what is and what is not an accurate representation of the model. The idea that 'the Narrative model' or therapy actually exists overshadows the existence of differences as practitioners attempt to engage reflexively with ideas and practices. It is ironic that our attempt to engage with the idea of 'the model or therapy' contradicts many of the presuppositions that underpin our engagement with the ideas and practices of what is called Narrative Therapy. I have struggled with defining the ideas that I use and the work that I do, under 'the model or therapy' umbrella. I feel a sense of collegiality with people who call themselves Narrative Therapists because we share a passionate engagement with issues of justice and ethics.

At that moment in time, I hoped the ideas and practices which I had developed could co-exist with others within a generalised description of 'Narrative ideas and practices'. This has been more difficult to realise than I expected. Since this time I have had direct experience of the process Anna Yeatman (5:229) describes in this way. 'Each reforming achievement which transforms policy in the name of equality, establishes a new regime of governance. All governance works in terms of a bounded community, a community of identity and thus establishes insiders and outsiders.' The description, Narrative ideas and practices is frequently used through text, interspersed with the descriptor Narrative therapy. However, I believe Narrative therapy is read first, while Narrative ideas

and practices is read second and translated to mean Narrative therapy. In fact, I believe interspersing these two descriptions has the potential to create the illusion of inclusion, while maintaining the privilege of exclusivity. Narrative therapy has now been comprehensively defined and thus legitimised through text. This extensive textual representation of Narrative therapy has enormous implications for the position I have taken. People position me as doing Narrative therapy even though I have refused this descriptor. For example, a conference committee was discussing who they'd invite as presenters. My name was suggested and several people objected saying 'She's a Narrative therapist.' After another conference where I presented, a participant said, 'I know Johnella says she doesn't like to define herself within a model but she really is a Narrative therapist.' In many teaching situations as I present the ideas and practices I've developed, I receive a mix of direct challenge, for example, 'That isn't Narrative therapy Michael White says, 'Please note, that I know Michael White strongly advocates against this type of positioning. I also argue against this, or, another experience I have is people expressing puzzlement and confusion which is expressed through questions which often ask me to position myself 'in opposition' to 'Narrative therapy.'

For example,

**Workshop participant:** *I find it hard to use sparkling moments in couple work. I mean when I find one, what is a sparkling moment for one person isn't necessarily a sparkling moment for the other - what do you think?*

**JB:** *The concept of 'sparkling moments' isn't one which I use. I find through relational languaging that I can centralise a significant everyday linguistic metaphor while also constituting the metaphor as moving. In this movement there is change and opportunities for the experience of agency.*

**Workshop participant:** *You don't use sparkling moments? Wow, I'm really confused.*

**JB:** *I'm saying that I use a different metaphoric descriptor - thus a different therapeutic practice. I'm not saying 'sparkling moments' is wrong. I'm saying I have developed other descriptors and practices which are different to this description and practice.*

**Workshop participant:** *So you're not a Narrative therapist?*

**JB:** *If using sparkling moments or externalising problems or finding the unique outcome is required in order to be a Narrative therapist, then perhaps I'm not a narrative therapist. If however being inspired by Feminist theoretical ideas, social constructionist ideas while being directly influenced by the finding of language for direct experience, while also privileging the impact of the social and cultural environment on the shaping of meaning, is welcomed within Narrative ideas and practices, then perhaps this is a belonging place for me.*

I believe the above example reflects the dangers inherent in the creation of a detached entity model or therapy. The quest for legitimisation, the desire for belonging and certainty combine with institutional processes to create a form of orthodoxy. It's ironic for me to consider that I have spent twenty-six years challenging psychological orthodoxy, only to find myself considered by others as a member of an orthodoxy. One of the questions I'm addressing today is, how do we resist the Western cultural institutional demands to create an orthodoxy? The desire for multiplicity, together with a social justice position is I believe, insufficient if we fail to develop a living practice which reflects these positions. I am referring specifically to the development of practices which support us to negotiate the complexity of the power relation. The power relation which intersects with class, gender and culture within the therapist/client, consultant/consultee, supervisor/supervisee,

teacher/student, manager/worker power relation. The practice I use to both make apparent and negotiate the power relation is relational languaging.

