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# Linking lives around shared themes: Narrative group therapy with gay men

*by*

**Christopher Behan<sup>1</sup>**

This paper is an expression of my experience of leading a gay men's group for the past six years in my practice at the Family Institute of Maine in North America. As such, many of the ideas may pertain most relevantly to practice with gay men. However, I will attempt as well to offer some ideas about how what I have learned could be useful to any narrative therapist doing what has been traditionally known as group therapy. I believe there is a great deal more to be said about group work from a narrative perspective. It is my hope that others will continue to add to this body of knowledges, skills and practices.

What has emerged from my experience and my studies in narrative therapy is a conviction that the idea of definitional ceremony, as proposed by Barbara Myerhoff (1978) and expanded by Michael White (1995), is at the centre of this work. Both writers talk about how authenticity is the outcome of a social process where one's preferred identity claims are acknowledged. Through definitional ceremonies, peoples' stories are linked around shared beliefs,

commitments and purposes. White (1995) has outlined how reflecting team methodology can be applied for this purpose of linking lives around shared themes. I would like to describe how the use of therapy groups as reflecting teams can contribute to the richer description of its members' lives. In these groups the reflecting team is made up of peers instead of psychotherapy professionals, as has been most common up until now. In this way, the therapy group becomes both a reflecting team and a community of concern (Madigan & Epston 1995).

Myerhoff describes how definitional ceremonies were *contrived to arouse great emotion and energy, which was then redirected toward some commonalities, some deep symbols, and shared stable norms* (1978, p.185). Indeed, she writes of how these collective dramas contribute to the construction of the 'self'. Here she describes a man who was writing his autobiography:

*Through the heightened awareness and consciousness provided by self-reflection, he was crossing the delicate threshold between merely being and being a man, a sentient human being, knowing himself to be. In order to accomplish this one needs reflecting surfaces ... Audiences, listeners, witnesses are essential for self awareness. (pp. 221-222)*

Following these ideas, I wish to write about an approach to group work in which the communal aspects of therapy are emphasised. This type of community assists its members in making meaning of their identity by seeing themselves and the world through multiple lenses. Lynn Hoffman (1998) talks about the idea of therapy as a 'kind of collective social weaving, like the Bayeux tapestry' where 'natural assemblies of people' are called together to create 'a more richly nuanced picture' of those present (p.7). In this way, the common narrative of 'finding your own voice' is a communal achievement. I think there is a great potential in this idea of making use of natural assemblies of people in therapy, those who surround the person in life, family, friends or any community of concern. Using group members as reflecting teams is just one of infinite possibilities. In the work described below, the group acts as outsider witnesses for gay men who have few forums where they can be acknowledged, since so many of them are cut off from their families or live in relative isolation.

I must add that for me the process of being a participant in these groups contributes richly to my own sense of who I am and who I want to be. I assume there will be real effects on me as a result of my interactions with the group members. I have been changed (and continue to be changed) by being with these fellows. As another gay person, I do not see these persons who consult me as other than who I am or as something exotic.

## **Background**

When I first began running a group for gay men, I had a lot to unlearn. Fresh from graduate school my head was inculcated with ideas about what constituted good group practice and my role as expert. Structuralist ideas had informed my learning about group therapy. At the same time, I started my work with a fervent hope to mitigate the suffering that these gay men were feeling, which I had experienced myself. I quickly saw how many of the taken-for-granted practices of therapy in groups did not fit for the men with whom I was working. For example, I knew that there were problems with the sacrosanct idea that group members could not have contact with each other outside of the group meetings.

It seemed cruel to me to introduce gay men to each other, many of whom were newly claiming their sexual identities and extremely isolated socially, and then forbid them to have contact. So, as I began the group, I knew I had to let the group members get to know each other outside of the group context. The idea that I had been taught of the group as an isolated social microcosm used to create a 'corrective emotional experience' (Yalom 1985, p.19), had to go out the window. In order to be more helpful to the men in the group, I had to find other ways to conceive of this undertaking.

