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Weaving new stories over the phone

A narrative approach to a Gay Switchboard

by

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In the Wellington Gay Welfare Group/Gay Switchboard, we have developed our own very powerful traditions of how to support men in the process of coming out. These are community-based traditions that are heavily influenced by methods of gaylines around the world, and owe a great deal to our origins in the post-Stonewall gay liberation movement of the late 1970s. This paper describes a framework for the work that we do.

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Coming out

Coming out is a process in which a person ‘rewrites’ the story they have about themselves. Before the process starts, they have a self-story which is more or less heterosexual, a story which they have absorbed from the world around them. It is a story which has them living as a heterosexual, known to their family and friends and workmates as heterosexual, and which predicts a heterosexual future. But for those people who call the Switchboard, this heterosexual story doesn’t fit – perhaps they never quite felt that it fitted, or perhaps rather suddenly it has started to feel very uncomfortable. Often the contradiction between their sexual and emotional desires and the heterosexual story has led to great anguish and confusion, perhaps even for a prolonged period. Coming out is a process of writing compulsory heterosexuality out of the story, and other forms of sexual and emotional expression into it.

As workers on the Switchboard, our role in the process by which callers rewrite the stories of their lives and sexual identities is pretty modest. The callers do the work, usually turning to us only as a preliminary audience, for reassurance, or perhaps when they get stuck. Even though our role is modest, the more we understand, the more we are able to assist the process. In this paper, I’ll describe some of the questions we ask to try to assist our callers remake their stories. I don’t in any way want to imply that there is a series of stages or steps in our counselling work, for this is not the case. For a start, most callers will do much re-storying without our help and will turn to us only at particular points. Even if we were present for the whole coming out re-storying process, it is never tidy or linear. Coming out is more like a process of weaving back and forth between the old story and the new story, between the past, the present and the future, between feelings and ideas.

While it is in the intense phase of coming out that the Switchboard is most often helpful, coming out is not a process that comes to an end – it continues throughout life. We go on developing, making ourselves, refining our stories. Although this paper is geared to Switchboard callers who are in their intense primary ‘coming out’ phase, I believe its underlying ideas can be applied far more widely. Furthermore, there are some similarities to narrative therapy which are explored below and in the table at the end of this paper.

1. Queer listening

More than anything else in our work, we have always stressed the importance of active, empathetic *listening*. It is our prime job to be a good audience both for the old ‘problem-saturated’ story, and for the early editions of an exciting new story. Our listening, then, enhanced by a real care for our callers and a sense of empathy which comes from having had some parallel experiences ourselves, is an extremely significant element of what we bring to our conversations on the Switchboard.

The kind of listening which has informed our training sessions is known in the counselling literature as ‘Rogerian’ (named after the influential psychologist Carl Rogers) or as client-centred listening. My understanding of Rogerian or client-centred listening, and what it has offered to me as a worker, is an acknowledgment of the significance of *reflecting* back a caller’s feelings to them, staying where they are at in a conversation and playing a role of clarifying and summarising where the caller is coming from. These have all been extremely powerful tools and significant philosophical orientations to the conversations we share with callers.

In practice, our listening does something more than reflection. Our callers contact us because we are a gay agency. It is likely that we have been selected as the audience for these stories *because* we are gay. Typically a caller early in the process of coming out has a life predominantly defined by heterosexuality, but has some fantasy or activity which contradicts that definition. As there are few places within the mainstream culture where respectful audiences can be found to non-heterosexual stories, and as the caller has chosen to ring a Gay Switchboard, we feel we have special job to listen for the non-heterosexual and emotional desires, the exceptions to the dominant heterosexual story, and to provide a chance for the meaning of these experiences to be explored. This is what the narrative approach calls *deconstructive listening to the problem-saturated story*, and which we could call *queer listening*. Queer listening is characterised by a special kind of curiosity. We are especially interested in those elements of the story that do not fit within a compulsory heterosexuality. We listen to the heartache, we empathise with the sense of confusion our callers may be experiencing, we reflect back the grief they feel, but we also maintain a curiosity

which seeks to make possible an expanded exploration of the gay element of the story.

