Selected Papers

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Selected Papers

Printed and Manufactured in Australia

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Introduction

Dulwich Centre Publications has decided to publish this collection of selected papers in response to continuing requests for reprints of various articles that I have written over the last ten years. Many of these papers have been difficult for readers in distant places to obtain. And for local readers, procuring those papers that originally appeared in Dulwich Centre's publications has been complicated by the fact that demand for these publications has consistently outstretched supply, and there are few, if any, stocks of these that are still available.

This collection does not contain all of my published work. Here, I have selected those papers that I believe most clearly reflect certain themes in my work. These are themes that I believe fit loosely within the domain of "constructivist" or "post-modern" thought.

I have decided to arrange these papers in the reverse order of their original publication. Thus, the more recent developments in my work appear at the beginning of this selection, and the earlier developments towards the end.

I would like to thank Cheryl White for her enthusiasm and continuing encouragement in seeing this collection through to publication, and Jane Hales for her untiring efforts in typesetting and layout.

THE EXTERNALIZING OF THE PROBLEM
AND THE RE-AUTHORING OF LIVES AND RELATIONSHIPS*

This paper provides an account of the practices associated with the externalizing of problems. Here, I have brought together ideas that I have published in various articles, and those that I have presented at workshops in recent years. After a discussion of some of the more central ideas and practices associated with the externalizing of problems, specific aspects of these practices are more closely reviewed. This is followed by some discussion of the dominant cultural practices that provide the context for the "thingification" or "objectification" of persons through the imposition of certain forms of individuality that are "capturing" of them. The practices associated with the externalizing of problems are proposed as counter-practices to these dominant cultural practices.

INTRODUCTION

"Externalizing" is an approach to therapy that encourages persons to objectify, and at times, to personify, the problems that they experience as oppressive. In this process, the problem becomes a separate entity and thus external to the person who was, or the relationship that was, ascribed the problem. Those problems that are considered to be inherent, and those relatively fixed qualities that are attributed to persons and to relationships, are rendered less fixed and less restricting.

I began my first systematic attempts at encouraging persons to externalize their problems approximately ten years ago. These attempts took place predominantly within the context of work with families that presented for therapy with problems that had been identified in children. I have presented aspects of this work in various published papers (e.g. White 1984, 1985, 1986).

The externalization of the child's problem clearly had great appeal for these families. Although the problem was usually defined as internal to the child, all family members were affected by it, and

often felt overwhelmed, dispirited and defeated. In various ways, they took the ongoing existence of the problem, and their failed attempts attempts to solve it, as a reflection on themselves, each other and/or their relationships. The continuing survival of the problem, and the failure of corrective measures, served to confirm, for family members, the presence of various negative personal and relationship qualities or attributes.

Thus, when the members of these families detailed the problems for which they were seeking therapy, it was not at all unusual for them to present what I call a "problem-saturated description" of family life. Elsewhere, when drawing on the story or text analogy, I have posed this "problem-saturated description" as a "dominant story of family life" (White 1988, 1989).

In assisting family members to separate themselves and their relationships from the problem, the process of externalization opened up possibilities for them to describe themselves, each other, and their relationships, from a new and non-problem-saturated perspective; it enabled the development of an alternative story of family life, one that was more attractive to family members. From this new perspective, persons were able to locate "facts" about their lives and relationships that could not even be dimly perceived in the problem-

saturated account of family life; "facts" that contradicted this problem-saturated account; facts that provided the nuclei for the generation of new stories. And in the process, the child's problem was invariably resolved.

The very positive responses to these early systematic attempts at encouraging families to externalize their problems provoked me to extend this practice to a wide range of presenting problems. Throughout my subsequent explorations of this approach, I have found the process of externalization to be helpful to persons in their struggle with problems, and have concluded that, among other things, this practice:

1. Decreases unproductive conflict between persons, including those disputes over who is responsible for the problem;
2. Undermines the sense of failure that has developed for many persons in response to the continuing existence of the problem despite their attempts to resolve it;
3. Paves the way for persons to co-operate with each other; to unite in a struggle against the problem and to escape its influence in their lives and relationships;
4. Opens up new possibilities for persons to take action to retrieve their lives and relationships from the problem and its influence;
5. Frees persons to take a lighter, more effective and less stressed approach to "deadly serious" problems; and
6. Presents options for dialogue, rather than monologue, about the problem.

