

change are filled with interlocking messages of our commitments and decisions. Each one is a message of possibility [emphasis added]" (pp. 238-241).

In therapy clients tell their stories and this telling is a redescribing or redefining of their lives or some aspect of their lives. More precisely, the therapeutic process is a "co-authoring" by client and therapist as "messages" of possibility are located through telling. Then the possibilities are "experimented with" in extending the life of the client forward in fruitful ways. The possibilities are openings into revised and new stories by means of which clients can comprehend, re-direct, and "evolve" their life.

**PRAGMATIC FRAMEWORK FOR STORIED COUNSELLING**

People come to counselling because they are experiencing some difficulty in life for which they are unable to find satisfactory resolutions. It is these difficulties which they tell stories about--or which they would like to tell stories about.

In the following paragraphs, I wish to bring attention to certain features of storying within the context of therapy:

- (1) In therapy, a client telling her story is thereby "making sense of her world."

(2) Stories are "living texts" authored from the raw material of lived experience.

(3) Stories should not be taken as accounts of truth or statements of "objective" fact but as interpretive accounts of the "sense and meaning of my life or some aspect of my life."

(4) Storying (narrative structure) emphasizes ". . . order and sequence . . . story as a model . . . is both linear and instantaneous (Bruner, 1986, p. 143). Through the telling of a story, a client is enabled to temporalize her experience, and give a sense of order or coherence to what she is experiencing in her life.

(5) Counselling is a "meaning-making" process (Carlsen, 1988). Statements which postulate or convey meaning are interpretive. Meaning statements originate from our "maps" of reality or, to put it another way, from analogies. In selecting one analogy in preference to another, there are no criteria of "correctness" to use. We can, however, situate our choice of analogy within the stream of social thought and we can examine and critique the effects of our practices which have been informed by the analogies we use (White, and Epston, 1991, p. 5-6). In cognitive psychology the analogy of "mind as computer" is often used. For storied counselling we can treat therapy conversation as "text", "narrative", "story."

Stories are oral texts and it is through the telling of stories that we . . . "re-experience, re-live, re-create, re-

tell, re-construct and re-fashion our culture and our lives" (Bruner, 1986, p. 11).

Lives, relationships and problems all evolve through the performance of stories (texts). Texts are indeterminate--each retelling shapes the story of one's life in differing degrees.

(6) People tell many different types of stories in therapy. Some of the more important types are:

- (a) Story of subjugation--how I am oppressed by others, by relationships, by circumstances, by an aspect of self;
- (b) Problem-saturated stories--accounts of how a particular problem is influencing some or all aspects of my life--and often the lives of others;
- (c) Dominant story--the biggest thing in my life right now or how I describe the essential meaning of my life at the present moment;
- (d) Alternative story--a different voice on how things are, or how I want them to be (also called preferred story).
- (e) Habituated story--the endlessly repeated story told to anyone who will listen--keeps the teller in a cocoon and prevents change from occurring.

- (f) Adopted story--the teller is giving voice to someone else's version of how the teller should construe things or act. This type of story is familiar to counsellors who have encountered the youth-client who has "adopted" a parent's version of what that youth should do or be in life.
- (g) Protest story--a story of how I am resisting, or thinking about resisting some dominating force in my life.

(7) In storied counselling an acceptable outcome is the generation of alternative stories which enable clients to perform new meanings and thus become open to new possibilities which they view as more satisfying, more self-helpful, more enabling and more open-ended.

(8) Stories never capture all of one's lived experience. There always remain "gaps" in storied accounts--there remains lived experience falling outside the actual narrated story. These unnarrated aspects of life experience are important starting points for alternative accounts--new and productive ways of making sense of what is happening and setting new frameworks for perceiving and acting.

Following Goffman (1961), Michael White refers to one's living experience falling outside of one's dominant story as "unique outcomes." According to White (White & Epston, 1990),

unique outcomes often can be located by "externalizing" the problem-saturated story. Externalization refers to taking the stance with the client that the "problem" is not located "inside" the person but is a phenomenon which is exerting influence over the client and how the client lives. In this way the client disidentifies or gains some distance from the problem, or at least stops perceiving the problem as an "inside-pathology." In essence, this externalizing is accomplished by raising questions about how the problem is having influence over the client and sometimes over others who are in relation to the client.

By achieving a separation from problem-saturated descriptions, from the habitual telling of the story, clients and counsellors are able to locate and ascribe meaning to "new" aspects of their life story. I have chosen to use the term "unique opening" to describe these new discoveries in the client's story. It seems to me that when a client and counsellor come upon new and significant experiences which have not been included in the clients initial or habitual account, what is achieved by this discovery is an "opening" into potential for revising the client's story--and thereby, the client's life. Another way of saying this is that the discovery is an opening into the creative space or potential of the client's life.

More precisely, what is achieved is the possibility of new and further redescriptions of aspects of the client's dominant story; or the possibility of constructing an alternative, preferred story is entered into through the "unique opening."

