Instructor’s Manual

for

NARRATIVE FAMILY THERAPY

with

STEPHEN MADIGAN, PHD

Manual by

Ali Miller, MFT and Stephen Madigan, PhD

psychotherapy.net
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Instructor’s Manual for Narrative Family Therapy, with Stephen Madigan, PhD

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Instructor’s Manual for

NARRATIVE FAMILY THERAPY WITH STEPHEN MADIGAN, PHD

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Tips for Making the Best Use of the DVD

1. USE THE TRANSCRIPTS

Make notes in the video Transcript for future reference; the next time you show the video you will have them available. Highlight or notate key moments in the video to better facilitate discussion during and after the video. Take advantage of the commentary throughout the transcript.

2. FACILITATE DISCUSSION

Pause the video at different points to elicit viewers’ observations and reactions to the concepts presented. The Discussion Questions section provides ideas about key points that can stimulate rich discussions and learning.

3. ENCOURAGE SHARING OF OPINIONS

Encourage viewers to voice their opinions; no therapy is perfect! What are viewers’ impressions of what works and does not work in the sessions? We learn as much from our mistakes as our successes; it is crucial for students and therapists to develop the ability to effectively critique this work as well as their own.

4. CONDUCT A ROLE-PLAY

The Role-Plays section guides you through exercises you can assign to your students in the classroom or training session.

5. SUGGEST READINGS TO ENRICH VIDEO MATERIAL

Assign readings from Related Websites, Videos and Further Reading prior to or after viewing.

6. ASSIGN A REACTION PAPER

See suggestions in the Reaction Paper section.

7. WATCH THE FAMILY THERAPY WITH THE EXPERTS SERIES

This video is one in a series portraying leading theories of psychotherapy and their application in work with families. Each video presents a master family therapist working with a real family who have real problems. By showing several of the videos in this Family Therapy with the Experts series, you can expose viewers to a variety of styles and approaches, allowing them an opportunity to see what fits best for them.
PERSPECTIVE ON VIDEOS AND THE PERSONALITY OF THE THERAPIST

Psychotherapy portrayed in videos is less off-the-cuff than therapy in practice. Therapists may feel put on the spot to offer a good demonstration, and clients can be self-conscious in front of a camera. Therapists often move more quickly than they would in everyday practice to demonstrate a particular technique. Despite these factors, therapists and clients on video can engage in a realistic session that conveys a wealth of information not contained in books or therapy transcripts: body language, tone of voice, facial expression, rhythm of the interaction, quality of the alliance—all aspects of the therapeutic relationship that are unique to an interpersonal encounter.

Psychotherapy is an intensely private matter. Unlike the training in other professions, students and practitioners rarely have an opportunity to see their mentors at work. But watching therapy on video is the next best thing.

One more note: The personal style of therapists is often as important as their techniques and theories. Therapists are usually drawn to approaches that mesh well with their own personality. Thus, while we can certainly pick up ideas from master therapists, students and trainees must make the best use of relevant theory, technique and research that fits their own personal style and the needs of their clients.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Because this video contains actual therapy sessions, please take care to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the clients who have courageously shared their personal life with us.
Madigan on Narrative Family Therapy

_The real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the workings of institutions that appear to be both neutral and independent, to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the political violence that has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them._

— Michel Foucault

Narrative therapy practice is premised on the notion that people organize their lives through stories (thus the use of the narrative or text metaphor). When we experience a client coming to talk with us, they usually relate a telling of their lives through stories. They tell their stories by linking together their understanding of the problem, relationship, illness etc., through a _sequencing of life events and ideas through time_. People often speak about what brought them into therapy, what they believe the history of their situation is, and who or what is responsible. At the time when someone decides to come to therapy, there is usually one prevailing theory told as to what they are in therapy for, and this theory is quite often thought to be quite limiting of their descriptions of themselves and situation.

As the originators of Narrative Therapy, Michael White and David Epston thought therapists were inevitably engaged in a _political activity_ in the sense that they must continually challenge the techniques that subjugate persons within a dominant ideology. Narrative therapists were asked to reflect (and assume) they were producing therapy in domains of power and knowledge and operating within systems of social control.

The therapeutic story of Ollie and his Mother outlines how problems are often inscribed onto individuals through generalized taken-for-granted ideas — in this case, generalizing by the school, parents, judges, the field of psychology, and the probation system regarding the reputation and character of Ollie. This kind of common psychological “branding” action took Ollie and his family to a powerfully punishing place, where a more relational and contextual rendering of ideas regarding how people are constructed may have spared this family pain. How this 12-year-old African-American boy came to be described, disciplined and punished had a strong relationship to our communities’ dominant
ideas about people - in this case, an African-American youth. These ideas about Ollie were constructed and shaped by dominant ideas, taken-for-granted notions, and disciplinary measures, and then they were shoved upon his identity/body.

Narrative therapy practice, as demonstrated in this session, is based on the idea that people make meaning in the world about who they are - and who they are in relation to others - through a dialogic relationship that is considered to be shaped by the prevailing cultural group. In order to offer a more colorful snapshot of their lives, client stories introduce a range of characters and “back stories” – in just the same way any good author might. While people live and construct stories about themselves, these stories also live and construct people.

The narrative therapist holds a firm belief that the person arriving into therapy is not solely responsible for creating the problem-centered deficit-identity conclusion that is often related to us. For example, the mother of a child viewed by the pre-school as not quite “fitting in” (what might be considered “proper” preschool behavior) may blame themselves as unfit (following in step with a predominance for mother-blaming ideas in our culture). Young girls struggling with body-perfection feel they have personally failed; a heterosexual corporate employee not able to spend more time with their children feels socially torn and inadequate; a gay or bi-curious high school student is entered into a fearful secrecy and feels a sense of individual shame. The ensuing story told by these persons in therapy is often one that adheres to specific “individual responsibility” for “their” problem, and a desperate desire to be “fixed.” This perplexing humanist notion of individual responsibility for the daily problems we collectively create, experience and reproduce appears cut-off from the relational context of the prevailing culture.

The belief that one does not measure up to cultural expectations can quite easily discount the person’s alternative skills, competencies, beliefs, values, commitments and abilities they have achieved (as a means of living/surviving within the parameters of dominant norms). It is within the process of re-authoring the larger multi-storied cultural context of personhood that therapist and client begin to guide their
discussions away from individualized problem stories, and towards richer and thicker narratives (emerging from underneath the initial problem-based disparate descriptions of experience).

Narrative therapy interviewing, as demonstrated with Ollie and his mother in this session, is based on the person’s storied accounts regarding their experiences and actions in life. Narrative therapists are not concerned with categories of behavior. Instead they turn their attention towards *action and interaction* of experience, response and reflection of the client. Within the practice of narrative therapy, problems are viewed as relational, contextual, interpretive and situated within dominant discourse, expression, response and cultural norms. This interplay presents the backdrop to the narrative maxim – the person is the person and the problem is the problem – not separate, but culturally, discursively and relationally interwoven.
Re-authoring Conversations

BY STEPHEN MADIGAN, PHD

Re-authoring conversations are a key feature in the practice of narrative therapy. Re-authoring conversations invite clients to help flesh out some of the more neglected areas and events of their lives (often covered over by the problem story being told). These may include: achievements under duress, survival skills growing up, and qualities of themselves left out of their story such as generosity, ethical stances and kindness etc. These are very often stories that could not have been predicted through a telling of the dominant problem story being told. These untold stories can be sadly neglected in the telling of the problem story, by both the client and the professionals involved with the client's story.