Over time, the group has evolved with my growing knowledge of narrative therapy, through trial and lots of error, and from feedback from the group members. I wanted to create a context where people could find an audience to witness the stories of their lives. Rather than a group effort which continues to enshrine the individual, contributing to more isolation and loneliness, I wished to participate in group work which would act as a forum in

which people's stories could be linked around shared beliefs and shared commitments. Eliciting and linking stories has become a key aspect of the group. I have been influenced by Sharon Welch's understandings of this:

*The function of telling particular stories of oppression and resistance is not to find the 'one true story' of subjugation and revolt but is to elicit other stories of suffering and courage, of defeat, of tragedy and resilient creativity. (1990, p.139)*

For most of the history of this group, we followed what I would call a fairly common group therapy format. There was an unstructured conversational style and group members would freely offer each other feedback about the latest events of their lives, problems they were encountering, and ideas and feelings they were experiencing. Group members had always told me that they liked this way of working, but as my knowledge of narrative ideas expanded I became less comfortable with some of the taken-for-granted practices of the typical format. For example, while I felt that the use of affirmations and positive feedback like, 'Great job', and 'You were really brave to have pulled that off', were helpful to group members, I didn't see them as contributing to thicker descriptions of the group members' preferred versions of themselves.

I had begun to believe that there was a great potential for group therapy to thicken the group members' descriptions of their lives in ways that would enable them to step into new ways of being. I certainly encouraged group members to talk about how they identified with the person speaking, but initially the ways in which I did this didn't help them to link how they specifically related to the speaker or why they found this identification remarkable. Opportunities to further link the group members' lives in meaningful ways were lost. I wanted to structure the group's time to maximise the authentication of members' identity claims.

I decided to use the reflecting team format in my gay men's therapy group. I was quite familiar with reflecting team methodology, having used it with clients, in the training program in which I teach, and in peer supervision. However, I think what really made me understand the impact that reflecting teams can have was to be on the inside of the work myself. While attending an intensive at Dulwich Centre this past winter, I experienced being the person at

the centre of one of the reflecting teams. Through that process I realised how my own experiences of loneliness and suffering while growing up gay were actually expressed in my work as a therapist with other gay men now. I also began to re-appreciate how surviving oppression had given me skills and knowledges that made it possible for me to move beyond just surviving, to a place where I could be patient and loving and strong in all my work as a therapist, and especially in my conversations with other gay men. Seeing how my experience of oppression and self-hatred had been transformed into expressions of love, convinced me that the gay men who consulted me could reconstitute their lives as well. I saw how reflecting team work was one way to create a context in which this could happen.

At first I was concerned that group members might feel disappointed, because fewer members' lives would be at the centre of the evening's conversation. It was after the second or third time that we tried using reflecting teams in the gay men's group that I put my concern to the group and I was reassured. Ed quipped: *I don't want to seem self-centred or anything, but when I'm on the team I'm not just thinking about the other guy. As I listen to you both talk, my mind is full of thoughts about my own life and emotions, and about things that have happened to me. I'm engaged with what he's talking about, but from my own frame of reference, so I don't feel short-changed in anyway at all. In fact, I like doing the group this way better.*

What follows is a description of my most recent practice and my thoughts about it.

## **Check-in**

Like most groups, we begin with a brief go-around that allows each member to check-in with the others about how he is doing and any recent developments in his life. It's also a time for group members to signal to the leader if he would like any time to talk that evening. Since it is not always possible for each person's life to be at the centre of the evening's conversation, checking in assures that everyone at least gets to talk a bit. Group members have told me it is an important part of feeling as if they belong.

Years ago, when I first started this group with my dear friend Fred Wolf, he would always start the next part of the group by saying, 'Who needs air time?' This has become a tradition which gives me a chance to negotiate with the group about who we will be talking with and how to divide the time. Depending on the circumstances, we have found that one or two people can be interviewed in an hour and a half session. It is not at all uncommon for us to focus on just one. Once it is decided whose life will be at the centre, we follow a four-phase interview structure for reflecting teams (White 1995).

