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Telling, retelling and retelling the story:

Survivors telling their stories with purpose and authorship



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Abstract:

With foundations in poststructuralism and feminism, this paper brings together the collective stories of sexual assault survivors working with a sexual assault response team. Through the use of narrative therapy principles these stories make visible the ways in which “expert-ness” can take authorship away from survivors and explore the ways in which outsider witness practices and telling, retelling and retelling preferred stories support double story development.

Keywords: narrative therapy, the personal is political, feminism, sexual assault, sexual assault response team

I want to express my profound gratefulness and respect to the survivors who share their stories with me. I too have in hearing and participating in multi-storied conversations with survivors, experienced outrage, excitement, inspiration, pleasure, distress, laughter, concern, worry, fear, despair, sadness, hopefulness and liberation.

It is these stories, along with a shared and collective commitment with my colleagues and fellow feminists, that support and sustain my continued work in this space, and nurtures my hope and dedication to feminism, justice seeking and justice-doing.

The Telling

The decision for a survivor to report crimes of sexual assault to police often comes from a place of deep consideration. We know that statistics around the reporting of sexual assault make visible a significant “under” reporting of these crimes (Lievore, 2003; Tarczon & Quadara, 2012). Complicated hopes, motivations and expectations play a significant role in this decision-making including personal safety, and wavering trust in the “criminal justice system” which requires survivors to tell the story of the abuse over and over again. I notice in conversations with survivors the shared experiences and effects that these requirements have on their lives, which has encouraged the direction of this project. It matters how we tell the story; narrative therapy principles provide a clear purpose of retelling stories in a way that (re)connects¹ survivors with what is important to them. Throughout this paper, I refer to two different types of telling; When I refer to “the telling, the telling and the telling”, this refers to the parts of the process of reporting sexual assault that requires survivors to retell accounts of the assault again and again, often causing further distress and suffering to the survivor

¹ Throughout this paper I have used the prefix “(re)” specifically in brackets to emphasise the narrative ideology that reconnecting to a landscape of hopes, values, purposes and determinations that already exist for survivors makes visible preferred storylines.

threatening a validation of a single story and diminishing the multi-storied nature of survivors' lives. When I refer to "the telling, the *retelling* and the *retelling*"; this is distinctly different and I am referring to the way in which narrative therapy offers a decentred and influential position to explore double story development of the way in which a survivor responds to trauma with agency; the way in which the art of the conversation can (re)connect survivors with hopes and determinations that support justice seeking and healing. The purpose of this project is to find purpose and meaning in the *retelling* that contribute to the preferred storylines of survivors and encourage broader social and systemic change to the "criminal justice system".

The collective "I" ~ This is *Jess*²

I have been working with Jess for over five years. I first met Jess at the time she decided to report a sexual assault. Jess attended the hospital where she told medical staff that her ex-partner had raped her. From this point, Jess has been navigating the complex and convoluted process of the "criminal justice system". For the purpose of this paper I present the *stories* of Jess. A compilation of narrative works that represent the collective stories and shared experiences of survivors navigating the systems and processes involved in working alongside a sexual assault response team.

I think about the ways in which violence and abuse have shown up in the lives of survivors with whom I have worked, and while jointly responding to the effects of the events of violence and abuse that precede our meeting, I see first hand the ways in which women respond to the ongoing anguish and suffering that comes with navigating the "system".

Documenting the collective stories and shared experiences of survivors in this way is a

² *Jess* is a pseudonym and is representative of many of the survivors I have worked with who have informed the direction of this project.

response to what I recognise as a complicated and dynamic configuration of power within taken for granted systems and processes that encircle survivors. The very act of documenting the unheard “single” stories of survivors in this way is an undertaking of activism and politicisation to make visible the political nature of sexual assault and men’s violence towards women. The theoretical and philosophical foundations behind this thinking sit well within the context of narrative therapy and are:

- An alignment with the feminist perspective that the personal experiences of women intersect with a greater societal culture of patriarchy that perpetuates gendered systemic oppression (Hanisch, 1970; Hughes, 1997; White & Yuen, 2007).
- A counter practice to the bureaucracy of powerful systems, processes and language that are often used to pathologise women and medicalise the effects of, and responses to violence and abuse (Baretta et al., 2010; Freedman, 2012; Pedersen, 2015; Yuen, 2019);
- A counter practice to the individualisation and internalising of survivors’ stories, often within a therapeutic and legal context, which inherently places the responsibility for healing and justice seeking solely on survivors (Baretta et al., 2010; Dang, 2018; Pedersen, 2015; Yuen, 2019);
- And, drawing from the recognition that narrative therapy and its pathways of telling, retelling and retelling stories that encourage double story development can *move (v)* us from a view of “personal problems” to a new perspective of problems as “political issues”, that encourages transformation and innovates social change from oppression towards empowerment (Carey & Russell, 2004; Denborough, 2008; Pedersen, 2015; Yuen, 2019).

The story of “Jess” presented here makes visible the use of dynamic, double story development and preferred storylines in order to interrogate the effects of power in working with individuals, within teams and across organisations. Noticing how violence and abuse shows up in the lives of survivors, provides space for rich descriptions of the ways in which violence and abuse threatens what is important to survivors. Violence and abuse in the shape of ongoing systems and processes can mimic the very same attempts to disconnect survivors with what they give value to through countless devastating and destructive tactics that influence how survivors make sense of what has happened and how they ultimately see themselves. Nevertheless, survivors respond to the violence and abuse, in the many shapes it can take, in ways that make visible what is important to them, and ultimately resist the effects of violence and abuse because of what is important to them (Denborough, 2006; Freedman, 2012; White, 2000; White, 2004; White, 2006).

Jess: The process of reporting sexual assault and going to trial has felt like a test; a test to see when I would bow out. Like... I can tell it's a “bow out moment” when a professional starts on one of their “spiels”. I know it's part of everyone helping me and keeping me informed, but all I can hear in these moments are “I don't believe you”, “this isn't important enough”, “you need to prove your worth”. This has tested everything I thought I understood about justice and accountability and at times it has felt like the same abusive tactics that he would act out towards me. That does not make sense to me. It just doesn't match up to my understanding of justice. It's got me thinking, “Am I crazy? I must have done something to deserve this.”

