



A Narrative Group Project
from Turkey: Exploring Diverse
Responses to Covid-19

İclal Eskiöđlu Aydın

Ibn Haldun University Center for Psychotherapy Research, İstanbul
Turkey
iclales@gmail.com

Introduction

In Turkey, the Covid-19 started in March, 2020. From March to June, the country was locked down only for 2-4 days in a week. With June, the lock down days were removed. In these 6 months, some people started to work at home. The psychotherapy center that I work at also passed to online sessions until June. However, in Turkey, doing therapy sessions online was still a new idea. Most of the people prefer to have face-to-face sessions. Also most of the therapists were unaccustomed to make sessions online. So, it was an adaptation period both for the therapists and the people consulting to therapy. With the emergence of the pandemic, we (the masters students and I) made a group project that was guided with narrative ideas. In this paper, the story of the project, the guiding narrative ideas and group processes are mentioned.

Story of the Project

The project arose in relation to responding to the difficulties that popped up in our lives because of the Covid-19. I am working at Ibn Haldun University Center for Psychotherapy Research in Turkey. I am a narrative therapist and, also, I give supervision to the master students of clinical psychology at the university. The master students were making their internships at the center. Because of

the pandemic, their internships were left half finished. Also, their academic dissertation processes were affected. Some of them had to go back to their homes, out of İstanbul. So, they found themselves in a very uncertain place full of anxiety, disappointments, and stress with the emergence of the pandemic.

The center was planning to announce that the people who were experiencing difficulties could call for help for free. The students were willing to help other people. Therefore, the therapists at the center were expected to guide the students in approaching those who wanted support due to the process. During our session with students in which I was proposing a narrative framework in supporting applicants, they expressed that they were experiencing great hardship in those pandemic days, and they did not know how to help other people while they did not feel well enough. Spontaneously, I offered to arrange a narrative group work for them to talk about the difficulties they experienced and find some ways that may help them to respond to these difficulties. In addition, they could use the ideas they would learn from a narrative perspective from this group work. However, since there were 18 students who wanted to attend the group work, I offered to split them into 4 groups, thereby making it easier to work.

Narrative Perspectives that guided the group's work

Covid-19 came into our lives suddenly and we do not know when it will finish. Because of the Covid-19, our lifestyles changed dramatically in which social distance separated us from each other, and we lost the warmth of our loved ones, leading us to face isolation and causing depressive feelings. Because the future is blurred, and our plans were canceled or postponed for an indefinite period of time, uncertainty and anxiety appeared in our lives in different forms. While some people have to stay home with a violent partner, others have the risk of death. Unfortunately, some people lost their loved ones or their own lives which triggers grief. Due to the immense changes in our lives, some narrative ideas may help us to reconsider the conditions we live in.

Trauma

The shape of the corona virus made me think about trauma. We may say that it is a collective trauma because lots of people experienced the intrusive and unexpected emergence of the effects of the virus. In narrative therapy, Michael White says, “no-one is a passive recipient of trauma” (White 2006). White asserts that everyone does something in order to prevent or modify the trauma or its effects because people try to protect what is precious in their lives. Therefore, we should evaluate both the effects of the trauma and the responses to trauma. However, trauma generally tries to convince us to see only its effects and ignore the responses to trauma. Thus, in narrative approach “doubly listening” that refers to listening to both the effects of and the responses to trauma is a posture in therapy that enables “double-storied” conversations. The double-storied conversations assist people to thicken their story about their responses to trauma rather than single-storied (only the trauma story) conversations (White 2006).

In the group work, listening doubly helped me to find out the things that helped the group members to sustain in these pandemic days. Thereby, we could discover their skills, areas of knowledge and values that they hold in the face of the difficulties they were experiencing. With listening doubly, I assisted them to strengthen their story of responses to trauma.

Liminal phase

Liminal phase is a period of “rite of passage” in life and it is described as:

“...in which one’s familiar sense of being in the world is absent, and where nothing means quite what it did before. This phase is invariably characterised by periods of disorientation and confusion, and times of significant despair.” (White 2020)

It is possible to think of the pandemic days as a liminal phase in life. Before the pandemic days, we were working at workplaces; going outside; having holiday plans; having social relations and activities etc. However, with the emergence of

pandemic, our “sense of being in the world” became unfamiliar and we started to face disorientation, uncertainty, and hopelessness.

In the group works, we discussed this period of time as a liminal phase. In addition, we talked about other liminal phases in life that they had experienced before. These conversations made it possible to see what we experience is a period. Thereby, disorientation feelings changed with “it is a phase in life that I will go through and it will end like the other liminal phases in life I experienced and overcame before”. When we know that we are going through a liminal phase, it is easier to focus on the things that help us to sustain in this process.

