



# Narrative practice as an ethical position and the moral legitimacy of narrative therapy

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## Abstract

Narrative practice involves questioning and resisting dominant cultural truths in both its theory and practices. It may even function as a form of activism. This paper attempts to raise questions about the good of such an activism and the moral legitimacy of practitioners engaging the people who consult them in cultural resistance. I shall attempt to extract hints of an implicit ethical position in narrative practice, and point to a moral rationality for raising questions about the legitimacy of acts of cultural resistance, and suggest some possible implications of such an enquiry. This draws on the ideas of moral philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre.

**Key words:** *narrative practice, therapy, morality, ethics, MacIntyre*

## What are we doing, and is it good?

Relations of power, normalising judgement and pathologisation are considered highly questionable processes, and strategies to subvert or resist such processes are explicitly part of narrative practice (White, 2011, pp. 3–26). Michael White and David Epston (1990, pp. 66, 75) use the term ‘counter-practices’ to describe aspects of the approach, and Michael Guilfoyle (2005) has considered narrative practice a therapy of resistance. White (2011) describes psychotherapy as a major site for the reproduction of valorised cultural ideals, whose shadow versions may encourage separation, disengagement, and isolation (White, 2011, p. 51). The idea that therapy should be culturally and politically neutral, he says, makes it more likely that it reproduces various forms of inequality and marginalises knowledges other than those of the expert disciplines. He suggests that therapists should question their own practices in ways that open up possibilities of not being wholly complicit in such reproduction, of subverting hierarchies of knowledge, of honouring acts of resistance to self-governance, of resisting a pathologisation of people’s lives and knowledges that subtracts from their sense of agency, and makes the social, historical, and political context of suffering invisible (White, 2011, pp. 53–54, 64–66).

But what makes it legitimate to resist such aspects of our culture? And to what end? Some kind of ethical position seems implicit in this resistance, but exactly what it is, is unclear. So too is the issue of legitimacy of narrative practitioners promoting such resistance. When people consult a therapist, they probably don’t do so because they want to challenge dominant aspects of their culture. On what grounds may a narrative practitioner enrol such a (likely desperate and confused) person in a practice of cultural resistance (Guilfoyle, 2005)?

White and Epston (1990) apply Michel Foucault’s analyses of subjectivity and power in modern society to therapeutic practices. This is, perhaps, a clue to why an ethical position is not explicit in narrative practice. Foucault (1980, pp. 64–65) was generally not interested in supplying any account of the right way to live, or attempt to determine what is just and good. The purpose was not to provide some new notion of what was right or true, but to provide analytical tools for challenging any claims to Truth with regard to human nature, in order to prevent any conceptual framework from attaining total dominance. This is echoed in *Narrative means to therapeutic ends* (White & Epston, 1990, pp. 26–27), when White & Epston write that this form of critique is not based on any alternative claim to Truth, but works by means of exposing the process whereby Truth is manufactured, and the conflicts involved in gaining such a status. As such, Foucault’s work is, as he also referred to it himself, a set of tools or ‘gadgets’ anyone can use (Foucault, 1980, p. 65). Foucault provided two tactics for resisting the

effects of power: 1) Subverting or reversing power in the specific context of its exercise, that is counter-tactics such as making power visible or refusing, and 2) ethical self-formation, meaning that the subject uses the technologies of power to produce results other than those intended by dominant notions of Truth (Thompson, 2003). The narrative practice of externalising the problem may be thought of as an example of the first strategy, as it involves an exposé of the tactics and agendas of subjectivation to a problem-saturated narrative, making the operations of power visible and more open for resistance. In a sense, narrative practice as a whole might be conceived of as an example of the second strategy, in that rather than simply exposing and attempting to refuse to be subject to psychotherapeutic discourse and practice and the normalizing judgements and pathologisation associated with it, narrative therapy uses the form and the position of psychotherapy to forge something other than what therapy already is. If we regard the practices of psychotherapy in general as closely related to modern power, and as involving the normalising judgement by the therapist, possessing a privileged knowledge of human nature and insight into the client, and promoting self-surveillance and self-discipline (Guilfoyle, 2001; White, 2011, pp. 23–26, 45–70), then we might also regard narrative practice as attempting to take over these technologies while subjecting them to a very different understanding of the person and the purpose of therapy. As such, narrative practice attempts to infuse psychotherapy with new meanings, deploying it to promote different ends – the privileging of knowledges and subjectivities outside of, or at least significantly divergent from, the dominant norms of the self and normality, promoting a relational sense of self and intentional state understandings rather than internal state understandings (White, 2002; White, 2007, pp. 25–26, 100–104, 137–139; White, 2011, p. 41; White & Epston, 1990, pp. 30–32). To the extent that the narrative practitioner achieves this, the therapy becomes a kind of political or moral activism, working from within the practices associated with dominant cultural truths (Monk & Gehart, 2003; Sutherland, 2007; White, 2011, pp. 49–54; White & Epston, 1990, p. 29).