The Sexual Assault Response Team

Jess' Mother: “The overall experience between departments and professions has been

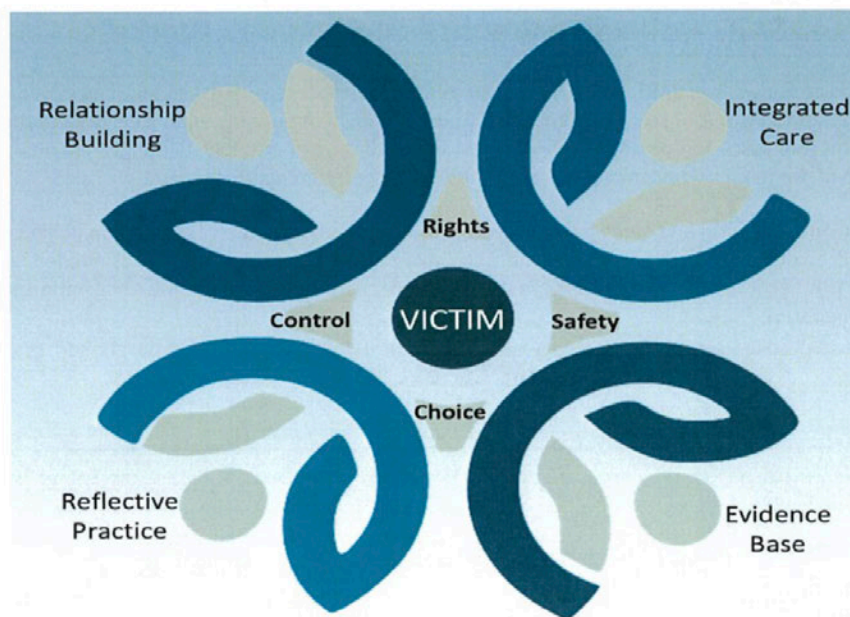
frustrating, confusing and distressing. Our experience has not been a positive one, and could not have been navigated without the support of the dedicated staff at the Townsville SASS... Any project that would enhance the fluidity between agencies, and promote the quality of support and advice to women at their most vulnerable, would be an invaluable and effective endeavour... interagency education, awareness and policy development to support cohesive, sensitive and empathic service provision, can only have a greater positive impact for individuals and families such as ours” (Townsville Sexual Assault Support Service, 2016).

In 2016, the Townsville Sexual Assault Support Service reported on the issue of sexual assault in the Townsville community. After speaking to survivors of sexual assault and multi-disciplinary professionals in the sector, it was recommended that Townsville adopt an interagency collaboration that provides flexible, holistic and ongoing support, advocacy and counselling to survivors of sexual assault (Townsville Sexual Assault Support Service, 2016). Since 2017 (even prior to Government funding), a number of agencies in Townsville committed to this recommendation in the form of the Sexual Assault Response Team (SART). SART is a multi-disciplinary, inter-agency group of professionals specialising in responding to sexual assault, including members from the Sexual Assault Support Service (SASS) (sexual assault support worker), Sexual Crimes Unit (SCU) (detectives), Hospital and Health Service (THHS) (clinical and allied health professionals), Clinical Forensic Medical Unit (CFMU) (forensic nurses) and the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (ODPP) (prosecutors and liaisons).

SART was established based on the recognition of the report that the complex and demanding space survivors were required to navigate to report sexual assault desperately

required a coordinated and specialist response at the time of crisis (Queensland Government, 2014 Townsville Sexual Assault Support Service, 2016). SART aims to center the complex needs of survivors through a holistic and wrap-around service that is responsive to therapeutic, general and forensic medical, and criminal reporting and court support needs as required (Queensland Government, 2014; SART brochure, 2020; Townsville Sexual Assault Support Service, 2016). SART works alongside survivors of sexual assault within a trauma and violence informed way to provide:

- Crisis intervention, advocacy and support
- Medical attention for general physical and sexual health care needs
- Investigative expertise to report the crime
- Forensic medical examinations for the purposes of reporting
- Follow up support and appropriate referrals
- Ongoing longer term counselling
- Support through court and the criminal justice processes



(SART, 2021)

Amongst the SART members from partner organisations there are clear roles and expectations throughout the process that provide a scope for practice that is consistent with SART's purpose of centering the complex effects that survivors are left to grapple with. SART recognises the rights of survivors, and the importance of ensuring their safety, prioritising their choices, and empowering them to regain control over their bodies and their lives (SART, 2021).

A Positioning of Power and Privilege ~ “The language of expert-ness”

The language we use to describe SART makes visible torrents of power in its foundations; a team of “specialist”, “multi-disciplinary” “professionals” working with “victims” or “survivors” of sexual assault. I recognise this language to be part of a dominant culture in which organisations use a particular language to demonstrate their capabilities to governing and funding bodies in order to sustain and maintain funding for services. I am considerate then of the possibilities in which SART could be recruited into a taken for granted language and culture of “expert-ness” that contributes to and perpetuates the use of power through the guise of a “specialist service”. Within the context of a multi-disciplinary team with wavering dynamics of power related to gender, ethnicity, class, education and a broader understanding and culture that informs values of “right and wrong”, “good and bad” and “truth and lie”; the practice of SART means that rising power can intersect, creating a dynamic space for a “shared” understanding of a greater purpose that meets the needs of the survivors we work with.

For myself, ideas of power and privilege from folk psychology, postmodernism, poststructuralism and feminism support me to understand intersections of power and how they can show up in sly and inconspicuous ways (Dang, 2018; Thomas, 2002; Yuen, 2019).

