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Anthropology, archives, co-research and narrative therapy

an interview with

David Epston

David Epston is one of the co-founders of narrative therapy and is widely respected for his innovative and creative work. He has introduced to the field of family therapy a range of alternative approaches including the use of leagues, archives and co-research, all of which he discusses in this interview. David lives in Auckland, New Zealand, where this conversation took place.

To begin, can I ask about how you came to work as a therapist when your initial academic background was in anthropology?

I think the transition occurred in a number of stages. Having been brought up to believe that the university was the repository of the wisdom of all ages, when I was appointed in 1968 as a junior lecturer to the anthropology faculty of Victoria University of Wellington, I was an excited young man. I believed all my dreams, and those dreams that others had for me, had come true. And yet, disenchantment set in pretty quickly. I was dismayed to learn that a university setting curtailed my imagination rather than giving it free reign. Looking back, I don't think I can recall a more unhappy time in my life.

So instead, I decided to travel overseas and I was on my way to Europe via Asia, when I stumbled into a job in Aboriginal Welfare in Darwin as an

anthropologist. In hindsight, I doubt I could have had a more chastening experience. My job was as an adjunct to a demographic project which had me 'counting' Aboriginal people. In the late 1960s, the last whispers of genocidal policies and thinking were still in existence. I recall a policy mandated to have departmental employees no longer refer to elders as 'boys'. All that I witnessed and participated in made me determined to equip myself to make some contribution in relation to people's lives. This led me to Edinburgh University to undergo a Diploma of Community Development. While studying there I was hoping to return to third world communities in a somewhat more enlightened capacity than as a servant of Australian Government policy in the late 1960s.

It didn't really work out that way though. After finishing my studies in Edinburgh I travelled to Canada and lived in Vancouver for a time before returning to New Zealand and securing a job as a social worker in a hospital. After working there for less than a year, wondering what in fact I was doing and moreover why anyone should pay me for my befuddlement, I decided to return to Europe to do a social work degree in a radical social work program at the University of Warwick. I found myself becoming engaged with family therapy, which made me very unpopular with my Marxist colleagues! It was during this time though that I made connections with various family therapists who were to prove influential to me, including Olga Silverstein and Anita Morawetz.

So when you ask me how I moved from anthropology to my work as a therapist, I believe that I went through a series of transitions. I gradually moved from undertaking anthropology as an academic pursuit, to instead finding ways in which anthropological ways of thinking could underwrite my practice as a therapist. To this day I refresh myself by reading anthropological texts because I find some of the debates in anthropology to be vitally relevant to the therapeutic realm, especially questions about representation. It's not as if I believe that anthropology has answered these questions conclusively, but I believe some of the dilemmas faced by anthropologists are shared with those of us working in therapy.

Can you say more about these dilemmas or questions about representation and where they have led your own work as a therapist?

The primary problem in anthropology is the politics of representation. In most anthropological research, the source of the knowledge remains concealed. The knowledge of the subject of the research is appropriated and talked up in professional texts, in professional ways. From my early engagements with anthropology, concerns about representation have never let me go.

Much of my work as a narrative therapist has been linked to my concern to act against this appropriation of knowledge in the field of the health professions. In acknowledging the alternative knowledges about life that are often co-created in re-authoring conversations, it then becomes a question of how to remain faithful to the sources of this knowledge, and how to do justice to the representation of the sources of this knowledge. This has led to the formation of leagues (for instance the Anti-Anorexia and Bulimia League) through which the insider knowledges of those who consult therapists can be represented in ways that acknowledge the authors of this knowledge, documents the very means by which it came into being, and also makes this knowledge accessible to others.

In turn, this has led to thoughts about archives and the role of archivists. The idea of archiving has always fascinated me and in many ways I see myself as an archivist, a co-creator and anthologist of alternative knowledges.

What does this metaphor of being an archivist or an anthologist of alternative knowledges make possible for your work?

An archive is a place where public records are held, and that in itself implies a different form of knowledge from that ordinarily engaged with in the professions. It implies a form of knowledge with an ethic of openness. The history of the library is a radical innovation. In nineteenth century England it was the basis of the democratisation of knowledge. The politics of a library, in which the distribution of knowledge is a public service rather than a private privilege, has always been intriguing to me. The history of the public archive is one within which I locate the work that I do. So that's one thing that this metaphor makes possible. It locates my work in a tradition and a history which mentors me.

Secondly, the metaphor of an archivist positions me as a collector and a sorter and this acknowledges the role and responsibility of discretion. There's a great deal of discretion about what's admitted into an archive and there's a considerable authority in this. An archivist isn't involved in synthesis so much.