Why do this? There must be some implicit prior notion of what is good and just? Why should we promote resistance to these dominant cultural truths? Why is it better to pursue a life based on notions of life outside of, or less dominated by, these truths? My own answer would be, because there are notions of life that are dear to me, that I hold to be good, that I want to pursue. Those notions conflict with dominant ideas about rationality and individuality. This sounds similar to White’s idea about ‘preferred’ identities and stories, but what does it mean that something is what someone ‘prefers’? And how can we know that whatever someone prefers is also what is good for them? Or good for the community they are part of? Where do preferences come from? And doesn’t the idea of releasing

people from the grip of dominant truths to pursue their own desires for their lives sound very much like the great myth of the Enlightenment, the great myth of liberal individualism: The individual who thinks for himself and casts off the oppression of society's traditions and institutions. Is narrative practice challenging liberal individualism, or radicalising it?

One way of exploring an implicit ethical position in narrative practice is to try to extract one from its theoretical sources, and from the practices themselves. A kind of deconstruction of narrative practice in the sense of the absent but implicit.

## *Theoretical sources*

I shall not attempt to cover all the sources for the theoretical base of narrative practice. I hope it will suffice to claim that, common to Foucault (1980), Bruner (1986), Geertz (1973), and Vygotsky (1986), is the idea that the 'psychology' of the individual person is a product of a meaning-making process that is essentially collective, historically situated, and significantly linguistic/narrative. These influences rule out any idea that the person could be understood to be self-contained and as possessing an inherent, universal nature, independent of the cultural context. But this also implies that the person is in fact taken to have a certain character. To be a person is to be part of a culture, and to be immersed in collective processes of meaning-making that produce the particularities of life and individuality for the specific individual: a relational self. If this is (at least implicitly) taken to be true in narrative practice, then narrative practice will want to resist the dominant order of society to the extent that this order claims, and depends upon, an understanding of the person that conflicts with this cultural, relational idea of the person. Therefore notions of self-contained individualism and proscriptions for the ideal, normal life based on an historically and culturally independent human nature, become targets for critique in narrative practice. If people are in fact not self-contained individuals, ruled by eternal human nature, then one might imagine how pretending to be so could be problematic. Is this, perhaps, part of an implicit ethical position in narrative practice? That the processes of individualisation and normalisation should be questioned and resisted because they are hiding their own social and cultural nature, and thereby producing a very paradoxical notion of self: a self that is produced socially but claims not to be, and therefore prevented from understanding itself. And perhaps also that individualisation and normalisation should be questioned and resisted to the extent that they mystify and disrupt those contexts on which a relational self would depend? This would be a claim that dominant notions of what it is to be a person are damaging to people.

A way in which dominant cultural truths may be damaging to people is if these truths marginalise or silence alternative meaning-making resources. White suggests that mainstream psychotherapy may do just that, as it is built around theories of what it is to be a person that reflect and support dominant cultural truths: that we are distinct individuals, contained within ourselves, and that problems reflect inner processes or facts about our personalities, and that we should strive to discover and liberate our true selves (White, 1997, pp. 220–231; White, 2011, pp. 25, 65). These truths are supported by the authority of expert disciplines that affect us through a normalising mechanism of power that incites us to strive to be 'normal' or 'authentic'. This is potentially damaging because the de-legitimisation and marginalisation of other cultural understandings reduces the meaning-making resources, and forms of living, available to people. Narrative therapy as resisting such a single-storied account of life in favour of facilitating access to a wider repertoire of stories and cultural resources, seems very pragmatic. But at the same time, White (1995) points out that this should not be taken to mean that it is simply a matter of access to other stories, or that all stories are equally valid. He claims that the relative value of available stories is evaluated with reference to a value system, and that moral relativism is out of the question. It is not, however, a system of values based on universals or dominant norms (White, 1995; White, 2011, pp. 3–4, 66–68).

Additionally, White points to ways in which dominant ideals of personhood, disseminated through expert knowledges, may be involved in producing the problems for which people seek therapy. An example of this may be experiences of personal failure as a consequence of not living up to standards of normality or authenticity.