(9) All humans are veteran story tellers. Stories tend to harden into frameworks for interpreting what is going on and thus have a guiding function on how persons live. On the negative side, stories of pathology, of victimization, or stories of endless, boring repetitiousness have the effect of trapping individuals in "realities" which they themselves had a hand in creating (J. Bruner, 1986).

When clients appear at a counsellor's door they do not come just as bundles of raw experience or as vessels seeking advice and information, they arrive with fables to tell. Because I am well-known in my community, clients will come saying "Oh, I have heard . . . about you." Even though we have never met, they already bring their story of who I am!

More importantly, clients bring problems and dilemmas which can be taken as glitches in their narratives (Spence, 1982) or as stories from which important passages (descriptions of living experience) have been omitted.

(10) While stories are mainly made up of recollections and reformulations which tend to be retrospective accounts, it is essential to keep in mind that a story often also has very

important proscriptive elements. The "guiding" function of storying is organized around our constructions of the future.

George Kelley (1969) captured the two dimensions of storying: explanation/formulation and futurizing, in his account of how he often gave fantastic and bogus explanations to clients about their symptoms. He found that his invented, outlandish explanations worked about as well as "scientifically correct" ones. He claimed that what seems necessary about any explanation is that they "account for the crucial facts as the client sees them and that . . . [they] carry implications for approaching the future in a different way" (p. 52).

(11) From a narrative perspective, claims of cause, purpose and blame are linguistic inventions, not noncontingent "truths." Cause, purpose and blame are invariably based on partial views emanating from "particular observational perches" (Efran, Lukens, & Lukens, 1990). In counselling conversations talk of purposes, causes and blame are best treated as signals of where confusion is likely occurring between semantic formulations and system operations. The tendency to confuse the map with the territory is never more than a footstep away--for both clients and professional helpers.

From a constructivist perspective, Truth and Determinacy are to be placed in quotation marks since both are a function

of perspective and cannot be given non-contingent status. We know what we know not so much by resorting to objectivity nor by relying on subjectivity but by participation. Reality is negotiated and is unceasingly under construction. The "stability" factor in social reality is eerily temporary.

Counsellors need to appreciate and use language wisely, for practically, it is the main tool which they have to do their work. Using language appreciatively (which includes taking a storied approach) means offering the client "trustworthiness." Boundaries of self and life patterns are not established by external facts, they are negotiated by members of linguistic communities. Counselling is a specialized form of conversation within which participants make distinctions and meanings, strive for coherence, develop alternative accounts and actions, and establish purpose and direction. In other words, negotiate and revise personal self-narratives.

Helping people talk straight and helping people narrate alternative stories by means of which they achieve more satisfying life conditions is at the heart of constructivist-based therapy. A philosophical position upon which to base this assertion about the desirability of helping people talk straight and developing alternative stories, is to be found in Jurgen Habermas' notion of "domination-free communication" (Habermas, 1987). It is by means of domination-free

communication that both selves and societies can achieve greater democracy.

### **STORIED COUNSELLING: PRACTICAL PROCEDURES**

To begin, I will express caution about the wisdom of advocating a prescribed "method" of counselling, especially if one thinks that a method of therapy is a matter of "fixing" broken or defective (human) machinery.

Counselling is primarily concerned with matters of choice and values, responsibility and ethics--patterns of connectedness and relation. Participants in counselling--both clients and counsellors--are collaborators in therapy. However, therapy is but a small aspect of a much larger and inclusive process of social negotiation. Counsellors and clients are members of larger constituencies--families, clubs, sub-cultures, unions, schools of thought and belief systems--in which the meaning of therapy is imbedded.

Generally speaking, persons who come for therapy are constrained from full membership in some sector of social life. They wish to raise their status to that of "eligible participant" and they expect that the counsellor will be able to do something which counts in increasing their chances to participate in the wider society. They wish to gain access to education or training, to find employment, to get social

service benefits, to achieve a more satisfactory participation in intimate relationships or in some way to gain more or better eligibility to perform in society.

It is probably best to think of counselling and therapy as a type of education--an enquiry into how better living arrangements can be made (Efran, Lukens, & Lukens, 1988).

Naming therapy as "education" has a demystifying effect and removes the fog of scientism and medicalization which has all too often choked the life out of various methods of counselling and psychotherapy. As counsellor-tutors, we try to engage our clients in "experimenting" with new ways of thinking and doing, or at least in "playing off the new against the old."

The question is: "How do we proceed in a practical way when we take a storied approach to counselling?"

The three most central efforts the counsellor must make are"

- (1) Elicit and facilitate client stories,
- (2) Participate with the client in co-constructing alternative stories,
- (3) Assist the client in finding ways of performing the "meaning" of stories.