2. Externalising homophobia¹

Perhaps the most valuable practical tool that narrative therapy has offered us is that of *externalisation*, but even this technique is not entirely new to our work. The basic theoretical idea of the Switchboard has always been that the problems our callers have are not to be understood as something to do with their sexual feelings but instead are due to homophobia – the fear of homosexuality which still pervades society. It is often useful to explain this concept of homophobia quite directly to callers, and it is commonly quite dramatically liberatory for them to hear ‘their’ problems talked about as being an outside force with its own name – a thing to be dealt with rather than something wrong within the caller himself. Once we have introduced the idea of homophobia, we can often relate the experiences that a caller talks about to that idea. Usually after a while they start doing this for themselves.

Caller: I was always afraid I might be called gay when I was a teenager.

Switchboarder: Where do you think this fear came from?

Caller: Well – my family would have been pretty down on gays. And there was a lot of anti-gay stuff at school.

Switchboarder: Anti-gay stuff? What would you call this? We often call it homophobia². Does that fit for you?

Caller: It was a homophobic place.

Switchboarder: It’s a bit like a disease, isn’t it? The fear of gayness. Would you say that there was a lot of this anti-gay stuff, this homophobia at school?

Caller: Yes, it was pretty bad.

Switchboarder: Can you tell me a bit about that?

Caller: Well there was graffiti in the toilets. And I had the reputation of being a poofter. I don’t know why. I was always getting hassled. I hated school.

Switchboarder: So this homophobia was pretty hurtful, then? What did you do about it?

Caller: I just kept to myself.

Switchboarder: Would you say the homophobia was very isolating for you, then?

Caller: Yeah.

Switchboarder: Tell me something about how you first became aware that you weren't completely heterosexual?

Caller: Well I suppose in the third and fourth form I felt sexually attracted to boys, and I was scared of that – I never did anything about it.

Switchboarder: Would you say it was the homophobia that made you afraid of being gay?

Caller: Yes I suppose so.

Narrative therapy trains counsellors in a general habit of inviting externalising conversations about problems. If someone complains of being ashamed, the counsellor will separate the shame from the identity of the client by a manner of talking about the shame as an entity outside the person, asking where the shame came from, what makes it bigger or smaller, and so on. If someone complains of feeling guilty, the counsellor might ask what conditions make the guilt worse, or even start to talk of the guilt as if it were a person, asking if the guilt has any allies, for example. So, narrative therapists will seek to name a problem as if it were an outside agent affecting a person's life, thereby helping the client escape from the sense of being totally consumed and controlled by the problem, and making it seem more possible for them to have some sense of choices in how he or she deals with the problem.

In some ways we have been using this technique of externalising homophobia right from the time the Switchboard started. We have done similarly with other concepts such as 'heterosexism', 'macho values', 'the closet', and so on. We could, however, probably be a lot more persistent than we usually are with questions which help people see that homophobia comes from outside themselves.

Some possible lines of questions include:

- *In what ways does homophobia control your life?*
- *How does homophobia hurt you? What other effects does it have?*
- *What does homophobia steal from you? What pleasures does it take away from you?*
- *What does homophobia tell you about yourself? Has homophobia robbed you of pride in yourself?*
- *If you look back a year, do you think that homophobia was a stronger influence then than it is now, or weaker?*

3. Relative influence questioning

The externalisation of the problem is made more significant in narrative therapy by a process called *relative influence questioning* which involves two kinds of questions, one kind which maps the influence of the problem on the person, and another kind which involves mapping the influence of people on the problem.

We are applying this technique when on the one hand we draw out the effects that homophobia has on a caller, or on the other hand we draw out ways the caller has been able to hide or escape from the influences of homophobia, or resist it and fight back against it.

Caller: I know that I want to go to the sauna, but I don't know if I have the courage.

Switchboarder: What stops you going, do you think?

Caller: I dunno. I guess I'm afraid of what it will mean if I go there.

Switchboarder: I'm really interested in this fear, and how it stops you doing what you know you want to do. What would you call it? What would you call this fear?

Caller: I dunno.

Switchboarder: We could call it the Fear? Or a fear of gayness? Or homophobia? Or something else? What do you think?

Caller: I'm worried about what I'll think, I'm worried about how others will react. I guess that's homophobia.

Switchboarder: And so, this homophobia, has it stopped you doing other things that you know you want to do? Does homophobia stop you from having any sex with men at all?

