

The personal is political: Deconstructing issues of gender, cultural norms and sociopolitical contexts in women's lives

by Cassandra Pedersen

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Abstract

This paper presents scaffolding for therapists and the people they work with to co-investigate the historical, social, political and economic contexts of problems, and the cultural norms that support them. The paper offers questioning tools that invite analysis of the relationships between dominant discourses and the broader doctrines, interests and systems that may benefit from them. These questions are outlined through an account of their exploratory use in the author's therapeutic conversations with a group of women whose difficulties that arose from the economic crisis in Greece were compounded by the effects of gendered and individualistic assumptions. The paper discusses how these narrative questioning methods facilitated the women's evaluation of the operations of power in their lives, and created openings for the reconstruction of preferred ways of being that were in keeping with their values and hopes.

Keywords

narrative therapy innovations, group work, co-research, deconstruction, dominant discourses, individualism, gender expectations, economic crisis, Greece

Investigating the ideologies of problems

This paper offers a series of deconstruction questions that were developed to expand the possibilities for investigating people's restraining experiences by bringing into therapeutic conversations the broader politics of problems. In order to deconstruct not just people's problems, but the patterns of power and knowledge that underlie them, a specific metaphor is involved: that problems have 'ideologies'. The idea that problems employ certain ideologies to enact their influence might sound strange, as we are used to thinking that only people have ideologies. However, the questions presented here provide non-threatening means to unmask, explore and evaluate problems' ideologies, which opens possibilities for co-investigating ways that persons may proceed across the 'known and familiar' knowledges of life to 'what it is possible to know' (M. White, 2007, p. 277).

The metaphor of problems having ideologies developed in the course of my work with Kiki (Pedersen, 2016) who was struggling with the effects of bulimia. Kiki's experiences resonated strongly with me, as I was also struggling with anorexia/bulimia. In fact, I noticed that I felt occupied by Anger whenever I witnessed Kiki's descriptions of inadequacy, and the way that certain dominant discourses claimed to speak the 'truth' of her identity. Thinking in terms of the 'absent but implicit' (M. White, 2000), I realised that my anger wasn't directed at Kiki or anyone around her. Rather, it was testimony to my anti-authoritarian values in relation to something much more abstract and amorphous: 'the context of a culture's discursive "pre-trainings" (in power)' (Madigan, 1996, p. 53).

Foucault (1980) described the constitutive dimensions of 'power/knowledge': that social and psychological realities are cultural interpretations embedded in specific discourses. We both create and are created by these discourses. Foucault argued that we 'are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth' (1980, p. 73). Indeed, while working with Kiki I realised that we had both been introduced to ourselves through the lens of a cultural 'truth' that linked our self-worth with particular female identities and idealised body shapes. At this point, the idea of problems' ideologies represented for me the norms and dominant discourses that enable problems to anchor in our lives. However, the development of this metaphor didn't end there. By the end of our

collaboration, Kiki had found ways to escape the web of bulimia, but I was left with further questions: Who or what promotes these taken-for-granted ideas about ideal body images and female identities? Who takes advantage of them? Might they benefit diet industries whose economic interests depend on them, for example? Is it possible that they are related to neoliberalism or patriarchal doctrines about women's roles? These queries signified a new therapeutic interest in scaffolding conversations (M. White, 2007) to deconstruct relationships between dominant discourses and the norms that they may serve, which may privilege some people over others. The notion of the ideologies of problems expanded to encompass these further questions about the norms, discourses and technologies of power (Foucault, 1977) that are embedded within the problems that people face.

In seeking to investigate the ideologies underlying problems, I was conscious that 'to deconstruct is to undo, not to destroy' (Shotter & Gergen 1989, p. 7). My intention in deconstructing the ideologies of problems was to open space for people to reconstruct preferred ways of being. I developed a series of therapeutic questions to facilitate this task.

Questions for deconstructing problems' ideologies

1. Identifying what is to be deconstructed and the related discourses
2. The intimate context: identifying social experiences that shape meaning-making in relation to dominant discourses
3. Broader contexts: identifying broader forces that shape meaning-making in relation to dominant discourses
4. Linking related discourses under a single name
5. Determining the effects of persons' recruitment into dominant discourses
6. Evaluating the effects of persons' recruitment into dominant discourses
7. Justifying this evaluation
8. Identifying power techniques that dominant discourses rely on to shape ways of being
9. Developing understandings about interests that promote, or are served by, dominant discourses
10. Evaluating these power techniques and interests

11. Justifying this evaluation
12. Finding new vantage points
13. Reauthoring conversations
14. Naming alternative ways of being and further reauthoring conversations.

