

‘Truth-making’ in a world made up of stories

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Abstract

This paper originated from conversations between Adam and Milan on how Michael White and his work had impacted on their lives and how they might best honour these influences. They found, in particular, that the ways in which Michael unpacked the effects of ‘truth-making’ on himself resonated strongly for them. These explorations inspired Adam and Milan to reflect on how claims to truth affect their practice and lives. In particular, this paper unpacks how the notions of assertiveness, body language and the therapeutic relationship are all influenced by truth-making.

Keywords: truth-making, positive power, Michel Foucault, Michael White, narrative practice, poststructuralism.

The idea of writing this paper about ‘truth-making’ was born from an email a friend of ours, Mark Gordon, had sent us, now over two years ago. The email told of the passing of Michael White and asked us if it would be useful to meet and discuss ways we as a community were affected by Michael and his work. The purpose was not to create hagiographies (the construction of saints), which David Epston (2009) has pointed out in a recent writing as something that Michael himself had a strong opinion about. Instead, it was to reflect on how Michael and his work had impacted on our lives and how we might best honour these influences.

I (A.H.) was unable to attend the gathering but I did spend a lot of time discussing Mark’s question with some of the people present that day. Milan and I discussed on several occasions how Michael’s work had influenced our lives, and one point that continued to be raised was witnessing how he openly unpacked the effects of ‘truth-making’ on himself. This is something that continues to inspire both of us to reflect on how claims to truth affect our practice and lives.

Foucault and ‘truth-making’

We had both read about Foucault’s ideas on truth and power (1972, 1977, 1980, 1984) before participating in Michael White’s narrative training, but we were only starting to grasp how they might apply to our practice. Because these were such new and different concepts and because we found some of Foucault’s writings difficult to understand, we simply could not make the connections with our lives. This difficulty is something we have since discovered to be not so uncommon amongst people first learning about poststructuralism. One of the best summaries of Foucault’s ideas on power and truth we have read is outlined in Michael White and David Epston’s collaboration, *Narrative means to therapeutic ends* (1990) which describes how, for Foucault, truth-making can occur via what he termed ‘positive power’:

The notion of a power that is negative in its effects contributes to a theory of repression, while the notion of power that is positive in its effects leads to a theory about its role in ‘making up’ persons’ lives. And when discussing ‘truths’, Foucault is subscribing not to the belief that there exist objective or intrinsic facts about the nature of persons but instead to constructed ideas that are accorded a truth status. These ‘truths’ are ‘normalizing’ in the sense that they construct norms around which persons are incited to shape or constitute their lives. (p. 19)

Put another way, truth-making is when people take on ideas that are viewed as positive and these ideas, in turn, contribute to the shaping of their lives. These claims to truth can render other explanations or ways of being invalid. This truth-making has profoundly influenced our lives but, crucially, it wasn’t until Michael discussed this in relation to his practice that we started to consider how it affects our own practices.

Positive power at work

Michael explained that there are many truth-making notions associated with what a therapist should and should not be Doing in their work. One example he highlighted was the

plethora of theories on body language circulated in therapy and how there are many 'should do' behaviours, recommended by 'experts'. Some of the behaviours that are commonly recommended include the therapist leaning forward on their chair to show interest in what people are saying and having their hands on their knees, while making eye contact when talking, to show interest. He also discussed how crossing arms is often viewed as aggressive or defensive body language and how it is often viewed as something a therapist, or even people in general, should not do.

Michael explained that such claims – of the dos and don'ts of body language – are commonly viewed as best practice or the ways a person should practice therapy. These examples of truth-making claims about body language had great resonance for us, because we had learned these claims previously and had been practising them without question. They fitted with the previous learning we had acquired about respectful body language and, therefore, made sense in our context.

Other ways of respectfully engaging with a person were not explored. We simply did not question whether leaning on the end of our chair, with our hands on our knees, while making eye contact, was culturally sensitive behaviour for the people we were consulting with. Or whether, in a different context than ours, that crossing arms could be seen as respectful and not defensive. We had taken on board these claims about body language, because we viewed them as positive and worthwhile acquisitions. It was a good example of positive power at work. However, by Michael discussing this example of truth-making and its relationship with positive power, we were encouraged to think more about the ways these concepts applied in our practice.

Influences on us in practice and life

The following story is about the notion of assertiveness and how truth-making and positive power has affected my (A. H.) practice and life. The idea of assertiveness was something I was inspired to question directly, after listening to Michael discuss his example of truth, power and body language.

An understanding that I once had about myself when I was starting work as a counsellor was that I was not assertive enough in my facilitation of a men's group. Various experiences had occurred over a period of time that supported my belief that I lacked assertion. I was told by an employer that, 'Leaving too much space for one person in the group might lead to others feeling dominated', and that I needed to be, '... more assertive with other group members to prevent this from happening'. I was also told that, 'Being more assertive would be good for you in general Adam'. So I read books on group leading that stated that one of the roles of 'a good group leader' is to use assertiveness to challenge the group to make positive movements towards their goals.

Furthermore, not many people were coming to the group, which I put down to my lack of assertion in promoting it. Finally, when the people participating in the group stopped coming and it closed down, I saw this as the final damning reflection on my poor assertiveness skills. People were not coming to the group and its closing down was due to my lack of assertiveness. A perceived lack of assertion had become a problem for me, which was beginning to dominate other aspects of my life.