Caller: Well I told you about the times when I was drunk with my mate.

Switchboarder: What about when you're sober? Have you ever had any sex with guys when you're sober? What about in your imagination? Do you ever *think* about sex with guys when you are sober?

Caller: Well yeah, I think about sex with guys quite often, but it makes me feel very guilty.

Switchboarder: Is this the homophobia again? Does it make you feel bad about your fantasies?

Caller: Yeah.

Switchboarder: But it isn't so strong that you stop the fantasies?

Caller: No. Not usually.

Switchboarder: How do you think you managed to keep the homophobia at bay long enough to continue having these dreams, these fantasies?

Caller: I don't know. I guess I just enjoy them. They kind of have a life of their own ...

Some lines of relative influence questioning include:

The effect of the homophobia on the caller

- *What kinds of things does homophobia convince you that you should do? What kinds of things does it stop you doing?*

- *How does the homophobia prevent you from going to the sauna / gay bar / coming out group?*

The effect of the caller on homophobia

- *When you were growing up, did you have any ways of hiding from homophobia in your family or at school?*
- *Were there any particular times that you can remember when you managed to lessen homophobia's influence?*
- *What have you noticed what helps make you stronger in dealing with homophobia?*
- *Who are the people in your life who might be allies against homophobia?*

4. Social critique

Inherent in the Switchboard approach is a criticism of a society in which the heterosexual norm is so strongly entrenched. The socially dominant stories of mythical heterosexual bliss are at times the source of our callers' ill-fitting personal stories, and so it is these social stories, as much as the callers' personal problem-saturated stories, which must be unravelled.

Whether it is called social critique or deconstruction of the dominant discourse, what we are doing is helping our callers stand outside the general presumption that heterosexuality is the norm by which all other forms of sexual expression are to be judged. It is not usually useful to offer callers long theoretical explanations about sex-role stereotyping in the patriarchal bourgeois nuclear family! Finding ways to remain sensitive to where our callers are at is important. As a service, however, we do have clear ideas about the sociology of the family, about the role of dominant constructions of masculinity, about the traditional subordination of women, and so on. Our ethical beliefs about these issues inform the questions we ask, such as:

- *Looking back, you've spoken about how homophobia was present in your childhood. Do you think homophobia is present in many people's childhood?*

- *What does homophobia think men should be like in this society?*
- *How does homophobia influence how some people act? What does it have them doing?*
- *What do you think are the effects of homophobia? For men's lives, women's lives, children's lives?*
- *What kinds of things might be done to make homophobia in society weaker?*
- *What do you imagine a world would be like without homophobia?*

5. Exploring sparkling moments

No matter how problem-saturated the story is, there are always exceptional events – moments and actions which are inconsistent with the problem-saturated story, developments in which the problem has not been in control. Narrative workers call these exceptional events *unique outcomes* or *sparkling moments*, and it is from these that new preferred stories are created.

On the Switchboard we explore those moments of fantasy and activity which defy the heterosexual story. We invite callers to talk about remembered childhood thoughts of being 'different', about boyhood camaraderie, about pubescent consciousness of homosexual desire, about early same-sex sexual experiences and fantasies, and about times they as young men stood outside the dominant constructions of heterosexual masculinity.

Some starting questions might include:

- *Tell me about times when you have not allowed homophobia to control you.*
- *What were your first victories against homophobia? How did they happen?*
- *Have you ever fantasised about having sex with men? How did you push the homophobia back enough to let you have those fantasies?*
- *Have you ever had sex with a man? How did you manage to escape the control of homophobia sufficiently for that?*

One of the very best things we can do for our callers is to invite them to catalogue these sparkling moments. But we are not satisfied with sketchy catalogue-style descriptions – we are interested in details. We want to find ways in which little moments can be expanded into sub-plots and linked to other sub-plots. A story lives in the details, and we seek in conversations to build a richness of description of such moments and a relating of such moments to other aspects of life.

So we are interested in where and when and with whom. We are interested in the colour of the other guy's hair and what he was wearing and the music that was playing. We are interested in the kind of personality he had and what his lifestyle was. We are interested in how the caller reacted to the event and the impact it had on the caller's sleep and his work and everything else in his life. We are particularly interested in the details of the meaning of the event for the caller – what the event(s) spoke to him about his life and hopes and dreams³.