Neglected events in the client’s life are viewed as exceptions or unique outcomes that are utilized as a beginning point for re-authoring conversations and the development of alternative story lines. Often these conversations evoke a longer-standing curiosity and appreciation about the stories clients find themselves telling. The telling of these alternative and often preferred recollections of their lives and relationships shapes newly-formed stories that can be further broadened and enriched.

People’s stories of life and of personal identity can be considered to compose landscapes of the mind that are constituted through landscapes of action and landscapes of identity. It is through narrative therapy questions that these alternative landscapes of the mind can be richly described and re-authored. Combining the different landscapes, narrative therapy acts to:

1. Question how the “known” and remembered problem identity of a person has been influenced, manufactured and maintained over time.

2. Question what aspects of the social order have assisted in the ongoing maintenance of this remembered problem self.

3. Locate those cultural apparatuses keeping this remembered problem self-restrained from remembering alternative accounts and experiences of lived experience.
4. Locate alternative sites of resistance through questioning how the person can begin to re-remember subordinate stories of identity living outside the cultural, professional and problem’s version of them.

5. Influence how discursive space can afford room for possibilities and different discursive practices to emerge, by resisting and standing up for the performance of this re-remembered and preferred self.

6. Explore who else in the person’s life might be engaged to offer accounts of re-remembrance and provide the person safety within the membership of a community of concern.

The following is a selection of some of the categories of questions a Narrative Therapist may ask:

**Mapping the influence of the problem in the person/family’s life and relationships**

Through mapping the influence of how people may be problem supporting, people can begin to see themselves as authors, or at least co-authors, of their own stories. They can then move toward a greater sense of agency in their lives as a primary author of the story to be told and lived through. Some questions to ask a client dealing with worry, for example, include:

- Are there ways in which you have unknowingly given worry the upper hand in your life?
- Have there been people or situations in your life that have helped you keep worry central to your life?

**Unique outcome questions**

Unique outcome questions invite people to notice actions and intentions that contradict the dominant problem story. Some examples of unique outcome questions are:

- Given over-responsibility’s encouragement of worry, have there been any times when you have been able to rebel against it and satisfy some other of your desires? Did this bring you despair or pleasure? Why?
• Have there been times when you have thought -- even for a moment -- that you might step out of worry’s prison? What did this landscape free of worry look like?

• I was wondering if you had to give worry the slip in order to come to the session here today?

**Unique account questions**

Unique account questions invite people to make sense of exceptions/alternatives to the dominant story of the problem being told (e.g. “I always worry”). These exceptions may not be registered as significant or interesting or different; however, once uttered and uncovered they are held alongside the problem story as part of an emerging and coherent alternative narrative. Some examples of unique account questions include:

• How were you able to get yourself to school and thereby defy worry’s want to keep you to itself at home alone?

• Given everything that worry has got going for it, how did you object against its pushing you around?

• How might you stand up to worry’s pressure to get you worried again, to refuse its requirements of you?

**Unique Re-description Questions**

Unique re-description questions invite people to develop meaning from the unique accounts they have identified as they re-describe themselves, others, and their relationships. Some examples of unique re-description questions are:

• What does this tell you about yourself that you otherwise would not have known?

• By affording yourself some enjoyment, do you think in any way that you are becoming a more enjoyable person?

• Of all the people in your life who might confirm this newly developing picture of yourself as worrying less, who might have noticed this first?
**Unique Possibility Questions**

Unique possibility questions are viewed as next step questions. These questions invite people to speculate about the personal and relational futures that derive from their unique accounts and unique re-descriptions of themselves in relation to the problem. For example:

- Where do you think you will go next now that you have embarked upon having a little fun and taking a couple of little risks in your life?
- Is this a direction you see yourself taking in the days/weeks/years to come?
- Do you think it is likely that this might revive your flagging relationship, restore your friendships, or renew your vitality?

**Preference Questions**

Preference questions are asked all throughout the interview. It is important to intersperse many of the above questions with preference questions so as to allow persons to evaluate their responses. This should influence the therapist’s further questions and check against the therapist’s preferences overtaking the clients’ preferences. For instance:

- Is this your preference for the best way for you to live or not? Why?
- Do you see it as a good or a bad thing for you?
- Do you consider this to your advantage and to the disadvantage of the problem or to the problem’s advantage and to your disadvantage?

Once the therapist begins to get a grasp of the format and the conceptual frame for developing temporal questions (past, present or future), unique account questions, unique re-description questions etc. they become a bit more easy to develop and will eventually seem “ordinary” to the interviewer and the context.

The structure of the narrative interview is built through questions that encourage people to fill in the gaps of the alternative story (untold through a repeating of the problem-saturated story). The discursive structure assists people to account for their lived experience, exercise
imagination and circulate the remembered stories as meaning-making resources.
Reaction Paper for Classes and Training

Video: Narrative Family Therapy with Stephen Madigan, PhD

- **Assignment:** Complete this reaction paper and return it by the date noted by the facilitator.
- **Suggestions for Viewers:** Take notes on these questions while viewing the video and complete the reaction paper afterwards. Respond to each question below.
- **Length and Style:** 2-4 pages double-spaced. Be brief and concise. Do NOT provide a full synopsis of the video. This is meant to be a brief reaction paper that you write soon after watching the video—we want your ideas and reactions.

**What to Write:** Respond to the following questions in your reaction paper:

1. **Key points:** What important points did you learn about Madigan’s approach to Narrative Family Therapy? What stands out to you about how Madigan works?

2. **What I found most helpful:** As a therapist, what was most beneficial to you about the model presented? What tools or perspectives did you find helpful and might you use in your own work? What challenged you to think about something in a new way?

3. **What does not make sense:** What principles/techniques/interventions did not make sense to you? Did anything push your buttons or bring about a sense of resistance in you, or just not fit with your own style of working?

4. **How I would do it differently:** What might you have done differently from Madigan in the session in the video? Be specific about what different approaches, interventions and techniques you might have applied.

5. **Other questions/reactions:** What questions or reactions did you have as you viewed the therapy session with Madigan? Other comments, thoughts or feelings?
Related Websites, Videos and Further Reading

WEB RESOURCES

Stephen Madigan: Yaletown Family Therapy
www.stephenmadigan.ca

The Vancouver School for Narrative Therapy
www.therapeuticconversations.com

Dulwich Centre: A gateway to narrative therapy and community work
www.dulwichcentre.com.au

The Dulwich Centre Narrative Therapy Library and Bookshop
www.narrativetherapylibrary.com

Narrative Therapy Centre of Toronto
www.narrativetherapycentre.com

Resources on Narrative Therapy, website of David Epston, Jennifer Freeman, and Dean Lobovits
www.narrativeapproaches.com

RELATED VIDEOS AVAILABLE AT
WWW.PSYCHOTHERAPY.NET

Narrative Therapy with Children, with Stephen Madigan
Exploring Narradrama, with Pamela Dunne
Adolescent Family Therapy, with Janet Sasson Edgette
Psychological Residual of Slavery, with Kenneth Hardy

RECOMMENDED READINGS


Madigan, S. (2011). *Narrative therapy: Theory and practice (Theories of...*


Discussion Questions

Professors, training directors and facilitators may use some or all of these discussion questions, depending on what aspects of the video are most relevant to the audience.

