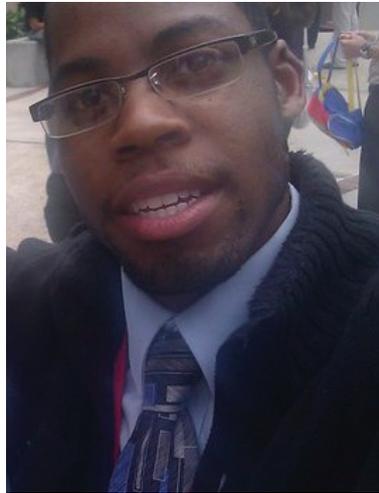


## A Social Worker's Guide to Narrative Therapy

A review of *Edith E. Freeman (2011). Narrative Approaches in Social Work Practice*

by Daniel Stewart



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Narrative practices place emphasis on stories and conversations in contrast to relying on pathology to tell us about our clients. Edith Freeman's book provides a foundational understanding of how to integrate these practices in social work settings and other human service fields. This book goes beyond just providing a cookie-cutter approach to problematic situations and instead focusses on how to access the client's cultural resources and strengths. Utilising a culturally-conscious approach such as this provides an epistemology that is both cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary.

The author begins by outlining '*Five Basic Principles of Effective Narrative Practice*'. As she outlines the principles, she includes further explanation for each principle by providing a section that includes, 'main elements of principles', 'significance of each principle', and 'narrative practice skills'.

Principle I, *The time and context of narrative principle*, highlights the importance of spontaneous storytelling as a means to help people relate to their 'past and current situations' (p. 9). Principle II, *The shared experience and transformation principle*, encourages practitioners to remember that clients are the 'experts of their narratives' and to keep up a 'not-knowing attitude', which builds a foundation for Principle III, *The naming and unpacking: the assessment and intervention principle*, and Principle IV, *The meaning-making principle*. Within these principles, the author suggests that practitioners can help clients 'expand' their narrative, while assessing the 'strengths and challenges in client's situations' (p. 51).

Naming is defined as a way to 'clarify areas in the client's narrative and life situation that are already changing, and the methods and interventions they are using to initiate change in other areas' (p. 51). This allows for an 'aerial view' of the client's life that was at one point invisible at the 'ground level' (p. 74) creating a space for the practitioner to acknowledge that no narrative is 'too big or too small' (p. 71). The author explains that transformative change is a process that begins, not just with listening to the story people narrate for us, but with experiencing the storyteller's story.

The author states that, 'People's narratives differ in type and purpose, including family, cultural, individual or personal, community, organizational, and life narratives' and 'are a mechanism for clients to manage their current life transitions and their recurring unresolved issues' (p. 9-10). For both new and experienced social workers, the author provides a clear understanding of not only the 'why' of exploring a client's narrative, but additionally the 'how'.

Principle V, *The social, political, cultural intervention principle*, illustrates that 'how' is a process of externalisation and deconstruction 'to help [people] separate themselves from their problem' (p. 8). The author suggests that practitioners must understand how a dominant discourse can reinforce 'beliefs and values' that suppress 'the lives and narratives of groups that exist in the margins of dominant society' (p. 98). Practitioners can help people move from a place of being 'marginalized' to a place of respect and acknowledgment when the practitioner opens up curiosity about 'un-narrated experiences' (p. 100-101).

I appreciate how the author acknowledges a person's culture as a major influence that contributes to his or her narrative. So often as practitioners we can get caught up in the details and lose sight of the person's transformative processes.

Edith Freeman reminds social workers that, 'Effective listening requires practitioners to stop note-taking or information-gathering and to begin the process of experience-gathering (listening to narratives)' (p. 38).

Again, I read this as bringing the reader back to the basics of narrative therapy, learning the art of listening.

The author cites numerous examples of different narratives that illustrate the ideas described in the book. An example is found on page 50 in which Clyde Collins, a 60 year-old who lost his wife and suffers from depression, explains his frustration after speaking to his company's Human Resource Manager about his job, because of pending layoffs and a possible buyout.

The practitioner explores the Clyde's narrative by using naming and unpacking questions such as, 'What specific part of the interaction or discussion that day made you so angry?' (p. 53).

As Clyde began to realise that the 'recent loss of his wife caused him to feel less sure of himself and less in control of his life', the practitioner continued to acknowledge Clyde's feelings and opened up curiosity about the meaning of his narrative.

The practitioner invited Clyde to, 'Talk about what your narrative means to you', and later asked, 'What did you learn from your narrative and how can you use those lessons now?' (p. 55). Edith Freeman cites an integration of systems and narrative approaches that were used concurrently to help the client.

As a social worker with many clients and many duties that can at times be overwhelming, it is helpful to have a book that presents complex ideas in a format that is simple and straightforward. This is an easy read and concepts are fully explained with supporting examples.

Throughout the book, Edith Freeman incorporates a systemic, integrated approach with narrative practice. Additionally, she expands the applicability of narrative practices in social work by integrating aspects drawn from other approaches, such as solution-focussed, transition-focussed, brief loss and grief therapy, task-centred interventions, and many more. With each intervention she encourages the practitioner to explore the evolution of the client's narratives and the context in which they are being narrated.

She encourages practitioners to explore the client's experiences by asking questions such as:

'What kind of person are you, based on the story?'

'What kind of person do you want to be in the future based on the story?'

'What lessons did you learn from this story?' (p. 85).

Narrative ideas and practices oppose the day-to-day pathological outlook so prevalent in the social work setting. I think it is important as counsellors and therapists to see interpersonal and intrapersonal problems simply as problems and avoid imposing a pathological identity onto individuals.

Through Edith Freeman's book, we see a narrative perspective that celebrates clients' individuality, their experiences, their culture, their passions, and their interests. I appreciated how the author repeatedly advises that a foundational basis for establishing a relationship with the client begins with respect.

This book has a wealth of information that is not only applicable in social work settings but also in other clinical and therapeutic environments that foster personal development. This book would be a great addition to the curriculum for student social workers, social work educators, trainers, social work practitioners, as well as those in other helping fields who wish to gain a better understanding of narrative practices and to learn to utilise them with their clients.

## References

Freeman, E. (2011). *Narrative approaches in social work practice: A life span, culturally centered, strengths perspective*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.