It affected my hopes and confidence in running future groups, because now I had a history of non-assertiveness in groups. It affected my thoughts about myself and, specifically, my ability

to offer opinions in social groups and work meetings. I even started to doubt my contributions in my close relationships with others. This led to conclusions such as, 'I'm not interesting enough', and, 'I do not have many worthwhile qualities to share with others'.

The dominance of these negative thoughts then started to affect my understanding of my past, for I started to remember times when I may have lacked assertiveness, such as when I played football and how I didn't tackle hard enough or when I sang in a school choir and did not sing loud enough. In conclusion, this dominance affected many aspects of my life – past, present and future – but fortunately this was not the end of the story. There were other more positive understandings to investigate.

One afternoon, when I was feeling particularly down at work, I decided I was going to reclaim my preferred identity of competency. I decided that I would explore the notion of assertion in finer detail, in order to assess what might have legitimised it as a required quality in life. One of my conclusions was that assertiveness had recently been given greater importance in my world largely through the influences of institutions such as the business sector. At the time, Milan and I were working in a community agency where the practice and use of corporate ideas and language were on the rise. Terms like 'targets', 'customers', 'clients' and 'business plans', were commonly used in this community agency and we were expected to use these ideas in our practices, such as report writing. The 'successful assertive individual' was just another of these business notions that had been brought into my life in this increasingly corporate workplace.

In this context, when I had been told I 'should be more assertive' and I had read about the importance of assertiveness, I had formed the belief - with a lot of broader and more influential help – that it was essential to the running of a successful group and maybe even a successful life. Recognising these influences was vital to the changing of this negative view about myself. It was through an unpacking of who and what had influenced the notion of assertiveness that I was able to make choices about what sort of relationship I wanted to have with it. I could now make decisions about whether or not I wanted to believe the institutions and knowledges that had reinforced the idea that 'assertiveness equals greater success'. Investigating these broader influences such as my workplace and its relationship with the business world, helped me to challenge this truth-making statement, while it opened up room for me to explore another story about myself.

Finally, through investing in a deconstruction of the notion of assertiveness, I was able to form an understanding of it that had a more appropriate fit for me, rather than the understanding that was presented to me by other people.

Dominant discourses in the therapeutic arena

In *The archaeology of knowledge*, Foucault (1972) contended that there are ideas that will have more dominance in a person's life than others. He called these dominant discourses. Generally, discourses are viewed as the language that a person or institution uses to explain their understanding of the world or how it should be. Foucault, however, was not really interested in building arguments using discourses. He was interested in analysing the construction of discourses; what impacts they can have on people; and how some discourses in certain contexts gain more legitimacy than others.

Thus far, we have used two examples – theories on body language and Adam's experiences with 'assertiveness' – to thicken out these concerns. Of course, we do not believe that

structuralist approaches are 'wrong' or that post-structuralist therapies are 'better'. It is just that they are different and, therefore, will have different effects. For example, structuralist approaches tend to support the idea that problems and solutions can be found internally, while poststructuralist approaches support the idea that external problems can affect the internal. As therapists, these considerations have helped us to think more about how dominant ideas or the rules that regulate our lives – that are often taken for granted – have come to be seen as 'the truth'.

We would like to share here one final example of how another dominant idea has strongly impacted on us – that is, that the relationship between the therapist and the person they are consulting with is the key to therapeutic change.

This was an idea that we were both very attracted to when we first started work as therapists. We were attracted to it as this notion suggests that, if a therapist is modelling a relationship which is experienced as genuine, accepting, and understanding, then changes will occur for the person who is consulting with them. It is through experiencing a relationship that is rich with these principles that people will be able to grow to their 'potential' or 'self-actualise'.

Again, narrative therapy and poststructuralist thought have been very useful in helping us to explore the potential effects of these assumptions on us and others.

First, by bringing these theories into the consulting room, we acknowledge that we were also subtly attempting to bring them into people's lives. However, these ideas may not have meant anything to the people we were consulting with. If they did, the way people experienced these concepts might have been totally different to the ways we were modelling them.

Secondly, we also assumed that the notion of 'self-actualisation' was valid or important to others when, in many cultures, self-actualisation or even notions of the self and the individual, have little meaning. We were using these ideas to guide our participation in counselling relationships, instead of learning what would work for the person seeking therapy.

Another reason we have reappraised these ideas about the 'client-therapist relationship' being 'the key' to constructive changes is that it can put too much emphasis on this relationship. Using the therapeutic partnership as the primary means to facilitate growth for a person, can reduce the importance of other relationships. It is not that we do not see our relationships with people as having a powerful impact in their lives, and theirs on ours. It's just that we believe there are many more relationships people have that, when unpacked, can support people in their journeys. It is our belief that putting too much importance on the therapeutic relationship can subtly reduce people's abilities to guide their lives and can reinforce the internalisation of problems.

We believe that people's expertise has been learned in, and is influenced by, their relationships outside of the therapy room. As a consequence, we are curious about these relationships and try to learn how they have been enriching, instead of focusing on providing a relationship that can be modelled or used outside of therapy. Our hope is that, by Doing this, we can further explore which people and what relationships support the problems, as well as the preferences in a person's life. By de-centering ourselves as the experts on what constitutes a healthy relationship, we can reduce the possibility of people viewing themselves as damaged or having a problem that stops them from entering into relationships. Instead, how the problems in a person's life are affecting their relationships can be explored.

We have come to like the idea of asserting ourselves to support our personal rights, which we understand to be quite a different idea from being told by others what to do to manage our work and lives. We have come to view the former understandings of notions such as body language and assertiveness to be more along the lines of imposing our will on others, instead of standing up for our life values and hopes.

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