INTRODUCTION

1. **Political**: What do you think of the idea of a therapy model being as political as Narrative Therapy is? What are your thoughts and feelings on the therapist bringing socio-political issues—such as racism, heterosexism, sexism, and classism—into the therapy room? Do you invite your clients to look at the way the dominant culture impacts their identities? If so, how? Have you explored how your own identity has been shaped by the dominant culture in your own therapy or personal growth work? What have you discovered?

2. **Research**: How did you react when Madigan stated that very little research has been done on Narrative Therapy and that Narrative therapists are not very interested in quantitative research? How important do you think it is for therapy models to be researched? Does the lack of research impact your opinions on the efficacy of this model? Why or why not?

3. **Taking notes**: What did you think of how Madigan took notes during the session? Do you like his technique of splitting the page down the middle and writing the problem stories on the left and the unique outcomes on the right? Why or why not? What do you think of how Madigan writes his clients a recap of what they said in the session? Do you tend to take notes in your sessions? What kind of notes do you take and why? How do your clients respond to this?

FAMILY THERAPY SESSION

4. **Starting the session**: Madigan stated that he usually begins his sessions in the same way he began this session, which is by asking, “Why it is that you have come to see someone like me in counseling at this particular time?” What did you think of this way
of starting the session? Would you have been more specific about whom you were addressing the question to or do you like how Madigan allowed either Ollie or Mrs. Poindexter to respond first? How do you tend to begin family therapy sessions?

5. **Too gullible?** What did you think of how Madigan believed Mrs. Poindexter and Ollie when they said that Ollie wasn’t trying to hurt his friend when he hit him with his belt? Did you find yourself also believing them or were you more skeptical? Did you have any concerns that Madigan was being too gullible? How have you handled situations with clients when they have been accused of something and they tell you they are innocent?

6. **Addressing racism:** What did you think of how Madigan asked Mrs. Poindexter, “Do you have any ideas why it is that you might have been treated in this way?” and then, “Do you have a sense as to why the school district here is structured this way and the one you used to be in is not?”? Do you agree with Madigan that as a white therapist with all the power, he should have addressed the issue of race and racism more directly? Why or why not? What reactions did you have as Madigan and Mrs. Poindexter talked about the role of race in Ollie’s getting in trouble? Did you have any concerns that Madigan focused too much on race and not enough on Ollie’s behavior? What are some ways you address issues of race and racism in your work with clients?

7. **Trouble:** What did you think of how Madigan externalized “trouble” by saying things like, “trouble was getting in the way of your life,” and, “so already trouble has taken the TV watching and the Sega channel away from him?” How do you think this technique helped Ollie and Mrs. Poindexter? Is this technique something you have used with clients before? Do you find it effective?

8. **Questions:** What were your reactions to Madigan’s line of questioning? For instance, he asked Ollie some questions that one could argue had obvious answers, such as “How come it would be a bad thing if you were to get suspended from school?” and, “Why would you want to have a good living?” What did you like and/or
dislike about the interview quality of the session?

9. **Therapeutic alliance:** What did you think of Madigan’s therapeutic alliance with Ollie? What did you like or dislike about how he related with Ollie? How about his alliance with Mrs. Poindexter? Was there anything Madigan said or did that you think particularly added to or detracted from his ability to connect with her? How might you have related to Ollie and/or Mrs. Poindexter differently?

10. **Taking action:** Towards the end of the session Madigan tried to get Ollie and his mother to come up with things they can do to get the word out about Ollie’s “good boy reputation” and Mrs. Poindexter responded with comments such as, “I think the district needs to change their attitude.” How did you react to this segment of the session? Is there anything you would have suggested to Ollie and/or Mrs. Poindexter that might have helped them feel more empowered in this situation? What did you think of Madigan’s idea of writing a letter on behalf of Ollie to his principal? Can you think of a time when you have intervened outside of the therapy session on behalf of one of your clients? If so, how did you feel about doing so, and did it have any noticeable effect on the therapeutic alliance?

**DISCUSSION**

11. **Court-ordered:** Have you worked with any clients who were court-ordered? If so, what sorts of challenges did you face in negotiating the needs and expectations of the court and the needs of the client?

12. **Pathologizing language:** Carlson brought up how the dominant culture would label Ollie’s behavior as antisocial, and Madigan talked about how he doesn’t like to use pathologizing language or the DSM. What were your reactions to this? What are your thoughts on diagnosing people with labels from the DSM? Would you have diagnosed Ollie with anything? Why or why not?

13. **Privilege:** What were your reactions to Madigan’s discussion about white privilege and the conversations he has with consultants about the way his own privilege impacts his work with clients? Have you explored how your race, class, gender, or sexual
orientation may offer you privileges that others—including your clients—may not have? How do you think privilege might play a role in your work as a therapist?

14. **The model:** What are your overall thoughts about Madigan’s approach to therapy? What aspects of Narrative Therapy can you see yourself incorporating into your work? Are there some components of this approach that seem incompatible with how you work? What in particular do you tend to do differently from Madigan?

15. **Personal Reaction:** How would you feel about having Madigan as your therapist? Do you think he could build a solid therapeutic alliance with you? Would he be effective with you? Why or why not?
Role-Plays

After watching the video and reviewing *Madigan on Narrative Family Therapy* and *Re-authoring Conversations* in this manual, assign groups to role-play a family therapy session following Madigan’s approach to Narrative Family Therapy. Organize participants into groups of three, consisting of one psychotherapist and two family members. If time permits, rotate so each person has a chance to play the role of therapist. The point here is not to try to resolve the family’s issues, but to use this role-play as an opportunity to practice the Narrative Therapy style of interviewing and to view the family through a Narrative Therapy lens.

**INSTRUCTIONS FOR ROLE PLAYERS:**

One person will start out as the therapist and the other two group members will decide who will be what family member. One option is to choose a segment of the video that you would like to use as a basis for the role-play; do not attempt to follow the sequence of interactions in Madigan’s demonstration session, but rather use the clients and situation in the video as a jumping-off point, and allow the role play to develop spontaneously. Alternatively, come up with your own scenario, based on a family you have worked with, your own family or a family you know well, or a completely fictional family.

Participants role-playing the clients should come to the session with a “problem-saturated storyline,” (e.g. the teenager got in trouble at school and his reputation is on the line) and therapists should focus on helping the clients develop an alternative plot to the problem story. Therapists will do this by first listening as compassionately as possible to the experience the family is having with this problem in their life. Then therapists can experiment with leading clients through a *re-authoring conversation*, by asking *unique outcomes questions* which will help the clients flesh out some of the more neglected areas and events of their lives such as: previous achievements, survival skills growing up, and qualities of themselves left out of their story such as generosity, ethical stances and kindness, etc. Therapists can also experiment with asking *unique account questions, unique re-*
description questions, unique possibility questions, and preference questions, all of which are described in *Re-authoring Conversations* in this manual.

Don’t worry if it feels awkward to jump around to different questions: Use this exercise as an opportunity to begin to get familiar with the types of questions a Narrative Therapist would ask in order to help clients develop an alternative, less “problem-saturated” narrative. Therapists can follow Madigan’s model of taking notes by splitting the page down the middle and writing the problem stories on the left and the unique outcomes on the right; then use the clients’ words verbatim when you reflect back your understanding of their experience.