## *Extracting from the practices*

What might be implicit in the very methods of narrative practice that point to an ethical position? Externalising conversations serve to conceptually objectify the problem and separate it from the person. This may in part be an example of a general strategy in psychotherapy: to speak of the problem in a new way that opens up space for new meaning-making. As such, it is functionally equivalent to practices of redefinition in other therapies (MacLeod, 1997, p. 88). Various psychotherapies employ different ideas about how people function, and different stories about life. They have a particular way of conceptualising people and their problems. But psychotherapies generally specify an internal space of inner processes and objects that control people – versions of 'the self-contained individual' (Guilfoyle, 2001). Externalisation explicitly counters this, and seeks to describe the problem in relational and political terms,

and thus refers to social life rather than inner life (MacLeod, 1997, pp. 89–92). This is consistent with the idea of a relational self, previously described.

Practices of re-membering and the use of outsider witnesses further support such a characterisation of narrative practice: The self (to be a person) is relational, and the source of its contents and structure is the social realm. It must refer to relationships, not an inner core to be revealed. This may be expected to have moral implications: to be a person is to pursue relationships and belong to a community. Practices that support relationships and communities would be expected to be of great significance to acquiring and maintaining a particular sense of self. Would this imply that practices directed at a person's sense of self ought to be closely related to concerns about what is good and bad for that person's relationships and community?

Re-authoring conversations are concerned with developing implicit or alternative plots in a person's life. There is a tension within every story because lived experience can always support more than one story, and because our lives will always be subject to more than just one narrative repertoire or discourse, as well as because any description must implicitly contain the opposite, and complementary, poles of the conceptual distinctions upon which it relies. Narrative practice literature tends to distinguish between the dominant story and counter-plots, associated with subjugated or alternative knowledges. These other stories, knowledges or moral frameworks are usually identified as being 'preferred' to the dominant story. But we can hardly consider these alternative knowledges, the categories of self and the lifestyle they proscribe to be exempt from, relations of power. They are simply other cultural resources (MacLeod, 2005) available to the person, and cannot be assumed to be rooted in some kind of authentic self, located within the person. An example might be a religious conceptual and moral framework. It has happened on more than one occasion that a religious conceptual framework was brought to bear on the life of a person with whom I have engaged in externalising and re-authoring conversations. Such a discourse did not appear in the person's life because of those conversations with me. They already played a part in the person's life. But the deconstructive practices of those conversations allowed a shift in the salience and relative influence of religious discourse, and as such I have played a part in promoting a particular religious conceptual and moral framework in that person's life. Is this good? In all the cases I have been involved in of this kind, the person concerned indeed 'preferred' the self and lifestyle of the particular religious framework. In all cases (so far) it did have the effect of reducing the problems for which they had consulted me, but these discourses are certainly also associated with their own relations of power and subject the person to authority (for example the authority of the Bible or religious elders).

Some people may prefer some kind of alternative cultural resource to that which is presently dominant, but others might prefer to be subject to dominant knowledges – such as mainstream psychiatric discourse. Is this simply a matter of individual preference? What if the context of a person's life does not support whatever that person prefers? How does the narrative practitioner determine whether the preferred lifestyle that is empowered is morally acceptable? Might a person not prefer a lifestyle that the narrative practitioner should have reason to object to, and might not want to empower (Hamilton, 2013)? Are values and preferences arbitrary whims of individuals?

### *What we are and what to do*

In raising the question of what kinds of outcome therapeutic practices should be producing, White (2011) asks whether it is our role to be accomplices in modern power and in promoting single-storied conceptions of life, or to sponsor diversity, complexity and to 'exoticise' the domestic (p. 43). White's position on this seems clear enough. But why should diversity be good for people? Why is it good to thwart the practices of social control in our society? Are those practices not there for a reason? On Foucault's analysis, modern power to a significant extent replaces certain traditional forms of power, including practices of explicit force, violence, and execution. Rather than controlling bodies by way of force, pain and death, bodies came to be controlled by way of the soul – by way of discipline and normalisation. This did not reduce the grip of power, but resulted in a pervasive but 'softer' form of power. For White (1995; 2011) to imply that diversity is good perhaps makes sense pragmatically. But surely, not any lifestyle can be considered good, whether it is the immediate good for the person consulting me (as in the sense of what that person may 'prefer'), or in the sense of the good of the community to which that person belongs (Hamilton, 2013). What is our legitimate claim to be contributing to the good of the community and wider society that supports our practices?

