



Client's retellings of witnessing conversations from counselling

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Tena koutou i tenei ahiahi

I hail from Auckland and currently live in Thames and work full-time at Wintec, here in Hamilton, as a counsellor educator on an undergraduate counselling degree programme.

The material for this presentation mostly came out of some counselling work I did, when in practice, in 2012. An area of interest for me in this work, was on the benefits for clients of reflecting on their recorded counselling conversations.

This interest is an extension on a recent doctoral research project that focused on couples and the benefits they reported when they reflexively investigated recordings of their relationship conversations. I came to call this process *Reflexive audiencing practices*

This presentation discusses the practice of clients engaging reflexively in counselling.

It describes one client's reflexions after witnessing audio-recordings of her counselling conversations with me.



Acknowledgements



- *Alice - counselling client
- *Laura, Geena, Doug, MJ - research participants
- Wintec
- Dr Kathie Crocket and Dr Elmarie Kotzè
- University of Waikato

* Pseudonyms

At this point, I would like to make some acknowledgements.

Firstly, I thank Alice, who was so willing to have me share some of her counselling experience with you.

Recording of sessions can be challenging for clients at the same time as providing a rich learning opportunity for them, for our practice, and for the counselling community. Alice agreed to recordings and generously gave consent for me to speak, teach and write about some of this learning.

Laura, Geena, Doug and MJ are four of the 10 research participants whose voices speak directly into this presentation.

Wintec has approved the practitioner research project that investigates this work with Alice.

Finally, the ideas I present here have been produced over many years in collaboration with many people. Too many to name individually. However, I continue to appreciate my former colleagues and doctoral supervisors, Kathie Crocket and Elmarie Kotze, from the University of Waikato. They have made integral and significant contributions to the ideas I present. Their voices are inextricably linked with mine.

The University of Waikato also provided me with two doctoral scholarships that made it possible to study full-time and complete my PhD. 🙏🙏🙏

Recordings for client reflexions

- What are your experiences and ideas about using recordings for clients to witness?
- What drew you to this workshop?

It would be helpful for you to say something about your thoughts and experiences of using recordings for clients to witness and what hopes you have or what drew you to this workshop.



What might Truman have said if he had had the opportunity to watch the TV Show about his life?

As a way of making a very long story as brief as possible, there are a few metaphors that help me show why and how the ideas of self-witnessing and reflexion can help people develop their individual and relational identities. And, why these developments can be relevant and beneficial for counselling. The first is The Truman Show.

In 1999 I saw the Truman show. Some of you may be familiar with this movie.

It was about a man, Truman Burbank, played by Jim Carrey, whose day to day life was filmed and televised, unbeknown to him, as a national reality TV show.

This illustrated to me how people often unwittingly and unreflectively live their lives according to particular discursive scripts - what I have come to refer to as one-size-fits-almost-all cultural stories. As a counsellor I had first-hand experience of how these ways of living often didn't serve people well. ☹

I wondered what Truman might have said if he had had the opportunity to watch the TV show about his life?

I am interested in what clients say when they get to witness conversations they have about their lived experience ☹ ☹ ☹

Reflection and reflexivity

Reflection

"... a kind of thinking about ourselves, showing ourselves to ourselves, but without the requirement of explicit awareness of the implications of our display" (p3).

(Myerhoff & Ruby, 1982).



I believe that generally, people do tend to reflect on their lives and relationships but I argue that they don't tend to do this reflexively.

So what is the difference?

I like the distinctions that Barbara Myerhoff and Jay Ruby made between reflection and reflexivity because I believe they offer very different witnessing positions. This positioning has implications for their lives and relationships .

Myerhoff and Ruby described reflection as; ☺

"... a kind of thinking about ourselves, showing ourselves to ourselves, but without the requirement of explicit awareness of the implications of our display". (Myerhoff & Ruby, 1982, p3). ☺

I liken reflection to the practice of looking in a mirror. When I look into a mirror I get a fleeting view usually limited to a visual image. This says little about how I have come to hold the meanings I make of what I see and the effects of this. So this image says little about my identity in this moment reflected back in the mirror.