The following is an account of how these questions informed my work with a group of women who were suffering from the effects of the government-debt crisis in Greece.

The co-researchers

My co-researchers in investigating lived experiences, social forces and local resistances were a group of women who had been seriously affected by the economic crisis in Greece. The initial invitation to form this group was addressed to anyone who had been profoundly affected by the economic crisis, the subsequent austerity measures and the social changes in Greece, regardless of their age, educational background, race or gender. The people who responded to my invitation were all women. I started to meet with a group of five Greek women aged between 22 and 60 years old, from similar low and middle socioeconomic backgrounds. Our work was conducted over 15 sessions, each of two hours.

In the first meeting participants mapped the effects of the crisis in their lives: chronic unemployment, unpaid bills, health problems due to stress. Members of the group were facing many other challenges, including domestic violence, the death of a child from cancer, divorce, unemployment and lack of support from ex-husbands. One of the effects of the crisis was common to all the women and pervaded our discussions: experiences of inadequacy. Through consideration of the contexts and outcomes of these experiences, participants concluded that this sense of inadequacy was particular to their experience as women. From that moment a new landscape of co-inquiry opened for our next meetings: what were the established social and gender standards, according to which participants conducted themselves as inadequate in this challenging time for Greece? The overall purpose of our meetings became the deconstruction of internalised gender assumptions that reinforced participants' experiences of 'inadequacy' as women, mothers, daughters and citizens, especially during the current period of crisis.

Identifying what is to be deconstructed and the related discourses

The participants' reports of experiences of inadequacy prompted an enquiry into the ever-multiplying routes to experiences of personal failure that modern power produces. Michael White (2004) explains that

this system of control depends on 'enlisting people in the discipline of their identities according to socially constructed norms' (2004, p. 174). The group members informed me that while they were working hard to bring their lives into harmony with gender demands that were considered taken-for-granted in their social surroundings, the increased economic hazards complicated their efforts. With this in mind, I invited them to identify discourses about what it means to be a woman of worth in the Greek culture during the current period:

- What expectations about your responsibilities or the missions for which you are considered destined as women, companions, mothers, daughters or citizens, have recruited you into an image of inadequacy regarding yourselves?
- How did your relatives, friends, colleagues or neighbours see the steps you tried to take in order to deal with the crisis, taking into account that you are women? On which notions regarding women and the crisis were these responses based?
- Are there any ways that you think or relate to other people, as a divorced woman, single mother or young daughter, that have been characterised as appropriate or inappropriate, particularly during the crisis?

A collective list (Denborough, 2008) was created, presenting gender expectations that participants were required to approximate in their daily lives.

Collective document: Expectations about women in time of crisis

- Be a financially independent career-woman and be submissive to the male bread-winner.
- Accept badly-paid jobs.
- Accept that women's work will be valued less than men's work.
- Be humble.
- Take care of everything and everyone (household chores, children, husbands, parents, job-hunting, social commitments).
- Do everything by ourselves, without any help. This way, we are more likely to be told that we have done a good job.
- Look helpless when we have a hard time. If we do this we are then more likely to be taken seriously by our husbands or managers.
- Obey consumerism, despite the fact that it does not address our daily difficulties.
- Maintain consumerism in our children's lives.
- Do as well as others in life.
- Always be productive despite the social restraints.
- Become a mother, whether or not this is your desire in life.
- Be 'kind' and 'polite' (especially in front of men) even if we disagree or feel that our values are violated.
- Put others first.
- Be giving and never complain.
- Be healthy. The health problems that result from our hard work are neither excused nor

acknowledged.

- Avoid sharing our burdens with others so that we do not make them feel sad.
- Avoid participating in conversations about political or serious social issues.
- Let men 'orate'. Speak little and listen to them.
- Behave in a kittenish way and appear to be vulnerable in order to find a husband.
- Be low-profile and let men make the serious decisions.
- Be 'well-married'. The criterion is the economic and the social status of the man; not who suits us as a person.
- Be sexually attractive.
- Be fit.
- Quickly lose weight after a pregnancy.
- Be the perfect woman (no matter what this means).

The intimate context: social experiences and activities

Inspired by Vygotsky (1978), I became interested in understanding how the social relations and activities that participants were engaged in had shaped their perceptions regarding these gendered assumptions. I asked them:

- How were you introduced to these expectations and by whom?
- What experiences have been most instrumental in your recruitment into these views and attitudes towards yourself and the people in your life?

The above questions elicited a series of stories about the participants' personal acquaintance with dominant gender ideas. For instance, Ntina referred to her husband's comments regarding her increased interest in political events during this time of crisis: 'Women are not supposed to talk about these things. It's a repulsive sight'. Her husband's response positioned Ntina as an object in 'truth games' (Bess, 1988, p. 14), by which, as Ntina explained, she came to know herself 'as a woman predestined to be low-profile'. White and Epston (1990) noted that men are more likely to be the instruments of the normalising gaze, and women to be the subjects of the gaze (see Foucault 1980).

The broader cultural, political and historical context

The next questions I asked addressed the social, cultural and political contexts of the gender expectations that supported participants' feelings of 'inadequacy':

- How do the media, the system of politics and the church contribute to the survival of these ideas about women?

- Do these expectations circulate most in circles that are considered 'high-society' or middle/working class or both?
- What is the history of these expectations about women, taking into account the political and social changes of the last years? Have you observed any changes in the expectations of women between the time before the crisis and today?

These invitations broadened the horizons of communication in the group. I noticed that participants started to engage in conversations that were no longer conducted in terms of 'I feel' but rather 'we feel'. Later they stated, 'it is important for us to talk about these understandings in the way we do because we can see now that our experiences are not just personal experiences, they are shared experiences that we as women face. This takes a bit of guilt out of us'. So, I decided to build upon the collective speech patterns that were emerging by framing my questions in terms of 'women's lives'. This 'collective language' (Denborough, 2008) made it possible for the participants' shared understandings to be conveyed, shared and acknowledged.

The women's responses to these questions illustrate their understandings:

Lifestyle magazines present a world free of crisis, as if we don't have problems with refugees. Women who care about these things feel we're out of place.

The crisis didn't find everyone in the same position, neither did it effect us equally. For high-society women there was a consumerism model with superficial expectations. Mothers from poor backgrounds had another expectation to worry about, to make it 'ON MY OWN!'

We, who come from a village, faced a contradiction. On one hand, the expectations of the city's consumerism wanted us to be superwomen, and on the other hand, our cultural context wanted us to be submissive to the man.

From 1940 to 74, our people fought in wars. The so-called 'occupation syndrome' followed Greeks. The fear of deprivation led them to save money to buy a house and when they finally bought one, it was considered a big achievement. Later on they bequeathed the house to their children so that they would have a better life. This is how the mentality of buying houses for our children was passed on in the Greek culture. Banks exploited this occupation syndrome and started promoting loans to us. In the past, people went without things to save for a house. Now, when taking out a loan, first you obtain the house and then you go without anything!

In the old times, the church considered a marriage break-up a shame, especially for women. We had to avoid talking openly about problems. Our generation got rid of the shame of break-ups.

Discrimination among classes is a mentality we all have inherited. In the past, people showed off their wealth at weddings where brides wore gold coins. We inherited as women the emphasis on social status regarding the choice of a husband.

When I asked for participants' feedback on this particular session they talked very highly about the uplifting

spirit that their use of the 'non-individualistic voice' (Denborough, 2008, p. 9) generated. They identified a sense of solidarity as the outcome of this 'co-research' (Epston, 2014) into the relationships between their experiences and those of the broader social group of women. Moving between the intimate and broader context extended the edges of participants' meaning-making regarding their gendered experiences. This discussion also challenged the socio-centric/individualistic divide and 'moved between individual and collective voice, to speak more than one language' (Denborough, 2008, p. 187).

Linking discourses, considering the effects of recruitment to discourses, and evaluating the effects of recruitment to discourses

Participants collectively imagined a representation of their lived experiences, embodying the gendered demands they faced. They named it the 'Perfect Giving Bionic Woman' (PGBW). The group then explored the relationship between the effects of the crisis and the effects of PGBW's demands. For example, Rania disclosed that the PGBW was getting in the way of her taking steps to restrict the effects of the economic crisis in her life. She was no longer able to economically support her mother: 'Even though I am beside her with all my heart, caring for her constantly prevents me from working as much as I could, which I truly need right now'. However, even though suggesting that her mum move to public rest home would be a significant step towards alleviating the effects of the economic crisis, Rania said that 'PGBW makes it unbearable for me to challenge the expectation to be a good, giving daughter'. The women clarified that the subjugating ways of thinking, acting and living that were promoted by the PGBW weren't appealing to them. Instead, they treasured values such as having an opinion, physical health and happiness.

Identifying techniques of power

Although we externalised (M. White & Epston, 1990) dominant discourses in the form of Perfect Giving Bionic Woman, participants often retained the impression that their 'subjectification' (Foucault, 1982) to this model was another sign of 'weakness and inability to deal with ourselves in constructive ways'. When this occurred, questions like the following allowed the women to identify the networks of power and relational politics, such as exclusionary practices, evaluation techniques and comments from participants' surroundings, which positioned them in terms of the PGBW.

- Knowing that you value the position of stepping out of the mass, on what methods did the PGBW rely to make you feel bad about that?
- Your ex-boyfriend was trying to dominate your life, body and soul. Can you recall what sort of attitudes would be necessary in order to justify this?

- Do you think that women and men are equally vulnerable to disparaging views about themselves?
What particular strategies are used to recruit you as women to these views and practices?

Participants also considered the disciplinary techniques of institutionalised power (Bess, 1988, p. 11) as it related to the broader conditions of the crisis. One participant described her experience in these terms:

In our company they used to check on us all the time. The schedule was exhausting, the overtime unpaid. There was this practice of being humiliated by those that were hierarchically higher. Besides, both they and I knew there were no jobs out there especially for women, so they could take advantage of that. When you experience this everyday as a woman, it is difficult not to internalise what they pass on to you, that you are worthless.

Analysing the interests that promote, or are served by, dominant discourses

I refer to the economic, social and political benefits distributed by dominant discourses as 'interests'. It is important to note these interests represent snapshots of complex relationships that are continuously in transformation – they are not simply analogous to power institutions. My intention is to let clients compose this snapshot, not me according to my own presuppositions, which are also shaped and influenced within 'a vast ... participatory landscape of community discourse that no person in language [including me] can possibly avoid' (Madigan, 1996, p. 52).

Participants in this group identified several 'global knowledges' (Foucault, 1980) that regulated the power relationships contributing to the positioning of woman as PGBW: patriarchy, consumerism, capitalism and individualism. The following questions are indicative of those that shaped our conversations about the role of interests:

- What would you call the system of beliefs that exclude you, as a woman, from politics?
- What ideologies support the pressure on you to have children, the 'pity looks' and the 'not being complete as a woman' 'truths' that you receive, despite the fact that mothering was not part of your own hopes?
- What or who benefits from the exponential growth of advertisements and TV shows promoting this distorted picture of the daily life of women?

Evaluating and justifying the evaluation of discourses' interests and power techniques

The group had developed a detailed deconstruction of the dominant discourses that led them to become 'docile bodies' conscripted into 'performances of meaning' (M. White, 1986, p. 11). They had analysed the history of these taken-for-granted ideas in their intimate and wider contexts of life, and the 'technologies of

power' (Foucault, 1988) associated with their recruitment to these 'truths'. Finally, they examined the sociopolitical interests that support and benefit from these norms. In other words, they gave voice to the ideologies of their problems.

Subsequently, I invited participants to take a stance regarding those ideologies and to justify their posture. They made it clear that the broader politics which promote the PGBW and suggest their 'inadequacy', did not resonate with their aspirations. Some of them responded:

- I don't accept the mentality of the crisis and the compromises it demands. My job is my right, not a privilege!
- I believe in an education that doesn't ask women to meet PGBW's expectations. To teach our children, regardless their gender, to appreciate love and respect.
- It's worth fighting for the position that we as women deserve. We don't need big revolutions. We need to start with our relationships with our husbands, in our workplaces, in our neighbourhoods.

This last statement acted as a counter-realisation to the 'paralysis of will' (M. White, 2002) experienced in response to the magnitude of the task of achieving social reform. It was in alignment with White's conclusions about the various options to participate in small 'p' political practices. As White stated:

If the operations of modern power are derived through the uptake of self and relationship practices that are first developed at the local level of culture, then there is the ever present potential for people to contribute to social change through the local development and sponsorship of self- and relationship-forming practices that do not directly reproduce the constructed norms of contemporary culture. (M. White, 2004, p. 155)

Despite our deconstruction work, participants displayed two forms of self-monitoring that called for a more persistent engagement with the evaluation stage. The first of these was the idea that asking for help to deal with the daily challenges of living in crisis would be an indignity. The second idea was that they had an individualised 'responsibility to provide goods' to their children. These notions of individual responsibility privatised their problems. To explore the history of this individualist discourse and determine alternative ways of understanding issues as collectively created, experienced and reproduced, I employed a series of questions to invite the women to see individualism as historically located.

Finding new vantage points

The women saw asking for help or being unable to provide goods for their children as evidence of their own inadequacy. However, this point of view did not take into account the broader sociopolitical situation in Greece or the inequalities based on gender that hindered their initiatives. This normative process of

interpretation has been described by Joan Scott (1995), as 'abstract individualism'.

I invited the women to trace the history of abstract individualism from an alternative vantage point. I used a series of questions that I described in a video presentation (Pedersen, 2017) as 'out of the box' questions. These questions invite people to step out of the 'box' created by limiting discourses, and situate themselves in a different scenario. From this new position, the norms, power plays and interests of dominant discourses can be re-evaluated. The knowledges and values that are elicited during this process can be transferred to the current situation in order to move towards a preferred way of being. In this instance, out of the box questions were used to aid the women to reposition themselves in relation to abstract individualism by inviting them to see themselves as part of different social circles; specifically, as part of a historical lineage connected to the experience of Greek women who had lived through previous crises.

Most elderly people in Greece have experienced several social and economic crises. By bringing to light stories about those people's survival, I hoped to provide a chance for participants to detect the different personal and community values that permeated their efforts. Questions were aimed at discerning the ways in which individualism and gender assumptions operated implicitly in participants' lives, informing their experiences of inadequacy, and how this differed from how these discourses had operated in previous times.

Kas: You said that different social circles that talk on the PGBW's behalf have influenced you in relation to the thought that each of you must try on your own to manage the crisis; that it's disgraceful to ask for help and that it's your personal responsibility to provide your children with goods. Let's imagine that we bring into the room figures of older generations. Who can you think of?

Participants referred to relatives, acquaintances and figures in old songs.

Kas: Do you know of any time of crisis that previous generations went through?

Women: The Asia Minor Catastrophe, the refugee movement of 1922, the Greco-German war of 1940, the Greco-Italian war of 1940 and the military junta in 1967.

Kas: What difficulties did past generations have to face?

The group shared stories of their elders and from documentaries on poverty, persecutions, imprisonment and the feeling that even in times of peace everything can suddenly be reversed.

Kas: Did women of those generations have to confront any expectations? Did the PGBW influence them back then or did it have a different form?

The participants looked into some of the ideas they had heard from elderly women, including proverbs such as 'a man is the head but a woman is the neck and turns it any way she wants' and 'don't air your dirty linen in public'. They concluded that even back then there were expectations on women but they mainly focused

on housekeeping and raising children. The expectation for mothers to provide for their children existed but was not experienced with as much guilt as it is today.

The questions I posed were informed by the idea that individualism as an issue is not cut-off from gendered power operations. The 'construct of the abstract individual has been shown by feminist analyses to be either an explicitly masculine subject or linked with attributes that are historically associated with men, such as rationality, autonomy, and independence' (Keskinen, 2004, p. 69) I wondered whether tracing the history of individualistic discourses in gender-neutral terms obscured participants' insights into the role of gender expectations in their lives.

Kas: What did those women do to cope with hardships and expectations?

Koula: Those generations had a neighbourhood and a yard where everyone gathered. They weren't as isolated as women are today, who stay at an apartment in a block of flats.

Popi: The mother of the house cooked for all the children in the neighbourhood. Today we hesitate to visit people because we worry about the fact that we have to bring something and we can't afford it. Those women made a simple spoon sweet by themselves and treated it. While today we stay in watching TV, those women gathered and danced to escape fear and poverty.

Participants' accounts reminded me of the description of contemporary individualism by Bellah and colleagues:

Individualism is a considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste. People form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is their hands. (1985, p. 37)

Kas: What values underlay these women's struggles to survive the hardships of war and poverty? Did they think that it would be shameful to ask for help or did they feel differently?

The women referred to old movies that show female friends organising daily gatherings to speak about their marriage problems. While reflecting on some of their relatives' stories of survival during war, the participants stated, 'Neighbours and the extended family provided mutual support with the upbringing of children during times of crisis'. 'They didn't measure their worth based on the consumerism model'. 'Poverty became a shame after 1980!' 'Yes, they tried to survive and provide for their children but they didn't feel they had to do it on their own. They asked for help'.

Kas: Which values were thought to be invaluable at a difficult time?

Lena: Solidarity, collectivity and bonding among people, in contrast to personal responsibility, individualism and alienation.

'Western culture values individuality at the expense of community, independence at the expense of connection. These are culturally specific values but they are represented to us as human attributes to strive

for' (Denborough, 2014, p. 159). However, our discussion opened space to remember cherished qualities of elders' shared experiences that did not fit within the rhetoric of abstract individualism. Participants talked with pride about the values of this cultural history and they expressed a sense of connection with their elders. It became obvious that despite the expectations to perform as autonomous individuals, they were not willing to renounce the relational aspects of their identity.

Kas: When time passed, and the economy of the country improved, did parents in those generations finally manage to provide their children with what they had been deprived of?

Popi: These generations saw an economic wellbeing they had never experienced before in the political and economic stability that followed the crisis. Having already experienced poverty themselves, they struggled to ensure that their children would have whatever they had been deprived of, sometimes with excessive zeal.

Kas: In what ways might the fact that they had been deprived of the things they could now provide have affected the value they gave to the provision of goods?

Popi: Due to the fact that those generations had experienced poverty, great significance was given to the financial security of their children. The idea of being a 'good parent' gradually became synonymous with being able to provide children with goods. So important was economic independence considered, that success started to be thought of as a personal or family affair and was measured in economic terms.

At that moment, participants had articulated the process by which the form of autonomy that is characterised by 'self-actualisation', had been shaped. White (2007) explains that many of the norms of contemporary Western culture venerate this version of successful personhood, which features what he called the 'encapsulated self' (M. White, 2007, p. 268).

Kas: Which of the explanations of what 'a good mother' or what it means to be 'a capable woman' did our generation inherit?

Lena: Standing on your feet, making it by yourself, providing for your children.

Ntina: Even though these things were possible in the period of affluence, at least for a few socioeconomically privileged groups in our capitalist system, the crisis had a restricting effect on our coping ability.

Rania: The demands on women have increased. Workloads increased, under worse conditions compared to men, while our responsibilities at home were not reduced.

Participants concluded that the difficulty of coping with the inherited cultural claims caused the guilt they felt as women and mothers.

The participants' revision of their inherited values created pathways for acknowledging the politics of their

experience in relation to individualism and gender roles. Specifically, from the perspective of individualism, they were treated, regardless of their gender, as detached entities who were expected to ‘make it by themselves in their lives’. However, participants illustrated that the foundations on which they could ‘stand by themselves’ as women in a capitalist system were gradually being demolished by the circumstances of crisis and by considerable gender inequalities, particularly in the field of labour.

Taking care of others is a highly gendered expectation in Greece. This ‘female duty’ added extra weight on their shoulders, which hampered their efforts to meet the demands of individualism. Apparently gender-neutral individualistic expectations were confronted with the gendered lives of those women, who were experiencing increased hardships in this period.

The women’s descriptions of the process of their oppression seemed to coordinate with the insight of second wave feminism that ‘the personal is political’ (Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993). Accordingly, I pondered ways to avoid replicating the construction of participants’ distress as individual ‘maladjustments’ rather than as a result of the operations of cultural and gender ‘truths’.

Kas: Do you view the ideas related to seeking help and providing children with goods as stable or do you think they change from generation to generation?