If one cannot stand outside of culture and discourse, then resistance to some cultural practices should imply the positioning of the one resisting within some other discourse (Guilfoyle, 2005, p. 117; Guilfoyle, 2012). The idea that a critique of the dominant order that does not support some other social order could be possible seems paradoxical. Can narrative practice encourage resistance to individualising and normalising practices without at least implicitly positioning itself within an alternative discourse? The presence of alternative discourses in acts of resistance by persons consulting narrative practitioners is assumed in narrative practice – this is the underlying assumption of the concepts of unique outcomes and the absent



but implicit. As previously mentioned, narrative practices presuppose certain things: that the self is relational and therefore depends on a community and a culture, and narrative practice also seems to entail that people have preferences that are worthy of respect, that people should not be treated as objects of authoritative knowledge and intervention, and that diversity and collaboration is good (White, 2007, pp. 266–272; White, 2011, pp. 3–70). A certain arbitrariness seems to attach itself to the notions of preference and diversity.

Foucault apparently tried to avoid performing critique in favour of any particular movement or agenda. He did not want to put some other claim to truth or the right way to live in place of those that he questioned. He intended his 'work' to be tools that others might take up and put to uses of their own. He seemed to desire anonymity and a kind of non-position for himself (Heede, 2012). There may be reason to question whether the tools he provided in no way imply a particular use. But accepting for now the neutrality of the tool-maker, there is still the issue of the tool user. The tool-maker may have no stake in the use of his tools, but the user does. White and Epston (1990) have taken up the counter-strategies of Foucault and put them to a particular use: the deconstruction and resistance to certain aspects of psychotherapy. I sit before a particular person, inhabiting a particular life in which he or she, and others too, have a stake. And this person asks for my help. Just as we may think that the therapist ought to be accountable for his uses of power, ought not also the narrative practitioner be accountable for his acts of resistance and subversion (Guilfoyle, 2005 pp. 117-119)?

We are caught up in relations of power, and it is this power that produces 'who we are'. We might think of Foucault's tools as instruments that allow us to loosen, or even cut, some of those bonds. To refuse the identities into which we are drafted. But if it is indeed discourse and power that makes us, then the alternative to our bonds is the abyss. White and Epston (1990) refer to the ideas of Clifford Geertz, and he precisely defines culture as that web of symbolic meanings in which we are suspended (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). To cut the bonds is to fall into the abyss of meaninglessness and nothingness, or to be caught in other bonds (Guilfoyle, 2012, pp. 635, 638). Foucault saw the insurrection of subjugated knowledges as a sign that power has been successfully thwarted (White & Epston, 1990, p. 26). He may not have cared what those knowledges were, but can we afford not to care? Do the people consulting us not care? Those alternative knowledges could be anything? It seems clear enough that narrative therapy does not strive to send people into the abyss. The deconstruction of dominant knowledges and stories always involves the thickening of other knowledges and stories, and taking up a position on the problem from within another discourse. So the narrative therapist makes a choice not to simply cut the bonds, but to facilitate being caught in others.

What we can do then, is consider whether there may be alternative sources of guidance in how to live than normative judgements of naturalness, normality or authenticity.

Foucault pointed to certain classical notions of ethics that he described as aesthetic rather than normalizing (Foucault, 1991, pp. 340–372). A possible alternative to being subject to normalization is to be subject to concerns about the aesthetic value of one's life. The technologies of the self pre-date modern power, and so may be put to other uses than those of normalising. Foucault saw this kind of aesthetic ethical practice as an individual choice (Foucault, 1991, p. 361). Foucault seems to provide the tools of resistance, but remains silent on what they should be used to promote. Perhaps we are at the limits of what Foucault can help us to do? His tools may create windows, but tell us nothing of how to evaluate what we see through them. He may open up new spaces, but refuses to provide anything with which to fill them.

White (2011, pp. 66–68) argues that moral relativism is not an acceptable route for narrative practice, as it attributes moral agency to the individual, just as foundationalism does. As such, the social structures associated with privilege and moral positions may still be overlooked. He suggests an ethic of accountability based on dialogue between people in different positions within society. Still, it is not clear what the moral framework for such an accountability should be? How are we to determine – even in such a dialogue that is conscious of context – what is just and right? What kind of moral thinking and character is necessary to want to, and be able to, enter into such dialogue?

