

# Narrative Therapy

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## Note 1

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1. The primary focus of a narrative approach is people's expressions of their experiences of life.
2. These are expressions of people's experiences of a world that is lived through, and all expressions of lived experience engage people in interpretive acts.
3. It is through these interpretive acts that people give meaning to their experiences of the world. These interpretive acts render people's experiences of life sensible to themselves and to others. Meaning does not pre-exist the interpretation of experience.
4. Expressions of experience are units of meaning and experience. In all considerations of people's expressions of life, meaning and experience are inseparable.
5. Acts in the interpretation of experience are achievements that are dependent upon people's engagement with interpretive resources that provide frames of intelligibility.
6. Expressions are constitutive of life - expressions have real-effects in terms of the shaping of life - in that:
  - as expressions constitute the world that is lived through, they structure experience and subsequent expressions.
  - expressions are in a constant state of production, and these productions are transformative of life.
  - action in the world is prefigured on meaning, the

specifics of action being determined by the particularities of the meanings that are derived in the processes of interpretation.

- expressions have a cultural context. and are informed by the knowledge and practices of life that are culturally determined.

7. Making sense, giving meaning to experience, is a relational achievement in that:

- all acts of interpretation require a frame of intelligibility, one that locates specific experiences in contexts of experiences of a similar class, one that brings particular events of people's lives into some relationship with each other.

- linearity is invariably evoked as people's experiences of events are situated in progressions of events that unfold through time.

- people traffic in meanings that are relevant to and shared by communities of people.

- the meanings of experiences that are, in the first place, ambiguous and/or uncertain are negotiated in communities of people according to established procedures.

8. In that it is through expressions that people shape and re-shape their lives, expressions are not an 'academic' matter. Expressions cannot be considered a static reproduction of some experiences that they refer to: they are not 'maps of the territory of life', not 'reflections of life as it is lived', not 'mirrors of the world', and not 'perspectives on life' that stand outside of what is going on.

9. The structure of narrative provides the principle frame of intelligibility for people in their day-to-day lives. It is through this frame that people link together the events of life in sequences that unfold through time according to specific themes.

10. Linear causality is a dominant feature of narrative structure - events are taken into linear progressions, in which each event contributes to the foundations of possibility for subsequent events.

**Formal (theoretical) systems of analysis:**

- establish global accounts of life and universal accounts of human

**Narrative analysis**

- brings forth the contradictory experiences of subjectivity,

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| <p>nature that construct naturalised and essentialist notions of the self.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● produce flat 'monographic' descriptions of life, which attempt to render events predictable</li> <li>● 'seek the general, so as not to be misled by the unique' (Bruner).</li> <li>● champion the norm, and render the unexpected invisible.</li> <li>● inform studies in the reproduction and transmission of dominant notions of self and of culture.</li> </ul> | <p>and de-naturalised notions of a self that is multi-sided.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● speaks to a multi-storied conception of life.</li> <li>● seeks the unique, so as not to be misled by the general.</li> <li>● enshrines the unexpected and deconstructs the norm.</li> <li>● provides opportunities to seize upon the unique in the reworking of dominant notions and practices of self and of culture.</li> </ul> |
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12. **In structuralist analysis:**

- life is represented in terms of behaviours that are considered to be the surface manifestations of deeper elements or forces.
- whatever it is that behaviour is a manifestation of can only be got at in explorations conducted by those who have 'expert knowledge' of states of depth, and who can apply highly specific transformational rules to the behaviours of the surface. In decoding behaviour at the surface of life, the application of these rules and procedures reveal the 'truth' of behavioural phenomena.
- notions of surface and depth are contrasted and juxtaposed.

**Narrative analysis is located in post-structuralist thought, in which:**

- expressions of lived experience are construed as actions that are constitutive of life - these experiences are what it is that is 'going on'.
- an understanding of these expressions of subjective experience, and the real effects of these expressions is to be got at through the consciousness of those engaged in the actions. It is these explorations of subjective experience that contribute to 'rich' or 'thick' description.
- thick description and thin conclusion are contrasted and juxtaposed.

13. **A narrative therapy is about:**

- options for the telling and re-telling of, for the performance and re-performance of, the preferred stories of people's lives.
- rendering the unique, the contradictory, the contingent, and, at times, the aberrant events of people's lives significant as alternative presents.
- a re-engagement and a reproduction of history through the alternative presents of people's lives, a re-engagement and reproduction that brings these alternative presents together with past relevant experiences that are linked by common themes, a re-engagement and re-production that invokes the 'wisdom of hindsight'.

- an exploration of the alternative knowledges and skills that inform these expressions, and the identification of the cultural history and location of these skills and knowledges - these are often the subordinate knowledges and skills of culture.
- an exploration of the proposals for living that are associated with the particularities of action that are informed by these alternative knowledges and skills of life.
- thick description in that it evokes people's consciousness in explanations of why they do what they do - about the invocation of notions of desire, whim, mood, goal, hope, intention, purpose, motive, aspiration, passion, concern, value, belief, fantasy, commitment, and disposition.
- rich description in that alternative stories of people's presents are linked with the alternative stories of people's pasts, a linking of stories across time through lives.
- rich description in that it provides for the linking of the alternative stories of people's pasts and presents with the stories of the lives of others - a linking of stories between lives according to shared themes that speak to purposes, values, and commitments in common.
- rich description in that it structures contexts for telling and retelling. and for the retelling of retellings - activities in the production of meta-texts, and texts that are meta to meta-texts.
- processes that establish these thick or rich descriptions as the foundations for the expressions, for the performances, for the tellings that follow.

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For another view, see Stephen Madigan's notes on [Narrative Therapy](#) at the Yaletown Family Therapy Centre in Vancouver. (Note, the [Yaletown Centre's website](#) uses frames, so the link here will launch a new browser so as to let you get back here.)

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## Note 1

These notes outlining 'Narrative Therapy' by Michael White are being used here as [a source for the construction of two hypertext units in the programme being developed at this site](#). The intention is to use the possibilities of the hypertext medium to 'underwrite' this surface, and lay out the 'landscape' on which it floats. The image to bear in mind as we do this is not one of an early morning mountainscape in which peaks float above a layer of cloud that obscure the real valleys and terrain below it. Rather,

think of using a whisk to make meringues from egg whites and sugar. We are looking to outline the 'processing of ingredients', not to reveal the nature of a given 'landscape of truth'

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In the next part of this course, we want to explore this outline in more concrete and practical terms. What follows, for practice, when the above principles and ethics are brought into the therapeutic situation? What does a narrative therapist do? How does a narrative therapy session progress? [Read on.](#)