Sustaining rather than solving

When we consider the situation as an overwhelming problem that should be solved, then we try to find solutions to end it, change it, escape from it. That may tire and exhaust us. However, when we accept the situation as a process, it may invite a sustaining and surviving position. A sustaining position may offer us to look at what we have in our hands: the things that help us to endure, to continue in the process.

Group Work Processes and Narrative Practices

The group works were conducted online in three sessions for all the four groups each of which lasted about 2.5 hours. The first session was done with some guiding questions that aimed to understand the difficulties they experience and discover the sustaining stories of the group members. In order to do that, some narrative ideas and practices guided us. The second meeting focused on generating collective documents. The third meeting was held to evaluate the process.

First meeting: Discovering the skills, knowledges and values

In the first meeting we talked about both, the difficulties that they experienced in the pandemic days and the responses that they gave to this hardship. I prepared some guiding questions for the conversations in the first meeting. However, during the group processes, I tried to take a de-centered position which in narrative therapy refers to bringing the areas of knowledge and skills of the people consulted to therapy, to the center of the therapeutic conversations, not of the therapist (White 2011). Here are the guiding questions:

- How do you evaluate the coronavirus period? What kind of anxiety or distress do you experience? Could you specify your anxiety/distress?
- Could you name the anxiety/distress? What kind of an image do you have in your mind when you think about this anxiety/distress?
- What are the effects of this anxiety/distress in your life?
- Are there any places, times, people, circumstances that the anxiety/distress increase?
- Are there any places, times, people, circumstances that the anxiety/distress decrease?
- Do you remember a tough time previously that you found a way for sustaining?
- In that tough time, what kind of a skill/knowledge/value helped you to sustain?
- Could you tell a story that this skill/knowledge/value made a difference in a tough time?
- What is the history of this skill/knowledge/value? How did you learn it? Who did you learn it from?
- Is this skill or value linked in some way to collective traditions (familial/community) and/or cultural traditions? Are there proverbs, sayings, stories, songs, images from your family, community and/or culture with which these skills and knowledge are linked?
- Could you share your feedback? What do you think about how this conversation went?

These questions were formed in order to benefit from some narrative ideas and practices discussed below.

Specification and externalization of the problem

The pandemic has a very pervasive form which affects lots of areas of our lives. Hence, when we see a problem as pervasive, we may feel the uncertainty. Therefore, if we narrow our conversation and choose a specific starting point, it is possible to feel a bit more certain, as an antidote to the uncertainty of the pandemic. So, I tried to specify the problem in the group conversations. For example, talking about “anxiety” is a very big topic, we may get lost inside it because there are lots of anxiety types. However, when we talk about “anxiety of losing our loved one”, the territory of the conversation may be more certain. So, I preferred to stay in this more specific area.

One of the helpful practices was externalization conversations. In relation to Michael White’s (2007) statement, “the person is not the problem; the problem is the problem”, we talked about the difficulties that they experience in a concrete way. In other words, I asked them to externalize and name the problem/difficulty that they experienced. They found an image to describe their problem as “experience-near” description (White 2007). For example, one of them identified the feeling of loneliness/isolation as “drawn into a black hole that is trying to strangle the silence and make us lonely”. By externalization, we were able to discuss the problems separately from the person’s identity. After identification of the problem, asked them the questions of the “the statement of position map” (Russell and Carey 2004). In relation to these questions, we searched the effects of the identified problem in their lives. In addition, we talked about the places, times, circumstances when the effects of the problem increase and decrease. The decreased circumstances helped us to find what works for them in these times, that is which skills, values, knowledge help them to reduce the effects of the problem.

Unique Outcomes and Double-Storyed Conversations

Externalization of conversations made it possible to separate the person from the “problem-saturated story” that enables them to feel the sense of “personal agency”

that means they have a participation in their own lives (White and Epston 1990). The question which aimed at searching for the times, circumstances and places when the effects of the problem decreased, revealed the “unique outcomes”. The unique outcomes refer to “those aspects of lived experience that fall outside of the dominant problem story” (White and Epston 1990). Finding out the unique outcomes made it possible to discover their skills, values, and knowledge, which helped them to see the experiences that “fall outside of the dominant problem story”.

Each group member found their own sustaining skills in which we discovered the stories, histories and broader connections of these skills and knowledge. When we were talking about the stories of the skills, I encouraged them to find a time where these skills and knowledge made a difference. In this frame, I used the questions that David Denborough mentioned in his book “Collective Narrative Practice” (Denborough 2008).

For the sake of tracing the stories of these skills, knowledge, and values that they found helpful for sustaining in these days, I asked them whether these sustaining skills have made a difference at another liminal phase in the past. They were so surprised to see that they had the same skills and knowledge in two different liminal phases in their lives. It was like a bridge that they discovered, something special for them, coming from experiences acquired through hardship and having been kept for a long time. One of them expressed her discovery with these words: “I realized that this skill was helping me for many years. However now I could know it and name it. This awareness made me feel strong and hopeful”. Some of them said that with the discoveries of skills and knowledge, they felt that “the control of their lives” is in their hands; not in the problem’s hands.

