



Re-Writing Life Stories Transactional Analysis and Narrative Therapy Approaches

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In narrative therapy people are invited to find new ways to tell their story. Typically people who come to therapy will begin with a 'problem saturated' story. Through various techniques – such as 'externalising the problem' – the person is invited to discover alternative storylines that have been waiting in the shadows. The invitation is not just for different stories, but stories that open-up instead of limiting possibilities for action and for living. Acts of resistance (cf. in TA acting outside of **script**), i.e. acts that do not conform to the themes and conventions of the dominant 'problem saturated' story, are identified. These are sometimes called 'unique outcomes'. They might be solicited by a question such as "Can you tell me about a time when you got the better of 'gloominess'". Of course, it may take time and patience before any examples are actually forthcoming.

'Unique outcomes' and other episodes that run counter to the frame created by the dominant ('problem saturated') story need not be isolated from one another. The person is invited to link them together as a story, an alternative story in which they are not swallowed by / frozen by / trapped by their problem, but act in pursuit of their own deeply held values and treasured goals. The person is encouraged to make the alternative stories rich, including personal details along with words, phrases and metaphors that have particular resonance for them. A rich and personal story, as opposed to something full of generalisations that might apply to anyone, has, the narrative therapy tradition argues, more potency. And the alternative stories need to be potent if they are to maintain presence and power alongside the dominant story. After all, the dominant story will have benefited from many more tellings and re-tellings both by the person, her social network and even her wider cultural community.

While there are differences, a number of narrative therapy techniques can be usefully understood as a subtle way of exploring what TA theory calls **discounting**. Externalising a problem begins with naming it and speaking of it as something that is outside the person. In naming it and talking of it as separate from the person, some space is created to see it in a different light. The space opens up possibilities for noticing things, for considering change and for making changes.

Externalising goes beyond just naming. A problem, like a person, has its own story and telling that story can be both instructive and therapeutic. The problem has successes and failures. The problem is on a journey: it can arrive and also depart. The relationship between the problem and the person has a history, a present and an as yet unwritten future.

I would also argue that narrative therapy techniques are especially well-suited to avoiding **adaptation** to the therapist or, alternatively, to powerful figures in the person's past who may have piled on shoulds and oughts backed up (in the person's perception if not also in reality) by powerful threats. Where a person does adapt to the therapist, or where decisions are not made congruently (with all three ego states / with a less than integrated Adult), there is always the risk of backlash and/or self-sabotage. It seems possible, though I am cautious, that narrative therapy technique is less prone to this. Michael White (in a presentation in Edinburgh 2007) suggests "When options open up people rush to them. It's not like homework." The 'homework' phrase is, I think, very important. If it is like 'homework' then there may be a rebellion. In TA we might say, if a person's discounts are effectively dissolved then her Adult is free to make well-informed and intelligent decisions relating to her here-and-now-reality. And this is not homework.

Workshop Examples: Discussion Points

Acts of Kindness I'm expecting – it'll be interesting to see if I'm right! – that the initial helping stories will emphasise the power of the helper and tacitly (or otherwise) imply relative passivity of the part of the

helped. There may be aspects of Rescuer and Victim (or Persecutor if the act of help is rejected). The drama triangle informs the way that many of our stories are told. It is called the 'drama' triangle for a good reason.

The interview is intended to make explicit the interviewee's contribution. An act of help requires a contribution from both parties. It does not seek to diminish the helper, but to break out of a thin and stereotyped story in which a weak / passive person is saved by a strong / active hero. Real lives are invariably more complex than that. When the complexity is removed and stories are thinned out then identity is marginalised. If your identity is defined by a thin story, with narrow possibilities of action, you will be more prone to be stuck in your life.

Problem Stories Part 1 I have invited you to avoid using TA language. Rather, I'm suggesting you home in on words and phrases that have a particular resonance for the interviewee. The narrative approach is deeply resistant to technical language and theoretical models in general. In part this is because of the power imbalance created. The therapist is an expert on counselling/therapy terms and theory. TA seeks to minimise this power imbalance by favouring ordinary words, keeping theory simple, and maintaining a commitment to open communication. Narrative therapy gives even greater priority to minimise the potential power imbalance. It gently but constantly insists that the person is the expert both on her problems and also on the means of overcoming them.

However, is narrative therapy denying itself some tools that would be valuable to people seeking help? Sometimes a bit of ego state diagnosis with a person can be hugely beneficial. People can leap upon the model and immediately see how it applies to them. This can stimulate and support important changes.

Problem Stories Part 2 The question about positive and negative invites the person to make their own judgement afresh. Society's answer, her family's answer or the therapist's answer do not have privileged status. And even if her answer matches that of others, it is *her* answer, one that she has actively come up with, one that she has decided afresh for herself. This question is a subtle and strong invitation into Adult.

The question about justification is a means of helping the person get in touch with what it is she values. These values can form the theme of a story of woven out of 'unique outcomes' (see above).

Reading / References

Morgan, Alice (2000) *What Is Narrative Therapy? An Easy to Read Introduction* (Dulwich Centre Publications) *Really clear, short and easily digestible chapters, lots of examples, very practical.*

Milner, Judith and Patrick O'Byrne (2002) *Brief Counselling: Narratives and Solutions* (Palgrave) *A very clear book with lots of techniques and examples. They are enthusiastic about their approach but urge you to decide for yourself. Their mantra in their promotion of techniques as well as in their counselling work is 'if it works do more of it, if it doesn't work, do something different'.*

Payne, Martin (2006) *Narrative Therapy: An Introduction for Counsellors* (Sage) *As well as describing techniques and approaches, this book tackles some of the background ideas behind narrative therapy, such as post-modernism, post-structuralism and some challenges to 'therapy culture'.*

White, Michael and David Epston (1990) *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (Norton) *This is a key text for narrative therapy. I found some of the early theory chapters are hard going, but later on there are very many rich examples including 'therapeutic documents', such as letters from the therapist to the person seeking help.*

White, Michael (2007) *Maps of Narrative Practice* (Norton) *Lots of richly detailed case material and (fairly) friendly theory. Gives a good sense of setup to sessions, pacing, timing etc.*

www.dulwichcentre.com.au *The website for Michael White's counselling centre. It has a very clear overview of narrative therapy and several useful articles to download.*

→ See also Workshop Outline and Interview Crib Sheets, all available at www.extra-help.org.uk