Getting "The News" Out

It is easy to get started with most clients when one takes a storied approach. Instead of using such phrases as "Present your problem," or "What is the issue you wish to deal with?," one says (in one way or another) "I'd like to hear your story." Every human being is always, at the moment, the endpoints of on-going streams of "lived experience." Experience is the first-order reality, but it cannot be apprehended directly as meaning.

Instead, we first articulate/express/perform meanings. As we perform meanings we re-experience, re-live, re-create, re-tell, re-construct, re-fashion our "worlds" both personal and social. A client who is performing his story is not revealing some pre-existing meaning from his biography, his performance is constitutive. As a person tells (gives voice to) her experience [lived text] the re-lived experience becomes a performed text--alive, active, and meaningful (E.M. Bruner, 1986). Storying is what the anthropologist Victor Turner called "putting experience into circulation."

The counsellor must take the stance that "selves" are not given but are always problematic and in production. Borrowing Meyerhoff's phrase, we are "the authors of ourselves".:

Of course, a counsellor does not simply say "tell me your story" and then sit there while the narrative unfolds.

Storytellers usually need assistance in achieving coherence, clarity and sense of "history" in their stories. The counsellor will need to use a number of instructive and linguistic tools when eliciting and co-authoring client stories. I will briefly describe three important tools: extending empathic understanding, externalizing the problem, and mapping influence through questioning.

### 1. Extending empathic understanding

Counsellors must be able to show a keen, intelligent interest in clients but at the same time refrain from intellectualizing. It is necessary to convey or teach an attitude to the client--and this attitude must be truly the counsellor's own--"in which a broadened understanding of oneself is encouraged (Kohut, The Kohut Seminars), p. 188."

The counsellor's own interest must be in what is going on with the client--what the client is telling about herself, her relations, her circumstances. Not only what the client is experiencing but also how the client is experiencing and interpreting those experiences. How is this client relating to her "problem?"

Extension of an attitude of empathy generally requires that the counsellor refrain from praising or blaming the client for what she says, thinks or does. Rather, the counsellor should encourage the client to see the advantages

or disadvantages of the particular mode of functioning being discussed. In this way the client improves her chances of achieving useful self awareness and knowledge. The counsellor who shows interest rather than blame or praise is much more likely to achieve a better understanding of the client--get closer to the facts of the client's situation as the client sees it.

People often "know" things about themselves that they have never verbalized. Verbalizing previously unexpressed self-knowledge makes that knowledge more available for coping with worldly concerns. It also does not hurt if someone else--the counsellor--gets a better understanding as a result of the client's verbalization of self insights.

A kind of bond can be achieved between counsellor and client through expressing and listening to self insights. This firms up the basis for working on the specific problems which the client expresses in her storying. In this way the client gets an "ally" and achieves fuller understanding of who she is, what she is, what she desires, and how she functions in her life world and relations with others and in relation to her "problem."

In building an attitude of understanding it is quite important not to try to persuade the client that she is something which she is not. First, the client needs the therapist's (unspoken) permission to accept what she is. Then,

Michael White and Epston (1990) have developed an approach to therapy which encourages people to "objectify" and, at times, to "personify" the problem. An "externalized" problem is (imaginatively) construed to be a separate entity and thus external to the person or relationship that was ascribed as the problem.

For example consider the client who describes himself as "undecided" about which career he ought to choose and prepare for. He defines himself: "I am undecided and confused about my future. I can't decide what I want to do with my life." What is described is a "person" who "is" undecided. The more this client tells himself (and others) this story of being an undecided person, the more his life becomes saturated with the feelings and implications of being undecided.

On the other hand, if the client is encouraged to reconstrue and adopt the view that indecision is an entity in itself and not a defining characteristic of his personality, then he will be able to examine the problem's influence on his life, on his relationships with others. Conversely, he will be able to talk about his influence on "the problem."

"Externalizing" originally was used by White (1984) mainly in the context of family therapy but has subsequently been extended as a practice to a wide variety of problems, both individual and relational.

As a concept, "externalizing" bears some resemblance to Robert Assagioli's recommended practice of "dis-identification" in which clients are encouraged to withdraw their ego-investments in certain kinds of problems. This allows the client to see his trouble "at arm's length" and thus to be in a better position to exert influence over it and to resist the influence of the problem on himself.

A meditation practice which is also somewhat similar to White's concept of externalization--at least in the intended result of giving the person a basis for getting free of the domination of a problem--is the meditational practice of "mindfulness" described by Thich Nhat Hanh (1976):

Recall the bitterest failures in your life and examine each of them . . . See that . . . these failures are not your own self . . . see to it that you are free from them . . . Only when you can relinquish them can you really be free and no longer assailed by them (p. 97).

Although "externalization" does not apply to all types of problems it does give clients remarkable strength for exerting influence over troubles in their lives and gaining a sense of liberation from "problem-saturated" existences.

I have developed a list of benefits from externalizing which I have been able to identify through my own experimentation with the procedure of externalizing: