

The Rhythm of Life helping children to respond to their parents' divorce

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ABSTRACT

This article presents and discusses a possibility of group intervention based on narrative therapy, specifically with the application of the methodology 'Rhythm of Life'¹. The participants of this project were children of divorced parents, between 7 and 12 years old. Participants met once a week, in an 8-week program. The focus of these meetings was to build a safe identity territory, to talk about these problems, and to look for answers to their doubts. The methodology helped them to achieve these aims. This experience was positive for both the children and the outside witnesses, creating resonance in everyone who listens to their songs.

Keywords: Rhythm of Life, Narrative Therapy, Methodology, Music.

1. Introduction

Counselors and therapists know that helping family members to deal with their relations and their stories is not always an easy task. If we get music as a metaphor, in some therapeutic meetings the lack of harmony is so intense that it sounds like noise rather than an attuned melody. When the therapist is surrounded by such a confusion of sounds he/she may become a conductor and help each one get in synch and, eventually, play nice symphonies together. That's the main objective of the methodology 'Rhythm of Life' (Müller, March, 2012) that will be presented in this paper.

To that end, we shall see some theoretical aspects of the Narrative Therapy (White & Epston, 1990; White, 2007, 2011; Madigan, 2011) as well as the Collective Narrative Practice (Denborough, 2008), get to know the steps of the methodology 'Rhythm of Life' (Müller, March, 2012), and have an example of how to apply this methodology in a group.

The methodology 'Rhythm of Life' is a Collective Narrative Practice whose basic theory is the Narrative Therapy, a post-modern intervention created by Michael White and David Epston. This theory is rooted in the principle that our lives are acknowledged as stories, some of which are rich and empowering whereas others are sad and filled with problems (White, 2007, 2011; Madigan, 2011). When, during the therapeutical process, the person becomes the author of his/her story, a favorite version of life starts being told, pointing out people and aspects that are relevant and meaningful.

This process of rescuing a person's own authorship is developed along the therapeutical meetings, all aiming at deconstruct dominant truths as well as reinforce, through conversations, a preferred story. This way the person is not a victim of the situation anymore and begins to write his/her story in a process called 'Personal Agency' (White, 2007, 2011).

One possible way to go through this process is to use the externalizing conversations to keep the individual off the problem and also to give this person voice. As stated by Michael White: 'the person is not the problem. The problem is the problem'. When people realize the problem is an issue apart, they recover a space of action where they can be themselves and act in a self-governing way despite the problem (Freeman, Epston & Lobovits, 1997; Monk, 1997; Epston, 1998; White, 2007, 2011; Madigan, 2011). Besides, we can consider the re-authoring conversations as aligned to the textual paradigm that considers each personal story as an inert wining of the landscape of action and the landscape of identity (White, 2007). Through

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re-authoring conversations people present the dominant version of their stories while the therapist listens carefully and asks questions trying to highlight potentially meaningful events so far neglected. Thus the alternative story is shaped and empowered. To do it, during the re-authoring conversations, the therapist weaves some aspects of the story itself with some aspects of the person's identity.

The details related to the story form what is called landscape of action: when and where it took place, the people involved, the causes and consequences, among other aspects of the narrative whereas the issues related to the person's perception of his/her own self form the landscape of identity focusing on the qualities, skills, values, beliefs and knowledge the person cherishes and which are outstanding in the narrative. Such intertwining of both landscapes makes new versions of the story come up to be considered (Monk, 1997; White, 2007, 2011; Madigan, 2011).

Another way the narrative therapists have to strengthen the alternative stories is to use the Re-Membering Conversations. Through these conversations, meaningful people – those who have made a difference, who are dear and close, who have taken a special part in some relevant context or who have taught and have been role models in some aspects and fundamental characteristics of posture and world view – are remembered and again are part of the person's preferred story (Monk, 1997; White, 2007, 2011; Madigan, 2011).

The whole Narrative Therapy process runs like a Scaffolding Conversation. Through such conversation, the person manages to get out of the known and familiar story and get to the point of acquiring new perspectives about his/her own self as well as building actions plans to promote the change (White, 2007, 2011; Madigan, 2011).

A major aspect in the Narrative Therapy is the presence of outside witnesses in some key moments of the therapeutical process. The outside witnesses listen to the stories and then talk about their feelings while listening to that narrative and also express how that version touched them and resonated with their own life story. Such attitude of re-telling the story under a new light, according to an outsider's view, reinforces some aspects of the story which was told and guides the 'author' of the story towards considering some points that, perhaps, were still in the dark (White, 2007, 2011; Madigan, 2011).