Were ethics or morality always conceived of as arbitrary and ethical life a personal choice? Moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (2007) suggests that neither was the case. On his analysis, morality only became arbitrary when pre-modern moral thought was rejected by Enlightenment philosophy, and the language of morality as a consequence became incomprehensible. Rather than deconstructing modern forms of social control from within, he analyses them historically by reference to a moral framework outside of modern moral thought. He tries to show that a version of Aristotelian virtue ethics provides a conceptual framework for understanding the predicament of modern moral thought as well as the origin of that predicament. He attempts to show that Aristotelian virtue ethics provided a rational and consistent moral framework in which morality was indeed not arbitrary, a matter of preference, nor a set of universal truths. In MacIntyre's version, this is a moral framework connected to a conception of the person as historically, socially and narratively constituted (MacIntyre, 2007, pp. 204–225) – a kind of relational self:

Individuals [in pre-modern societies] inherit a particular space within an interlocking set of social relationships; lacking that space, they are nobody, or at best a stranger or an outcast (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 33–34)

## MacIntyrean virtue ethics

Pre-modern moral thought, MacIntyre argues, was based on the idea that to be a person is to have a social function within a community with a particular lifestyle, according to a particular conception of the kind of story that the life of a human being is. To act morally is to act according to one's social function, which must include an understanding of 1) what one is, 2) what the telos (purpose) of one such as one self is, and 3) the means by which one may progress from what one is towards one's telos. The means here are the moral prescriptions or virtues. Knowing what is a virtue involves determining whether some learned disposition, attitude or activity generally contributes to attaining good. For a disposition to be a proper virtue, it must serve as a means for attaining four kinds of good: 1) Giving access to experiencing and promoting the goods internal to the particular practice to which it relates, such as playing chess well, or performing one's social function (being a king, a mother, etc.) with excellence, 2) promoting that which is good for a person living the kind of life that this person is living, where life is understood to be a narrative unity with a beginning, a middle, and an end – a climax or telos towards which it is moving, 3) promoting that which is good for the community to which that person belongs, and 4) promoting that which is good for a human being in general according to the cultural/religious/moral tradition to which the person belongs. The fatal mistake of Enlightenment philosophy was to conceptually distinguish between person and social function, and as a consequence reject the notion of a telos for human life. The notion of 'what one is' and a memory of the moral prescriptions were retained, but without a telos related to a specific social context, there was no choice but to attempt to correlate morality with 'what one is' – something that would make no sense within the complete framework. This led to a series of (failed, on MacIntyre's account) attempts to locate the grounds for morality in human nature or universal rules, resulting at last in the perception of morality as being indeed without grounds at all. (MacIntyre, 2007) For Aristotle, this idea of morality was connected to a biological theory of human nature. Such a concept is hardly acceptable in the context of post-structural narrative practice. MacIntyre too sees this as a problematic element in Aristotle, and he proposes that the point of reference for a telos and an understanding of what is good should not be Aristotle's biological theory, but cultural traditions. That it is the various traditions in a society which provide us with fundamental ideas about how to live and the purpose of life.

A consequence of this analysis is that ideas that morality is arbitrary or simply power is a product of Enlightenment philosophy, and not simply what morality has always been taken to be. This also implies that power and authority need not be the same thing. The kind of morality MacIntyre speaks of is, in a sense, objective. It sets up rational moral arguments that

are open to examination. If one can set up such an argument as to what another person ought to do, and that person can examine the moral grounds for this argument and find it to be correctly argued, then one may be said to speak with authority. But this does not involve any manipulative practice or attempt to control the other – it is not power. For a therapist to influence the actions of a client by means of reference to privileged knowledge and the sheer weight of his words being positioned as expert is power. For a therapist to understand the relevant moral framework pertaining to his client to some degree, and to engage in moral argument with them that is consistent and valid within that framework and positions them correctly, is to exercise a degree of moral authority within that framework, without exercising therapeutic power.

MacIntyre's critique of moral philosophy and his use of a modified Aristotelian virtue ethics as an alternative conceptual framework to modern liberal individualist moral thought, may provide narrative practice with a thinking tool or a rationality for conceptualising its own moral position and examining the legitimacy of its acts of resistance.

In MacIntyre's (2007, pp. 204–225) account of an Aristotelian moral framework, the task in life is to come to understand the role into which one has been drafted within a community, a story, and a tradition, and to act to promote the goods relevant to that role or space. Goods that must always be the good for one self as well as one's community. Or alternatively to attempt to reject that space for some other space. This notion of space, role or social function within a community and a tradition may be thought of as alternative concepts to those of identity and preference, which are common in narrative practice. This may underscore efforts to ground matters of 'preference' in an understanding of the place and social functions of the person in therapy, and the community and tradition these belong to:

For the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships. The possession of an historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide.

