

'Yes, and ... ': A Narrative Response

Susan Nicholson**

I too can identify with the frustrations of the 'yes but' client. The man who brings in extensive notes and spends the session reading out reams of evidence to support the validity of his viewpoint that his wife is to blame for their breakup. The seethingly angry woman who sits on the edge of her chair ready to negate any view that challenges her own. As a therapist, I can feel the strain of battling to have my voice heard, so much so that at times I wonder whether it is better to sit back, let the clients 'debrief', and recognise the healing power of being a non-judgemental witness to their pain.

It is all too easy to get caught into a reciprocal 'Yes, but' pattern: 'Yes, I can hear that you are hurting, but let's try to understand your wife's point of view better'. Even as the words leave my mouth I know that I have taken a wrong turn and that a battle is imminent. I have learnt that it is crucial to hear and validate fully the individual's experience of his or her marriage. We know that men in particular can be obliviously happy while their wives are miserable. It is totally possible for two very opposite experiences to coexist in the one relationship. Paradoxically, the more one avoids arguing for change, the more frequently the client will show a willingness to entertain a different viewpoint.

Nancy speaks of the client refusing to let go of hope for the relationship in spite of evidence that this hope is false. From my perspective, this hope is a scant cover for a deeper hopelessness, fear and sense of failure. It is one or more of these themes that I often find most productive to follow in my work with the 'Yes, but' client. Nancy's client 'Thomas' is quoted as saying: 'We were a wonderful family ... if only I could go back ... it was all her nosy parents' fault ... I know I shouldn't have hit her ... I don't care what she says, I know we had a good marriage ... What's the point of going on?' I hear his anger masking a deeper distress, his holding on to the marriage as evidence of his fear and sense of hopelessness about his life. I might ask him, 'What impact has the break-up of your marriage had on your sense of hope for your life? Has it pulled the rug out from under your hope?'

Clients like Thomas are desperately holding on to some form of control in their lives, and this makes it very difficult for them to acknowledge feeling fearful or hopeless. It can help to normalise their feelings, to name fear and hopelessness as common experiences for people in their situations. If my client is male, I may also want to explore the impact of gender on his ability to own such feelings, asking whether he sees it as harder

for men than for women to acknowledge this sense of being out of control.

If fear (or hopelessness) is something that my client identifies with, then I will want to explore its impact in his (or her) life. 'How is fear driving ... your life? ... your relationship with your ex-wife? ... your happiness? What does fear feed in your life? Does it feed false hope? Does it lead to endless and painful court battles? Does it have you holding on to the past? Does it make it very difficult for you to hear your ex-partner's view of the situation?'

We might want to put fear to the test at some point, perhaps even stand up to it by engaging in a role reversal whereby Thomas becomes his wife and I interview her (him) regarding her experience of the marriage. Tough stuff, but something that Thomas may want to do if it is presented in the light of a decision to take a stand against fear.

I am particularly interested in getting into components of the dominant story, which basically means understanding the clients' negative self-beliefs. Externalising conversations are the best pathway to the dominant story, so I might externalise 'hopelessness' or 'fear' and explore its impact on the clients' view of themselves. 'What does fear (or hopelessness) have you thinking and feeling about yourself?' Thomas may well respond with a deeper experience of himself as having failed or of feeling incompetent.

As a Narrative therapist I now have several pathways in front of me. I may want to work with Thomas on deconstructing failure by exploring its historical basis. Has failure hounded him in earlier life situations? What kind of life experiences have fed this belief that he is a failure unless he has someone by his side? As Nancy has identified, there may be a background story of abandonment, of learning that one's existence is dependent on another.

Nancy expresses interest in asking questions that expand the individual's sense of autonomy of self. My experience is that these questions are even more powerful if they follow from, and are linked with, an exploration of the dominant story. This might involve observational work, keeping track of times when the client experiences themselves in a light that cannot be explained by 'failure'; times when they have stood firm in the face of 'fear' and/or have experienced a sense of hope for their lives. Or it may involve exploring past evidence of an alternative story. Perhaps even the classic question 'Who from your past would be least surprised to see you believing in yourself and your abilities? What was it that they could see in you that may have been lost to yourself?'

My final thought relates to the therapeutic relationship itself. Despite Nancy's frustrations, her clients

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return for session after session and most probably would report her as being most helpful. I'd be interested in exploring what they find helpful. Also, what does this persistence with therapy suggest about their relationship with hope? Would someone who was totally taken

over by hopelessness continue to seek help? What qualities are they drawing upon within themselves which enable them to continue to search for something better in their lives?

'Yes, and ... ': An Object Relations Response

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A notable feature of Nancy Cogan's paper is the frankness and courage she brings to her discussion of the therapeutic and ethical dilemmas raised when working with a particularly difficult group of clients. The group Nancy describes are indeed difficult. All are unwilling partners in a separation, have been violent or have a potential for violence, and present with a need to rehearse and re-rehearse their own view. As Nancy describes it, these clients seem to have lost their capacity to listen or to think about what is happening to them.

An object relations therapist generates hypotheses by gathering information about the client's early life experiences. This knowledge can give meaning to current life situations as well as to what is happening between client and therapist. Exploration of Paul's circumstances for example, might include the following questions: 'What was the nature of Paul's relationships with his parents? How did he react to their loss? How did Paul and his parents deal with the death of his brother?

For an object relations therapist, transference-countertransference (TCT) dynamics are pivotal in understanding how unconscious dynamics are re-enacted within the therapeutic relationship (Stiefel, Harris and Rohan, 1998). An object relations perspective uses the TCT in order to give meaning to what is happening. The therapist's feeling and thinking self is the instrument used to understand what is happening in the interaction, the space between client and therapist. Nancy introduces us to the TCT experience with Paul immediately when she says:

I've heard this before, and before ... whatever I did, it had no impact. I've tried interrupting, I've tried hearing him out, I've tried—I'm feeling helpless ... must be paralleling how he's feeling. How can I use that?

In object relations terms this is rich material for TCT: an unconscious communication from the client which is projected into the therapist. Nancy is feeling stuck

and there is a sense of desperation about getting out of the 'stuckness'. Unlike the client who seems to have lost his capacity to think, the therapist is desperate to use her capacity to think. She does this by turning to the literature on gender issues, de Shazer's classification of clients and trauma theory. It is in the trauma literature that Nancy observes that instead of recovering from the trauma of separation these clients seem to be 'stuck' in it. What is happening? How can the perceived 'stuckness' be understood?

The perceived stuckness can be understood as an unconscious re-enactment of an earlier scenario in which the clients themselves experienced a state of desperation, confusion, helplessness, anxiety and insecurity. This could describe the early attachment experience. The TCT with Paul for example, suggests that what the client is experiencing is a state of fusion with the therapist. This would explain the inability to listen to the therapist and the repetition: in Nancy's terms 'the need to rehearse their own view'. Any interruption in the form of words which challenge the client's experience represents a threat to this desired fusion and results in a terror of separation. In object relations terms the therapist could understand the client's communication in the following way:

I want to be separate but it is too threatening. I am used to someone containing my unwanted feelings about being a separate person and I hate them for having left me in this state to deal with my own feelings. I will do anything I can to make it difficult for my ex-partner [therapist] because it's their fault for making me feel the way I do. At one level [consciously] I want to move out of my stuckness but at another level [unconsciously] I want to stay stuck because then I don't have to recognise my need to be separate, which brings up feelings of confusion, insecurity, desperation and abandonment.

The 'stuckness' represents a defensive picture of self in the unconscious mind in which the 'other' is essential in order to avoid feelings of overwhelming abandonment. Self as separate is unconsciously perceived as a terror that cannot be described in words. Winnicott describes this state as a state of 'unintegration' (1976: 44), a feeling of total disconnection from anyone or any-

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