Finally, a therapeutical strategy very much used in the Narrative Therapy is the use of documents to acknowledge the alternative story that is getting momentum. These documents are letters, certificates, diplomas, statements, among other possibilities that reassure this preferred story. In the instance of a group work, participants are asked to write a collective document so that the group may share what they've learned with other people living similar situations (Monk, 1997; Epston, 1998; White, 2007, 2011; Denborough, 2008; Madigan, 2011; Müller, 2012).

There are several ways of Narrative Therapy to be applied in groups and all of them have one specific metaphor as base: The team of Life, The Tree of Life, The Kite of Life, The Pantry of Life, The Rhythm of Life. The Collective Narrative Practices follow some basic presumptions: 1) Each and every person responds to life's challenges in some way and this knowledge and skills may be shared with other people; 2) There is always a double-storied account: one related to the problem and another one about how the person managed to overcome that problem. It's the therapists' job to bring out this double narrative; 3) People may enlarge their preferred stories, the one which helps to build wider perceptions richly described about themselves and their stories; 4) The individual experiences told by the person may be connected to some sort of collective; 5) People may share their knowledge with others who are going through similar situations and, hence, contribute to other people's lives.

The methodology brought forward in this article is the 'Rhythm of Life' (Müller, March 2012), which weaves the Narrative Therapy concepts with the metaphor of music. It's a group work methodology that reinforces the positive aspects of people's life stories while connecting these individual stories aiming at getting the collective forces mobilized to deal with tough situations in life. To get to these goals, it uses music as a metaphor and promotes, along the process, a connection between the metaphor and life itself.

Next, you will find a more detailed description of the methodology 'Rhythm of Life' and a possibility of applying it.

2. Intervention layout

The methodology 'Rhythm of Life' was created to be easily applied in different social and cultural groups as well as in different age groups. Its playful character involves drawings, symbols, music and individual and group storytelling. As the main metaphor is music, it all begins with a conversation around this theme: what are their preferred music, which one has a special meaning for them, what would be the soundtrack for their lives, among others. At this stage, often times people like to sing some songs.

Just after this conversation, drawing material is handed out to the group: paper, colored pens and pencils. The methodology 'Rhythm of Life' is a five-step process, as follow²:

- **My instrument:** a moment when each person draws a musical instrument. It's not necessary for the person to know or to play the instrument. The person is asked to draw, in the middle of the page, an instrument he/she likes, leaving some room at the top and at the bottom. Further on, each participant will draw and write the stage, the preferred stories, the aspects that make he/she unique, hopes and dreams, and the significant people sitting in the audience.

- **My interpretation:** a moment for each person to present his/her instrument, as well as the stories and the persons related to it. The person also says the kind of music he/she has played the most – romantic, rock, blues, or some other rhythm – and also what the audience's reaction is.

- **The Orchestra of Life:** a moment to put individual stories together to form a collective context. All the instruments are put together as an orchestra and the group can see that each person plays one instrument, but when several people are gathered, they make up an orchestra and they can play beautiful symphonies together.

- **Getting attuned:** a moment to let the group acknowledge how important it is to get the individual contribution in sync with the group's needs, trying to smooth the individual potentials and the group expectations. The way a single person plays an instrument differs from playing in a group. What individual changes must take place in order to contribute to a collective context? Little by little the metaphor gets connected to life and people can acknowledge how their personal attitudes can either help or hinder the group in responding to challenges.

- **Our song:** a moment of reflection on how to share what was learned with other people in similar conditions. As a rule, the group writes a song to get their message across, but they also can have their own lyrics put in a familiar folk song.

All along the process, some theoretical aspects of the Narrative Therapy are present: each member of the group, besides telling his/her story, is also an outside witness of the other members' narratives; when they are asked to write the names of the people in the audience, they are doing a re-membering conversation; when they are invited to write and tell the others some aspects of their own story of life and some aspects of their own identity, they are doing a re-authoring conversation; when they are asked to get the symptom in sync and then turn it into a group symphony, they build up, metaphorically, their alternative stories; when the group composes the song sharing their learning, they draw up a collective document which, in this case, is musical. The whole process unfolds like a scaffolding conversation: step by step, each one taking their own time and pace, coming to a dynamics that lets the person get out of the known and familiar story and get closer and closer to new versions of himself/herself and of their life stories.

Besides, music is a kind of language that can be understood by different people in different cultures. Music makes us sing and dance and it stays in our minds and can be accessed at any moment, in a way that written words can't (Denborough, 2002). Thereby the present methodology's flexibility: it can be applied and understood in a wide range of both social and cultural contexts.