Within the context of the practices associated with the externalizing of problems, it is not the person who is, or the relationship that is, the problem. Rather, it is the problem that is the problem.

EXTERNALIZING PRACTICES

The following discussion provides a description of some of the practices that are associated with the externalizing of problems. These practices have evolved in my work with persons who have sought therapy, and have been found to be consistently helpful in assisting such persons to separate from problem-saturated descriptions of their lives and relationships, and in generating alternative and more rewarding accounts of these.

My interest in the helpful aspects of the externalizing of problems has been reinforced and extended by my readings in the "interpretive method", and by Michel Foucault's analysis of dominant cultural practices in Western societies. I have discussed some aspects of Foucault's analysis in the second part of this paper, and, in this present discussion, will briefly summarize the interpretive method, placing special emphasis on the "text" analogy. For a more detailed discussion of the text analogy and its relation to therapy, I would refer readers to **Literate Means to Therapeutic Ends**, co-authored by David Epston and myself (1989).

In referring to the interpretive method, I am not doing so in the psychoanalytic sense of the word. Social scientists refer to the interpretive method when they are studying the processes by which persons make sense of the world. In arguing that persons cannot have direct knowledge of the world - that it is not possible for persons to have an appreciation of objective reality - social scientists have proposed that all knowing requires that persons interpret their experience of the world. And any act of interpretation requires the ascription of meaning.

The text analogy proposes that this meaning is derived though the "storying" of experience; that it is the stories that persons have about their lives that determines the meaning that they ascribe to their experience. The plotting of experiences of events into stories or "self-narratives" (Gergen & Gergen 1984) is necessary in order for persons to make

sense of their lives - to provide them with a sense of coherence and continuity - and is relied upon for the achievement of a sense of purpose.

Not only do the stories that persons have about their lives determine the meaning that they ascribe to experience, but these stories also determine which aspects of lived experience are selected out for the ascription of meaning. As Bruner (1986) argues, it is not possible for narratives to encompass the full richness of our lived experience.

> .... life experience is richer than discourse. Narrative structures organize and give meaning to experience, but there are always feelings and lived experience not fully encompassed by the dominant story. (p.143)

It is the stories that persons have about their lives that determines both the ascription of meaning to experience and the selection of those aspects of experience that are to be given expression. It follows therefore that these stories are constitutive or shaping of persons' lives. The lives and relationships of persons evolve as they live through or perform these stories.

Through the lens of the text analogy, various assumptions can be made about persons' experience of problems. Here I will make the general assumption that persons experience problems, for which they frequently seek therapy, when the narratives in which they are storying their experience and/or in which they are having their experience storied by others:

a) do not sufficiently represent their lived experience, and that, in these circumstances,

b) there will be significant and vital aspects of their lived experience that contradict these dominant narratives.

The externalizing of the problem enables persons to separate from the dominant stories that have been shaping of their lives and relationships. As previously

mentioned, I have referred to these stories as "problem-saturated" descriptions. In separating from these stories, persons are able to identify previously neglected but vital aspects of lived experience. The presence of these neglected aspects of lived experience could not have been predicted from a reading of the dominant story. Thus, following Goffman (1961), I have referred to these aspects of experience as "unique outcomes" (White 1987, 1988).

As unique outcomes are identified, persons can be encouraged to engage in performances of new meaning in relation to these. Success with this requires that the unique outcome be plotted into an alternative story about the person's life. I have referred to this alternative story as a "unique account", and have developed an approach to questioning that encourages persons to locate, generate, or resurrect alternative stories that will "make sense" of the unique outcomes (White 1988).