Barbara Myerhoff and Jay Ruby suggested that reflexivity, on the other hand;

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Reflexivity

- Is "to allow the mind to criticize" (p4).
- "...generates heightened awareness ... loosens us from habit and custom and turns us back to contemplate ourselves" (p1).
- "Once we take into account our role in our own productions, we may be led into new possibilities achieve a greater originality and responsibility than before, a deeper understanding ... of ourselves ..." (p2).



Myerhoff, B., & Ruby, J. (1982).

Is "to allow the mind to criticize" (p4). ☺

"...generates heightened awareness ... loosens us from habit and custom and turns us back to contemplate ourselves" (p1). ☺

"Once we take into account our role in our own productions, we may be led into new possibilities We may achieve a greater originality and responsibility than before, a deeper understanding ... of ourselves ..." (p2).
Myerhoff, B., & Ruby, J. (1982).

On these terms, reflexivity involves people as active knowing agents. They are offered the authority to critique their lives and relationships and to see how they are implicated in the cultural stories they enact. They get to determine (within inevitable limitations) the stories they prefer to live by. Rather than unquestioningly shaping their lives to fit prevailing and sometimes limiting models of living they can shape the models to fit their lives. They can originate rather than replicate lives and relationships.

In both my research with couples and my counselling relationships, people who engaged in reflexive audiencing reported experiencing new possibilities, originality, and understanding.

In using this distinction, I am not wanting to privilege reflexivity over reflection, but in this context of counselling and identity development, I think reflexivity offers added possibilities. ☺ ☺☺

Positioning to audience



I used recording devices – audio and video - in my research and counselling conversations to capture the conversations for participants and clients to witness and reflect on. Video and audio recordings offer different, and I believe, unique, witnessing perspectives to that of being in the conversation.

The perspective from in a conversation can be very similar to being in a maze. We see the territory we are in. ☹

Let's compare that picture to one in which people can witness their conversational territory from a vantage point. ☹

The view from this vantage point that looks over the maze is more expansive.

Research participants and clients reported that the spatial and temporal distance and the added senses available to them, made a difference. For example, when we are in a conversation we don't often get to see ourselves. And we don't get to hear ourselves without talking at the same time. ☹☹☹

Laura

What [watching the DVD of our conversation] allowed me to do, is to put myself in that position again, but to be able to feel and notice things different, because I'm not in the here and now, I'm in a different place.

This is how Laura, one of the research participants, described how she was repositioned.☺

"What [watching the DVD of our conversation] allowed me to do, is to put myself in that position again, but to be able to feel and notice things different, because I'm not in the here and now, I'm in a different place".

I wanted to offer clients the opportunity to reflect on their lives from a different place.☺

Doug

We've probably had several conversations like [the one on DVD] where we haven't come to a third person reflection on, we haven't sat on the same couch and put the issue there, we've been on either sides and finger pointed ...I tend to like the image of sitting here together and both looking the same way. For me that's been helpful.

Doug, a research participant, is reflecting on the research process with his partner Charlotte. He has identified that becoming an audience to their conversation made it possible to externalise an issue. He said,

... we've probably had several conversations like [the one on DVD] where we haven't come to a third person reflection on, we haven't sat on the same couch and put the issue there, we've been on either sides and finger pointed ...I tend to like the image of sitting here together and both looking the same way. For me that's been helpful. ☺☺☺

What Doug identified and described was a distinction between oppositional positioning and collaborative positioning in their conversations.

MJ

I saw me dominating the conversation so much it worried me, because I really thought when we finished that film that we'd had an equal talk.

That's what shattered me when we saw the first footage, was my sort of overall dominance. I dominated that, and I didn't want to.

I actually physically saw it, and I think from perhaps the male point of view, even though you're told a hundred times, it's not till you actually see it you believe it.

With recordings, areas for concern can be externalised and explored from a 'close distance'.