I see my role as interviewer and reflecting team facilitator. My job is to create a forum where the expert knowledges of the group members are privileged. My expertise is to build a scaffold for these knowledges to be confirmed. I do not leave it to chance, as I did previously, for the person at the centre's preferred claims about his life to be acknowledged or more thickly described. My role is central, and I do not deny my special knowledge as a facilitator.

## **Tellings**

I have come to think that much of the group session involves group members engaging in the 'tellings' of their lives. In order to assure that the person's life who is now at the centre of the group stays at the centre, and to ensure that the ensuing conversations contribute to lives more thickly described, I offer these following general guidelines to the rest of the group whom I consider to be the witness group or reflecting team. I have found that these guidelines will help to lead the group towards four classes of responses: joining, orientating to mystery, exploring alternative landscapes, and deconstructing one's interests (White 1995).

- Listen very carefully to the story, especially for how it relates to your own experience.
- Notice any images which come up for you from this person's life and from yours.
- Be ready to acknowledge your appreciation for what he is going through.

- Be curious about the developments in this person's life.
- Be tentative in your comments. Use the 'subjunctive mood' and phrases that leave openings for uncertainty: 'I was wondering ...' or 'I'm not sure about this but ...'
- Be prepared to answer questions about what struck you and why.

These are minimal guidelines to set the stage for a thoughtful and rich team process. With five minutes of training and some occasional coaching, group members have little difficulty doing a fantastic job on the reflecting team. With the team together in one place (in their own small circle off to the side in the same room), I begin a conversation with the person whose life is at the centre. I have what I consider to be a typical narrative-type conversation with him. These types of conversations have been described at length in the literature about narrative therapy. In these conversations I work with the person consulting me to: negotiate an experience-near, particular, non-structuralist definition of the problem or of the alternative story; map the effects of the problem or alternative story on the life of the person; engage in an evaluation of those effects; and encourage the person to justify those evaluations.<sup>2</sup> These types of conversations give people an opportunity to truly engage with the stories of their lives. As active participants, they take a position on their experience and the meaning they make of their lives. In our group I have found that a conversation of a half an hour to forty-five minutes gives the reflecting team group more than enough to reflect on.

What follows is a description of some of the themes that emerge in the tellings that take place in the group. I have also included some typical questions I might ask around these themes. After I have described some of these themes I will explore the ways in which the reflecting processes operate in the group.



### ***Externalising homophobia/the influence of heterosexual dominance***

Early in the work it is often useful to externalise homophobia as a way of separating the person from the problem. Frequently people who are gay are surprised to think of themselves as carrying homophobia, but by examining how homophobia has been socially constructed, how they face it in their day-to-day lives (e.g. through silence about the details of their lives, fear of physical harm), they are more clearly able to take a position against homophobia in their lives. It has been useful to think about homophobia as a manifestation of heterosexual dominance as a way of deconstructing how it is a dimension of power woven into the social fabric. Personal descriptions of homophobia, such as 'life in the closet', or 'the shame game', help to make the externalisation more experience-near. By taking a position on the effects of homophobia, a person is able to connect with ways that a self-hating position is not consistent with his own beliefs.

- *How do you see heterosexual dominance influencing your relationships with your co-workers?*
- *Do you find that heterosexual dominance silences you when you are talking with them about what you did with your weekend?*
- *Why is it that homophobia doesn't fit with your dreams for your life?*

### ***Coming out***

Many of the men who attend the group are 'out', having told their family and friends they are gay. Many of the other group members are extremely scared about letting anyone know about their sexuality. So the very fact that they have even joined the group is discussed as a unique outcome that may be more embracing of an identity as an 'out' person. I have found it necessary to be transparent about my own political belief that being 'out' is better than being in the closet, that being put in the closet is part of the discursive practices of heterosexual dominance. It is important to note that, despite my strong preference for people to be open about their sexuality, the person at the centre needs to decide the pace of his coming out. Being 'out' may make him vulnerable to real physical danger, loss of job or housing and cut-off from family

and friends. We also emphasise 'coming out' as a process that never ends and that people in our lives may need time, just as we ourselves did, to adjust to the fact that we are gay.