Other questions can be introduced that inspire persons to investigate what these new developments might reflect about personal and relationship attributes and qualities. In the process of entertaining, and responding to these questions, persons derive new and "unique re-descriptions"[1] of themselves and of their relationships (White 1988).

Questions that invite persons to extend the performance of these alternative stories can then be introduced. These prompt an investigation of some of the new and

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1. Unique re-description questions can also assist persons in the revision of their relationships with themselves (e.g. "In what way do you think these discoveries could affect your attitude towards yourself?"); in the revision of their relationship with others (e.g. How might this discovery affect your relationship with ...?); and in the revision of their relationship with problems (e.g. "In refusing to co-operate with the problem in this way, are you supporting it, or undermining it?"). The revision of persons' relationships with problems is discussed in more detail on page 14 of this paper.

"unique possibilities" that can be expected to accompany the unique accounts and the unique re-descriptions of persons and their relationships (White 1988). The scope of these alternative stories can be further extended through the introduction of questions that invite persons to identify and recruit an audience to the performance of new meanings in their life. I have refered to these questions as "unique circulation" questions (White 1989).

I believe that the process of therapy that is informed by the practices that are associated with the externalizing of problems, is one that facilitates the "re-authoring" (Myerhoff 1986) of lives and relationships. This has prompted me to propose a "therapy of literary merit" (1988).

In the following discussion, I have endeavoured to provide a more particular description of some of the practices associated with the externalizing of problems. Although details of these practices appear under different headings, readers will note that there is considerable overlap in the discussion under each of these.

RELATIVE INFLUENCE QUESTIONING

I have found a general interviewing process that I have referred to as "relative influence questioning" (White 1986b) to be particularly effective in assisting persons to externalize the problem. This process of questioning is initiated at the outset of the first interview, and persons are immediately engaged in the activity of separating their lives and relationships from the problem.

Relative influence questioning is comprised of two sets of questions. The first set encourages persons to map the influence of the problem in their lives and relationships. The second set encourages persons to map their own influence in the "life" of the problem.

By inviting persons to review the effects of the problem in their lives and relationships, relative influence questions assist persons to become aware of, and to describe their relationship with the problem. This takes persons out of a fixed and static world, a world of problems that are intrinsic to persons and relationships, and into a world of experience, a world of flux. In this world, persons find new possibilities for affirmative action; new opportunities to act flexibly.

Mapping the Influence of the Problem

Questions are introduced that encourage persons to map the influence of the problem in their lives and relationships. These questions assist persons to identify the problem's sphere of influence, and this can include its influence in the behavioural, emotional, physical, interactional and attitudinal domains.

This identifies the problem-saturated description of family life, which is a much broader description than the description that is usually offered of the problem "itself". Rather than restrict the investigation of the effects of the problem to the relationship between the problem and the person ascribed the problem, these questions identify the effect of the problem across various interfaces; between the problem and various persons, and between the problem and various relationships.

This opens up a very broad field for the later search for unique outcomes, and for the possibilities for affirmative action. Affirmative action might be taken across any of these interfaces. This presents possibilities for all of those associated with the problem to experience a new sense of personal agency.

In providing an example of the practice of "mapping the influence of the problem", I have selected encopresis. I believe that this is appropriate, as many of the practices that I describe in this paper were originated

in my work with families where children had histories of persistent and unremitting soiling.

Nick, aged six years, was brought to see me by his parents, Sue and Ron.[2] *Nick had a very long history of encopresis that had resisted all attempts to resolve it, including those instituted by various therapists. Rarely did a day go by without an "accident" or "incident", which usually meant the "full works" in his underwear.*

To make matters worse, Nick had befriended the "poo". The poo had become his playmate. He would "streak" it down walls, smear it in drawers, roll it into balls and flick it behind cupboards and wardrobes, and had even taken to plastering it under the kitchen table. In addition, it was not uncommon for Ron and Sue to find soiled clothes that had been hidden in different locations around the house, and to discover poo pushed into various corners and squeezed into the shower and sink drains. The poo had even developed the habit of accompanying Nick in the bath.