Subsequently it is fundamental to my practice, that the interrogation of power is central in order to make visible and disrupt the effects of powerful language and processes in survivor's lives. The concept of "giving voice" is discussed in Lainson, Braun & Clarke (2019, p. 91); Clarke acknowledges that as an individual (or organisation) we are not merely describing or "giving voice", we have bias that will shape the way we make sense of the problem. It becomes our responsibility to make ourselves visible and respond to the power in these relationships and find ways that share the insider knowledge of survivors in a meaningful way (Faulkner, 2020; Lainson, Braun & Clarke, 2019). I therefore want to acknowledge my own power and privilege in the position I hold within SART and as a therapeutic counsellor; I do this as a practice to highlight the effects of un-interrogated power, as well as a counter practice that aspires not to replicate these effects within the relationships with the survivors with whom I work (Faulkner, 2020). My life has been shaped by many privileges that benefit from dominant cultural philosophies. For example, as a white, cis woman, I benefit from living in a colonised country with heteronormative and capitalist values; I have parents who are still married and have enough money to "own" colonised land and assets that have supported their children through private schools and tertiary education. A tertiary education has provided me the benefit of well paying employment and the opportunity to have health insurance. As a woman I experience the effects of patriarchal culture including gendered barriers to employment, financial opportunities and access to resources; I have an ongoing fear of male violence and harassment, which can be experienced as internalised messages of misogyny and self-blame.

"Survivor-Centred" ~ Inviting the survivor into the team

So how then do I, and we (SART) counter this practice of "expert-ness" and resist the recruitment tactics that emphasise the power we hold as "professionals" in a "specialist

service”, which subsequently moderates the needs of survivors through this authorised cultural lens? A diversity of members in the team with a “shared” purpose in responding to survivors of sexual assault in a “trauma and violence informed” way, can prove that there are many pathways to this purpose. The SART service itself is the first of its kind set up in the state, and I know that there is a distinctiveness to this service of working alongside survivors throughout the entire process that is not the norm in other sexual assault response teams. My role as the sexual assault support worker is quite unique comparatively to other sexual assault support worker roles, but also within the context of SART. Whilst other members’ active roles may be time and purpose limited, the extensive and holistic nature of the support worker role means a continuation of working alongside survivors throughout the entire process. This unique role in the team makes it possible to see the ways in which power can rise up in different spaces and consequently can get in the way of the survivor centered model we espouse. This distinction means as support workers we negotiate a delicate balance of a “professional” in a “specialist team” but also finding ways to genuinely invite the survivor into the team; and more broadly, we have a unique space to innovate a practice within the team that draws on the insider knowledge of the collective stories of survivors in order to encourage social and systemic change.

What then do we mean when we promote “survivor-centred”? In what ways can the survivor be invited into the team and their insider knowledge be at the centre of meaningful decision-making? Narrative practices of inviting the survivor and their insider knowledge into the processes of SART supports this “survivor-centred” model. It becomes a unique part of the support worker role to remain alert to how power can show up in different ways and offer opportunities for survivors to respond to these tactics of power in a safe and supported way that elevates their own unique insider knowledge (Denborough, 2006; Epston, 2001).

The first time I met Jess ~ The start of double story development

It's a Friday night on call when the phone rings, I pick up and it's a triage nurse from the hospital. The nurse says she is seeking support for a woman, Jess, who had arrived and reported a recent incident of sexual assault. The nurse said that Jess wanted to talk to police about reporting this assault. I contacted a detective from our team and arranged to meet him at the hospital. When we arrived and met Jess she told us what had happened to her. Jess had to repeat this story a number of times that night, and each time I heard Jess repeat the story of abuse she repeated a number of times in various ways *"I've had enough, I've told him again and again, he can't keep doing this to me."* After this initial conversation, I spent some time with Jess to talk to her about the process of SART and ongoing support, we discussed some of the immediate options that were available to Jess from medical, forensic and therapeutic contexts, and again, Jess spoke about a determination to have this behaviour enacted towards her stop. Based on this resolute statement, I was curious to follow a conversation that explored the movement of hope and determination through questions that navigated and made connections with a landscape of action and identity, and additionally invited opportunities for double story development, that make visible the absent but implicit, and that richly describe and validate the ways in which Jess has responded to violence and abuse with agency and intention (Denborough, 2006; Denborough, 2014; Freedman, 2012; White, 2000; White, 2004; White, 2007; Yuen, 2007; Yuen, 2009).

The following questions intended to trace a history of the way in which Jess responds to “behaviour that was never okay” and additionally invite consideration of the way in which Jess has persisted with these responses over time. I wanted to create a foundation for re-authoring that explored landscapes of action and identity and invited opportunities for Jess to (re)connect with what she gives value to (White, 2007).

■ *Jess, I’ve heard you say a number of times that you’ve had enough of this behaviour; I heard you talk briefly about the efforts you’ve made over time to let him know that this behaviour was never okay, and you mentioned many things that have been in your way to talk to people about this. I am wondering, what steps did you take that made it possible to come here and talk to us tonight?*

Jess: I’ve had lots of time to think about this. Me and my ex-partner, we broke up a while ago. The only reason we saw each other again was that I was picking up some of my personal stuff I had left at his house. When I was there, he seemed really calm, which was unusual. Towards the end of our relationship, all we did was fight, which always ended with him hitting me. But he seemed different today. It seemed possible to talk to him about all the hurt he’d caused me. When I was talking to him, he had his head in his hands and he seemed really reflective about what I was saying; and I thought to myself, oh my god, he’s actually hearing me! Somehow throughout the relationship I managed to hang on to some hope that he could change, that he deserved to change. But after I finished talking, he looked up at me with those eyes that he had, and yeah... I guess he wasn’t really taking it in at all.

By making visible Jess' connection with a uniquely and personally defined hope that seemed to be connected to change, I wanted to invite Jess to consider the ways this hope for change (or hope for something else) might be supporting her to make important decisions tonight; that what Jess gives value to might actually support her through this process.

■: *Jess, you said that despite the violence and abuse perpetrated towards you, throughout the relationship you managed to hang on to some hope that he could and deserved to change, the steps you are taking tonight, does that fit with this same hope? Or is there a different hope tonight?*

Jess: I guess it's kind of the same hope. Like, I loved this guy, I still have that hope that he can change. But I think now there is also a hope for accountability. You know, I grew up learning that you had to answer to something when you did something that wasn't okay.