- *Wow, you came 'out' to your sister! What does that say about the kind of relationship you would like to have with her?*
- *Right in that moment, after you told her about being gay, how did you feel?*
- *How does that fit with how you want to live your life?*

### ***Oppression breeds depression***

Each June in the annual gay pride parade in our city, a contingent from our group volunteers to march together. Last year one of the group members carried the slogan 'oppression breeds depression' on his picket sign. We have spent many hours in our group talking about the effects of depression in our lives. We have explored how describing the emotional effects of oppression as a clinical symptom obscures the political nature of the so-called disorder. We have examined how being gay in our culture may give rise to 'symptoms' such as feelings of worthlessness and guilt, isolation, depressed mood and even a desire to kill oneself.

- *Have you found that being 'out' to your friends has been a bit of an antidote to the sadness you used to feel when you were around them?*
- *Besides taking Prozac, what else have you been doing to fight against the effects of depression in your life?*

### ***Monolithic gay culture***

This is an expression we made up to describe what has also been referred to as 'internalising the oppressor'. Oftentimes when a gay man comes out, he may expect that, after years of oppression in 'straight culture', he will be welcomed with open arms into the gay world. Instead he may be confronted with a subculture that marginalises certain types of other gays. Older men may feel profoundly disqualified by the huge emphasis on youth and physical fitness that pervades much of gay culture. Transvestites or people who practise

sadomasochism may be edited out of portrayed versions of gay life because they do not fit the political ideal that 'we're just like everyone else'.

In the group, the steps toward freedom from oppression are framed as moving away from global or essentialist accounts of people. It is worth noting, however, that gay culture also does offer some ready-made accounts of life for people to step into, such as 'pride', which can be profoundly affirming.

- *How did you claim being forty-six and overweight in the face of such strong stereotypes in the gay community?*
- *How does knowing that the Stonewall riots of 1969 were initiated by drag queens, help you to reclaim your identity as one of them?*

### ***Relationships***

Many of the gay men who consult me speak of having had difficulty developing long-term loving relationships, and I think this is because of the influences of isolation and other negative effects of homophobia. In addition, gay culture has, in general, venerated casual, sexualised relationships. The group is a counterculture that supports preferred descriptions of the person as lovable and as capable of sustaining a long-term loving relationship or any relationship of his choosing. (We do have a rule that group members do not engage in sexual relationships with each other while in the group, not because we're against sex, but because it makes things too complicated in the group.) Group members may find that after 'coming out' they have another 'adolescence', learning about dating and socialising all over again.

- *Regarding relationships, where do you see yourself going in your life now that you've laid this ground work?*
- *How does being more visible as a gay man fit with your dreams for a relationship with another man?*

### ***Creating/joining community***

Homophobia has cut off gay men from each other. An alternative story of connection has these men stepping into membership with each other in political action groups, AIDS service organisations and social networks. Whether it's

working with others to pass equal protection laws or going to a ballroom dancing group, joining lives around shared themes expands the witnesses to preferred claims that the men have about their identities and lives.

- *Now that you're leaving the group, how do you think your friends at the gay newspaper will continue to support you?*
- *Where else do you find what you've found here?*

## **Retellings of the tellings**

After the group member at the centre of the conversation has completed his telling, this is when the rest of the group reflects. At the Family Institute of Maine we have experimented with many different spatial arrangements for reflecting teams and have decided that in general, when circumstances allow it, having the team in a separate space and connected by a one-way mirror or closed circuit television has the best outcomes. This clearly delineates the performers from the audience and heightens the ceremonial aspects of the work. However, for the work described in this paper, I have been only been able to use one room. We form two distinct clusters in the same room, and I move between the two over the course of the process.

