

## Externalizing conversations

The idea of externalizing conversations comes from **Michael White** (1948 –2008) He was an Australian family therapist, known as the founder of narrative therapy, and for his significant contribution to psychotherapy and family therapy, which have been a source of techniques adopted by other approaches. In his therapeutic work White was concerned with those who are the most vulnerable in society: the mentally ill, children, or the abused and downtrodden. He developed ways of responding to women who had experienced abuse (White, 1995c) and was exploring ways in which narrative practices can assist groups and communities to respond to broader social injustices.

White's main idea can be summarised as 'the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem'. Through a process of externalizing conversation, it is easier for us to characterize our worries, to describe them as separate from our being. White describes how people can become recruited to a 'spoiled identity' by the negative stories they accept about their lives (White 2007, p. 13). Externalizing conversations can help challenge the self-destructive belief and behaviours of those who have been abused. By engaging in therapeutic externalizing conversations it is possible to re-author one's life, to challenge the dominant knowledge and social practices that are demeaning of us, and to develop a preferred alternative narrative.

White says that externalizing is much easier to use as a technique when working with small children, since for them magical thinking and fantasy are present in their every day. Therapeutic writing exercises are often creative and playful. The use of metaphors, poems and other fiction, picture cards etc. helps the participants to use their imagination and create imaginary external characters that help them externalize their problems and find new solutions.

### Literature:

White, M. (1995c) 'Naming abuse and breaking from its effects.' In White, M., *Re-authoring lives: Interviews and essays*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications. Interviewed by Christopher McLean.

White, M. (2007) *Maps of narrative practice*. New York: W.W. Norton.