We are interested in discovering a variety of *kinds* of sparkling moment or exceptional event. These are not just sexual events. Often the key influence of homophobia is to prevent the caller from disclosing his homosexuality to anyone else. It is often this that is most bothering the caller. There are always exceptions to this aspect of the problem, too – there are sparkling moments of disclosure in even the most closeted of stories. This is not so strange to us – we frequently find ourselves asking a first-time caller to consider what significance the act of calling the Switchboard has had for them. Very often the first call is a courageous exception to the old story in which homophobia has turned important parts of life into 'dirty secrets'. The first call is often a sparkling moment to explore and build upon.

The first call can often also be used retrospectively as in the following example:

Switchboarder: Can you think back to the first time you rang us? Were you thinking about making that first call for very long before you did?

Caller: Yes, for a few weeks.

Switchboarder: Was it hard to build up the courage to ring?

Caller: Yes, I was pretty shit-scared.

Switchboarder: Thinking back, can you explain what that fear was all about, then?

Caller: I guess I was afraid that by calling you I was kind of giving in to being gay. I was afraid of being gay.

Switchboarder: So calling us was in some way standing up to that fear? How did you manage to get it together to call us? How did you overcome the fear about gayness?

Caller: Well I figured that I better do something. I figured I couldn't live the rest of my life paralysed by fear.

Switchboarder: So you knew you didn't want to live a life in fear. Is that right? Can you explain to me a bit more how that meant you were able to ring?

Caller: Well I had been thinking about sex with men for years, and I'd never done anything about it. I felt really stuck. I sort of had to ring you guys, or I thought I'd never do anything for my whole life.

Switchboarder: So ringing was not only standing up to fear about being gay, but also standing up to a fear of not doing anything with your life? Is that right?

Caller: Yes, I thought I had to start having a life sometime.

Switchboarder: So making the call was like taking a step towards having a life? Is that right?

Caller: Yeah.

Having got to this point in the conversation, the Switchboarder could then explore what taking a 'step towards having a life' meant for the caller, whether it was good thing, if so why, and what he thought it said about him that he could take that step. This conversation would lead into considerations of what the caller wanted for this life, his hopes and how calling the Switchboard was reaching out to those dreams. Whenever a sparkling moment is identified, it can be used as an opportunity to ask questions that invite the caller into considering how these moments influence his sense of his own identity. We are interested in exploring in detail the meanings of sparkling moments in callers' lives.

6. Trying on labels

As a new story starts to develop which is not dominated by homophobia – a story in which there is some room for non-heterosexuality – it can be helpful to start to ‘fix’ the new story with a name. It is not up to us what label of sexuality our callers decide to wear, and we are relaxed about the likelihood that their label-preference will change. It’s also fine if callers prefer not to wear any label at all. But inviting questions which pose choices about self-descriptions can help people make decisions in story-lines, and can help them construct a self-description that fits for them.

- *From what you’ve told me about your life and what you want for your life, does the word heterosexual fully fit for you?*
- *Do you have words that for now might describe you better?*
- *What would it mean in your life if you started using the word [insert caller’s word] to yourself right now?*

7. Detailing the action

Telling and retelling the story of coming to terms with their sexuality helps the caller expand it and make it richer, and that expansion and enrichment can be enhanced by focusing on the story in different ways. Narrative therapists make a distinction between what they call the *landscape of action* and the *landscape of consciousness*⁴. The landscape of action concerns what is *done*, or (which may for many purposes be as important) what is imagined, whereas the landscape of consciousness is concerned with the meanings of these events or imaginings. In the context of coming out, the landscape of action refers to homosexual fantasy and experience, disclosure of homosexuality to other people, and such life-changes as leaving a marriage.