We follow the format that most narrative reflecting teams do - each person speaking from his own experience about the conversation they have just witnessed. In the gay men's group I have found that the linking of lives around shared themes happens quite readily with little intervention on my part. I have a fairly light touch as a facilitator at this point. Again I see my role as providing a scaffold. My primary role during the retellings is to act as an interviewer to assure that the reflections are linked back to the life of the person at the centre, to deconstruct comments with the aim of further linking lives, and to unpack unquestioned assumptions. (This is especially helpful if a group member has lapsed into giving advice.) Here are a few examples of the types of questions I might ask:

- *Ed, you said that you were impressed that John got up and delivered the eulogy at this father's funeral. What in your own history made that seem like such a huge accomplishment to you?*
- *What other things did you hear John say that led you to see that as an impressive event? Do you have any guesses about what made it possible for him to take that step?*
- *When Bill talked about telling his boss at work that he was gay, did you have a sense about some of the things he was overcoming in making that revelation?*
- *Given your own experience in 'coming out' as gay, what do you imagine he was struggling against in that moment?*
- *Alan, why do you think that, of all the people in this group who heard Dan telling us about going for an HIV antibody test, you found it remarkable? Why did it strike a chord for you?*
- *You seem quite certain that monogamous relationships are the best way for people to go. Am I right about that? What in your experience has made you so convinced of that as a value?*
- *Larry, you were talking about a soaring eagle just a moment ago. Can you say what it was about what John was telling us about that brought this image to you?*

The focus of the team's reflections and my questions create a process where people's lives are more richly described. The men in this group have often experienced themselves as invisible because their lives are dominated by isolation, and often have a sense of their identities as spoiled. For them, these reflecting teams are an opportunity to re-engage with themselves as deeply connected with others and to be embraced by an account of themselves as people deserving to be cherished and understood. As a result of the team acting as a witness in this way, the life of the person at the centre becomes multi-voiced, connected to many others around their preferred claims about their identities or histories. The difficult tasks of resisting oppression and becoming visible are supported.

In this way the conversations within the group become a process of community building. As Sharon Welch describes, *the ability to resist - the continual reminders that it is possible and worthwhile - is sustained by the creation of alternative structures, by a community in which love that compels and sustains resistance is fully expressed* (1990, p.80). My hope is that the group serves this sort of role in the lives of its members.

### **A note regarding applause**

I would like to add here that when a team member does make a reflection that might fall under the category of 'applause' (White 1997, p.97), it is easy enough to remedy. I think these types of comments can be expected in the thinning discourse of popular culture. I make it my job to help to deconstruct these reflections when they come up, ensuring that I do so in ways that do not shame or discourage. If someone says, 'That was absolutely fabulous what he did', I will follow up by asking something like, 'From what John told us about his own hopes for his life, what gives you the idea that he would evaluate that development as fabulous?' or 'Say, Richard, of all the people who responded to that part of what John was saying, why was it you that noticed it and remarked upon it?' These sorts of questions invite Richard to talk about the developments in John's life in terms of his own life, and encourage a discussion around joint purposes, hopes and dreams.

It has taken me a few years (at least) to expand beyond mere affirmations and to restrain myself from sharing my own evaluations with those who consult me. In these teams I have come to expect applause, so I just work with it when it comes.

### **Retellings of the retellings**

What has stood out to me in my work with the gay men's group is the way that the telling is made more real by the retellings, how the retellings expand on the boundaries of the tellings. After the reflecting team has offered

their reflections, I return to sit with the person who is consulting the team and interview him about his experience of the reflecting team. I have found a good way to get started is to orient the interview to three questions:

1. Among the things you heard from the team, what stood out to you as helpful or important?
2. Was there anything that just didn't fit for you?
3. Is there anything you would like to do differently or follow up on as a result of this conversation?

Of course, there are at least a million other possible questions. I have found that these types of questions generally work to continue to link the life of the person at the centre of the conversation with those on the reflecting team. At this point in the process the person generally experiences himself as profoundly embraced by the preferred descriptions of his life.