There's always more to come, the doors of an archive are always open for additions. An archivist seeks to augment the archive rather than to delimit it. To me, these are helpful guides in shaping my role in this work.

In order to archive solution knowledges, or alternative knowledges, I imagine a considerable amount of work needs to be done first. Can you speak a bit about this process and what it entails?

I've always thought of myself as doing research, but on problems and the relationships that people have with those problems, rather than on the people themselves. The structuring of narrative questions and interviews allow me and others to co-research problems and the alternative knowledges that are developed to address them.

The concept of co-researching is of absolute significance to me in this work as it structures another way of knowing and being together. It enables a relationship that brings together each person's purpose. The purpose of the person who comes to consult with me is generally to co-research ways in which to change their relationship with the particular problem in their lives. My purpose in the work, as well as to be a co-researcher in this process, is to try to add to the archive of knowledge around this particular problem as this is something that I will take forward through my work with others. Many people who have shared these co-researching relationships have moved on once the concerns we were researching are no longer a burning matter for them, and this is fine. But as a co-researcher, as an archivist, you have the moral responsibility of holding onto these alternative knowledges and making them available to others in ways in which your contributors confirm.

There are other ways in which engaging in co-research shapes a particular ethic of this work which I believe are significant. For example, co-research is informed by a particular type of inquiry. It is shaped by an ethnographic imagination, which again is a term from anthropology. In my teaching, I find this ethnographic imagination to be one of the hardest things to impart and I really don't know why this is.

Can you say a bit about what you think distinguishes ethnographic imagination from other forms of enquiry?

I think what distinguishes ethnographic imagination is its morphology, the shape that it takes. I think it requires a considerable discipline and a considerable humility. When an anthropologist visits the traditional peoples of the Tiwi Islands, northwest of Darwin, if they wish to engage with the meanings and understandings of the Tiwi they will be required to question all their own assumptions of life. The Tiwi people's ways of thinking and understanding life are based on completely different assumptions to those of us from western cultures. In order to engage with the meanings and understandings of the Tiwi an anthropologist would be obliged to have what Joan Laird calls an 'informed not knowing'. I think this is relevant to therapists working with those who consult us. Within the field of therapy, for many years there was an implicit assumption that in order to help someone you must know a great deal about them. What's more, if you found yourself in a situation where you didn't know enough about a particular person then there was a further assumption that you ought not show this lack of knowledge. Approaching therapy with an ethnographic imagination is a different proposition. However, 'informed not knowing' is still knowing a lot. To be able to assist people to know their own knowledge is a considerable form of expertise. It requires a different sort of inquiry, one that involves setting to one side one's own assumptions, making no pretences that you can know another's experience and 'walk in their shoes', but rather entering into an inquiry based on ethnographic imagination, whereby you seek their versions of how they go about the living of their lives.

The other relevant consideration is that in the professions we have been trained to think in comprehensive ways, in grand ways. I admit that this can be an attractive form of figuring things out. But I like the particular, the precise, the minute. I believe that therapy involves an ethnography of the particular, and the only way you can engage in such an ethnography is by asking specific questions. A lot of people have been schooled out of these sorts of questions. Sometimes people see the use of specific questions as directive, or leading. But I have no problem with asking questions that guide people to discover the grounds of their knowing. I have no problem with questions that lead people where to look, and that bring whatever is out there into their field of vision. I never know what's going to be found, but I believe I have a responsibility as a co-researcher to utilise a rigorous ethnographic practice.

Respectful curiosity is one thing, and a good thing, but I like to see it used with a considerable expertise. I believe what makes this expertise possible is an ethnographic imagination and an ethnography of the particular.

You have always been someone who has brought ideas and concepts from diverse fields to bear on your work as a therapist. I'd like to ask you how you see the family therapy field now. Are there things that are happening that you are particularly interested in?

What I'm interested in are those points where the historical jurisdiction of this field - in other words 'the family' - is breached. I'm for any transgression of that historical jurisdiction. When family therapy as a field came into being it was radical for its time. It proposed an alternative to individual therapy which was then upheld as the only form of legitimate interaction between therapist and client. But now the concept of family, especially the idea of the nuclear family, is no longer generally accepted as the primary descriptor of everyday life.

People operate in all sorts of social formations, like communities, clubs, teams. One aspect of narrative therapy has been to engage with these alternative descriptors of life and identity. People's identities are shaped by so many different relationships. I think we should be considering many different forms of community, and many different ways of calling people together, or convening people. And as for me, I intend to experiment with new technologies and all they have to offer by way of virtual communities or communities of concern.

Our work is now located far beyond the boundaries of 'the family'. In fact, if family therapists renamed themselves as 'social practitioners' or something akin to that, I'd be very happy.