MJ and Anne were a heterosexual couple and were both retired.

MJ was struck by what he saw on DVD and named as "dominating the conversation".

As you listen to MJ's words, imagine sitting in the counselling room with a man and his partner as he acknowledges dominating practices in his relationship? What would it be like for his partner to witness this acknowledgement? And, how might you as a counsellor respond?

MJ I saw me dominating the conversation so much it worried me ... , because I really thought

when we finished that film that we'd had an equal talk. ☹

... That's what shattered me when we saw the first footage, was my sort of overall

dominance ... I dominated that, and I didn't want to.

What made a difference for MJ?

Well "I actually physically saw it, and I think from perhaps the male point of view, even

though you're told a hundred times, it's not till you actually see it you believe it".

- This couple have been together for over 50 years.
- I will soon show a similar statement that illustrates this is not just a male thing as MJ suggests. 🙄🙄🙄

Geena

[The process of witnessing and reflecting on recordings] was quite confidence building ... by watching myself I realised that I don't look as bad as I think I do and I don't communicate as badly as I think I did , and I actually contribute quite well . My thought processes are actually OK and my intelligence level's actually OK, whereas you never have that reflection normally. It's helped me to get to know myself. I've grown heaps from it.

For Geena, another research participant who was in a relationship with Susan, reflexive audiencing was powerfully shaping of her identity personally and relationally.

Again, I ask you to imagine as a counsellor being alongside Geena as she speaks these words. ☺

[The process of witnessing and reflecting on recordings] was quite confidence building too ... by watching myself I realised that I don't look as bad as I think I do and I don't communicate as badly as I think I did, and I actually contribute quite well My thought processes are actually OK and my intelligence level's actually OK, whereas you never have that reflection normally" . "It's helped me to get to know myself" ... "I've grown heaps from it" .

Geena was a woman in her late 50s. These are pretty significant identity claims.

Reflexive audience positioning

▣ Collaborative, safe, respectful

▣ A reflexive eye/I (Davies et al, 2004)

▣ Appreciative curiosity

▣ Alongside position



How people watch/listen to themselves on recordings involves an important ethical consideration. I wanted people to have a collaborative, safe and generative experience.

This meant creating a receiving context for people to witness recordings in.

In the research I worked carefully with participants about ways they could watch the DVD and talk together.

This preparation was crucial and is equally so in counselling relationships too.

Taking up a third-person position as an observer where the focus is on the process more so than the content is not familiar territory for most people, nor is it easy. ☺☺☺

I have found it helpful to ask people to consider different witnessing positions that may be available for them to take up – for example, they might watch from positions of blame, defence, fault finding, moralizing or criticism (what Bronwyn Davies and her colleagues called a judgmental eye/I gaze). Or, they might watch from a reflexive eye/I gaze - one that looks without judgment, to find the unexpected, the surprising – the contradictions, the 'good' and the 'bad' in all its detail ... to say with fascination, 'oh so that's how it is'. (Davies, et al., 2004, p. 376 *Not exact quote*). ☺☺☺

This kind of witnessing involves curiosity - what Kaethe Weingarten defined as "not presuming to know what the speaker means but wanting very much eventually to understand" (2003, p. 198).

This is appreciative curiosity that assumes goodwill and attends to the best interests of self and other. ☺☺☺

This process assists people to be positioned alongside each other in a deliberate way. To look alongside rather than at each other (Kendon, 2003).

This is the kind of positioning that Doug talked about earlier ☺☺☺

Alice

- 4 counselling sessions
- 1st session disclosure of historical abuse, effects, and emergent story of understandable protest.
- 2nd, 3rd sessions recorded.
- 4th session a recorded review of the work.

•So far I have given examples from the research that have relevance for counselling.

•Now I want to give an example from my counselling practice.

•Alice and I had four counselling sessions together.