After the role-plays, have the groups come together to discuss their experiences. Invite the clients to talk about what it was like to role-play this family and how they felt about the therapist’s interventions: What did clients like and dislike about the way the therapist listened to their experiences of their problem? Did clients feel understood and cared for? How did they feel about the therapist’s questions? Do clients feel less stuck in their “problem-saturated” narrative after this session? Then, invite the therapists to talk about their experiences: How did it feel to conduct a family therapy session using a Narrative approach? What was it like to facilitate a re-authoring conversation? How was it to ask the different types of questions? Did they find Madigan’s note-taking technique useful? Finally, open up a general discussion of the strengths and the challenges in applying a Narrative Therapy approach to working with families.

An alternative is to do this role-play in front of the whole group with one therapist and one family; the rest of the group can observe, acting as the advising team to the therapist. Before the end of the session, have the therapist take a break, get feedback from the observation team, and bring it back into the session with the family. Other observers might jump in if the therapist gets stuck. Follow up with a discussion on what participants learned about using Madigan’s approach to Narrative Therapy with families.
00:19:58

**Madigan:** Hi Mrs. Poindexter.

**Mrs. Poindexter:** Hi.

**Madigan:** And Ollie.

**Ollie:** Hi.

**Madigan:** We got caught up outside a little bit and so we got to catch up a little bit about where you live and where I live and I told you that I lived a long ways away in Canada and you told me you lived up the road and we are going to kind of continue on that kind of conversation. And it will go for about 45 or 50 minutes.

**Mrs. Poindexter:** Okay.

**Madigan:** And then we will stop and if you have any questions afterwards we can spend a bit of time together afterwards if you like.

**Mrs. Poindexter:** Alright.

**Madigan:** But I guess what I am most interested in tonight is why it is that you have come to see someone like me in counseling or a counselor at this particular time.

**Madigan Commentary:** This is the question that I usually start all sessions with, as the question addresses the temporal dimension (past, present and future) and location of the visit to therapy. Why now and not six months earlier or five weeks later? In this case the Mother lets me know that therapy was not her preferred choice. The question also opens a discursive pathway to begin describing the person’s relationship to the problem story and who is involved in the telling/creation of this story. The question begins to contextualize the relational aspects of problem making.

**Mrs. Poindexter:** Okay, well my son Ollie had a problem at school and it went to the court. So then at that point they asked about us seeking
counseling for him, about anger counseling.

**Madigan:** Okay, okay. Do you mind if I take some notes while we talk and if you would like to take them home with you tonight you can.

**Mrs. Poindexter:** Sure.

**Madigan:** If you can understand my writing.

**Mrs. Poindexter:** Okay, alright.

**Madigan:** So there was some trouble at school?

**Mrs. Poindexter:** Yes.

**Madigan:** That went to the courts.

**Mrs. Poindexter:** Right.

**Madigan:** And the courts then suggested that you –

**Mrs. Poindexter:** Seek counseling for him.

**Madigan:** Counseling, okay. And did you say something that it had to do with, in your opinion, something to do with anger.

**Mrs. Poindexter:** Right.

**Madigan:** And would that be your word or the court’s word?

**Madigan Commentary:** The languaging of problems and the location of this language brings forth difference – a tension of understandings that open up meaning about the problem and the person. I feel a strong desire in therapy to privilege the client’s language and understandings of the problem. In this way we begin to move toward local discourse and understandings and away from dominant language and understandings located in the professional expert domain.

**Mrs. Poindexter:** The court’s word.

**Madigan:** The court’s word. What word would you use?

**Mrs. Poindexter:** Okay, my opinion, I don’t think he needs any counseling, but once something goes to court, then you have to follow whatever steps they say to take.

**Madigan:** Right. So what do you think they got wrong?
Mrs. Poindexter: Okay, say that again.

Madigan: What is it you think that the court may not have seen in Ollie that maybe you see in Ollie and what they would call anger you would call something else. What would you call it?

Madigan Commentary: This difference in understanding the problem sets forth a tension and a curiosity for both the therapist and client as to possible reasons why this tension exists.

Mrs. Poindexter: Just a good talking to. Telling him to take something...to do something a different way instead of – well what he did, he wasn’t trying to hurt someone but they thought he was.

Madigan: Do you want to tell me what happened or is that important?

Mrs. Poindexter: No, he said that he was in the bathroom, he and another boy, and that the boy hit him on the arm. They weren’t fighting. The boy went out the bathroom he say and he come back in, he say that he hit him, he take his belt off and hit him with the belt. That do sound, it doesn’t sound right, hit someone with a belt.

Madigan: So you would think that hitting someone with a belt is not a good –

Mrs. Poindexter: No, he shouldn’t have hit him with a belt. But so when the boy went home, told his parents then they had him go to court.

Madigan: I see, so was Ollie charged?

Mrs. Poindexter: Yes.

Madigan: Yes. And what was he charged with?

Mrs. Poindexter: Battery.

Madigan: Battery? Does that mean assault?

Mrs. Poindexter: Yes, the belt they said is assault. So then he had to seek counseling and see what they say.

Madigan: I see. And that is why you have come here to talk to me.

Mrs. Poindexter: Yes.
Madigan: I see. You think that perhaps a good talking to at home would have –

Mrs. Poindexter: It really was just a kid thing; it wasn’t a big thing. It was just that they made a big thing out of it.

Madigan: I see. And the “they” is who?

Madigan Commentary: Harry Goolishian wrote a marvelous paper entitled “The Problem Determined System,” which addressed the importance of figuring out who was saying what about the problem and how this was affecting how the problem was being maintained. Similarly, the French post-structural philosopher, Michel Foucault, encouraged us to question and critique taken-for-granted notions of dominant understandings of personhood. I wanted to know who was involved in this story of Ollie needing to come to court-ordered therapy, how this story first began, what political ideologies might be affecting this story, how the story was being maintained and for whose benefit.

00:24:00

Mrs. Poindexter: The parents.

Madigan Commentary: This is the first place in the session – as you will see – that I missed raising the question about the possibilities of how race/racism may have had an effect on the story being told.

Madigan: The parents. I see. What do you think about this? Would you agree with your mom or would you agree with the courts?

Madigan Commentary: The session was being filmed by a camera crew and I was wondering what this might be like as an experience for a 12 year-old boy, so I brought him into the session’s conversation with a question that could connect him by connecting him to his Mother’s ideas.

Ollie: I agree with my mom.

Madigan: Yeah, why would you agree with your mom, Ollie?

Madigan Commentary: The ‘why’ question is known in Narrative Therapy as a landscape of identity or meaning question, where the person is asked to take a position. In this case, I am asking Ollie to state and take a position on the problem.
Ollie: Because I don’t even think it was anything or do anything [like bad] about like go to court.

Madigan: Yeah, what’s your story of what happened?
Ollie: I walked in the bathroom, he was already in there.

Madigan: Is this a guy you know or?
Ollie: Yeah, he’s in my class.

Madigan: Would he be a friend of yours or not a friend of yours?
Ollie: A friend.

Madigan: He would be a friend of yours, okay.

Ollie: And then I wanted to look in the mirror and then he hit my arm and said, “Hi Ollie.” He hit me in my arm and said, “Hi Ollie,” and –

Madigan: Is this something that you guys do when you see each other? Do you hit each other in the arm?
Ollie: Not usually.

Madigan: Not usually, okay.

Ollie: Then I told him that hurt then he went out the bathroom and came back in and then I hit him with the belt. Then he went back to the class and when we got back to the class he started laughing.

Madigan: Okay, and I’m not really understanding some things. Do you mind if I ask you a little bit more about this? Like when you took off the belt, for what reason?
Ollie: I was just playing around with him.

Madigan: You were playing around. So it was a playing around kind of hit?
Ollie: Yeah.