3. A way of applying this methodology

The Project 'Getting over divorce' is a response to a usual demand and aims mainly at help children respond to their parents' divorce and the dilemmas they have to face.

Nowadays, divorce is very common in many families, and it can be considered by the children as a good option to a better family atmosphere (Souza, 2000; Nunes-Costa et al., 2009; Schneebeli and Menandro, 2012). At the

² Further information about the methodology is available both in video and text at Rhythm of Life Database [<http://narrativetherapyonline.com/moodle/course/view.php?id=16>]

same time, many researches show that the impact of the divorce on children may vary according to their age (Souza, 2000; Ramires, 2004; Hack and Ramires, 2010; Raposo et al., 2011) and it includes the need to deal with different kinds of feelings such as fear of abandonment, anger, guilt, among others. Therefore it's very important to focus on their capacity to respond to events rather than on the traumatic retelling which reinforces bad feelings.

Furthermore, Souza (2000) emphasizes that the lack of interfamily communication over divorce hinders the way children understand what happened and how things will be from then on. This attitude is based on the social myth that talking about painful subjects worsens the suffering. Moreover, silence is taken as absence of difficulties when actually it means that children are responding to divorce in absolute solitude. Souza (2000) mentions the importance of children having someone to talk to and to vent out what they're going through, mainly with friends their own age.

Travis (2003), in a research with Brazilian family therapists, found out that most of them don't consider it relevant to have specific knowledge to deal with remarried families, therefore, they don't look for readings about this theme. Another aspect of family therapy is highlighted by Cano et al., (2009) and it focuses on the importance of creating new methodologies that could benefit people who are going through this situation.

Taking into consideration these reflections, I'll present a possible way to apply a collective narrative methodology in a group of children and teenagers, considering, with Nunes-Costa et al.(2009), that children adaptation happens through strengthening their self-esteem, cognitive competence, autonomy, and social support. Specifically talking about this age group, we know the relevance of mutual help among friends and colleagues the same age (Piaget, 1930/1996; Féres-Carneiro, 1998; Souza, 2000).

This project started on May 2nd, 2012, and finished on July 09th, 2012. The 11 children who took part in the project, aged between 07 and 12, were divided in two groups. To reach the goal of helping the children build new narratives about the separation, 08 meetings were provided, each one with a specific theme, as shown below:

1st meeting: Who are we?

The first meeting aimed primarily at the children's introducing themselves sharing their stories and expectations. It was the moment of creating the notion of belonging and of building a safe identity territory so that they could talk about the problems they were facing.

2nd meeting: Our Doubts

The goal of the second meeting was to give the children a chance to vent their doubts about the divorce. The groups posed 37 questions divorcewise ranging from their parents' separation ("Why have they split?") up to more philosophical ones ("Can love last forever?")

3rd meeting: Meeting with Young Adults

Some young adults, aged between 20 and 25, who had been through the same situation as children, had managed their parents' divorce and now live quite well with it, were invited to this third meeting. The major point in this meeting was to show the children that getting over a problem is possible and also to help the children with their doubts from the previous meetings.

4th meeting: The Rhythm of Life

On the 4th meeting, the methodology 'Rhythm of Life' was applied. Through this methodology the children could access their inner skills to tackle the situation. Besides, they could share the connections they had made with their stories of life. The two bands, 'Rescue of Love' and 'The Sound of Overcoming' arose from this meeting.

5th meeting: Our Song

On this occasion the children wrote the lyrics for their songs meaning to share what they had learned with people in a similar situation. Besides, we struck it lucky with the special collaboration of the pianist Fernando Vago Santana who arranged the songs. Both songs and its chords are attached.

6th meeting: Rehearsal

The 6th meeting's goal was to rehearse the songs for the presentation yet to come.

7th meeting: Recording

On the 7th meeting, the children recorded their songs with two goals:

- 1) to have a recording for the DVD to be given to their parents at the ending and
- 2) to share their songs with other people who had been through their parents' divorce – hence, outside witnesses – but who hadn't taken part in the project so far. The specific goal of getting these people involved was to check how the songs would resound in those who didn't take part in the 'Rhythm of Life' process. They were asked to listen to the songs and say how they felt while the children were singing.

8th meeting: Answers

Our last meeting was the moment to read the outside witnesses' answers. All letters mentioned how lightly and how deeply the children had talked about the separation topic.

On July 9th, 2012, the Project 'Getting over divorce' was ended with a presentation to parents, family and friends. The objective at this moment was to present the methodology 'Rhythm of Life', the development of the meetings and the final result: the children's songs. On this occasion, the children sang their songs accompanied by the SESI-ES Choir.