MacIntyre, 2007, p. 221.

## Implications

Might narrative practice be seen as therapy related to a particular moral position? A position that seeks to undermine liberal individualism, normalising judgement and scientific ideas about human nature, and promote a relational self, as well as the conditions for such as self, namely an understanding of one's place within a social and moral order, and the stories we are part of? Might narrative practice not only be concerned with how to resist or escape certain positions or identities, but

also with examining what it means to live well and belong to something? Perhaps MacIntyre's ideas about the meaning and context of morality could lend a framework for contextualising a moral position in narrative practice? This could be an ethic based on notions of personhood that gives priority to issues of community, tradition and the inseparability of the good of the individual and that of the community to which he/she belongs. It would involve the narrative practitioner asking himself questions about what community he belongs to, what history it is that defines him/her, what his/her place and telos is, what the good of his/her community is, what personal qualities and attitudes contribute to such good. MacIntyre offers a moral rationality that presupposes a relational and narrative conception of the person, and that is not based on universal truths about life or normalisation. It may provide us with a moral rationality that releases us from moral arbitrariness or reduction to power. This would perhaps provide a means of determining the proper use of the tools Foucault has given us. What is to be resisted, and in favour of what? It may even be that Foucault's ideas could relate to such a kind of morality in a meaningful way (Levy, 2004).

We may regard the notion of a relational self as belonging to a particular tradition of thought – the tradition to which we belong as narrative practitioners. What could this tradition have to say about the fundamental good for human beings? What might ground an ethic of the relational self? Perhaps something like what Harré (1998) suggests:

... quite particular moral order must be in place. There could be no discourse, no conversation at all, unless there were in place all sorts of practices in which certain reciprocal grantings of rights were immanent.  
(p. 19).

But how do we halt the slide [...] that would leave us with a wholly contextual account of evil? I confess I have no easy solution to this conundrum, but I believe it lies somewhere in the conditions necessary for there to be language at all.  
(p. 168).

Perhaps this provides a sense of moral legitimacy of resistance to practices that exclude and silence the voices of others, or invites us to treat people as targets of practices of manipulation and persuasion. Perhaps the 'ethical substance', to use Foucault's terms (1991, p. 353), for an ethic of narrative practice is power, particularly power that excludes and silences.

Such a moral rationality will also set limits for morally legitimate resistance and deconstruction. As narrative practitioners,

we have a function and a place within a particular social order, a community with a history that makes us who we are (Guilfoyle, 2005). To act in ways that denies or hurts that community and that history, may be to pursue interests that are not in concordance with the good of the community that makes us who we are. For the narrative practitioner, this community includes psychotherapy as a broad area of practice and tradition in our society and the actual organisations or institutions in which we are employed. This may well generate moral dilemmas, because it puts us at the heart of those elements and processes in our culture that narrative practice opposes. The power associated with scientificity that our tradition of thought critiques plays an historical and current role in providing 'therapists' with a particular status and legitimacy (Foucault, 1988, p. 275–278; Foucault, 1980, p. 82–85; MacLeod, 1997, pp. 14–17, 19–20) – a status that narrative practitioners depend on.

The idea that diversity is good, because it provides a range of stories and forms of living, could perhaps be understood in relation to an ecological metaphor: genetic diversity increases the likelihood of a species being able to adapt to changing conditions. MacIntyre's understanding of the context of human life and morality sets up limitations on this diversity, however. Diversity ceases to be good, if a particular divergent lifestyle is damaging to the common good of the relevant community, in relation to its particular way of life. But this is a kind of questioning of diversity that does not relate to ideas about normality in the sense of an essence of human nature, a universal rule or a statistical norm. MacIntyre's ideas seem to resonate with narrative practice in some regards. In other ways they are at odds with it. The usefulness of MacIntyre's ideas perhaps lies in providing a different way of thinking about moral problems. A rationality to frame an enquiry into how narrative practice is positioned in a community and a moral landscape, and provide us with questions to ask ourselves about the wider effects of resisting dominant culture with regards to both the lives of those who consult us, as well as our own position within the world of psychotherapy and society. As such, rather than attempt to integrate MacIntyre into the theory of narrative practice, his ideas might serve as a conversational partner for the resisting, deconstructive mindset of the post-structural elements of narrative practice.

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