

Re-remembering - a supervision exercise

Mark Hayward & Barry Bowen

Mark has been my clinical supervisor for over five years, first in Jersey and then in Hampshire. It works well: we are both interested in narrative ideas and therefore in transparency and a respectful approach to therapy, supervision, teaching and writing. We have also invited the therapeutic teams in which I have worked to take part of each of Mark's supervisory visits.

We have four half-day clinic sessions per week and each clinic has between two and four therapists. Our approach to therapy is fairly narrative and solution-focused. We tend to use a reflecting team process, with the team either in the room or observing through a one-way screen.

This interest in reflecting teams led us naturally to consider Michael White's use of teams, outsider witnesses and re-remembering conversations. In February of this year, members of the four clinics and I met with Mark at my house, following a 'working lunch' at a nearby public house. During the afternoon, Mark and I entered a re-remembering conversation, with Mark interviewing me. The interview was recorded, as was the subsequent reflecting conversation by my colleagues, Sue Lambie, Hilary Robinson, Eleanor Lucas, Alison Smith and Rob McNaughton, my reflecting on the reflecting, and our final joint discussion. In this article Mark will set out the theory underpinning re-remembering in the context of White's version of a reflecting team. We will then move on to excerpts from the conversations.

I'm a little uncertain about the popular practice of separating words into two parts to denote new meaning: 'response-ability', 'disease' or, less ambiguously, 'psycho-therapist'. My uncertainty is whether the effect is trick or illumination. But despite my linguistic resistance, re-remembering practices and re-remembering conversations have given me some of my most, fulfilling moments as a family therapist. These inquiries have led me on such rewarding journeys of discovery - discoveries of figures from a client's or professional's past who had been



central to the construction of a person's values and commitments, central to the establishment of a lifestyle and central to the social construction of their identity.

A re-remembering orientation considers a person's history of relationships as constituting a kind of club of their life, with opportunities for upgrading, downgrading or revoking membership. Through such a process the significance of particular relationships is revealed and, in this privileging of relationships, a highly systemic practice is expressed.

In therapy, a sign that re-remembering ideas might be helpful could be if someone has evident skills (e.g. persistence) or knowledges that seem to have no history. Or, more obviously, they might, seemingly out of context, mention a figure from the past. As systemic therapists, we are aware that making relational connections visible can make sense of things, provide understanding and embed people in their social history. Typical initial questions to pursue such an opening might include 'How were you able to persist in your efforts during this time?' (in an exploration into the presence of persistence in this person's life). 'Who in your life would be least surprised to know about your continuing persistence?' or 'Which people have contributed

to your skills with persistence during difficult times?' These might be used in inquiring into significant relationships that contributed to the person's relationship with persistence. With a person or persons identified you can move into further re-remembering questions such as:

- What did they see in you that others missed?
- What did their awareness of this make it possible for you to achieve?
- How might their purposes or hopes have contributed to your skills of persistence?
- What might it have meant to them that you helped them fulfil such purposes or hopes?
- How are these people still able to be present in your life or work?
- How might your use of persistence be some kind of testimony to their contribution to your life and to your shared values?
- How might their contribution to your skills of persistence now be benefiting others' lives?

These ideas can make a significant contribution to the Personal and Professional Development (PPD) of family-therapists and trainees. A good starting question might be 'What are the intentions or purposes behind your work?' or 'What are the values you hold that inform your practice?' Enquiries into the social history of

their preferred practices, using questions that follow the themes above, have taken me on the most unexpected and heart-warming journeys.

These conversations are organised within intentional state understandings - understandings that focus on a person's conscious intentions and purposes, their values, beliefs, passions, hopes, dreams, principles and commitments. They focus on the knowledge and skills that people use to fashion their lives, their understandings and practices that helped them take action against problems that beset them. (This contrasts with internal state understandings that focus on those semi-conscious and non-conscious understandings and ideas like needs, deficits, resources, personality and human nature etc. which can require interpretation and the expertise of others to reveal.) Whilst these conversations use a wide range of narrative practices (e.g. externalising or exceptions), questions from remembering conversations can be key to the transformative possibilities of the discussion.

Mark begins by asking about the influences on Barry's work over the last 20-odd years. This includes the dominant therapeutic approaches he has followed and the move from co-working to the preference for working in teams. Barry talks about 'coming in from the left field' (i.e. not always doing what might be expected). What were the influences for this way of working? One was working with another therapist during the 1980s.

BB: I would sit behind the screen and watch him work and I wouldn't really know where he was coming from or where he was going until the end, when it would all come together. He would pick up all sorts of beliefs and what people felt were facts that I would have never gone into because it did not fit into the orderly way I did things. **MH:** How was it that you were available, given that this was not your way of thinking? **BB:** ... because there were three of us working together. One was a Milan therapist, one was a strategic therapist, and one was a structural therapist. We came together and we learned from each other. I was very much based on practice, [the Milan therapist] was based in theory, and [the strategic therapist] was a great philosophical thinker: quite a melting pot. The first time I had worked in a team of more than two

people ... and it was the first time I had worked in child and family guidance [as it was then known].

MH: What would you call that period?

BB: A very positive period ...

He goes on to talk about the 1980s as a struggle between the opposing approaches of Milan and structural, a struggle that was not reflected in this team 'because of the personalities'.

BB: We saw ourselves as people first and the way we worked second.

The discussion compared BB's growing liking for team-work with his self-image of being 'a very competitive person' and looks at the influence of working in a multi-disciplinary team, the confidence that grows with experience and the importance of trust.

MH: How do you go about developing trust?

BB: Part of it is by being open yourself ... being sensitive to how people might be thinking ... listening to other people's ideas.

He talks about previously seeing himself as 'pushy' and 'insensitive to the feelings of others'. He talks about major change points coinciding with moving from place to place and being dissatisfied with the way he was living his life.

MH: Any you would care to share?

BB: The obvious big ones like marriages breaking up.

They use the word 're-evaluations' to describe these change points and how they led to more emphasis upon openness, sensitivity and trust. MH invites BB to think about some of the people who might have influenced him during these re-evaluations. He mentions the strategic therapist from the 1980s and the team he worked with in Jersey.

MH: What were you driven by? **BB:** The feeling that it always could be better ...

He talks about his early life in a northern working class family, hating his school, leaving school with few qualifications, trying different jobs, marrying 'too early', divorcing, working in a middle class area and meeting people with a different expectation of life, deciding to start to learn again, studying and achieving academic success. This led to moving around the country and meeting other people who influenced him.

MH: Were there people who were

significant to what was driving you?

BB: I had a girlfriend when I was 26 who was a teacher. She introduced me to serious music, more challenging theatre and novels. Without her I would never have gone to university.

MH: What do you think she could see in you ?

BB: She was the first person to say I was bright. She had a trust and expectation that I was going to do very well.

MH: How significant was that trust?

BB: Because I valued her... when you have a lot of respect for someone who then seems to respect you and sees things in you, you begin to think perhaps it is there.

This illustrates some aspects of the remembering experience. BB was able to explore his changing relationship with openness, sensitivity and trust, together with some of the crucial people in his life who had made some impact on the importance of these qualities on both his professional and personal life.

MH: And what about trust? **BB:** A lot of the people I respected are people I also trusted. I guess I learned it because I was on the other side of the trust. It made me feel differently, so I began to feel that trust was important. **MH:** Were there people who were significant in the development of openness, sensitivity and trust? Anyone come to mind? **BB:** Not people so much. I spent some years in my twenties looking at eastern philosophy and this became very important as a way of thinking. I also spent some time in my late twenties in the Anglican church and I think that was an important part of my development as well ... that sense of community, something other than what can be seen, felt and touched.

MH: And that sense of community, does that relate in any way to teamwork?

BB: Yes, I think the seeds of it were there then.

MH: Tell me something about the connections you've made between what you learned from eastern philosophy and the Anglican church and your commitment now to teamwork.

BB: In the eastern philosophy group we used to have a way of getting in touch through work. We used to do things like clean windows, but putting all our concentration on the place where our hands were and the meeting with the surface, so being completely in the present, being in a group and realising that everyone was feeling this way. We used to meditate together, so there was a sense of community there. The

Anglican side was a lot to do with going on retreats, spending a couple of days with a group of people and being very much together as a group. MH: When you talked about the Anglican church and retreats I was thinking of reflectiveness. Would you say there is a connection? BB: Definitely there is a connection between the eastern philosophy, the meditation, the Anglican church, retreats and reflecting.

MH: And would that connect with your frequent re-evaluations? BB: I think the re-evaluations started earlier than that, but it re-inforced them. **MH:** When did the re-evaluations start? BB: They probably started around about the age of sixteen or so. I left school thinking 'what am I going to do with the rest of my life?' I guess even earlier than that, when I was totally turned off by the whole macho thing about an old-fashioned boys' school. MH: What was it that the macho boys' school clashed with in you? BB: It seemed to privilege the grosser bits of life.

MH: The things you were talking about like openness and sensitivity, trust and listening and developing things don't sound terribly macho. I was wondering if some of those things were around even then? BB: I think I saw myself as being more sensitive than some of the people around me or, at least, I thought I was. **MH:** And did you have someone who inspired you in any way? BB: I had a friend, whom I met when I was about ten, who was one of life's eccentrics. He was very cerebral and very much a lateral thinker. He didn't at all follow the expectations of those around him.

MH: And what sort of influence did he have?

BB: That you don't have to think the same way as everybody else. MH: I remember that you were very interested in Erickson, a well-known eccentric. I wonder is there a connection?

BB: Actually, I'm reasonably conforming. I don't have extreme views, I don't lead a particularly extreme life, but I do like the idea of thinking wider than what is immediately in front of you.

Knowing a little of Barry's enthusiasm to create, develop and support therapeutic practice teams I was curious about the history of this in his life. His described relationship with competitiveness seemed at odds with this teamwork commitment. The changing relationship between competitiveness and teamwork would

have been a good avenue to explore further.

At the end of the interview the team reflected on what they had heard.

RM: I was struck about what inspires us to change and develop new ways of working, what helps us to think about moving on ... that struck a lot of chords with me. HR: ... although Barry said that there were people who influenced him, I had the sense that something inside him was driving him a lot sooner. It seemed like Barry was looking for things to be different from a very early age. I wonder if there are other people in the team who have been open to changing? **RM:** Like attracts like ...

EL: I wonder if Barry is less competitive than ambitious. AS: I could really identify with that competitiveness, because I know I am like that ... it seemed to me that Barry had managed to change it.

SL: When Barry was talking about the closeness he had to the other teams, it reminded me about a time when there was a misunderstanding between us. Because of Barry's openness and the frank discussion I was able to have with him we reached an understanding between us and the trust has grown since. AS: We've all learned to trust Barry, and hopefully he's grown to trust us. It's been fascinating linking the person with practice. It shows how much we bring of ourselves to the work.

I felt that this conversation became more about how we were using openness, sensitivity, trust and the ambition for constructive change in our teams and how everyone had been contributing to that process.

I like this description of Barry's. *Using* openness, sensitivity etc. reflects an intentional state, understanding and makes these things more available as skills. This contrasts with *having* openness, sensitivity etc. which reflects an internal state understanding and implies their existence as qualities that you either have or you don't.

MH: Is there anything you'd like to comment upon?

BB: The sense that the whole team was sensitive to each other, that was there before I joined them. Sue and Rob mentioned the friction that seemed to get sorted out. That dates back quite a long way. I was driving my car and a lorry pulled out in front of me. I opened the window and I said a few choice words to the driver. He wound his window down very slowly and said 'I'm sorry, I make mistakes sometimes.' Ever since, I've always tried to apologise if I've thought that I was in the wrong. In that one phrase he changed my whole way of thinking.

There followed a team discussion around the themes brought up in the re-membering conversation. By the end of the session we all had a sense of having shared something much bigger than an account of one person's professional and personal journey.

Reference
White, M. (1997). *Narratives of Therapist's Lives*, Duiwich Centre Publications.

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