What's important about the making of the relational? I believe the making of the relational through language reduces the potential for orthodoxy. The words used to present a position, or an opinion, or a psychological idea, or to reflect the living of experience or to constitute an autonomous self are neither true or false, good or bad, respectful or not, right or wrong. When these words are reconstituted into the relational, we breathe life into the words. They become contextual, relative, imbued with culture, gender, socio-economic status, they breathe, they sing. Consequently 'the I' or self also becomes relationally and contextually constructed. In 1995, a participant on one of the Family Therapy training programmes was reflecting with me on the day's teaching, facilitated by my business partner and colleague of seventeen years, David Epston. 'You know what David said about you today, Johnella? He said, there isn't anybody I know in counselling who thinks about relationships and relating the way Johnella does - she sees relationships everywhere! Not just in the obvious couple/family relationships, but everywhere!' This statement about my practice back then was accurate and today, some eight years later, the understanding I have of constituting the relational through language continues to develop. The perspective I now hold is the single, separate autonomous 'I' is brought into conventional existence through the use of the English language. Conversely, the relational 'I' is brought into existence through relational languaging. When I imagine the development of this relational perspective, I can reach back to my family history. I spent my early years roaming for hours in the bush clad hills behind our West Coast home. I often wandered the bush in companionship with its sounds and smells and its inhabitants. However, rather than reaching back into those childhood years to make sense of this relational world view, I will attempt to articulate in more detail the central tenets that underpin this therapeutic work and thus the water I swim in which I have come to call relational consciousness. I know I have companionship in seeing and being in the world in this relational way. Clearly I am not alone in valuing and living a day to day existence through the construction of the relational, yet for most therapies which rely upon the spoken English word as their primary medium of change, the dilemma is immediate. How do I generate relational consciousness while tied to the conventional use of the English language? How do I support people (clients) to perceive (enquiry/explore) the self as contextually created while restrained by the English syntax which creates and imposes a sense of self as fixed, autonomous and separate? I have proposed that relational languaging and relational consciousness creates a relational self in contrast to an autonomous bounded self which is generated and privileged through the conventional use of the English language. I would argue that this autonomous bounded self maintains a system of privilege which is disguised by a seemingly natural order of preferred and valued personality traits and characteristics. The processes which emerge through this linguistic tradition create a presence and an absence. The dominant group is brought into presence through the conventions of the English language while any group other than the dominant group, is constituted through the conventions of the English language as an absence, that is 'I am not this'. The conventional use of the English language thus acts to colonise others at a profound level - the level of identity.

I believe Adrienne Rich (4:35) expresses urgency for change;

're-vision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of tendering an old text from a new critical direction - is for women more than a chapter in cultural history! It is an act of survival.' She also comments, 'There is also a difficult and dangerous walking on the ice as we try to find language and images for a consciousness we are just coming into and with little in the past to support us.'

The premises 'its an act of survival' is relevant across the divides, constituted through gender, culture, class and sexuality relations. Through relational languaging I believe we can engage with,

understand and develop relationships differently. Within this relational meaning, the construction of the power relation which produces privilege and disadvantage can be exposed without vilifying one individual over another, one group over another, one gender over another, one culture over another, one country over another, one species over another. Is this an outrageous proposition? Could the reshaping of language have such radical possibilities? I don't know, but I hope its possible. Do language systems other than English generate a contextual self through language? In an article titled 'Whakamaa, Mana, and Maori Self Image' (3:67), Joan Metge writes about the concept of Mana.

How is the Maori concept of Mana related to the concept of 'self image' as elaborated by social scientists? First Mana is very much wider and deeper in scope. It embraces and contains the idea of 'self image' which covers only one of its aspects. The concept of Mana has a spiritual dimension which is lacking in that of self image. Social scientists see the person as building his self image on the basis of human standards and comparisons with other human beings. Although human recognition plays a part, Mana comes ultimately from outside the individual, from spiritual sources and links him with God or the Gods in a network of others similarly linked alive and dead.'

She also states (3:57), 'Human beings are not passive recipients of Mana but active hosts and stewards.' I am referencing Joan Metge's ideas in order to illustrate that other language systems, in this instance Maori, constructs attributes of the self as contextual, as relative. In contrast I believe the use of conventional English grammar produces definitives which are inherent within and belong to the autonomous self, for example, I have good self-esteem. In introducing the work of Adrienne Rich and Joan Metge, I hope to draw attention to both the traditions of protest and the traditions of relational being which are centuries old. The therapeutic work I do, has and continues to benefit from these traditions (Note 1). In this plenary I'm unable to present the variety of grammatical forms which I use to construct the relational. However in simple terms, colonisation of the self occurs either with the grammatical structure of the possessive, I am or you are, or the use of detached language, that is, This is the truth. This is just. When I move the possessive to constitute the relational, I generate the following, for example,

I am afraid, becomes this fear which you are experiencing

or,

I believe in equality, becomes How does this belief you have in equality move into a practice?

In this process the autonomous detached 'I' is reconstructed into a relational 'I'. This relational 'I' is positioned as an active agent in relation to an everyday linguistic metaphor, that is, fear and equality. When I notice detached truth statements I move to include a relational possessive, for example,

This is the truth, becomes

How did you come to this truth position?

What is the truth position which you or believe in?

### Multiplicity

K. Gergen (2:249) proposes a 'post modern consciousness' where 'a multiplicity of self accounts is invited but no commitment needs to be made to any of them'. In this account which offers 'no commitment to any single life accounts', Gergen proposes the commitment to multiplicity. Thus through this textual representation, Gergen takes up a position which is the proposal of multiplicity. I believe the construction of the idea of multiplicity does little to address the practice of engaging with multiple positions within a power relation. In fact, without the creation of a practice, the construction of multiplicity becomes a devise to disguise and maintain privilege. I am always positioned somewhere. I take up and inhabit a cultural, gendered, class, sexuality and psychological

knowledge positions. In an environment where a power relation exists, that is, therapeutic relationship, supervisory and/or consultative relationship, teaching relationship, management relationship, how do we remain alert to the effect of taking up a position, while also being alert to recreating this position? I believe when I reconstruct the everyday language we use into the relational, I am positioned relationally and thus differently to the occupation of a definitive position. For example, 'I am hurt by you' is generated by the conventions of the English language. A relational position is possible through a consciousness which is generated by relational languaging. In this relational place, I am positioned to consider and reconsider the occupation of this place through an engagement with the relational environment.