The way the methodology 'Rhythm of Life' was applied in the Project 'Getting over divorce' reached all of its goals as far as the children were concerned. Furthermore, it also helped the outside witnesses in their re-authoring process.

Next, the results achieved with each of these groups.

The children

The children who experienced the 'Rhythm of Life':

1. were able to create a space where they felt safe and supported enough to talk about their experiences and their doubts, heard the statements from other people who, themselves, had endured their parents' divorce, and noticed that there are stories quite different from theirs and reckoned the possibility of getting over all situations.
2. connected themselves to their life stories and were able to rescue qualities, skills, values, beliefs, significant persons, among other positive aspects, strengthened their identities through this connection to their life stories, and lived what the late Paulo Freire (1992), a Brazilian educator, used to call "unity in diversity" when they realized their stories were different, but there was a possibility of getting over for all;
3. composed songs sharing what they had learned with other people with similar experiences in life, and realized their songs can bring positive effects to people who hear them;
4. could share all this learning process with their families and friends in some moments of integration among the people who were present;
5. through a re-authoring process, they could realize that even though their parents aren't together anymore, they are still a family.

Outside witnesses: The young adults

Besides reaching its aimed objectives, the Project 'Getting over divorce' has brought other positive results to people involved in the process. The young adults who came to talk to the children reported that the experience had been important to them as well, for they had been able:

1. to think if they had really overcome their parents' divorce and also they could wonder 'when' and 'how' this had happened;
"I was surprised for I had the opportunity, still in the middle of so many queries, to reflect: At which point have I overcome 'something'?" (L., 20 years old).
2. to do for the children what they wished had been done for them – more experienced people talking to them and pointing out possibilities;
"The most interesting aspect is that sharing this moment with the children is an opportunity to do for them what I wish someone had done for me." (E., 23 years old).
3. to connect to their own abilities, qualities and values and remember important people who helped them to overcome those difficult moments;
"It was extremely touching to remember my whole story. It made me feel proud of what, in the past, had been so painful." (M., 21 years old).
4. to look at their lives now and acknowledge the current possibilities.

"During the period I took part in the Project 'Getting over divorce', I had a calm, peaceful and mature lunch with my parents and my brother. (...) At that moment, I realized that we will always be a family, no matter what." (L., 20 years old).

Outside witnesses: The people who heard the songs

The people who heard the children singing reported that such an experience:

1. had reconnected them to their overcoming stories and to their necessary abilities and qualities to move forward (courage, determination, hope...), renewing their joy, their lightness and the feeling that they're able to get back on track;
2. had made them remember special people and moments;
3. had made them willing to help other people who are going through similar experiences.

Outside witnesses: The pianist who composed the songs

The pianist who composed the music to the children's lyrics considered that this project has impressed him "both for its format simplicity and for its deep emotion's approach" which has allowed him:

- to connect to the children's feelings to give music to their emotions:

"By just imagining what the children have been through, I see myself in their shoes. I can feel their pain, their strength, and I try to express, through my art, what I believe they'd like to express with their words, smiles, and tears".

- to reflect from another viewpoint about the role of the artist in society:

"Writing about it now helped me to get a more mature reflection on a theme: after all, what's the use of an artist in society?(...) the artist serves as voice and color to a dumb and grey society that doesn't find a way to express itself".

Outside witnesses: SESI-ES Choir

The members of the SESI-ES Choir were invited to accompany the children on the refrain of the songs, but they didn't know the story behind those lyrics. When they heard the presentation of the Project 'Getting over divorce', they realized the deep meaning of those songs and, many of them, got really emotional when they walked onstage to sing with the children.

"I had no idea about the grandeur and the meaning of these songs." (T. 77 years old).

"It was touching. I was on the verge of tears." (J., 75 years old)

Outside witnesses: The Parents

The parents were touched with their children's presentation and with the lightness with which the theme was approached. After the presentation, one of the fathers came to talk to me and told me that at first he hadn't agreed on his son's taking part in a project about a theme which was "already over" – a recurring posture, based on the myth that talking about something painful deepens the suffering. However, after the presentation, he had realized the meaning of it all and had noticed that, along the project, his son's relationship with him had improved. The music had connected them: being a musician, his son wanted his help to have the best possible performance onstage.

Outside witnesses: Audience in the 10th Family Therapy Congress in Curitiba, PR, Brazil and in the 11th International Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference in Adelaide, Australia.