Having acknowledged that the current emphasis on the provision of goods and on personal responsibility is greater than it was in previous generations when collectivity was valued, the participants concluded that the meaning of these values is related to the broader historical conditions of each time period.

This was a turning point in our conversation, as it allowed participants to notice that dominant ideas are temporal. David Denborough, commenting on the writings of sociologist Norbert Elias (1987/2001), stated that ‘the “we – I balance” within a group, community or culture is not fixed once and for all, but is subject to very specific transformations’ (Denborough, 2008, p. 189). Correspondingly, it was my intention to ‘bring things back into their original mobility, their openness to change’ (Bess, 1988, p.1). I asked the following question:

- When you see how fragile the meanings attributed to the ideas of ‘standing on my own feet’ and ‘providing for my children’ are, would you come to the conclusion that a woman who lives up to these expectations may be seen as more virtuous?

Participants concluded that responding to these expectations is not a case of morality or higher personal competencies. A mother who provides more goods does not necessarily care more for her children. She just has the means to respond to the criteria her time sets in relation to society and women.

The more participants explored the local and cultural construction of women’s identity, the more they challenged the legitimacy of these normative knowledges. By reconnecting with the collective values of past

generations, they began to recognise the ways they had been participating in the 'grand narratives' of history (individualism, patriarchy and capitalism).

It became clear that it was critical to avoid being taken up with romantic ideas of questioning those 'grand narratives' at the expense of attending to actual expressions of crisis and power. A specific comment came as a wake-up call: 'I don't agree with this system, but this is the system we have, so what can we do?' I realised that asking participants to merely evaluate 'interests' seemed meaningless to them, as it was oriented towards a distant macro-level where the possibilities for change seemed remote. So, I focused my attention on three points:

1. How could I facilitate conversations that would link the evaluation of the PGBW's operations with the real effects of crisis?
2. How could I facilitate conversations that would link the evaluation of interests with the participants' lived experiences of crisis?
3. How could I think about this locally as well as globally?

After considering these questions, I asked:

- If you continued to observe how fragile the PGBW's expectations are, would the guilt continue to blame you for being 'inadequate' or 'undignified'? If you ask for help to cope with the crisis or if you 'fail' to fulfil your children's wishes in exactly the way they or you would like, what counter-realizations are more available to you now?

The women responded that it's not easy to deal with the sense of inadequacy, 'especially when our social circles take expectations of women for granted, and when our children grow up in a capitalist environment that promotes consumerism'. Nevertheless, the women said that they had become more conscious of the wider history of these expectations, and this 'make us feel less "powerless" and "alone" when we notice comments that enhance the PGBW'. They reiterated that 'help is not a sign of "weakness"; it's about "solidarity". We can resist in whatever circles these ideas circulate [family, work, friends, etc.]. That gives us a sense of hope and connection'. The participants' responses reminded me of Foucault's words: 'When I speak of power relations I am not referring to Power-with a capital P – dominating and imposing its rationality upon the totality of the social body. In fact, there are power relations. They are multiple; they have different forms, they can be in play in family relations, or within an institution, or an administration' (Foucault, 1988, p. 38).

Correspondingly, participants affirmed that although they may not be able to stop the crisis, by questioning the naturalness of self-blame, a space was generated for them to weaken the effects of the crisis in their

daily lives. Some sought help from soup kitchens. Another asked her daughter's conservatory to reduce the fees so that she could continue to study. Another asked a friend to help construct a trolley so that she could sell handmade jewellery in the streets. Eventually, participants acknowledged with pride that their resistance at a cultural level (to PGBW's expectations) was connected with their resistance at a political level (to the crisis, individualism, patriarchy and the negative aspects of capitalism).

Reauthoring

'Sparkling moments' in the participants' resistance to the PGBW's demands and the effects of the economic crisis served as entry points to subordinate storylines which gave rise to an increased sense of 'personal agency' (M. White & Epston, 1990). To further elicit these subordinate storylines, I developed scaffolding questions that invited 'landscape of action' and 'landscape of identity' (M. White, 2007) descriptions:

- Can you tell a story that shows how your values arose in your life, despite the PGBW's will? What are the skills and knowledges you have used to stand against the PGBW's expectations?
- What steps have you taken to respond to the consequences of the crisis now that you are detached from the expectations of the PGBW? Who has supported you?
- What steps have you taken to move away from the influence of individualism? What would you call this step? What were the guiding intentions, purposes or hopes?
- What do your realisations suggest about your commitments for your life, for the people you care for, for your community and for the world in general?

Despite the PGBW's expectations and the influence of individualism, Rania accepted help from a person she trusted to take care of her mother. This was a profound step in the face of crisis and individualism. It gave Rania the ability to work, it reduced her stress and it pleased her mother. She named her new attitude a 'step of reconstruction'. 'When I think of this step of reconstruction I feel as if there are angels above me,' she said.

Additional abilities and special knowledges were drawn out through the 'thickening' of the participants' 'small acts of living' (Goffman, 1961).

Absent but implicit: distress as a tribute

By re-situating the history of the problems faced by these women in local relationship politics and broader power relations, alternative interpretations became possible. For example, I asked Popi, 'If your disappointment could speak, what would it say is the value you hold precious, and which the crisis

disrespected?' This 'absent but implicit' (M. White, 2000) question led Popi to understand her disappointment about her long-term unemployment as evidence of her stance on meritocracy: 'The basis of the crisis is economic, but there is also a crisis of values. Claiming a job in meritocratic ways is not easy. However, I feel proud of my stance'.

Naming alternative ways of being and further reauthoring

By naming the counter stories of resistance to problems and their ideologies, the women's 'telos' (M. White, 2002) or commitment to preferred aims and purposes became tangible. Participants named their alternative identity projects: 'independent-thinking woman of solidarity', 'free-spirit woman', 'voice-defending woman', 'ideology-loyal woman of love'.

As reauthoring conversations evolved, several unfolding plans arose: the women planned to speak openly to other mothers about the PGBW and to organise social gatherings with neighbours about 'women helping women' (Yuen & C. White, 2007, p. 12). I invited the participants to think of any men that would appreciate their alternative ways of experiencing themselves. The 're-membering conversations' (M. White, 2007) that followed provided a great deal of support to the women. One of them shared that when she was a child her dad had told her, 'never hang from a man's balls'. She realised that he also believed in 'voice-defending women'. Another remembered the great help she received from her brother when she decided to escape from an abusive marriage. Finally, the group considered a 'society of equality'. They stated their intention to seek 'partnerships with men to work on issues of gender' and renounce a man-blaming approach. The women had begun to live out alternative stories of personal agency and new courses of action.

Final thoughts

I hope to have shown how these conversations for deconstructing the ideologies of problems can be used to disrupt 'the rhetoric of problems and the political scaffolding which supports them' (Madigan, 1996, p. 59).

The metaphor of problems having 'ideologies' offers additional options to look for people's resistance. In addition to considering the ways they have responded to problems and the effects of problems, people can be invited to consider their engagement with the ideologies of their problems. In doing so, they may find this a relevant, approachable and important way to identify ways in which they have refused to acquiesce and submit to problems.

The deconstruction map describes a collaborative process that provides a means for people to identify their

internalised assumptions, the history of dominant discourses in their intimate and wider contexts of life, and the 'interests' that underlie taken-for-granted beliefs. In this way, the ideologies of problems can be unmasked and made available for evaluation. This is particularly important in order to display and deconstruct the practices of power associated with people's recruitment to generalised 'truths'. In our group setting, discourses supporting constraining knowledges were taken apart, and within the context of disassembling, other storylines and meaning-making emerged. Our conversations took the form of a counter-cultural map, which attempted to 'de-thingify' people by breaking them free of limiting cultural (and gender) descriptions.

Questions inviting the women to position themselves within alternative social circles encouraged participants to step 'out of the box' of individualism. They were invited to see themselves as existing within a social tapestry of wider circles, including the elders, with whom contrary collective discourses were encountered. Through the lens of the elders' experiences, the women deconstructed the historical, political and cultural transmutations that shaped the prevailing gendered and individualist discourses that supported their experiences of inadequacy. On that account, the 'out of the box questions' can be seen as an invitation to traverse the 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky, 1978) by unsettling routinely accepted ideologies and rendering them newly strange and exotic. Participants gained a reflexive perspective on issues of 'assistance'. They reinvented themselves in harmony with preferred collective values and they explored new practical options to move through crisis.

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