For example, 'I felt really hurt when you didn't acknowledge my contribution to the research on DNA and depression.'

Relational consciousness through relational languaging. 'When the contribution which I had made to the field of DNA research didn't receive the acknowledgement from you which I expected, I experienced a sense of hurt.'

In re-languaging the first statement into the relational, I am positioned to further re-search the following for myself

- the contribution which I believe I have made to the DNA and depression research.
- the processes for acknowledgement which I had expected.
- the experience of hurt which I felt.

In this re-search I am also positioned to consider the following:

- the types of contribution which received acknowledgement
- the processes by which contributions are named, known and recognised and measured.
- the politics of acknowledgement
- the type of acknowledgement I am hoping for. The effect of Gender, ethnicity, class on the construction of this hope
- the effect on the relationship of hoping and expecting the acknowledgement to come from the other
- the meaning I make of the hurt which I experience. How this meaning effects the way I feel, think about myself, the contribution I believe I've made, the other and the relationship.

Once I engage in this relational re-research for myself, I am better positioned to prepare for a discussion with my colleague. The re-languaging allows me to move beyond the binary of:

'I think I made a contribution' - 'You obviously don't think its enough of a contribution to acknowledge me.

'Maybe I'm over-reacting, maybe it isn't such a big thing,' or,

'Maybe he is invisibilising me on purpose, what a competitive..'

In this example, the use of relational language allows me to acknowledge that I stand somewhere,

while relationally considering and reconsidering this stand in relation to the contextual environment. I am thus positioned in relation to the language I use to describe living experience rather than immersed in the truth of this language. I am therefore positioned to notice the processes which construct orthodoxy rather than being immersed within these processes. Teachers, writers, therapists inevitably take up positions which are legitimised through text. I believe the challenge I am presenting to us is, to go beyond rhetoric and good intentions and ask - 'What are the structures in place to create positions which are temporary?' In other words, a place to stand now, while at the same time holding the willingness and ability to change this place when challenged. This challenge is most likely to occur when we discover that other's experiential knowledges take us beyond the experiential knowledge we have access to.

## Conclusion

It is my strongly held belief that relational consciousness and relational languaging creates an ethical platform for me to stand on, for example, respect, collaboration, trust as a relational construct. For example, when we engage with relational languaging, we can step outside of the binary. In languaging this way we can create a temporary position which liberates the self from the effects of totalisation, for example, 'I am respectful' or 'I am not respectful'. Instead we generate the relational, for example,

- the respect practices which I use/you use;
- the respect ideas which I hold/you hold;
- the effects on the relationship of these ideas and practices which I hold/you hold.

Relational languaging allows us to stand somewhere, while considering the history of, development of, effects of this stand. Through a relational languaging process:

- respect is constituted through cultural practices,
- respect is a relational construct which is experienced in and through ideas and practices, rather than an intrinsic quality,
- respect is more than intentionality.

This platform allows me to ongoingly negotiate the operation of the power relation within therapeutic conversations. It supports me to work beyond and within the margins of the lived experience I have. It creates the potential for momentous discoveries to be made within everyday lived experience. This is one way. I don't expect you all to take up this way. I do however hope that if respect, collaboration and trust are central tenets of the therapeutic work you do - that you take up the same challenge I have taken up of wondering -

What are the strategies that I use to ensure that I am not acting as an agent of social control?

What are the accountability structures that I use to reflect on what it is that I can't know across culture, gender, class, sexuality, age ?

and, what strategies do I use to make apparent or visible the power relationship in the therapeutic relationship, supervision/consultation relationship, teaching relationship?

and, once visible how do I negotiate the experience of this power relationship with people?

What are the strategies I use to refuse to occupy a definitive place, which rarifies the discoveries I have made by embalming these discoveries as truths, as a therapy, as the way?

What are the strategies I use to notice the quick sand of occupying or being placed in a privileged place which exists despite my protest of 'I don't want to be here!'

In grappling with these questions, you and I will reflect a striving or an intention to engage collaboratively with people. This will not protect you or me from the discovery that we have unwittingly imposed ideas and practices on others. I act on the belief that there is no definitive position on cultural relations, gender relations, class relations by negotiating the implications and effects of the power relation within every therapeutic relationship. Consequently we are available to make discoveries which will take us beyond, what it is we know. This can be both exciting and at times, terrifying. More importantly it represents a desire to learn from our predecessors, to humble ourselves by seeing that their flaws are also ours. There is nothing admirable about the facility of hindsight. When I look to the past, to the dilemmas, to the philosophies, to the therapies, to the people - 100 years, 50 years, 20 years, 10 years, 5 years ago, I see my potential future.

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