In response to my questions about the influence of the poo in the lives and relationships of family members, we discovered that:

1. *The poo was making a mess of Nick's life by isolating him from other children and by interfering with his school work. By coating his life, the poo was taking the shine off his future and was making it impossible for him and for others to see what he was really like as a person. For example, this coating of poo dulled the picture of him as a person, making it difficult for other people to see what an interesting and intelligent person he was.*

2. *The poo was driving Sue into misery, forcing her to question her capacity to be a good parent and her general capability as a person. It was overwhelming her to the extent that she felt quite desperate and on the verge of "giving up". She believed her future as a parent to be clouded with despair.*

3. *The ongoing intransigence of the poo was deeply embarrassing to Ron. This embarrassment had the effect of isolating him from friends and relatives. It wasn't the sort of problem that he could feel comfortable talking to workmates about. Also, the family lived in a relatively distant and small farming community, and visitation of friends and relatives usually required that they stay overnight. These overnight stays had become a tradition. As Nick's "accidents" and "incidents" were so likely to feature in any such stay, Ron felt constrained in the pursuit of this tradition. Ron had always regarded himself as an open person, and it was difficult for him to share his thoughts and feelings with others and at the same time keep the "terrible" secret.*

4. *The poo was affecting all the relationships in the family in various ways. For example, it was wedged between Nick and his parents. The relationship between him and Sue had become somewhat stressed, and much of the fun had been driven out of it. And the relationship between Nick and Ron had suffered considerably under the reign of tyranny perpetrated by the poo. Also, since their frustrations with Nick's problems always took centre stage in their discussions, the poo had been highly influential in the relationship between Sue and Ron, making it difficult for them to focus their attention on each other.*

Mapping the Influence of Persons

Once a description of the problem's sphere of influence has been derived by the mapping of its effects in persons' lives and relationships, a second set of questions can be introduced. This set features those questions that invite persons to map their influence, and the influence of their relationships, in the "life" of the problem. These questions bring forth information

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2. To preserve confidentiality, all names that appear in this paper are fictitious.

that contradicts the problem-saturated description of family life, and assists persons to identify their competence and resourcefulness in the face of adversity.

Ordinarily, it is very difficult for persons to locate examples of their own influence in the life of the problem. This is particularly the case when they have suffered under longstanding and apparently intractable problems that they have experienced as eclipsing of their lives and of their relationships.

However by this stage, the identification of the influence of the problem has set the scene for the identification of the influence of persons. In externalizing the problem, the first set of questions have assisted persons to separate from the problem, and to review their relationship with the problem. Thus, persons are less transfixed by the problem and less constrained in their perception of events surrounding the problem. This facilitates the discovery of unique outcomes.

And as previously mentioned, the mapping of the effects of the problem across various interfaces - between the problem and various persons, and between the problem and various relationships - opens up a very broad field for the search for, and identification of unique outcomes. Thus, in the mapping of their influence in the life of the problem, persons are not restricted to the narrow focus of the relationship between the problem and the person, or the relationship, in which the problem was considered to reside.

For new information about previously neglected "facts" to effectively contradict the problem-saturated description of life, it must be considered significant to the persons concerned. Only if it is significant will it constitute a unique outcome for such persons. The prior mapping of the extent of the problem's influence facilitates the attribution of such significance. Any new piece of information about the influence of

persons is thrown into sharp relief against this map. For example, it was only after mapping the influence of anorexia nervosa in her life and upon her relationships that a young woman was able to appreciate the profound significance in the fact that she had not allowed the problem to isolate her from friends.