Jess had described and made a (re)connection to a hope connected with change as well as a different hope for accountability. I wanted to re-acknowledge these hopes and provide an opportunity to re-tell and enrich the story of these hopes. I was also curious to explore if they had any relationship with each other. Was there a way that Jess could honour both of these hopes in the actions she was taking tonight?

■ *Can you describe a time when the "change" or the "accountability" has worked out? Can you help me to understand what steps you might have taken towards them when something wasn't okay? I wonder, has there been a time when the change and the accountability have worked well together?*

In the opportunistic windows of time for these initial conversations, in the busy space of the hospital, and in between police, medical and forensic team members coming in and out, asking more questions of Jess, Jess went on to richly describe a number of accounts where she took steps towards *change* and *accountability* even before the violence and abuse

started and even when the violence and abuse got in the way. In these conversations, Jess made an initial and somewhat thin (re)connection with what these actions said about what was important to her, which she gave an experience-near name of *having my story heard*. Despite the busy and chaotic space of the hospital I was able to acknowledge and validate these steps towards what were important to Jess, and provided further acknowledgement that despite this space, I was witnessing Jess in this moment, still finding ways to (re)connect with what was important to her; taking steps towards *change* and *accountability* in order to *have my story heard*.

The Telling, The Telling and The Telling

Jess: The last year and a half has been a whirlwind of appointments, meetings, court mentions and a lot of waiting around for the next step. When I made the initial report to police, not a lot seemed to be happening after that, except for me telling my very private story over and over and over again to many, many, many people. I'm a really private person; I hadn't even spoken to my family about this in so much detail. But telling so many strangers every detail of what happened to me, it felt like I had shed my skin in front of everyone. I felt so exposed and vulnerable.

As the night went on, Jess had to describe what had happened to her another four times to different medical staff, forensic staff, and a change over of detectives. The effects of the telling and the telling and the telling³ throughout this process becomes noticeably

³ When I refer to “the telling, the retelling and the retelling”, I am referring to the way in which narrative therapy offers a decentred and influential position to explore double story development of the way in which a survivor responds to trauma with agency; the way in which the art of the conversation can (re)connect survivors with hopes and determinations that support justice seeking and healing. Here, I refer to “the telling, the telling and the telling”; this is distinctly different and refers to the parts of the process of reporting sexual assault that requires survivors to retell the account of the assault again and again, often causing further distress and suffering to the survivor and threatening the validation of a single story and diminishing the multi-storied nature of survivors’ lives.

exhausting to survivors. These initial steps of investigation often cause further distress and suffering for survivors, and can be distant and disconnected to the hopes and purposes of a survivor's determination to report what has happened. This process can often ask and require a survivor to take steps that ignore the agency of her responses and intuition that protect and take care of her safety. From a decentred and influential position, a fundamental part of my role in this initial meeting is to very promptly connect survivors with a landscape of action and identity that can offer a *foundation of determination* that supports survivors to make the necessary immediate decisions in that initial meeting, but also throughout a very long and grueling process that may follow through to a trial in District or Supreme Court often years after the initial report. Conversations with Jess, even now after she has been to trial, continue to come back to that same *foundation of determination* that we talked about in the very beginning of *change* and *accountability* in order to *have my story heard*.

Despite a focus and intention to address consistent feedback from survivors, and amongst competing purposes and agendas across the diverse members of SART, we continue to face challenges to find ways that reduce the requirement for survivors to repeat the story of the assault over and over again, and that when they do have to do this, there is practice that is grounded in double story development. While there are clear roles amongst the team members, many of their differing purposes require collating information and evidence for different reasons, and in very distinctly different ways. The challenging nature for survivor's having to engage in the telling, the telling and the telling can tempt questions that strongly align with a culture of individualising and internalising the very political problem of sexual assault and men's violence towards women (Baretta et al., 2010; Dang, 2018; Pedersen, 2015; Yuen, 2019). As the support worker, it may or may not be appropriate during the investigative processes of SART to call out and make visible these internalising tactics that

can later show up masquerading as “self-blame”. Inevitably however, I notice that the effects of these processes and language show up in an ongoing way in the counselling room, where there is often increased safety and space to become curious and interrogative about these taken for granted ideas.

The Retelling

“The personal is political” ~ Linking single stories to shared experiences

“The ripples from the Women’s Liberation Movement and the feminist politicising of everyday life were key threads in the development of narrative practice. The ripple continues”. (White, 2019, p. 57)

The political nature of shared experience demonstrates the connection between women’s private lives and their social experiences influenced by the dynamics of patriarchal power. In the 1960s and 1970s, during the second wave of feminism, this prominent feminist slogan provided a framework to consider the relationships women were facing between their personal experiences and the broader fight for equal treatment (Hughes, 1997; Russell & Carey, 2004; White, 2019; White & Yuen, 2019). *“The personal is political”* makes visible the gendered nature of social experiences that are taken for granted and supported by dominant beliefs and values that support a patriarchal culture (Coates, 2003; Hanisch, 1970; White & Yuen, 2007).

“The personal is political” has become a significant influence in the work I do with women; a reminder of the political nature of this work, and ultimately the philosophical foundation for this project. In acts of activism and politicisation *“the personal is political”* has become a “feminist friend” that supports me to see the gendered nature of violence and

abuse against women, to observe the ways in which women are silenced and pathologised within medical, legal and judicial spaces, the way a patriarchal culture that supports individualism, victimisation, medicalisation and self-responsibility ultimately blames women for the harm they have experienced, and directs the responsibility of healing and justice seeking solely on them (Baretta et al., 2010; Dang, 2018; Denborough, 2008; Freedman, 2012; Hanisch, 1970; Pedersen, 2015; Russell & Carey, 2004; White, 2019; White, 2016a; White & Yuen, 2007; Yuen, 2019).