Revealing the skills and knowledge led us to engage in double-storied conversations. In other words, at the beginning of the first meeting, they came with a dominant problem story (single story) however after talking about the skills and knowledge, they developed double-stories (both the stories of the difficulties they experienced and the responses they gave to these difficulties) at the end of the first meeting.

Discovering the history and the connections of skills and knowledge

In the conversations that we were searching about what sustained them in the process of pandemic, I asked them to discover the history of the skills, knowledge and values with the following questions proposed by David Denborough : “How did you learn this? Who did you learn it from?” (Denborough 2008). They found some important, precious people in their lives that they had learned these skills from. The moments that the connections were established between these people were very powerful. They expressed that they felt the support of these people in their lives.

Then I asked them the broader connections of these skills and knowledge with the following questions: “Is this skill or value linked in some way to collective traditions (familial/community) and/or cultural traditions? Are there proverbs, sayings, stories, songs, images from your family, community and/or culture with which these skills and knowledge are linked?” With this question, skills and knowledge were described in a collective context (Denborough 2008).

Second Meeting: Generating Collective Documents

Denborough (2008) mentioned the aim of the collective documents as “. . .to collectively convey a range of hard-won skills and knowledge, in parallel with a rich acknowledgement of the circumstances in which these have been hard-won”. After the first meeting, group members wrote their own discoveries of their sustaining skills, knowledge and values. However, the stories were still individual. In order to tell stories in a collective way, in the second meeting, we collected all the writings and we read them aloud in the group. Each group read and edited the writings together. Before reading, we decided these guiding tips to gather them in a collective way:

1. *Selecting phrases, metaphors, images:* They focused on selecting the words, phrases, sentences that may attract the attention of the people who will read/watch the collective documents. They tried to find impressive phrases,

literary descriptions, metaphoric expressions that may help to evoke imagination and feelings of the audiences.

2. *Collective expressions*: The group members tried to eliminate the individual statements and pick out the collective expressions.
3. *Double-Storyed Telling*: Each document focused on both the shared difficulties that they experienced in pandemic and the skills, knowledge and values that helped them to survive in these days.

At the end of the first editions, I asked the following questions: “What do you want to do with these expressions? Do you want to write a poem, or make a video, or draw a painting or something else? How do you want to convey these documents to the audiences?” Each group responded in a different way: first group wanted to write paragraphs, the second group chose to write a poem, the other group wanted to make a video, and the last group decided to form a formula. So, each collective document went through very creative and unique processes.

Sharing Collective Documents and enabling contributions

“Once we begin to acknowledge people’s responses to trauma and what it is they give value to, we can start sharing our survival skills and making contributions to one another” (Denborough 2014). It is really important to share our skills, knowledge, and values with other people who have similar difficulties in their lives. As Denborough (2014) mentioned that on television, newspapers and online news we watch/read only trauma stories (violence, abuse, disasters etc.); however we don’t read/watch/listen the stories of surviving skills that include the steps the people take in order to protect themselves or others, to create safety.

After they developed collective documents, I asked them with whom they wanted to share these documents. All of them decided to share the documents with people in Turkey and the people around the world who experience difficulties.

Thus, they wrote the documents in Turkish and then translated them into English. The collective documents were put on the Ibn Haldun University's website in Turkish; and the Re-authoring Teaching website in English.

For receiving responses, they prepared some questions which they hope to be helpful for the audiences. The questions were formed for the sake of establishing the connection with the audience, evoking the contributions of other people, and thickening the sustaining stories. Here are some examples from the questions:

“When you watch the video, which expression(s) caught your attention?”

“What did the expressions which caught your attention remind you about your life?”

“Does the poem contribute in any way to your sustaining in this process?”

“If you wanted to write one more stanza to this poem, what could it be?”

“Do you think that you can also develop your own formula of your stories (both with the effects of difficulties and the ways in which you can survive against these difficulties)?”

“Did our stories remind you of anything that assists you in surviving in the face of pandemic?”

Third Meeting: Definitional Ceremony and Evaluating the Process

After the editions of the collective documents, we met again for definitional ceremonies which refer to “the process can move from the written word to an oral ritual” (Denborough 2008). Each group read/watched the collective documents together loudly. When they read/watched again in a ceremonial frame, they had the chance to give voice to a double-storied re-telling and they gathered around

their stories of survival. Afterwards, we evaluated the group process and received feedback for the project. You can find some of the feedbacks below:

“Actually I noticed that this skill has been in my life for many years, however I recognized it in this meeting. This makes me feel stronger and hopeful”

“I see that the control of my life has been in my hands in front of difficulties since I was a child”

“Sometimes we cannot think what can help us when we face hardship in life. However I now know and I can use this skill in the future instead of trying to find it”

“This awareness says to me ‘you could overcome the problems in life by using your own skills rather than trying to find something from outside and you can use your own resources when you need’.”