When mapping the influence of family members in the life of what we came to call "Sneaky Poo", we discovered that:

1. *Although Sneaky Poo always tried to trick Nick into being his playmate, Nick could recall a number of occasions during which he had not allowed Sneaky Poo to "outsmart" him. These were occasions during which Nick could have co-operated by "smearing", "streaking" or "plastering", but when he declined to do so. He had not allowed himself to be tricked into this.*

2. *There was a recent occasion during which Sneaky Poo could have driven Sue into a heightened sense of misery, but she resisted and turned on the stereo instead. Also, on this occasion, she refused to question her competence as a parent and as a person.*

3. *Ron could not recall an occasion during which he had not allowed the embarrassment caused by Sneaky Poo to isolate him from others. However, after Sneaky Poo's requirements of him were identified, he did seem interested in the idea of defying these requirements. In response to my curiosity about how he might protest against Sneaky Poo's requirements of him, he said that he might try disclosing the "terrible" secret to a workmate.[3]*

4. *Some difficulty was experienced in the identification of the influence of family relationships in the life of Sneaky Poo. However, after some discussion, it was*

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3. This intention is a unique outcome in that it could not have been predicted by a reading of the problem-saturated story of family life.

established that there was an aspect to Sue's relationship with Nick that she thought she could still enjoy, that Ron was still making some attempts to persevere in his relationship with Nick, and that Nick had an idea that Sneaky Poo had not destroyed all of the love in his relationship with his parents.

After identifying Nick, Sue, and Ron's influence in the life of Sneaky Poo, I introduced questions that encouraged them to perform meaning in relation to these examples, so that they might "re-author" their lives and relationships.

How had they managed to be effective against the problem in this way? How did this reflect on them as people and on their relationships? What personal and relationship attributes were they relying on in making these achievements? Did this success give them any ideas about further steps that they might take to reclaim their lives from the problem? What difference would knowing what they now knew about themselves make to their future relationship with the problem?

In response to these questions, Nick thought that he was ready to stop Sneaky Poo from outsmarting him so much, and decided that he would not be tricked into being its playmate any more. Sue had some new ideas for refusing to let Sneaky Poo push her into misery, and Ron thought that he just might be ready to take a risk and follow up with his idea of telling a workmate of his struggle with Sneaky Poo.

I met with this family again two weeks later. In that time Nick had had only one minor accident - this described as light "smudging". Sneaky Poo had tried to win him back after nine days, but Nick had not given in. He had taught Sneaky Poo a lesson - he would not let it mess up his life any more. He described how he had refused to be tricked into playing with Sneaky Poo and believed that his life was no longer coated with it, and that he was now shining through. He was talkative, happier, felt stronger and was more physically

active. Sneaky Poo had been a tricky character and Nick had done very well to get his life back to have for himself.

Sue and Ron had also "got serious" in their decision not to co-operate with the requirements of Sneaky Poo. Sue had started to "treat herself" more often, particularly on those occasions during which Sneaky Poo was giving her a hard time, and "had put her foot down", showing that it couldn't take her so lightly any more.

Ron had taken a risk and had protested Sneaky Poo's isolation of him. He had talked to a couple of his workmates about the problem. They had listened respectfully, offering a few comments. An hour later, one of them had returned and had disclosed that he had been experiencing a similar problem with a son. There ensured a very significant conversation and a strengthening bond of friendship. And without that coating on Nick's life, Ron had discovered that "Nick was good to talk to".

I encouraged the family to reflect on, and to speculate about what this success said about the qualities that they possessed as people and about the attributes of their relationships. I also encouraged them to review what these facts suggested about their current relationship with Sneaky Poo. In this discussion, family members identified further measures that they could adopt to refuse Sneaky Poo's invitations to them to support it.

We met on a third occasion three weeks later, and I discovered that all had proceeded to take further steps to outrun Sneaky Poo, steps to ensure that it would be put in its proper place. Nick had made some new friends and had been catching up on his school work, and the family had visited overnight with several friends and relatives. Sue was making good her escape from guilt. This had been facilitated, to an extent, by the fact that she and Ron had been talking more to other parents about the trials and tribulations of parenting. In so doing they had learned that

they were not the only parents who had doubts about their parenting skills.