The problem is the problem ~ Externalising and politicising single stories

Since working with Jess, she has told me about some of the times when various systems and processes (outside of the SART process) have intersected with her life due to escalating violence and abuse perpetrated towards her. Jess described the ways in which “support services” concerned with criminal justice, mental health, drug and alcohol use, child protection and education have all contributed to a narrative of Jess as *bad mother*, *junkie*, *perpetrator* and *criminal*, ultimately perpetuating an idea that “Jess is the problem.” Jess reflected on the ways in which the violence and abuse has made invisible what is important to her, the ways in which these powerful institutions have ignored the effects of violence and abuse on Jess’s life and ignored the ways in which Jess persistently took steps to *anticipate*, *protect* and *keep safe* from the violence and abuse.

White’s (2007) externalising and re-authoring maps introduced a path towards conversations that took Jess out of the problem, and made visible some questions about taken for granted ideas of what it meant to be *victim*, *deserving*, *good person*, *protective mother*, *strong*, *resilient* and *worthy*. I asked Jess to describe what it was like to receive these messages from “support services” and what those message had made possible or visible to

her about what was valuable in her life but also what was valuable to the “support services”. Jess gave these interactions an experience-near name of *power and control over me* and through tracing a landscape of action alongside a landscape of identity, Jess identified a determination and a skill of *advocating for myself*. Questions that externalised, deconstructed and politicised Jess’ experiences were so important as they explored: *why was it necessary for advocating for myself?*; *where did the power and control sit in this space?* and *who benefits from the power and control sitting where it does?* These questions make visible the absent but implicit and the agency Jess embraced in her responses to violence and abuse and the systems and processes using *power and control over me*. Jess identified a mimicking of tactics of violence and abuse being acted out by the “support services” and identified the problem of systems not being set up to identify the *real problem*. Jess named the *real problem, the recruitment to power and control*. Jess described the way in which “support services” get recruited into the tactics of violence and abuse and therefore (re)perpetuate tactics of *power and control, intimidation, blame and gas-lighting*.


Jess was *moved (v)* from a personal understanding of the problem with internalised ideas – that there was something wrong with her as an individual, mimicking the pathologising language of *junkie, bad mother* and *criminal* towards herself – to a multi-storied understanding of herself that included ideas of being a *good person, protective and resilient* which had cultivated the skills of *advocating for myself*. Further interrogation of power opened conversations that brought a broader political understanding of the problem; an understanding in which Jess *moved (v)* towards the experience-near name of *advocating for change*. This made possible conversations about the way in which Jess understands *power and control* in relationships within society and has made a strong (re)connection with values for *fairness* and *social justice*. The co-discovery and connection of collective stories and

shared experiences in Jess' unique story has built a foundation for Jess to take action with these new understandings. Jess has recently enrolled in a Bachelor of Social Work and has every intention to bring the purpose of *advocating for change* with her throughout the degree and into her career to contribute to the lives of other women who are navigating "systems". By means of co-discovering these connections of shared experience, the relationship with Jess became rich with a shared hope for change making possible conversations that *moved(v)* us both to a new understanding of *the real problem*. These conversations have been quite profound and have genuinely transformed the way I see a purpose in this role for noticing the way in which power shows up in our lives.

The problem is the "system" ~ Making visible shared experiences

More particularly relating to the survivors I work within the context of SART, narrative therapy and a deconstructing lens has made visible the shared political experiences of survivors, especially within the "criminal justice system". Many of the conversations I have with survivors require externalising and re-authoring conversations that interrogate the power and control experienced as a result of the systems and processes survivors are required to engage with, in order to report crimes of sexual assault. Getting to know the effects and influence of the problem helps survivors to position themselves in relation to the problem (Carey & Russell, 2004; Denborough, 2014; White, 2007). Supporting many survivors over many years to interrogate the power and control experienced within the "criminal justice system" has me recognising common themes and shared experiences. This influences the way I work with survivors and the questions I ask to support survivors to find their own position to these experiences.

In the first conversations I have with Jess I am inviting a (re)connection with what Jess gives value to. The externalising and re-authoring in these conversations form a foundation of acknowledging actions of resistance throughout this process. This conversation highlights a retelling though the weaving in of previous conversations and preferred stories and actions; and (re)connects them with a parallel story of interrogating the power within the “criminal justice system”. I wanted to make room for the possibility that these foundations can experience movement and change; invite in new concepts; encourage curiosity for their relationship with each other; and make visible new knowledge that links Jess’ personal stories to shared experiences of a political system that uses its power to silence survivors as the author of their own stories. I wanted to invite Jess to consider possibilities of regaining authorship of her own stories as well as the ways in which this process could change to elevate the preferred stories of survivors and encourage (re) authorship for survivors.

 *We’ve been working together for about two years now Jess, I am wondering if we could spend some time today tracing a bit of history of the experiences you’ve had so far? I know we’ve talked about things that have happened along the way, and how they have affected you, but I wonder from where you sit today, is there anything you could tell me about the process as a whole? Is there anything that you know today that brings a new understanding of how you’ve got to this point? Is there anything that you know today that influences the way you think about “change” and “accountability” and “having your story heard”?*

Jess: The police said to me at the very beginning, “this is your chance to tell your story”; and when I

first reported to police, they listened to everything and even asked if I wanted to tell more of the story. I decided not to at that point, because I thought what I had told them was the best chance I had to hold him accountable for what he had done to me. But as time went on, the more “professionals” I met with, the more I was told about what I could and couldn’t include in my story. Once I started talking to prosecutions, the story I had told police started being cut and paste and edited into something that didn’t represent the whole story. It felt like I had been removed from the story.

Jess' description of having control of the way the story was told, brought to my mind a metaphor of being the author of a story, and the concept of having "authorship", I was curious to explore this further and consider the effects of the changing nature of the "authorship" in this space. I was curious about what the "authorship" made possible in these initial stages of reporting, and what had gotten in the way of Jess being the author of the story; who was now telling the story; and who was benefiting from this edited and adapted version.

■ *When you describe the way you talked to police about the story, it sounds like you were the author? That you had control of the way the story was heard? Am I getting that right?*

Jess: (Nods).