“I now realize that I was following a family tradition (cooking) and from now on cooking will have a meaning for me”

“I think it is a really helpful awareness to know what helps us in life.”

“When we were generating the collective document, it was a time that we were in that moment, we didn’t think about pandemic, difficulties, anxiety etc. We really enjoyed that period of time.”

“I am so surprised to receive responses from other people.”

“This project contributed both to our lives and to our therapeutic practices.”

Examples from Contributions

I want to share one of my colleagues’ response to the collective document:

“When I looked at the collective documents, I felt like I was watching a marbling

art that all the documents are a part of a unity; however none of them interfere with others, like the colors in the marbling art.”

After sharing collective documents, precious contributions were received. Here are some examples from these contributions:

Contribution to the collective poem:

Someone wanted to add one more stanza to the poem as:
 Color the life in your own way
 Of love everything in your heart
 Give so generously that you can warm every soul on earth
 Mingle the souls that no soul remains without love in the world

Contribution to the formula:

All the difficulties/ Endurance=0

Contribution to the paragraphs:

“This document helped me to see that the solutions in life are in ordinary things that we do here and now rather than sophisticated or outside”

Contribution to the video:

“I thought that my own skills, values are so important”

My Experience as a Therapist

As a therapist, all the group processes were very exciting for me. At the beginning of the first session, there were only difficulties, problems and feelings of hopelessness and desperation. However, I witnessed the discoveries of their responses to pandemic. I usually have individual sessions and when we discover

double-stories with the people who consulted for therapy, it really made me feel excited. However, in group work, seeing the responses with more than one person increased my excitement.

In addition, the processes of generating collective documents were very creative and I could see the evolving of the expressions from individual to collective. When the documents were prepared in a collective way, it was very different from the beginning. I felt like I was watching a riverbed in which the water flows through different geographical areas.

On the other hand, because the students were receiving supervision from me, we knew each other. However, after the group project, we felt warmth between us, and our relationship became closer. Also, after the group project, some of the students did sessions with people who had difficulties because of the pandemic and they used the narrative ideas. I was supervising them and I saw that they were so good at narrative practice even though they did not have the narrative therapy training. I saw that this project contributed to them both as a person having difficulties in pandemic days and as a therapist. In conclusion, the group project was very unique, creative and constructive for all of us.

Conclusion

This group project began spontaneously after a need of the therapists who wanted to help people having difficulties in the pandemic process. In group works, I preferred to see the pandemic as a liminal phase that is the sense of being lost; and a collective trauma that lots of people experience from the effects of the coronavirus. Therefore, we tried to find out the sustaining skills rather than solving skills. As the feedback points out, the group members discovered their own skills, knowledges and values in life. It was not coming from an 'expert' who said what was "healthy/unhealthy to do" in these days. The conversations in the group work encouraged them to look at their already used skills and knowledge. Thus, they felt that they had already survived in some way, in these pandemic days as they had survived previous hardships in their lives. They also involved their creativity

skills to the process. Thereby, each group tended to choose the type of document in relation to their interests in life.

The Collective Documents

Here are the links for each collective document. You can reach them and contribute to these documents. We are really curious to hear from you. Please share your contributions with us.

- For the Collective Paragraphs "The Bonds That Let Us Continue" [click here](#)
- For the Collective Poem "Of a little stone thrown into the sea" [click here](#)
- For the Collective Video "From These Days to Future" [click here](#)
- For the "Collective Formula of Feeling Strong against Difficulties" [click here](#)

References

Denborough, David. 2008. *Collective Narrative Practice: Responding to Individuals, Groups, and Communities Who Have Experienced Trauma*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.

_____. 2014. *Retelling the Stories of Our Lives: Everyday Narrative Therapy to Draw Inspiration and Transform Experience*. W.W. Norton & Company.

Russell, Shona, and Maggie Carey. 2004. *Narrative Therapy: Responding to Your Questions*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.

White, Michael, and David Epston. 1990. *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

_____. 2006. "Working with people who are suffering the consequences of multiple trauma: A narrative perspective." In *Trauma: Narrative responses to traumatic experience*, edited by David Denborough, 25-85. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.

_____. 2007. *Maps of Narrative Practice*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

_____. 2011. *Narrative Practice: Continuing the Conversations*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

_____. 2020. "Challenging The Culture Of Consumption: Rites Of Passage And Communities Of Acknowledgement". *Dulwich Centre*. <https://dulwichcentre.com.au/articles-about-narrative-therapy/deconstructing-addiction/challenging-the-culture-of-consumption/>