We then did some contingency planning, just in case Sneaky Poo tried to make a comeback and to outstreak Nick again. I saw this family again one month later for a review. At the six month follow-up, Nick was doing very well. Only on one or two occasions had there been a slight smudging on his pants. He was more confident and doing even better with friends and at school. Everyone felt happy with his progress.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM TO BE EXTERNALIZED

In the practices associated with externalizing the problem, care is taken to ensure that the persons' description of it and of its effects in their lives and relationships are privileged. After the problem has been described, the externalizing of it proceeds "naturally" from the mapping of its effects in persons' lives and in their relationships. This externalizing of the problem is further reinforced by the mapping of the influence of persons in the life of the problem.

Often, persons offer common and general definitions of the problems that are of concern to them. However, the details of the effects of, or the persons' experience of these problems are always unique. Thus, apart from in very general terms, it is not possible to predict the effects of the problem in advance of meeting with the persons concerned.

The definitions of problems that persons offer can be quite specific and behavioural (e.g. "He tantrums when ..."), and they can be quite general (e.g. "We have a communication problem"). And at other times, persons can have difficulty in specifying a definition of the problem that is appropriate to their experience of it. On these occasions, it can be helpful for therapists to suggest several candidate definitions of the problem, and then to check with the person as to whether any of these definitions reasonably encapsulate the experience that is of concern to them.

As with any approach to working with persons who seek therapy, it is important that therapists do not make generalizations about situations, but keep in mind the specifics of every circumstance and think ahead to the likely consequences of particular courses of action. This argues for a certain level of "consciousness" on the therapist's behalf, and, lest the therapist inadvertently contribute to persons' experiences of oppression, this consciousness requires an appreciation of local politics; that is, politics at the level of relationships.

This consciousness discourages therapists from inviting the externalizing of problems like violence and sexual abuse. When these problems are identified, the therapist would be more inclined to encourage the externalizing of the attitudes and beliefs that appear to compel the violence, and those strategies that maintain persons in their subjugation; for example, the enforcement of secrecy and isolation.

Definition as Fluid and Evolving

Although the external definition of the problem can remain fixed across the course of therapy, it is often more fluid and evolves through time. This is particularly the case when persons have been undergoing some struggle to identify terms of description that adequately represent their experience of the problem.

The evolution of problem definitions can be considerably facilitated by relative influence questioning. The following discussion provides one example of how this process of questioning contributes to the evolution of the external definition of the problem.

Marjorie, a sole parent with two children,

aged ten and eleven years, sought therapy for what she described as tantrums in the family. When asked to clarify this, she stated that she thought that everyone, including herself, took their frustrations out in the form of tantrums.

When asked about what she perceived to be the effects of these tantrums on her life, Marjorie said that they encouraged her to avoid conflict with the children. When asked about the effect of avoiding conflict in her relationships with her children, she suddenly identified the fact that this was forcing her to abdicate her rights. Did this mean that she often felt taken for granted? "Yes!", Marjorie exclaimed.

When asked what Marjorie thought could be making her vulnerable to the invitations of others to be a taken-for-granted person, "guilt" emerged as a likely culprit. The effect of guilt in her life was then more fully explored. Thus, guilt was a new external definition of the problem that struck a chord for her, one that encompassed vital aspects of her lived experience.

Aspects of Marjorie's influence in the life of guilt were then identified. Marjorie was encouraged to perform meaning in relation to these unique outcomes and she took steps to extend her own influence by protesting the effects of guilt and by announcing her resignation from it. For the children, it was discovered that this guilt had been successful, to an extent, in its invitations for them to take Marjorie for granted. However, several occasions upon which the children had successfully declined these invitations were identified. This family quickly repossessed their lives and relationships.

From the Specific to the General

At times, when persons offer a highly specific definition of the problem, it can be helpful to encourage them to construct a more general external definition of it. This has the effect of broadening the field for the identification of the influence of the problem, and for the location of unique outcomes.

The following discussion is illustrative of some of the beneficial outcomes that accompany the construction of more general external definitions of problems.