•In the first, she disclosed historical abuse that had serious effects for important relationships. What emerged in that session was a story of understandable but misdirected protest – misdirected at Alice, her parents and partners. Anger, anxiety and aggression were destroying what was important to her. Alice decided that she wanted to redirect the protest in ways that were more appropriate and preferable.

•At the end of the conversation I expressed a wish that we had recorded the session. Alice said, “me too”.

•The second and third sessions we audio-recorded. These conversations mostly focused on the appropriate and preferred ways that Alice intended to approach her relationships with self and others. She took these recordings home.

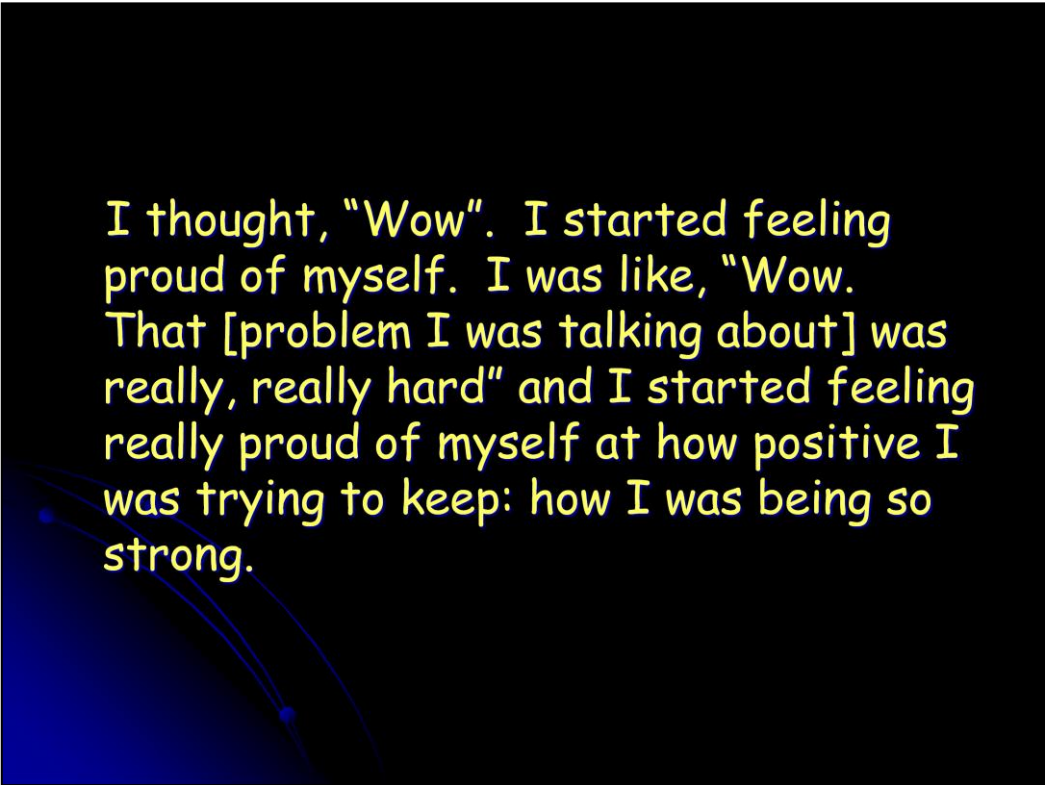
•Alice decided that she didn’t need further counselling sessions but as my contract was due to end, she wanted to come back a fourth time to review our work. We recorded this conversation. The following excerpts are from this fourth conversation.

Alice

I'm feeling really good at the moment. When I sat down and listened to my recording [of our last counselling session] last week, I started getting really emotional listening to myself cry and listening to the things I was talking about.

