

Our lives are a story. We all have a dominant story, and this story is seen within a cultural and social context. If our dominant story restrains us from seeing the alternate stories, and thus the fullness of our lives, it becomes a problem saturated dominant story.

These restraints from seeing the alternate story become the problem. In joining, the first step in the therapy, we must objectify or thingify these restraints or problems, by giving them a life of their own. This is called externalizing the problem.

The next step is relative influence questioning. This questioning is to find out how the problem influences the person, their life, and their relationships. You are also continuing to broaden the field looking for unique outcomes. Unique outcomes are events that would not have been predicted by the problem saturated story. You can find these unique outcomes in the present, past, or future.

With these unique outcomes you open up a space for an alternate story. As you set the alternate story beside the problem saturated story you create a double description to present to the client. Before the client leaves, you hand out a noticing assignment. They are to take notice of the victories they have had over the problem.

## Externalizing the Problem

It is not the person who is the problem, or the relationship that is the problem. Rather it is the problem that is the problem. (White)

Envision a table designated as the forum for defeating the problem. On one side we have the problem and its allies and on the other side we have the team working to defeat the problem. It makes sense that we would want as many people as possible on the side fighting the problem. When individuals feel blamed, criticized, or attacked they rarely will join your team. However, when we can neutralize and objectify the problem, we are in a much better position to enlist the help of all. Viewed in this way, a table with a team on one side and the objectified problem on the other side, all can discuss how the problem affects them. Teachers, families, and students are all negatively affected by, for example, "disruptive behaviors"; "rudeness"; and "hesitancy to show abilities."

It is most useful to find time to discuss the problem with the student. Through discussion you can help formulate a description of the problem that fits the experience and understanding of the student. For example, disruptive behavior can be defined and experienced by a child in a multitude of ways. It might be triggered by anger, anxiety, or restlessness; it might be a call for attention; or a result of a child's inability to understand an assignment. Whatever the underlying cause, it is most useful to define the problem based on the child's experience of what is problematic to him/her.

The next step is to delineate all the effects of the problem on each person in the system. How does the problem effect the child (teacher, family) and make things more difficult. This creates the "problem-saturated dominant story" (White). This story is countered by exploring an alternate story, one that is filled with "unique outcomes"; times when the problem was not a problem because someone in the system resisted or ignored the problem behavior. Exploring the unique includes focussing on:

1. unique outcomes (asking questions such as, "How did you do that?" "What made that possible?" "Does that make you feel stronger than the problem?" "Could you imagine doing that again?")
2. unique redescriptions (defining the problem in progressively less problematic terms, e.g., shouting may become talking out)
3. unique possibilities (imagined ways of fighting the problem)
4. unique circulation (noticing and building an audience for unique outcomes)

When we can separate the person from the problem, see the problem as outside the person, we put everyone in a more advantageous position to fight against the problem. We remove blame from the persons affected by the problem. The child

is not "disruptive" rather she is plagued by "disruptive behaviors". The student is not "rude," rather he is "plagued by rudeness". The child is not "lazy and unwilling to apply herself," she is instead "plagued by a hesitancy to show her true abilities." This certainly is in concert with the age-old adage "the child is not bad it is the behavior that is problematic."

When we present the child as good and the behavior as the problem we can more readily enlist the child's help in overcoming the problem. In addition, we often can more easily recruit families to help in our defeat of the problem if they do not feel that their child or the entire family is at fault. Separating the person from the problem can facilitate the following:

1. decreasing conflict
2. undermining a sense of failure
3. enlisting group cooperation in working against the problem
4. reducing stress
5. increasing options for dialogue rather than monologue
6. creating more possibilities for people to take action against the problem

This is not simply a matter of semantics, it is a way of conceptualizing problems that removes blame and opens up avenues for dialogue and creative solutions.

#### Externalizing the problem as a tool for all.

We all are plagued by problematic behaviors. At mid-year we can be especially troubled by things such as discouragement, self-doubt, and perfectionism. These often take the form of negative self-messages. We can counter this self-defeating practice by externalizing the problem. Rather than defining the problem as residing within us, i.e., "I am ineffective, stuck, unable to help this student or teacher" ; we can conceptualize the problem as outside of us, i.e., "I am plagued by discouragement, self-doubt, or perfectionism." After defining and externalizing the problem, we can explore all the ways the problem effects us and go on to explore the unique- unique outcomes, redescriptions, possibilities, and circulation.