■ *Can you describe a time when you noticed that this had changed, that there was a sort of editing to your story that was occurring? Did you notice, was there anything in particular that got in the way of you having control of the way the story was being told?*

Jess: I remember receiving a letter from prosecutions saying that they had received the information for the case and were reviewing it. But what stood out to me in that letter was that my name wasn't even in the title of the case; it was "The Crown vs. him". Where was I, I thought? I didn't think much more about it at that time, but now that I've faced a trial I can see, what they really mean when they say "I'm just a witness". Yeah, "just". No longer the author.

■ *The experience of being "just a witness", it sounds like this contributed to authorship moving further away from you? You hinted that in the beginning when you first spoke to police it felt like you had more choice and control about what parts of the story to share and not share, am I getting that right?*

Jess' hindsight noticings of not being named in the correspondence from the prosecutions provided a turning point for discussions. These questions aimed to explore the effects of having authorship, alongside the effects of being "just a witness" and to externalise and politicise the experience of being "edited". This became a significant conversation and realisation for Jess and myself as the questions and Jess' considerations made visible a shared purpose of "accountability" amongst the initial team and exposed the "system" as the problem. Jess' language moved(v) from an individual problem to an understanding of the way in which the "system" takes power and authorship of her story. This new found knowledge continued to inform the way Jess made sense of what had happened throughout the process of court and the trial and allowed Jess to give this injustice an experience near name of: *"there's so much more to the story"*.

Jess: Yeah. At that point, it felt like I was being listened to. Like, you, me and Matt and Dave (SCU), we were a team. I sensed a reciprocal kind of outrage for what had happened to me and that we were working together towards accountability. But since it's moved to court, it's like none of us get a say. Like, if things weren't going smoothly with the police or at the hospital, you could talk to them and we had some influence. But now, I keep hearing, "Well, the judge will decide that at the end of the day." So the judge gets to decide all of these things without even talking to me, cause I'm "just a witness". Then even when I do get to "have my day in court" I'm told, "you can say this", "you can't say that", "don't mention his drug taking, or any of the violence from

before". And the defence barrister doesn't seem to have any of these rules! No wonder the jury couldn't come to a decision, they haven't even heard the whole story. There's so much more to the story!

Collective stories and shared experiences within the "criminal justice system" make visible a culture of silencing survivors. Questions that make room for interrogating the power can draw attention to survivors' agency in responding to violence and abuse and inviting them to take a position, which can externalise and make visible a greater political injustice as the problem.

The Retelling ~ There's so much more to the story

With an overwhelming compilation of collective stories and shared experiences of the court and trial part of the SART process, it makes visible the enormous and firmly established culture of systems and process that feel untouchable, unchangeable and uncompromising. Powerlessness and hopelessness creep in at this time and I notice that the tactics of the power and control on survivors start to seep through to the work we do individually and as a team. I notice that the power I have had with other members of SART is diminished in this space and we all become stifled into positions of silence and etiquette. The very long established and powerful ritual of our “criminal justice system” takes over the process and it seems that the work we have all done together to externalise and politicise the problem is suspended during this time; and we all, *especially survivors* have to “just get through it”. There is a blatant injustice to the way in which survivors are treated in this space, further perpetuating the effects of violence and abuse.

The devastation and destruction that can occur from this process is then picked up again in a therapeutic context. Typically, the rest of the SART team disperses at this time and the focus becomes managing the effects of what has happened in the counselling space. The effects of *there's so much more to the story*, at this time can often leave survivors feeling abandoned and discarded and (re)connects them into earlier unhelpful narratives of “*I don't believe you*”, “*this is not important enough*” and “*you need to prove your worth*”. Court and trial reveals another layer of power that requires interrogation. However, the earlier conversations become really important at this time to reposition and (re)connect the survivor to what is important to them (i.e., *change* and *accountability*).

The previous (re)connection with knowledge, values and skills invites a practice that further validates and acknowledges survivors' responses to traumatic experiences and invites opportunities to engage in another retelling of these preferred stories and alternative ways of being and responding in the world (Denborough, 2006; Denborough, 2014; White, 2006; White, 2007; Yuen, 2007; Yuen, 2009).

As Jess described the effects that the process was having I felt compelled to respond in a way that acknowledged Jess' agency and resistance to what was not okay (White, 2004; Yuen 2009). Throughout the time Jess and I have been having these conversations, we have built a foundation of richly described hopes, values, purposes and motivations. The value for "change" and "accountability" has stayed steadfast and has therefore become a consistent anchor point in conversations where Jess felt let down and betrayed by the "criminal justice system".

Jess: This process has been absolutely grueling. I didn't realise how many times I would have to talk about what happened to me. I remember way back to when I first went to the police, when I had decided what had happened was not okay. After I made my statement, they said the hard part was over! That wasn't true.

■ *This prolonged process that has had you speaking again and again about what happened to you, pushing you into difficult conversations with people you weren't expecting, but nevertheless, you have persevered. I'm wondering, what has kept you connected to the motivation that what happened was not okay? To a value of change and accountability?*

Jess: I thought long and hard for fifteen months about how I could let him know that this was not okay. I really thought that I could just deal with it on my own. But he just kept treating it like a joke. I had to think about my safety, I had to think about how he would react. I actually spoke to lots of professionals before I got connected with a police officer that actually took me seriously. Everyone I spoke to in that fifteen

months made me believe that it wasn't important enough to report; that I should just deal with it and move on. I always knew what happened wasn't okay, that's why I made multiple attempts to report it.

Outsider witnesses as a counter practice ~ Inviting contribution from SART to innovate social change

I considered the use of outsider witness practices as a hopeful approach to invite in opportunity for survivors to (re)gain authorship of their story, but also to use the influence of a dynamic conversation between survivor and “professional” to encourage a (re)connection and *move (v)* towards to a shared value of a “survivor-centred” model. The artful questions in an outsider witness practice sets an intention not just for personal (re)connection, but also an innovation towards greater social and systemic change (White , 2016b). I note here that this practice is not intended to diminish or minimise the injustice the survivor has experienced throughout a trial, but as a counter-practice to the damaging and destructive silencing that has come beforehand, to promote transparency within the team, to challenge the culture of “expert-ness”, and to invite survivors in an authentic way into the very centre of our team encouraging and innovating social change (White, 2004).