- *Tell me something about how gay feelings have been part of your life in the past. When did you first notice gayness? What was it like to notice that?*
- *What things have you done towards having the sexual life you want?*

- *What was the first step you took?*
- *Who was the first person you told?*

The action-line of a story goes from the past, through the present, to the future. Obviously a great deal of attention will be given to current activities and a large part of the counselling process might well be about what happened just last night, how to overcome today's obstacle, or the fears about disclosing one's homosexuality to a best friend tomorrow. Very often a lot of Switchboard discussion is about the *now*. We are also aware of the importance of accumulating detail around histories that will assist callers deal with their present circumstances. For example, we often try to explore *past* events which speak to a willingness on the part of the caller to resist compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia. These past examples of actions often enable a stronger sense of identity in the present. What we could perhaps give more attention to in our work is development of the future of callers' stories:

- *If you managed to resist homophobia effectively, how do you think your life would be?*
- *In a year's time, do you think your life will be the same as it is now, or do you think that you will have taken steps to push homophobia out of your life?*

8. Developing the landscape of consciousness

A story is not just a series of events, one after the other. The point about a story is that it tells events according to patterns and meanings, and so the development of a new story requires a development in what narrative therapists describe as the *landscape of consciousness*. It is in this domain that people have knowledge about themselves, in which they have their values and beliefs, and in which they see their own stories connected to wider cultural discourses.

On the Switchboard we are sensitive to a development in our callers of self-esteem, a sense of the inherent goodness of gayness, a feeling of pride. One of the ways we do this is to ask questions that invite callers to reflect on the meaning of certain acts or steps that they have taken.

For example, when callers retell events from their past in which they resisted the effects of homophobia and/or compulsory heterosexuality, we are able to ask about the meanings of these events.

- *What do you believe it says about you that you were able to take this step?*
- *Who else would recognise in you the attributes that this step required?*

It is also significant that many callers find a better equilibrium in their lives as gay people to the extent that they have thought about and decided where they stand in relation to the larger issues of gay community life, sexual politics, gay liberation and queer theory.

At various points in our connection with a caller, conversations around the following kinds of themes might be appropriate:

- *Has your sense of yourself as a person changed as your acceptance of your sexuality has increased?*
- *What does it tell you about yourself that you are increasingly having the strength to resist homophobia in your life?*
- *As you live a life which is more and more free of homophobia, how do you think you will see yourself as a person? Is your pride in yourself decreasing or increasing?*
- *How do you understand this growing pride in yourself? Is it in anyway connected to your ideas about gay liberation? Queer consciousness?*

9. Using gay cultural resources

While every person's story is unique, the uniqueness is largely in the combination of the elements. Many of the elements of all of our stories are borrowed from a huge variety of sources. We use bits and pieces from our cultural environment, transforming them along the way. The way we understand ourselves and events, the way we tell them, and the way we perform our stories is derived from the cultural resources around us. In transcending a problem-saturated story, the richer our cultural experience in relevant areas, the better the

possibilities for new stories which transcend the problems. Of course there are some areas in which the resources available in the wider discourses of the culture are more developed than others. Narrative therapists have taken to building cultural resources for their clients in some areas, such as bulimia and anorexia. There are various examples of therapists building archives – collecting accounts of clients' struggles against their problems and accounts of their successes – so that clients through their documents can help each other and be helped by each other⁵.

On the Switchboard we don't have to build an archive – there already exists a rich body of gay cultural resources, and Switchboard has always recommended gay novels, coming out memoirs, history and film to callers. It's not all high-culture, either. We are not ashamed to talk about gay icons in the world of entertainment or rumours about sporting greats. Videos that celebrate gay sex are often also significant resources. It is in reaction to all these sorts of materials that callers develop their own story-lines.

We try to take care, however, to guard against any sense that the cultural resources we recommend are prescriptive of ways of being. We don't believe that any resource should tell a caller how he should live his life or pattern his sexual interactions. It is often as useful for a caller to be able to say to himself 'This is NOT me' as it is to be able to say 'This IS me'. We try to convey this belief in all of our conversations.

10. Using peer-groups

An important part of coming out is the development of a network of gay friends, whose roles importantly include story-exchange. To some extent this can be organised or even ritualised. Consciousness-raising groups were a feature of the post-Stonewall gay liberation period. These unstructured, non-hierarchical groups of men, all of whom were in various stages of coming out, provided a forum for the sharing of thoughts and experiences. They were a place where stories of growing up could be shared, a sense of injustice expressed, and where comradeship and support could be given to one another. This tradition continues in the coming out groups and newcomers groups which we have facilitated over

the years, and in the Icebreakers Organisation for young gay men which we are currently involved with.