This project was presented in the 10th Family Therapy Congress in Curitiba, PR, Brazil, in July, 2012. In every presentation of the songs, the audience reacted with deep emotion and felt connected with the children's stories and songs, as stated below, in messages sent to the children:

"You have to know that what you did is very important and meaningful and has helped me to keep these memories without suffering or pain. Thank you very much, your song was like a tender hug to me." (Y., São Paulo).

"Thank you for translating my experience into music, it was BEAUTIFUL!!!" (S., Santa Catarina).

"Joy and inspiration are stronger before such beautiful examples, and this helps to empower the transforming courage." (L., Rio de Janeiro).

"Thank you for your creation of your 'Rhythm of Life' and share it with us. Your broad expression of being able to continue to love and be yourself touched me and filled my heart with joy and my eyes with tears." (K.N., USA).

4. Some considerations

This article aimed at showing a practical application of the methodology 'Rhythm of Life' in the Project 'Getting over divorce' which concerned children dealing with their parents' divorce. The results achieved show the potentials and possibilities of this methodology as a useful tool in group works in a number of different contexts. After all, as mentioned before, music is a language easily understood by people in different cultures and societies.

That's why this methodology serves many kinds of purposes, being able to be applied individually and collectively. In an individual approach, the step 'The Orchestra of Life' may be suppressed with no bad consequences. In a group approach, special attention must be paid to some details. First of all, the group must have a common objective which will be the focus of the work. In this article, the focus was the parents' divorce. Some themes such as rehab challenges, old age challenges, being a family therapist, life of a musician among others, have already been worked on with this methodology.

Another aspect to be considered is the difference in cognitive-motor ability among the participants. In the project presented here, this factor hindered the application of this methodology, specifically in the 4th meeting. The 7-year-old children, still learning how to write, had more problems to write about some aspects of their stories than other literate children aged 12. This caused a break in the pace of the process, but, if the groups are more homogeneous, such problem will be avoided.

Because the 'Rhythm of Life' is not a methodology to exclude any person in need, even illiterate people can take part in the project and, yet, get its full benefits. The therapist must instruct the participants to put in paper, at every step of the project, any graphic representation related to their life stories. The objective is not the correct spelling of the words, but rather the meaning of each graphic symbol and its connection to the person's life.

In general terms, the methodology provides a playful and relaxing environment so that people can expose their stories and build an alternative version of narratives more adequate to what they expect from life, making them the authors of their own lives.

In the Project 'Getting over divorce' presented here, the methodology 'Rhythm of Life' helped them to get out of the role of victims of the situation and to start being transformation agents, being able to share with other people who are going through similar situations the knowledge built along the 08 meetings.

Like ripples on a lake after a stone is thrown, the experience with the children caused positive effects on the people involved with the project, and these results were far above its initial goals, reinforcing the idea that shared learning are potentially transforming.

Thus, it was verified that the methodology 'Rhythm of Life', as applied in the Project 'Getting over divorce', is adequate and its results are relevant to all the people involved in the process. It is expected to help counselors and family therapists to tackle their clients' difficulties in all kinds of life narratives.

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Songs:

Getting Over

Band 'Rescue of Love' (May 30th , 2012)

 D A
The divorce ripped off
F#m B7
a piece of my heart
 Em A
But now I'm getting over

 G A4 A
And I can say:

(Refrain)

 D F#m B B/D#
Throw all your bad memories into the sea

 Em A
And forget the pain

 Em A
From now on let's sing

EmA G/D D
And be happy at this moment.

 D A
Now I look back on the divorce

 G
And I understand

 Em D
It's better to have your parents divorced than fighting

 G
That's a solution

 Em A
To ease the pain in my heart.

(Refrain)

F#m B7
Between parents love is endless while it lasts

 Em A
But for the children there's no wall to love

Em A D G/D D
It's a treasure.

(Refrain)

I'm here

Band 'The Sound of Overcoming' (May 24, 2012)

(Refrain – twice)

D
I'm here

A
That's what friends are for

G
You must stand up

A
And move forward.

D
Don't cry

A G
You'll make new friends

D A
The bad things from the past

G/D D
You will forget

Em7
Life has bad things

A7 D G A
And good things, too.

(Refrain – twice)

F#m Bm7
I've been through all this

A
And I've overcome

G Em A4 A
I've learned that other people have been through this as well

G A
And they haven't been so sad (twice)

Em7 A
Because it's better to live in harmony

A7 D G A
Than always fighting.

(Refrain – twice)

F#m7 Bm7
There will always be doubts

G A
And you must find the answers

G
Take a look at life

Em7 A
In time the answers will come

G Em7 A7 D G A
You'll hear the Sound of Overcoming.

(Refrain – twice)