As “professionals” participating in part of a very well established and accepted ritual of the “criminal justice system”, I acknowledge the power and privilege I hold in my role and notice the ways in which survivors so bravely hand over control of their important stories with hope that they will be respected and upheld to what is fair and just. There is power in highly validating the stories of survivors, not to invalidate these experiences of trauma, but to build on alternative storylines, storylines that (re)connect survivors with what is important to

them, and simultaneously to *move(v)* witnesses into profound and transformative change (Dang, 2018; Denborough, 2006; Denborough, 2014; White, 2004; White, 2016b).

With this invitation to Jess, she wrote a statement to be shared with SART which she named *There's more to the story*:

*It seems impossible.
A rape case against a past relationship,
is it even possible to win?*

*REPORTING
It took me 15 months to report to police.
I had my reasons.
I am a private person,
I didn't even tell my family about this.
I was trying to deal with things myself.*

*Until he confessed everything to a new girlfriend,
and she began to text and call,
wanting me to "just get over it";
that he was a different man to her.
"Let bygones by bygones" she said.
Seriously, WTF!*

*Then she wanted to befriend me,
have coffee down the strand with me,
and discuss how she should handle him in their relationship!
Um, NO!*

*After these messages, police told me I should get a new DVO.
I went to the DV service in town the very next day.
I made a statement in my application for a no contact order, which
included details about the sexual assault.
I got it stamped by a JP and given a court date for two weeks later.*

*At court I spoke to a duty lawyer.
I asked about pressing charges for the rape.
She explained that "the process was extremely difficult,
many years and he may not even get in trouble".*

She said "I think you should be happy with the 5 year no contact order"

!!

So, I tried.

I went to police the next year.

My initial experience was with a duty officer.

A huge tattooed man.

His advice whilst I explained my situation was...

"if you want money from him, this is not the way to do it".

After hearing that I had been sober for 6 years,

he showed me his AA tats and said "we should forgive as addicts".

!!

Far out!

I went away and thought for another week.

I went back.

Finally, the nice office ladies called Ryan down from Sexual Crimes Unit.

Ryan was really good; calm; and got straight onto it.

He called [REDACTED] and she came straight down.

Everything there was handled really well.

I handed over my phone,

all the text messages were copied

I gave my DV letter,

and gave a statement.

Ryan kept me up to date and let me know when

he was finally arrested.

Mitch arrested him.

Mitch told me how he was aggressive towards police and used aggressive words towards me.

Even though later that could not be told to the jury.

He got bail the next day.

The judge said,

"it's an historical case,

he is no danger to her".

*He had just broken the no contact order a month before,
caught by police with alcohol in hand at my front door.*

I called police,

They took 45 minutes to come,

he was still there.

He had just been taken home after he was bailed

with virtually no conditions

to a house just 3 streets away

*On a Friday afternoon at 5pm,
after he got bail,
the police suggested to me
“you should move
NOW!!”*

*The next year is a whirlwind
of “court mentions”;
and bugger all.
A lot of me telling my very private story
over and over again,
to many many people.
Extremely stressful.*

*I was sure he was staying at his bailed unit most of the times,
I called to ask them to check.
They said “we checked a week after his bail
he was there,
so no need to check again.”
How great for him!*

*For me,
over twelve months of looking over my shoulder
Just doing things daily;
he was in the same suburb.*

*Apart from with [REDACTED]
Every contact... police, DPP...
went completely quiet
for over a year*

*I got a court date.
Finally
Even then, the DPP only sat down and spoke to me for 30 minutes,
3 days before the court date.*

*DPP
When I sat down I was told,
“This is your time to tell your story”.
But...
“You can’t mention this, this and this”.
Well, it’s not my story then is it?*

*It was clear from the start that this was not even my case.
I was "just a witness"
in "The Crown vs. Him."
I was hardly told anything.
Because, "we can't coach the witness".*

*I hour before taking the stand,
"his girlfriend's text messages are out".
"don't talk about past violent events"
"don't mention his drinking and drug abuse"
"luckily we got his previous violent convictions in".*

*I got up,
gave evidence,
without a screen.
I knew what had happened.
I was clear in my head.
But, all I got to explain was my side of the rape*

*Then
Defence was able to just;
grill me.
The things that they were allowed to suggest,
are absolutely disgusting.*

*Prosecutions have so many rules to follow
Defence can just totally destroy you.
Loopholes,
sniggering,
as they suggest,
sarcastic comments
under their breath,
but loud enough to hear.*

*He did a runner,
from the first trial;
I knew I was in danger at that point.
But the jury could never be told,
not at the first trial
and not at the retrial.*

*It was treated as a joke.
Defence lawyers, laughing about his "runner"
while I was sitting right there.*

But they're not the ones in danger.

*It went on without him.
Defence closing statements
are totally demoralising
no victim should ever have to hear these!
New horrible suggestions,
without being able to reply.*

*They said "I had fallen off the wagon,
slutty ex-girlfriend,
ringing for booty calls".
They made up lies.
They said he had taken responsibility for hitting me,
but in no way could this possibly lead to rape.
"it isn't his MO".
They said "no adult takes 15 months to report a rape".
The report I made at the DV service was apparently "hear say".
I was turned into a "pissed off ex" that was having "booty calls".*

*All evidence should be at least heard
The 12 people
both parties
then make a decision*

*"Not guilty!"
He paraded in front of me
laughing.
Off he went, to collect his stuff and go.
To a house just 3 streets away.*

*If I was not
who I was
I would have taken my own life*

*2 days later,
my body collapsed.*

*I would not recommend this
to any woman,
until things change*

*But I guess that's probably the point...
make it so difficult that no one goes through with it?*

It's a battle of who quits first.