This part of the consultation is also a time to ask other follow-up questions aimed at further linking the group members around shared purposes and dreams:

- *How did Alan's reflections speak to you about your hopes for the future with your new partner? What was it that he said that rang true for you?*
- *Why do you think what Jim was saying about how he handled a similar situation with his wife fit so well for you?*

## **Wrapping up**

The last part of the evening is a less structured conversation which gives people a chance to talk all together about the process and to debrief a bit. Often a team member will talk about what another member's reflections meant to him or they will offer words of encouragement or thanks to the person who has been at the centre. It is also an opportunity for them to interview me about my experience of the process. They may ask me why I asked a certain question or took a certain direction in the interview. I may take the opportunity to speak about how the work shapes my own life, the contributions of the group to my

sense of myself as a therapist, as a person and as another gay man. We always give the person at the centre a chance to have the last say - really to say anything he wishes, and then we all say goodbye. Many of the fellows in the group go out for coffee afterward and get together during the intervening week to take walks together, go to the movies, and so forth.

## **Saying goodbye**

When someone leaves the group, we make an event of it. Our ceremony for saying goodbye is for each of the group members to acknowledge how the person who is leaving has contributed to his life and what his connection to him has meant. The person leaving also speaks with the other members about these kinds of contributions.

Paul was leaving the group after eight months. He had recently come 'out' to his wife, got divorced, and then had come 'out' to all of his colleagues in graduate school. He also reported that he had stepped into an identity as a gay man that he felt at one with and that corresponded with his desire to accept himself, enjoy his sexuality, and to be loved by those around him.

*You guys have all been part of a time in my life that was really hard, even more difficult than having cancer when I was nineteen - at least I had support around that. For thirty-five years I had felt really alone in my sexuality and now something has shifted. For all that time I really hated myself. I felt disgusting for having sexual thoughts about other men. I was feeding into all of society's stuff about being gay ... In the past six months there's been a huge shift. I love myself now. I accept who I am and how I am - everything about me. I accept the fact that I have hazel eyes and I'm balding and I'm gay. It's all part of me. What made that transition easier is that you guys accepted it first before I did. You made me realise I'm not the piece of crap I thought I was.*

*I remember when I was still struggling and I typed in a message into my computer - 'I'm a 35 year old man looking for a support group'. It was hard to type in that message. Chris, you responded and you gave me*



*your information. Boy, was I really scared just typing that in and hitting send. It was acknowledging something about myself. Returning your call to me, that was also acknowledging something. Coming to see you was acknowledging some more, and it was really overwhelming. I was really depressed at the time, but it was a real turning point. I am glad you were all there to get my message.*

Regarding the use of reflecting teams in the group, Paul said:

*For me, I really liked that process. It just made things more real. I liked the intensity of it. In a traditional setting, where everyone says what they have to say, there is something too quick. Without the team too many things can be missed. One person would say something, then someone would say something right after, and someone after that. You don't get as much that way. With the reflecting team, where we sit and actually reflect, you can plug into whatever the person has been talking about and pull up in your mind whatever's been happening in your life that's similar. The process drives itself. It's a different energy.*

## Acknowledgments

This paper is dedicated to my dear friend Fred Wolf who started and co-led this group with me for five years. He died two days after Christmas last year at the age of 76. I listened to Sarah McLachlan on my laptop pretty much continuously as I wrote this paper, remembering him. She sings 'I will remember you. Will you remember me? Don't let your life pass you by. Weep not for the memories.'

In November and December 1998 I attended the Level I and II Intensives with Michael White at Dulwich Centre in Adelaide, South Australia, where, among many other wonderful happenings, my work in this group with gay men was richly acknowledged.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the contributions to this work by the men in my group. I am amazed by how patient they have been with me as I continue

to learn. I have used some of their first names in quotations throughout this paper. I am grateful to them all.

## Notes

1. Chris Behan can be contacted c/- The Family Institute of Maine, 65 West Commercial Street, Portland, ME, USA, email: cbehan@sweetser.org
2. This orientation to therapeutic conversations has been greatly influenced by Michael White's Statement of Position Micro-map (Dulwich Centre intensive training course, 1998).

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