Madigan: But it wasn’t a hit to hurt?
Ollie: No.

Madigan: No. Okay, and did he understand that it was playing around?
Ollie: I guess so because he laughed when he got into class.

Madigan: He laughed?

Ollie: Yeah.

Madigan: And so at which point do you think the story took a turn? That it became from laughing to something serious?

**Madigan Commentary:** In narrative therapy sessions I am always on the lookout for specific turning points in the story. For example, when did the story move from point A to point B and what information was brought forward to create a question of exactly how this discursive difference created a difference and why?

Ollie: When he told his parents that someone hit him with a belt in the bathroom.

Madigan: I see. I see. So what happened after that, after his parents – did they phone up the school or?

**00:26:04**

Ollie: I think they called the school then the school called here and told my mom that they were going to send a letter for us to go to court.

Madigan: I see. I see. Now have you ever been to court before?

Ollie: No.

Madigan: No. And is this a new kind of trouble that you would be involved with or an old kind of trouble?

**Madigan Commentary:** This is the entry point towards an externalizing dialogue surrounding the problem of trouble, where the problem of trouble is not located or privatized inside Ollie’s body but is discursively located in relation to discourse and culture.

Ollie: New.

Madigan: Be a new kind of trouble. I see. And when your mom was saying that your trouble was school, is school troubling at all for you?

Ollie: Sometimes.

Madigan: Yeah, how would school be troubling for you?

Ollie: Because there are certain people that do certain things.
Madigan: How do you mean? Like I kind of know what the trouble is like up in Canada but I’m not sure if it is the same as the kind of trouble that might go on down here.

Ollie: Like some people in my class have bad attitudes and stuff like that. One time I asked the teacher, we were reading something in the book, I asked the teacher what page we were on, and then the person say, “You should know Ollie, why don’t you ask somebody else,” or something like that.

Madigan: That’s what the teacher said?

Ollie: No, this was somebody in my class said.

Madigan: Oh, that’s what somebody in your class said.

Ollie: And then I told them why don’t they be quiet and the substitute sent me to the office.

Madigan: So would you have a reputation as someone who has a troubled reputation or a not troubled reputation?

Madigan Commentary: Therapy is a practice where the person and therapist are always negotiating identity. Identity in this case is called reputation. I want you to imagine all the numerous factors involved in negotiating a 12 year-old African-American youth’s identity, factors which often have nothing to do with the youth but rather are assumed to be true! In some ways the entire session is about moving Ollie away from a pre-ordained fugitive identity and towards his preferred identity.

Ollie: Not troubled.

Madigan: Not troubled. Would you agree with that that Ollie is someone that doesn’t have a troubled reputation?

Mrs. Poindexter: He’s a good boy.

Madigan: He’s a good boy?

Mrs. Poindexter: He’s okay as long as someone doesn’t keep aggravating him and...as long as someone bothers him, he will get angry.

00:28:06

Madigan: He’ll...?
Mrs. Poindexter: Get angry.

Madigan: Get angry. And do you think, Ollie, would you agree with your mom with what she is saying?

Ollie: Yes.

Madigan: Yeah. So do you think that people aggravating you will eventually get you to be, get you to have a troubled reputation? Do you think that is possible and that you would have to give up your good boy reputation?

Ollie: No, I don’t so. Like if somebody aggravated me, sometimes I won’t do anything. Sometimes I will just tell the teacher.

Madigan: I see. I see. Which would you prefer to have – a troubled boy reputation or a good boy reputation?

Madigan Commentary: Again I bifurcate the question and ask Ollie to take up a position/protest on his preferred identity. When working with youth who feel they have no power it is important that they be invited to make claims away from certain stories and towards preferred claims about themselves. As you will see below, this line of questions privileges his story and it is done through Narrative Therapy questions that are both curious and respectful, so as to afford Ollie a place in the discussion regarding his own story-making.

Ollie: Good boy reputation.

Madigan: How come?

Ollie: Because I don’t want to be bad. I don’t like to be bad.

Madigan: Why not.

Ollie: I don’t want to do anything.

Madigan: Why don’t you like being bad?

Ollie: Because then you will get suspended from school or something like that.

Madigan: Yeah. And is that a bad thing if you were to get suspended?

Ollie: Yes.

Madigan: How come it would be a bad thing if you were to get
suspended from school?

**Ollie:** Because then if you are out then you aren’t going to learn that much.

**Madigan:** Okay, so if you were out of school then you won’t be able to learn much. And why is that a problem if you don’t learn much?

**Ollie:** Because if you are not in school then you just won’t be able to learn. Then the teacher won’t be there to teach you anything.

**Madigan:** Yeah, so what is your sense of what happens to people who don’t have teachers teaching them and aren’t learning? What happens to people like that?

**Ollie:** When they grow up they don’t have good jobs or something like that.

**Madigan:** Why would it be important for you to have a good job?

**00:30:00**

**Ollie:** So I can have a good living when I get older.

**Madigan:** Yeah, why would you want to have a good living?

**Ollie:** So I can have a good house and everything, stuff like that.

**Madigan:** Good house?

**Ollie:** Yeah, and then I want to be, what do you call it, I don’t want to be in trouble or anything when I get older like going to jail or anything.

**Madigan:** And you said not going to jail. To jail. Okay, so part of the reason then if I can just recap for you, you would want to have a good reputation or a good boy reputation is that it would allow you to finish school and have people teaching you. You could make a good living. You could buy a good house and it would help you not to get in trouble and would help you stay away from jail. Yeah? Would there be other reasons why you might want to stay away from a troubled reputation?

**Madigan Commentary:** I write down a lot of verbatim notes in therapy. One of the reasons I do this is so that I am able to re-read and re-tell Ollie what his positions in life are. My re-telling back to him affords a re-experience of the story he has told and a fresh ability for him to hear his
own preferred story from the place of being a listener. The re-telling also makes room for him to correct anything spoken. In a sense, what we are creating through the use of his own documented story is a “counter-file” – a file that is in direct opposition to the documented story of Ollie created and written by the school, counselors, the courts, etc.

Ollie: Because if you have a troubled reputation you won’t have many friends.

Madigan: You won’t have friends. Okay. Is there anything else other than having a troubled reputation won’t give you friends and having a good one will allow you to finish school and have good teaching, you make a good living, have a good house, won’t get in trouble and not going to jail?

Ollie: If you have a good boy reputation you will have friends…

Madigan: You will have friends. Okay. Alright.

00:32:00
Now it seems like a lot riding on – you get a lot for having a good boy reputation. And would I be right in saying that you don’t get much from having a troubled reputation?

Ollie: Mm-hmm.

Madigan: Yeah? What else would happen to you if you developed a troubled reputation and trouble was getting in the way of your life and getting in the way of all of the good boy reputation?

Ollie: Then I would be in trouble a lot.

Madigan: If you were being in trouble a lot, what would that bring to your life? Can you think of things that maybe what it would bring to your life and maybe what it has already brought to your life in this recent bit of trouble that followed you?

Ollie: No.

Madigan: No. Do you think your mom might have some ideas on this?

Ollie: Yeah.
Madigan: Should I ask her?

Ollie: Yeah.

Madigan: What do you think might happen if trouble was to gain more of a life in Ollie’s life, if it began to take over his life a bit more? What do you think…can you think of things that might happen to him and his reputation?

Mrs. Poindexter: Getting into trouble, he will not get to watch TV. He doesn’t have a TV.

Madigan: So there would be no TV watching.

Mrs. Poindexter: It’s already gone. The TV and the Sega channel.

Madigan: Sega channel. So has trouble already taken – I’m gathering that Ollie likes to watch TV and the Sega channel, do you?

Madigan: Yeah. And so already trouble has taken the TV watching and the Sega channel away from him?

Mrs. Poindexter: Yes.

Madigan: Can you think of other things that trouble might, if it was to continue to push Ollie around in his life, what it might take away from.

00:34:08

Mrs. Poindexter: This would make him have a bad attitude. Getting into trouble.

Madigan: Getting into trouble. How do you think it might affect his school?

Mrs. Poindexter: With him getting into this, if someone doesn’t know him then they could think that he is bad.

Madigan: I see. So this trouble reputation would circulate among other people, even who don’t know Ollie.

Mrs. Poindexter: For someone that didn’t know him.

Madigan: For someone that didn’t know him?

Mrs. Poindexter: Yes.
Madigan: I see.

Mrs. Poindexter: They would think that he hit someone with a belt and hurt him, which he didn’t hurt the boy, but it doesn’t sound right to hit someone with a belt.

Madigan: I see. So certain stories would be told about Ollie that may invite even more bits of trouble?

Mrs. Poindexter: I want him, by taking the TV, I want him to know if he goes to school or wherever he goes, just mind his own business. If someone does something to him, just tell the teacher or an adult and not fight back if he don’t have to.

Madigan: I see. Do you have a sense of whether or not you would agree what your mom is saying or disagree with what your mom is saying?

Ollie: I agree.

Madigan: Yeah? Why would you agree with what your mom is saying about not letting trouble or other people push you into more trouble?

Ollie: Because if people push me into more trouble then I will be in even more trouble; I will be in a whole lot of trouble.

Madigan: Okay, so trouble brings on more trouble. Would that be right in saying this?

00:36:00

I don’t know if that is what you are saying. Are you suggesting that the more trouble you get into, the more trouble could affect your life?

Ollie: Mm-hmm.

Madigan: Yeah? Would that make sense to you? Trouble brings trouble?

Mrs. Poindexter: Yes. The school district that he is in is it is sort of weird to me. For instance if the kids get into something, I think that the principal should first of all try to see about straightening the situation out, call the parents in, and things I don’t think it would get out of hand.

Madigan Commentary: This is the turning point in the session. Mrs.
Poindexter begins to lead me towards a broader contextualized and more relational understanding of the problem.

**Madigan:** You mean go to court?

**Mrs. Poindexter:** This thing, right. Because kids do different things that may not make sense because they are not old enough to know not to do different things.

**Madigan:** Do you think because of other things that have, other bits of trouble that have happened in the school that they dealt with Ollie in this way?

**Mrs. Poindexter:** I think because of the school district that this thing was dealt…I know the mother apologized.

**Madigan:** To you?

**Mrs. Poindexter:** Yes.

**Madigan:** So the mother apologized to you. Did they apologize to Ollie as well?

**Mrs. Poindexter:** Because she didn’t know…she probably did, didn’t see?

**Madigan:** She apologized to Ollie as well, yeah.

**Mrs. Poindexter:** But once you have someone to go to court, you don’t know what the judge is going to say. And see the judge he talked like he knew him personally like he did something real bad and he is not bad like that.

**Madigan:** What was the experience like going to court?

**Mrs. Poindexter:** It wasn’t a good one.

**Madigan:** It wasn’t a good one?

**Mrs. Poindexter:** And for a whole year we will have to go up and down the road going back to court, probation officer and…

**00:38:06**

**Madigan:** Is that what happened, did you get a probation officer?

**Ollie:** Yes.
Mrs. Poindexter: 40 hours of community service work.

Madigan: 40 hours of community service work.

Mrs. Poindexter: And I think it is $300 and some dollar fine in a year’s time that you will have to pay.

Madigan Commentary: Outrageous!!

Madigan: So this troubled story brought on a life of its own. Is that what happened? Yeah. Do you have any ideas to why it is that you might have been treated in this way?

Madigan Commentary: At this point, as a white therapist with all the power, I should have introduced the issue of race and racism. But instead I chose to lead Mrs. Poindexter into it, believing it was “safer” to conduct the session in this way. In retrospect, although it worked out right, I was wrong.

Mrs. Poindexter: Do you know Ollie?

Ollie: No.

Mrs. Poindexter: You don’t know why?

Madigan: Do you have a suspicion or a hunch as to why Ollie was treated in this way?

Mrs. Poindexter: Do you know?

Madigan: Do you know? I get a sense that you have a twinkle in your eye and you have a hunch going on.

Mrs. Poindexter: I just wanted to see what he would say.

Madigan: Oh I see. Do you have a sense that he knows?

Mrs. Poindexter: Do you know why?

Ollie: No.

Madigan: Would you mind if your mom let me know, let me in on what her hunch is?

Ollie: No.

Madigan: You don’t want her to say?

Ollie: [Unintelligible]
Madigan: You do mind. I can hear?

Ollie: You can hear.

Madigan: Would you mind, would that be a good place to go here and tell me your hunch of what is going on?

Mrs. Poindexter: Okay. I have had experience with schools, another district school, that I didn’t have, I never had this type of problem. This school district out here, it just seems like, at least a little anything, things that could be straightened out, the district makes a big thing out of. And if the kids get to high school, if he doesn’t watch what he is doing, I mean real careful – be real careful – they are out.

00:40:07

Madigan: I see. Do you have a sense as to why the school district here is structured this way and the one you used to be in is not?

Mrs. Poindexter: Yes, I know why.

Madigan: Why is that?

Mrs. Poindexter: I was told that they hadn’t got used to the black kids going to this school.

Madigan: As a mother, what is it like to have that told you, that the school district is operating in certain ways because black kids are now in the school?

Mrs. Poindexter: Well I didn’t like it. I never had anyone to bother me. I mean, no matter what color they were, I have never had no one to bother me. But it seemed like once the boys get in that school district, they really have to be careful. The girls can get out pretty good if they don’t get to be bad girls, but the boys have to really watch their self real careful and everything they do.

Madigan: So do you think that race had something to do with how Ollie was treated?

Madigan Commentary: Finally the issue of race is addressed – and now the story making takes a turn.

Mrs. Poindexter: I think so. Because if it hadn’t been a white boy, it was a white boy, if it had been two white boys I don’t think, they
wouldn’t have went to court.

**Madigan:** So the person that was involved with Ollie was white?

**Mrs. Poindexter:** Yes. He’s not a bad boy either. It was just that the parents, both of them or one, just made a big thing out of it.

**Madigan:** As a mother, how does it feel to have Ollie exposed to this system that maybe he might get treated differently because of the color of his skin?

00:42:09

**Mrs. Poindexter:** Well I don’t like it.

**Madigan:** You don’t like it?

**Mrs. Poindexter:** No. I do not like it. It’s like you have a black principal in the high school, black principal...no wait, no, in the junior high and the school he goes to. So, if you can’t be the principal and help all the people, why be a principal when you can’t do all the people good. If you don’t have the power to go with the principal job, there’s no sense in you being one. So I don’t really know what they have one for.

**Madigan:** I see. If I was to ask the principal that question, how do you think he might respond, that he needs to treat everyone with the same level of respect and the same way?

**Mrs. Poindexter:** I don’t know what he would say because I really don’t know what he has the job for, if he can’t, okay, say one year we went to the grade school and this black principal told him about a white teacher, something she did. He say, “Well I don’t want to take sides.” I wasn’t asking him to take sides. I was just...he could have brought both of us in to find out why was she doing that.

**Madigan:** Exactly. Yeah. Do you think that the principal would respect your opinion of what went on?

**Mrs. Poindexter:** He would have to. Especially when you tell him the truth.

**Madigan:** Tell me, what did the mother of the white boy say to you when she phoned up and apologized?
Mrs. Poindexter: No, she was in court, all of us were in court. And she told me she was sorry. I think it probably was that they would have him go to court and that would make him afraid not to do that again. I don’t think that they thought that they would do all that they did.

Madigan Commentary: Internalized racism works in just this way. The classmate’s white mother was of the belief that Ollie would be treated in the same way as her own son if he had gone to court--perhaps Ollie would get a slap on the wrist. Instead, he was severely penalized, which promoted the mother’s apology.

Madigan: Who?

Mrs. Poindexter: The other boy’s…yes. I don’t think they did it thinking that they would do all that the judge did. I think that they just thought that we would go into court and that would scare him into never doing that again.

Madigan: I see. And how did they feel after the probation and the community hours and fine came down in court?

Mrs. Poindexter: The mother just told me that she was sorry and that she didn’t know that they would do all of that.

Madigan: What did you make of that?

Mrs. Poindexter: Of her saying that? I only said that once you go to court you don’t know what the judges say. You never know what he will say. So if you don’t have to go to court, you stay out of there.

Madigan: So do you think that trouble might find the African American children in the school quicker and they will develop reputations of trouble more than the other children in the school? Do you think they are more likely to take that on?

Mrs. Poindexter: I think so.

Madigan: Why do you think that?

Mrs. Poindexter: It’s not only…I’m not the only one that has had a bad experience.
Madigan: There have been others?

Mrs. Poindexter: Yes. I have a brother that had a girl going to school, a very quiet girl, never bothered anyone.

00:46:04
She couldn’t finish high school there. She had to go to another school.

Madigan: Why was that?

Mrs. Poindexter: She was picked on.

Madigan: Picked on...you mean racially picked on?

Mrs. Poindexter: Oh, I don’t know. I don’t think it was. I don’t know.

Madigan: So as a mother, being involved in this neighborhood and school, are there ways in which you have come to know that you can make it a bit safer for your child?

Mrs. Poindexter: Do I know of another way?

Madigan: Or what ways can you make it safe for them or is that possible?

Mrs. Poindexter: It’s a way that you can go to that type of school and get out of there, but these kids do not want to. Okay, they don’t want to take a lot of...hmm.

Madigan: You can say it.

Mrs. Poindexter: A lot of...if they think someone is not treating them right, they won’t take that stuff like someone used to take.

Madigan: How do you mean?

Mrs. Poindexter: Like kids used to take that stuff, but they don’t take it anymore. And then once they say something, then they will say that they are starting something. It’s really...it is really worse than it was when I went to school.

Madigan: How so?

Mrs. Poindexter: Because I went to a school and if any of the kids started a fight or anything, the principal said he is not going to have it. He said all of the kids always went there and they always will. And see that’s what the principal out here has to do.
Madigan: He said what?

Mrs. Poindexter: He say that he is not going to have kids picking at each other or some teacher doing something to the child that she shouldn’t.

Ollie: He has said that before.

Mrs. Poindexter: The principal did.

Ollie: Mm-hmm.

Madigan: What did he say?

Ollie: He said the same thing she said.

Madigan: Which was what? Which part?

Ollie: Like about he doesn’t want kids picking on each other, stuff like that. Or talking about each other’s mothers and stuff like that.

Madigan: Yeah. Do you feel welcomed in the school that you go to?

Ollie: Mm-hmm.

Madigan: You feel like you belong in the school that you go to?

Ollie: Well, not really because they moved us from one school that was closer to our house to a different one that is out in Creek.

Madigan: And how are those two schools different? Are they different in any way?

Ollie: I don’t know.

Madigan: Do you prefer one to another?

Ollie: I prefer the one out where we live because it is like close to our house.

Mrs. Poindexter: The atmosphere is different. It’s different.

Madigan: How so?

Mrs. Poindexter: Like if you walk in the office or something, you don’t expect for them to roll out the red carpet for you, but they act like you didn’t even walk in.
Madigan: At the new school?
Mrs. Poindexter: Yes.
Madigan: I see.

Mrs. Poindexter: Well, see that type thing is done so for, like if I treat you like this, you get out of here. That is what it is for. And see a lot of people when they can, they just move out, just move on away so they don’t have to be bothered with that.

00:50:10

Madigan: Would white mothers be treated differently than black mothers in the school?

Mrs. Poindexter: Yes. For instance like when this girl collided with him and her mother came in and yelled at him and say, “Don’t you ever hit my daughter again.” When you could see the mark on his face where they collided with each other – he did not hit her. Had I walked in and yelled at that child, I would have been supposed to be doing I didn’t have any business.

Madigan: So there are different rules for different mothers?
Mrs. Poindexter: Seems like it to me.

Madigan: Do you talk with other mothers about this?
Mrs. Poindexter: No.

Madigan: Having Ollie go through this experience as a mother, how does it make you feel?

Mrs. Poindexter: It makes you feel like you are about 3 feet tall. And it makes you feel like if you get your money together you move out, too. You move out, rather than to stay there and put up with something like this.

Madigan: Is that being considered? Is this being considered…

Mrs. Poindexter: Yes. Yes.

Madigan: …so difficult and heartbreaking for this family that you have considered a move?

Mrs. Poindexter: (Nods head).
Madigan: Yeah. Do you have a sense of what your mother is feeling around this, Ollie, and why?

Ollie: Yeah.

Madigan: What do you think your mom is feeling about this and why?

Ollie: That I don’t think that they should have moved us from one school to another and then started treating us different.

00:52:05

Madigan: I see. Are there more black kids in the other school you were in?

Ollie: Yeah.

Madigan: Yeah. What do you think is most upsetting to your mom about this troubled reputation that has been placed on you?

Ollie: Oh, because the principal didn’t like, he didn’t bring us together and ask us why it happened or anything. He just asked me, did I hit him with the belt?

Madigan: I see. Your mom has a hunch that if it was two white boys that this had happened to, maybe it wouldn’t have gone to court. Would you agree with that or disagree with that?

Ollie: Agree.

Madigan: You would agree? Why would you agree with that?

Ollie: Because if it is two white boys getting along like they are friends and everything, they treat each other better. But if it is one black boy and one white boy, they will treat each other different and something like that.

Madigan: And if it is two black boys, do they get along okay?

Ollie: Mm-hmm.

Madigan: Do you have a hunch as to why that is? No? Just happens that way? Is it something that you have known before?

Ollie: It just happens that way.

Madigan: Just happens that way. And do you have a hunch as to why it might just happen that way? No? Do you ever have talks with your
mom about why things happen that way sometimes?  
Ollie: Not really.

00:54:00:  
Madigan: No. Do you think that might be important to talk with your mom or your dad or your brothers about this?
Ollie: Mm-hmm.

Madigan: Any speculation about what they might say?
Ollie: No.

Madigan: Given that this has gone on and you have to do the 30 hours of community service. 60 hours? 30?
Mrs. Poindexter: 40.

Madigan: 40, sorry. 40 hours and pay the fine – has this in any way changed your view of yourself?

Madigan Commentary: This is an important identity-making question, tracking the effects of the problem and Ollie’s response to it.
Ollie: No.

Madigan: No. How do you continue to see yourself, as a troubled person or a good boy person?
Ollie: Good.

Madigan: Good? In spite of all of this and going to court and all of the trouble that happened, why is it that you would, or what is it that it tells you about yourself that you still hold strong to this good boy reputation?
Ollie: I don’t know.

Madigan: Like do you think if I interviewed some of your pals or your brothers or your mom, what do you think they would tell me about who you are as a good boy?

Madigan Commentary: This is a preferred circulation question, asking Ollie to speculate if he has support in his preferred version of himself from his community of concern. From here I want to question and thicken his own preferred description of his identity.
Ollie: I don’t know.

Madigan: You don’t have any idea? What kinds of things might they tell me about you that would tell me that you still have a really good reputation as a good boy?

Ollie: That I don’t start anything with other people.

Madigan: Yeah. What else might they tell me about you?

00:56:00

Ollie: I don’t disrespect people.

Madigan: Don’t disrespect people. What else might they tell me? If I was just to sit them here in the room or write them a letter or give them a phone call. I say, “I want to know about Ollie and his good reputation. Can you tell me about him? What do you think about him?” What might they tell me about you?

Ollie: I’m a good friend.

Madigan: You’re a good friend. Would they tell me that you are a fast runner as well, like we were talking about in the hallway? So would they say that you are a good athlete? And good student, you told me you had four B’s, an A and a C, is that right? Would they maybe tell me that you were a good student?

Ollie: Yeah.

Madigan: And good at sports? Yeah? What do you think your mom might tell me about you that would lead me to think that you have this very good boy reputation, in spite of everything else that may have gone on?

Ollie: I don’t get into a whole lot of trouble.

Madigan: Are there things that you could tell me about Ollie that would lead me to believe that he is a really good boy and he has a good reputation?

Mrs. Poindexter: Oh, okay. He does his homework. He doesn’t talk back to you. He doesn’t say bad words.
He doesn’t run away.

**Madigan:** Would I be right in thinking that you are proud of Ollie?

**Mrs. Poindexter:** Yes.

**Madigan:** As having him as a son?

**Mrs. Poindexter:** Yes.

**Madigan:** Did you know that your mom was proud of you and who you were as her son and who you were as a growing man? Yeah? What’s it like to hear that she believes that you are good boy and you do your homework and you don’t talk back and you don’t use bad words and that you don’t run away and that she recognizes that as qualities in you?

**Madigan Commentary:** This is a re-telling to Ollie of his Mother’s account of him.

**Ollie:** I feel good.

**Madigan:** You feel good? Yeah? But what makes you feel good about this?

**Ollie:** Everything she said.

**Madigan:** Everything? Yeah. I’m just wondering given what is happening that there is a bit of a story out there of you getting into trouble, how it is that we might circulate the story more about you being a good boy and to gain that good boy reputation back. And I’m wondering if it might help if I was to write a letter to the principal and say that I met you and I have had a really nice talk with you and really stand behind your good boy reputation. Do you think that might fill it out a bit more?

**Ollie:** I don’t know. I really don’t know.

**Madigan:** I’m just wondering if other people might need to stand up on your behalf, Ollie, and say, “Yes, he did get into trouble and he is sorry for it, but we need to struggle hard to get back his reputation as a good boy because we fear that he might just become troubled or viewed as a troubled boy.”
Can you think of ways in which we might circulate and make this good boy reputation grow a bit more?

**Mrs. Poindexter:** I think like when something happened at school they should stop making a big issue out of it and then it won’t go this far. I know you go to school to learn, you don’t go to school to play. But they really take a lot of the childhood away from the child if you treat them that way. They can’t even go into school and do hardly anything that they make a big thing out of it.

**Madigan:** So do you think that there would be ways that we could stand behind Ollie and his good grades and him wanting to play and him gaining back his reputation?

**Mrs. Poindexter:** Okay, say playing – like if they have recess and you go outside, with him getting into this thing, he can’t hardly go outside and play, because what if he accidentally did something.

**Madigan:** Well that’s what I mean. I am wondering how long that reputation will be a part of his life and what things we might be able to do?

**Mrs. Poindexter:** It seems like it is going to last as long as he is in that school.

**Madigan:** Yeah, I’m just wondering if there is something else that we might be able to do about finding ways in which Ollie can stand up for himself as a good person and as a good boy and let people know about this. Like can you think of ways you might be able to let people know that you are not a troubled person but you are really a good boy person and have a good boy reputation?

Can you think of ways that you would let people know about this?

**Ollie:** No.

**Madigan:** Yeah. Well I am wondering if yourself and the people that are close to you think that you are a good boy might be able to find time and begin thinking of ways to circulate these rumors about yourself being a good person and wanting to finish school.
and wanting to have a good living and wanting to own a house and wanting not to be in trouble or go to jail and knowing that you are not disrespectful and that you are a good friend. That you are a good student and that you are good in sports and that you don’t get into a whole lot of trouble. How is it that you can make that story bigger about yourself?

We know exactly what you can do to make the troubled story bigger, don’t we? So I am just wondering if you have any ideas about how you can make the big boy reputation, the good boy reputation, stronger in yourself?

Like if you brought some of this respectful and friendly and not getting into trouble ways to school, do you think that that might help? Yeah?

Mrs. Poindexter: I think the district needs to change their attitude and then that won’t point the finger at someone like they are a bad person.

Madigan: Right, right. Are there ways in which these views can be brought to the district? I mean I certainly would be willing to write a letter on behalf of Ollie and yourself.

Mrs. Poindexter: I’ve talked to the school district and they know you are telling the truth, but they are not going to go against no one else for what you are saying.

01:04:02

Madigan: So in the meantime how do you keep his good reputation alive?

Mrs. Poindexter: I tell him different things you have to put up with. I think being a boy you have to. Because being a girl, it don’t seem like you have to put up with this stuff.

Madigan: Do you mind if I keep in contact a little bit and see how things are going?

Mrs. Poindexter: Yes.

Madigan: And maybe be one of the people on his side to continue to put forward this idea. Would you mind if I dropped you a line from
Canada?

**Mrs. Poindexter:** That’s good.

**Madigan:** And maybe if there are other kids that I am working with, maybe I can send you down stories about them and about what they have found, whether it to do with troubled reputations or racism.

Now we have to wrap things up here.

**Mrs. Poindexter:** Okay.

**Madigan:** How was this for you?

**Mrs. Poindexter:** This was good. Very good.

**Madigan:** Was it alright for you, Ollie?

**Ollie:** Yeah.

**Madigan:** Do you have any final words that you would like to say?

**Mrs. Poindexter:** I would like to say I didn’t know we would get to tell the story but it is a true story.

**Madigan Commentary:** This was quite beautiful to hear because after their experiences of probation, the fine, community work and court ordered “therapy,” Mrs. Mrs. Poindexter feels that she was listened to.

**Madigan:** And I just want to tell you that I really believe your story and I would like to stand behind your story any way that I can. And I am very sad that the story is going on for you.

**Mrs. Poindexter:** Okay.

**Madigan:** And I am saying that to you as the person here with you and also saying it as a white person. So thank you so much for coming and sharing this story with us.

**Mrs. Poindexter:** Okay, thank you.

**Madigan:** Thank you. See you Ollie. I will get your address if you wouldn’t mind.

**Mrs. Poindexter:** Okay, sure. Thanks.
Video Credits

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