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## JOINING

- \* Get to know the person as more than a problem
- \* In finding out about them you can begin to look for unique outcomes
- \* "I know you would like to talk about your problems, but I find it helpful to get to know you first..." tell me about your shoes and what it's like to walk in them  
empathy - the ability to have compassion and understanding for someone else's experiences
- \* Begin to use their languages - the idea is not to get out in front of the client or fall behind them. The idea is to be side by side with them. This is the co-collaboration or co-construction
- \* "What brings you here today?" "What do you think the problem is?"
- \* Use their language

## ETERNALIZING

- \* Get away from the idea that the person is the problem. If the problem is within you, you can become the problem or enemy
- \* Make the problem the problem...make the problem a noun or a subject (Gerund is a verb used as a noun).
- \* Give the problem a life of its own
- \* Feeling bad becomes "the bad feelings"... "when or where do they overtake you"... "what invites you to do this"... "Do they follow you to school, work, home"
- \* the client controls the content and we control the process

## RELATIVE INFLUENCE QUESTIONING

- \* Broadens the field
- \* Use their language - our job is to understand their meaning. Not put our meaning on them. This will be the co-construction
- \* People know intrinsically how to solve their own problems. It is through our questions and the language of the process that we keep them focused on the construction of a new story. They decide where to go. You provide the process.
- \* How does the problem affect you, or have influence over you, your family, your friends, your job, your life? "Do you like this ?" ... "Is this pleasing you?"...
- \* How have you had influence over the problem?
- \* Within an example of the problem you can see the problem
- \* Curious questions - be curious
- \* What keeps you from doing that?
- \* What gets in your way?
- \* How has stubbornness tricked you or lied to you? What has it taken away from you?
- \* How has this unhappiness taken hold of your life? - How can you take the power back?

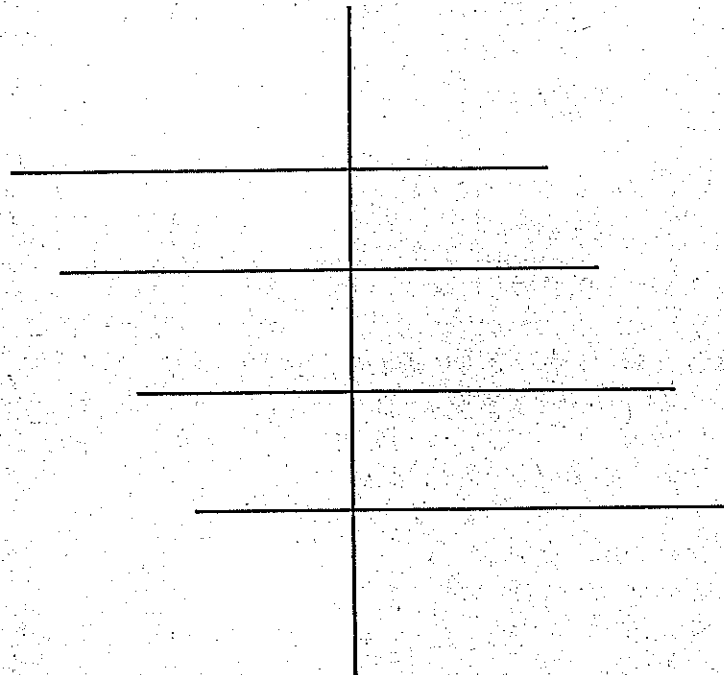
- \* Example :
  - client: My father is the problem
  - therapist: What is it that he does that is the problem?
  - client: He interferes with my life
  - therapist: Tell me about this interfering - What does it invite you to do?

UNIQUE OUTCOMES

- \* You want to help give the person power and control over the problem...What is it about you that allowed you to .....? When the client is successful, how are they doing it?
- \* An unique outcome is an event that would not have been predicted by the dominant story.
- \* You are having people use the strengths they already have - there is nothing wrong with American that can't be changed by what is right with America.
- \* You first attempt to find it is in the present...then the past...finally the future - "How can you imagine yourself?..."
- \* The size of the step isn't as important as the direction is.

Dominant

Alternate



## DOUBLE DESCRIPTION

- \* On one hand I hear ..... but on the other hand you .....
- \* Noticing assignment - take account of your victories over the problems. The client brings these victories back and you audience them.
- \* How will these changes affect your future?

# ALL STUDENTS ARE WELCOME

These Behaviors are Not  
Welcome:

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