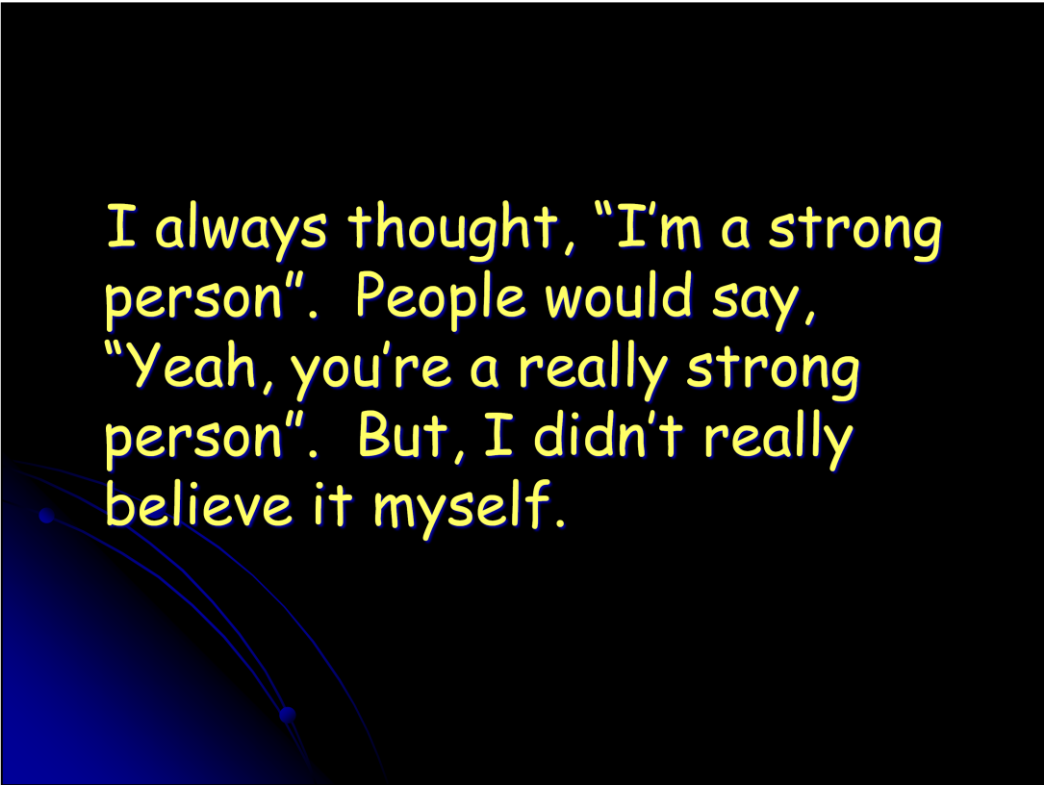
This is a person who saw crying as an expression of weakness.

Notice here how Alice speaks of listening to the things she was talking about. I think there is a nuanced but important difference between listening to herself speak and listening to the things she was talking about.