The Smith family consulted me over their seven year old daughter, Mary, who had a longstanding "sleep problem". The parents, James and Rachel, were finding this problem very fatiguing. They had made exhaustive attempts to solve it without experiencing a "scrap" of success. These attempts had included consulting books, soliciting professional advice and attending courses on parent effectiveness.

Rachel and James had found that the only viable way of dealing with this situation was for one of them to sit alongside Mary, and to reassure her by holding her hand until she went to sleep. This often took over an hour and a half, and at times up to two and a half hours. Rachel and James were at their "wits' end".

As Rachel, James, and Mary could not recall an occasion of Mary getting off to sleep by herself, it seemed unlikely that significant examples of their influence would be available in the restricted field that was provided by such a narrow and specific definition of the problem. Therefore, I introduced questions that encouraged the specification of a more general external problem and the identification of the broader field of the problem's influence.

As the sleep problem had Mary depending on her parents for reassurance, what effect did James and Rachel think this could be having on her life more generally? After some discussion, "insecurity" emerged as a more general external definition of the problem. Apart from the sleep problem, what other effects was insecurity having in Mary's life? Rachel said that insecurity was clearly making it difficult for Mary to deal directly with any conflict that she had with her peers.

Under circumstances of such conflict, she would usually run to the nearest adult, visibly distressed and in need of reassurance. This tended to happen more frequently when James and Rachel were present. In mapping the effects of this "insecurity" in James' and Rachel's lives and in their relationships with Mary, it was ascertained that it compelled them to intervene in such disputes on Mary's behalf.

When reviewing the influence of family members in relation to insecurity, I asked if anyone could recall an occasion during which Mary could have allowed insecurity push her into depending on her parents for reassurance, but when she reassured herself instead. Immediately Rachel thought of a recent example in which she had noticed Mary doing some of her own problem-solving with a peer instead of running to her mother to do this for her.[4]

This opened the door for the introduction of questions that encourage the performance of new meanings. Had Mary noticed this too? No she hadn't. How did she think she might have done this? What had she done to get herself ready to make such a breakthrough? What was it like for her to discover that she had become a problem-solver? What else did it say about her ability? I canvassed the parents' opinions on these questions as well, and the responses brought forth a new description of Mary's competence and of her

ability to reassure herself.

Mary was definite in her preference for this "new picture" of herself as a person over the "old picture". What did her attraction to this new picture say about Mary's readiness for other steps to take her life away from insecurity? And how would this new knowledge of Mary's capacity to escape insecurity and reassure herself assist Rachel and James to defy the effects of insecurity in their relationship with her? In response to these questions, various possibilities were discussed, and over the next six weeks, Mary developed her capacity to reassure herself to the extent that she started to insist on getting herself off to sleep.

From "Expert" to "Popular" Definitions

At times, persons offer a definition of their problem in terms that are informed by "expert knowledge". This is so when persons have been encouraged to use "scientific classification" to describe their concerns. These re-transcriptions of problem definitions serve to decontextualize problems, and thus detract from the options that might be available for persons to intervene in the "life" of problems. They do not provide definitions that enable persons to review their relationship with the problem, and they do not provide definitions that allow for unique outcomes to be identified. Thus, these re-transcriptions frequently diminish the possibilities for persons to experience a sense of personal agency.

It is often important to encourage persons to construct alternative definitions of problems; definitions that are more relevant to their experience; definitions that enable persons to more adequately address their immediate concerns. The following example provides an account of the derivation of an external definition of the problem that was relevant to the experience of family members concerned.

Jim was brought to see me by his worried

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4. Although an example of Mary's influence in the life of insecurity was quickly identified, such an example was not essential to the progress of the therapy. Alternatively, an example of the parents' influence in the life of insecurity could have been identified. Recently, when working with another family where a child had a similar problem, evidence of the child's influence in the life of insecurity was not immediately available, but evidence of the parents' refusal to co-operate with the dictates of insecurity was. On this occasion, they had demanded that the child reassure herself. Family members were engaged in a performance of meaning in relation to this unique outcome, and, before the end of the session the child seemed happy that, on this occasion, her parents had firmly taken her side against insecurity.