*Perhaps it would have been easier to prove
If he had killed me like he said he would.
He probably would have killed himself too.
He always said, *if he killed himself,*
*he would take me with him.**

Those messages, they never go away.

*It was a significant part of this story that Jess highlighted the messages she received from professionals and others throughout this process.

Therapeutic documentation ~ the (re)authoring of Jess' story and a (re)connection to the *foundation of determination*

The process of creating this therapeutic document offered Jess an opportunity to consider the story she wanted to author. After a devastating outcome at the trial, the effects of injustice were so very present in Jess' life and the process of documenting *there's so much more to the story* invited further conversations and opportunity for Jess to (re)connect with previously named values of "change" and "accountability". The process that is offered through the "criminal justice system" very rarely delivers the "accountability" that survivors are seeking and so the conversations that occur following this process appear as another test for survivors to bow out from justice seeking. While (re)connecting with the *foundation of determination*, previously named values can transform and take on new meanings. For Jess, the value of "accountability" became a focus of conversations again, and it became important for Jess to question the taken for granted ideas of "accountability" that simply suggest that if someone breaks the law, they will face the consequences enacted by the "criminal justice system" that supports victims and sends the "bad guys" to jail. To deconstruct these ideas, I very carefully asked questions with a purpose to invite Jess into considerations outside of this binary and to spark curiosity towards ideas of "other consequences" that take place outside of

this process. I am however especially thoughtful in these conversations that the purpose of considering “other consequences” by no means minimises the experience of this injustice and certainly does not ask the survivor to accept the injustice of the outcome. I formulate these questions thoughtfully and cautiously and to the unique circumstances of the survivor. For example:

- *I’ve noticed that the hope for accountability has stayed very determined throughout this process Jess, I am wondering, has your understanding of accountability been tested throughout this process? Has this process brought about a new understanding of accountability and what “consequences” he may or may not face?*
- *If these taken for granted ideas of accountability that we have discussed aren’t adding up here, are there other ideas of accountability or perhaps “other consequences” outside of this process that fit better with your understanding of this Jess?*
- *Jess, you’ve spoken about a new understanding of “accountability”, what has this new knowledge made visible or possible for you?*

The carefulness I keep with these questions requires safety, time and a gentle awareness of the ways in which I, and Jess could be recruited into the acceptance of this injustice. The questions are very purposefully and intentionally constructed to continue to direct accountability towards the person who has caused harm.

More Retellings

Finding an audience ~ using the power of “expert-ness” to contribute to double story development

From a decentered and influential position, outsider witness practices offer a highly validating and acknowledging space for survivors to take (re)authorship of their stories. I recognise the power and influence we hold as a team and the possibilities for contributions as acknowledging witnesses (Denborough, 2014; White 2004). Having journeyed this lengthy process alongside survivors, members of SART provide a unique audience to these stories and can offer a practice that validates and acknowledges the responses of survivors to traumatic experiences; profoundly reinforcing double story development and preferred identity storylines (Dang, 2018; Denborough, 2006; Denborough, 2014; White, 2004; White, 2016b).

I was aware that there would be some barriers and concerns to inviting this practice into the SART space. I was considerate of the possibilities in which Jess's information and words could be used in very contrasting ways as to what it was intended. I was thoughtful about purpose, who to share with and when, preserving Jess's authorship, timing, privacy, confidentiality, receiving genuine responses that would support Jess's preferred identity storylines and promoting this to fellow SART members who may see this as a cross over of roles, and perhaps "out of their scope". As a way of responding to these considerations, I wrote the following letter to my fellow SART colleagues:

Dear fellow SART member

Jess has asked me to share with you the story of her recent experience of our service, and more recently the experience of going to court and giving evidence at trial.

Jess felt strongly about sharing her story with our team in this way because after the trial she felt like there is so much more of the story that she wanted to be heard.

After reading Jess's story we invite you to respond. In your response, please consider the following:

- *What stood out to you in this story?*
- *What do you think this says about the way Jess has responded to this difficult process?*
- *What do you think this says about what is important to Jess?*
- *What could Jess's story make different in your personal and/or professional life in the future?*

Thank you. By responding to Jess's story you are contributing to an alternative justice seeking process that Jess was unable to achieve through our criminal justice systems.

Sending this invitation and speaking with SART members has proven they see value and worth in these practices, however as expected there are a number of administrative concerns for the way in which this can be participated in by members of SART who are more regulated in their interactions with those we work with. At this time, the invitation and open and transparent spaces for conversation about concerns amongst SART are ongoing. Whilst the outsider witness practices are not possible right now, I am open and determined to find ways that this practice can overcome and survive established cultures that continue to silence survivors and those on their team. I am thoughtful that I do not just want to ask any audience to witness Jess's story (although I am sure there are plenty who might find benefit in her words). Rather than this being just another "telling", there is a purpose in this *retelling*. The strength of the contribution from the "right audience"⁴ for this outsider witness practice can

⁴ I want to acknowledge that perhaps my very firm personal grip to the "professionals" being "the right audience" has kept hidden other possibilities.

make possible profound reciprocal transformation for individual survivors, the team who supports them, those they support in the future and an encouragement of innovative social and systemic change.

Final thoughts

It is a great privilege to be able to work alongside survivors in this way, and to witness the ways in which they respond to and resist the effects of violence and abuse. Our widely accepted and taken for granted rituals in the “criminal justice system” mean that there is a continued need for survivors to respond and resist the tactics of abuse which take away authorship from them and continue to silence their stories. Applying narrative therapy principles within the context of a sexual assault response team makes visible the shared experiences of “single stories” within systems and processes that aim to “support”. Narrative therapy principles, and the creating and offering of opportunities in this context for the telling, retelling and retelling of preferred storylines, makes possible an interrogation of power and “expert-ness”, and rich double story development that (re)connects survivors with preferred knowledge, values and skills that sustain through these times of anguish and suffering. It is survivors’ contributions and continued determination and resistance of these systems and processes that encourages and makes possible innovation towards social and systemic change.

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