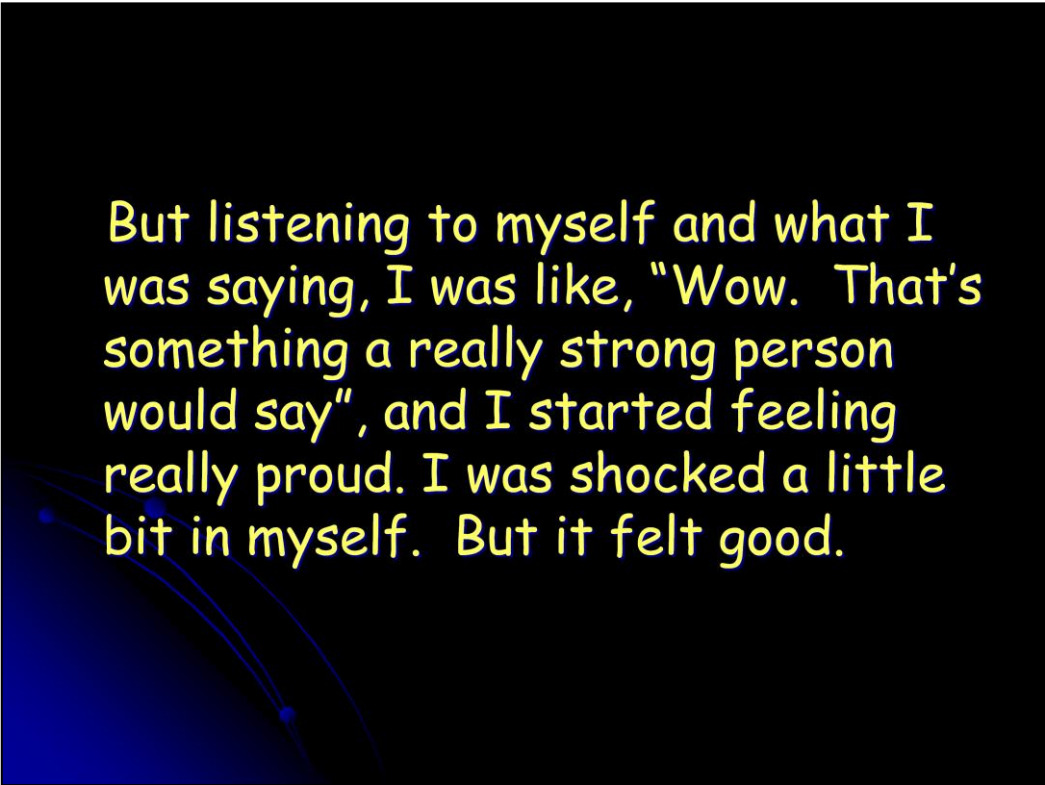
I thought, "Wow". I started feeling proud of myself. I was like, "Wow. That [problem I was talking about] was really, really hard" and I started feeling really proud of myself at how positive I was trying to keep: how I was being so strong.

Alice was able to engage with the content, but also the process of responding to the talk.



I always thought, "I'm a strong person". People would say, "Yeah, you're a really strong person". But, I didn't really believe it myself.

The thought of being strong was available to her. It was believed by others but not by Alice.



But listening to myself and what I was saying, I was like, "Wow. That's something a really strong person would say", and I started feeling really proud. I was shocked a little bit in myself. But it felt good.

By hearing herself, from the distance of time and space, the evidence of strength was apparent and the thought of being strong was transformed into a belief. Strength became an identity claim she believed in and took up.

Remember MJ's words – "even though you're told a hundred times, it's not till you actually see it you believe it".

It seems that for Alice and MJ, the process of self-witnessing, using reflexive audiencing practices, provided the context in which important identity shifts could be made.

Discussion and questions

- What are some of the implications do you see for the counselling relationship?
- What thoughts are you having about making and using recordings for client self-witnessing?
- What reflexions or questions are you left with?

Implications for counselling relationship

- Clients get to see themselves from a different perspective.
- A similar perspective to what counsellors get.
- Client and counsellor determine what is important and what is addressed.
- Enhances collaboration, co-authorship and co-research.
- Client-initiated *and* counsellor-initiated inquiry.
- Produces a repositioning of counsellor and client.
- Use and distribution of recordings

For me, the repositioning that is possible in counselling conversations when counsellors and clients sit side-by-side and reflect on what they see and hear is important to acknowledge.

What counsellors might see and pay attention to and what clients identify as important and meaningful might be quite different. Space is created for both counsellor-initiated inquiry and client-initiated inquiry.

This adds additional layers to practices of collaboration, co-authorship and co-research in counselling relationships.

Use and distribution of recordings

Alice's recordings were audio. If they had been DVDs there may have been more implications to her taking them home. I may have arranged for her to see them in subsequent sessions. I wasn't concerned about any aspect of my practice, but I would have concerns about them turning up on You Tube or Facebook. Clients do not have the same responsibilities for confidentiality that counsellors do.

Also, our conversation was focussed on appreciative curiosity and on steps Alice was taking on her own behalf towards the development of preferred identity stories. For this reason I was confident that it would be safe for Alice to audience the recordings on her own. However, she was still struck by the pain she witnessed. Client robustness to witness pain or difficult experience, on their own, is another important consideration.

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Thank you for your
participation