Narrative therapists use a number of different methods to involve peers in the process of re-making identities. Building upon the work of other family therapists, they talk about the usefulness of *reflecting teams* – which listen to a discussion between the client and a counsellor and then reflect on what that discussion brings up for them. It is found that the client can enrich her or his story from these kind of reflections⁶. Narrative therapists have also developed *leagues of problem-fighters*⁷, such as anti-bulimia leagues, which link people with common problems and common experiences together. In these leagues each person can be the adviser of others, as well as a learner from others, connections can be made and a sense of community achieved.

Coming out groups fulfil many of the purposes of both reflecting teams and leagues of problem-fighters. Participants tell their stories, their stories impact on an audience of peers, and that impact in turn impacts back on the teller, and the story is refined. The next telling will be just a little bit different, perhaps parts will be told with a little more self-confidence, perhaps parts will be told with a slightly different meaning or significance. Participants hear the stories of others, and parts of those stories seem relevant to themselves. Stories become linked, and as they do the sense of isolation begins to diminish.

11. Coming out into the world

It is one thing to tell the new story to a Switchboarder or in a peer group, but telling it in the wider world has a different significance. Narrative therapists place great store in recruiting an audience for the new story and spreading it – *spreading the news*, as they say.⁸

This is significant for many reasons. In the first place, the audience, as a result of hearing the new story, changes its expectations of the teller, which makes it easier for the teller to live and perform the new story. This is something we are familiar with. If you tell Mum and Dad or your workmates that you're gay, even if they react negatively, you're no longer going to need to pretend you have a girlfriend and you're going to find it easier to get on with having a gay life.

In the second place, narrative therapists value spreading the new story because the teller gets feedback from the audience, and this feedback leads to further extensions of the story. The reactions of family and friends to coming out stories become integral parts of the coherence of coming out stories in their later retellings.

In this way coming out involves *performing* a new story in the wider world. These performances occur in many different theatres of life – from one's friendship and family networks, to membership of gay organisations, to gay commercial venues, to the privacy of one's bedroom.

We try to provide conversational support as callers begin to perform their newly crafted identities.

- *Have there been times when you have displayed your gayness?*
- *What were these times like? What does it mean to you that you chose to do this?*
- *Are you interested in telling other people about these stories of your life?*
- *Who would you like to tell apart from me?*
- *What part could we play in supporting this process?*

Reflections

Working in the Switchboard has been a significant part of my life now for 18 years. It is difficult to articulate quite what it has meant and continues to mean. It brings a sense of gratification for playing some useful part in the lives of callers but there is much more than this. The concerns of callers inform my own continuing journey but there is much more than this also. There is something sustaining for me in being a part of a group of gay men working together on a valuable project. Like any organisation, we have had our ups and downs, and our disputes – petty and profound. But the Switchboard is a pool of men whom I believe to be remarkable. Jerome (my former partner who died some years ago) was a leading member. Rangimoana (my new partner) has recently joined. Many of my best friends are involved or have been. And when

there has been something important to do in this town – to run a campaign for homosexual law reform or start the fight against AIDS – it has been from among Switchboarders that so much of the energy has come. How else to describe what these people mean to me? They have been a significant part of my life now for 18 years.

Acknowledgements

This paper was first written in mid-1999 for the Wellington Gay Welfare Group and its Gay Switchboard, which I have worked with since 1982. Formal training in the Gay Switchboard had mostly centred on a client-centred Rogerian approach, and this paper was intended to show how in fact our approach was informed also by gay liberation ideas current in the post-Stonewall years which had led us unknowingly to adopt some of the content of narrative therapy. A second intention was to show how our practice could be enriched by a fuller and more conscious engagement with that approach.

A version of the paper was subsequently published as ‘Weaving new stories over the phone: a narrative approach to a gay switchboard’, *Gecko, a journal of deconstruction and narrative ideas in therapeutic practice*, 1999, Vol.3. That publication included valuable reflection of the paper by Zoy Kazan, Christopher Behan, Claire Ralfs and Patrick O’Leary. I wish to thank all these people for their contributions. I also want to thank Gene Combs, Dominic Davies, Ian MacEwan, Antony McFelin, David Semp, and Bob Trett, and particularly David Denborough (staff writer at Dulwich Centre Publications), who made useful suggestions, and all the members of the Gay Switchboard over the years.

Notes

1. To read more about externalising conversations and the other narrative ideas described in this paper see Epston, D. & White, M. (1992): *Experience, Contradiction, Narrative & Imagination*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.
2. I am aware that in this call the Switchboarder makes a deliberate decision to invite an externalisation of homophobia. Other concepts could have been used, for instance ‘anti-gay prejudice’ or the words of the caller ‘anti-gay stuff’. The decision to externalise homophobia is a political and deliberate one. Homophobia was the key historic externalisation of emergent gay culture after Stonewall that enabled and continues to enable gay people to separate themselves from the effects of dominant attitudes to same-sex sexuality.

3. In asking questions about particularities, we take care that we are seeking details of the meaning of the events for the caller, not just for details of events. This is especially important when talking about sexuality, for any probing for information about another person's sexual activities can be experienced very negatively. We take care to ensure that the conversations are going in helpful directions by asking the caller if these are good things to talk about, and by constantly enquiring about the meaning of events for the caller so that the conversation is centering the experience of the caller at all times.
4. See White, M. 1991: 'Deconstruction and therapy.' *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, 3. Reprinted in Epston, D. & White, M. (1992): *Experience, Contradiction, Narrative & Imagination*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.
5. See Epston, D. & White, M. 1990: 'Consulting your consultants: The documentation of alternate knowledges.' *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, No.4. Reprinted in Epston, D. & White, M. (1992): *Experience, Contradiction, Narrative & Imagination*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.
6. See Gecko 1999, Vol.2. Special Issue on 'Reflecting teams'.
7. See Grieves, L. 1999: 'From beginning to start: The Vancouver Anti-Anorexia Anti-Bulimia League.' *Gecko*, Vol.2.
8. See Gecko 1999, Vol.2. Special Issue on 'Reflecting teams'.

Switchboard tradition

Narrative therapy

1. Queer listening

- Listening, reflection and summarising
- Empathy (enhanced by elements of shared story between helper & helped)
- Congruence or honesty
- Caring or unconditional positive regard
- Special attention to elements which contradict the heterosexual story

Deconstructive listening for gaps and contradictions while exploring the problem-saturated story.

Being the audience for the first tellings of the new preferred story.

2. Externalising homophobia

Talking about

- homophobia
- heterosexism
- closet
- macho values
- social expectations

Externalising problems as if they are outside agents affecting a person's life, rather than part of the identity of the person.

3. Relative influence questioning

- Discussing the effects of homophobia on caller
- Discussing the ways the caller has had
 - of hiding from homophobia
 - of resisting homophobia

- Mapping the influence of the problem on the person
- Mapping the influence of the person on the problem

Switchboard tradition**Narrative therapy****4. Social critique**

Developing a critique of hetero-normative society (homophobia, sex-role stereotyping, etc.)

Deconstructing the dominant discourse.

5. Exploring sparkling moments

Affirming the caller's courage in phoning Switchboard
Exploring past homosexual experiences and thoughts

Exploring events which are outside the control of the problem (sparkling moments/unique outcomes).

6. Trying on the labels

Trying on new labels (homosexual, gay, queer, bisexual)

Establishing a name for the new and preferred story.

7. Detailing the action

Telling and retelling coming out stories with attention to fantasy, activity, disclosure and lifestyle:

- past
- present
- future

Telling and retelling the preferred story with attention to its development in the landscape of action.

8. Developing the landscape of consciousness

Discussing coming out stories with attention to self-knowledge, values, beliefs, worldview, theory, and philosophy.

Discussing the preferred story with attention to its development in the landscape of consciousness.

Switchboard tradition

Narrative therapy

9. Using gay cultural resources

Use of gay novels, film, pornography, history, heroic figures, etc.

Use of resources from other clients and archives.

10. Using peer groups

- Icebreakers
- Newcomers groups
- Gay Dads
- Acquiring gay friends
- Reflecting teams
- Leagues of problem-fighters

11. Coming out into the world

- Disclosing gayness to friends and family
- Developing an openly gay lifestyle
- Recruiting an audience and spreading the news
- Performing the preferred story