



*Witnessing and positioning:
Structuring narrative therapy
with
families and couples*

AUTHOR
JILL FREEDMAN

Evanston Family Therapy Center, Evanston, USA

Jill Freedman is the Director of the Evanston Family Therapy Center. With Gene Combs she is the author of 'Narrative Therapy: The social construction of preferred realities' (W.W. Norton).

In this paper, the author describes a way of structuring family therapy that fits with the narrative metaphor; creating space for stories to be understood, deconstructed and further developed. In this process, people move between positions of telling and witnessing. Family members engage in shared understanding and meaning making

Keywords: *Narrative therapy, positioning, outsider-witness, couple therapy, family therapy*

Key Points:

1. For narrative therapists, family therapy is a context where we can deconstruct problematic stories, tell and retell preferred stories, and witness family stories and individual stories of other family members.
2. A witnessing structure in which family members listen to another member tell his or her story can contribute to understanding and meaning making.
3. Through responding to questions we ask members in the witnessing position, they can contribute to thickening preferred stories.
4. If it is difficult for family members to listen and understand while witnessing, we can facilitate a particular position from which to listen, such as listening as one would to a friend.
5. If more distance would be helpful for people to really listen and understand, we can offer other options, such as using video so that the witnesses are actually hearing and seeing family members tell their stories at a later time.

Address for correspondence:

Evanston Family Therapy Center,
1212 1/2 Elmwood Ave, Evanston,
IL 60202 USA.

Phone: +1 847 866-7879.
narrativetherapy@sbcglobal.net

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INTRODUCTION

The narrative metaphor suggests that people make sense of their lives through stories (Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007; Duvall & Beres, 2011; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Madigan, 2011; White & Epston, 1990; White, 2007; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1994). Although each of us has a huge number of experiences, only a few of these become the stories that shape us and through which we shape our lives. Some of these stories are about individual people and others are about family and relationships. When couples or families come to therapy each person may have different stories that are prominent for them and that they think are most relevant; there may be some shared stories that different family members tell; and there may be similar stories that different family members tell but that they have made different meaning of, perhaps emphasizing different aspects of the same event or maybe understanding the same event in different ways.

Narrative therapists focus on rich story development—the telling and retelling of preferred stories. Rather than a single-storied life we are interested in helping people develop multiple stories. Our focus is not on solving or eliminating problem stories. We are interested in multiple stories contributing to people's experience. Often when a problem story becomes a single strand of a multi-storied life, the problem looks quite different or becomes less significant and people have different options about how they relate to it.

Additionally, we think of our identities as both storied and relational (Combs & Freedman, 1999; Freedman & Combs, 2004; Hedtke & Winslade, 2004; White, 1989; White, 2007). We make ourselves up as we go along in relation to each other. So not only are the stories we tell ourselves important, but the stories we tell others about ourselves and our lives, and the stories others hear us tell, and the stories that they tell about us, are important because they shape our identities.

We think of family therapy as a context where we can deconstruct problematic stories, tell and retell preferred stories, and witness family stories and stories of other family members.

This process is not quite as simple as it sounds. One complication is that people often orient to therapy not as a place to tell and retell stories, but as a place in which a “neutral” third party will weigh in on different versions of a problem or advise people in terms of solutions or evaluate the situation to determine the “real problem” or ask questions to connect the problem with family history or teach communication skills.

We are up to something quite different.

A WITNESSING STRUCTURE

In order to accomplish the telling, retelling, and witnessing of stories, it is very useful to set up a structure. We can call this a *witnessing structure* (Freedman & Combs, 2004, 2008). As

one family member tells a story we ask the others to be in a reflecting or witnessing position to hear and understand the story as it is told by the first family member. We then ask those who have been acting as witnesses to contribute to the telling and meaning making of the story. We think of their contribution as a retelling that thickens and adds richness to the story. The original speaker becomes a witness to the retelling of the story that he or she has told. We may then ask questions to invite the family member who spoke originally to engage in a retelling of the retelling. Through this process family members gain understanding of each other's stories and engage in developing and thickening preferred stories.

INITIATING AND/OR NEGOTIATING A WITNESSING STRUCTURE

We can initiate this structure informally by beginning to engage in it or we can explicitly describe it and ask family members to join in. We usually begin informally with the therapist simply talking directly to one person and respectfully referring to the others in the third person. It is important to watch other family members to make sure that they are engaging in the process. If they seem not to be engaged or if they interrupt, it can be helpful to explain the process. We might say something such as, *Would it be okay if I talk to Bethany for a bit? Then I'll ask you some questions about our conversation. At another point each of you will also have some time to talk and I'll ask everyone else to listen.* If family members continue to interrupt or indicate by their actions that they disagree it can be helpful to reassure them about how we are listening by saying something like, ***I am guessing that your experience of this and what you think is most important to talk about may be different than what Bethany is describing. I understand that family members often have different understandings of the same events. I am keeping that in mind and I will make sure there is time for us to listen to what you think is most important, too.***

If even after this kind of reassurance family members continue to interrupt or state their disagreements we may say something like, *Have you had a conversation already about this? Did it go this way with each of you saying how you disagree and what you think? Was it helpful? Is it okay if we try something different?* These questions pave the way for explicitly negotiating the witnessing structure.

We may say, *In our experience when people talk directly to each other about something problematic, what they are listening for is how they disagree or what they want to say to counter what is being said. It is extremely hard to really listen and understand when your attention is on what you want to say next or on how someone is wrong or how they are leaving something out. We would like to create a space where you can really listen to each other. Would that be okay?*

Our questions—*Is it okay if we try something different?* and *Would that be okay?*—are real questions. On occasions people have told us that they have not spoken at all about something and that they were waiting until they came to therapy to say something to other family members, which they would like to do directly. We are negotiable about the structure. Usually though, we find the witnessing structure extremely helpful and most families and couples are happy to join in with this kind of conversation.

UNPACKING PROBLEM STORIES AND IDENTITIES

Once we have set up the structure our task is to ask questions that will eventually help family members move into the development of preferred stories. In order to be able to do this it is usually important to have some understanding of the problem and its effects. Often it is very meaningful for people to have the experience of other family members listening to and understanding what they find problematic. As we listen we can ask questions to deconstruct or unpack the problematic story. Through deconstruction we hope to expose how the problem was constructed. We are interested in deconstruction to the extent that we can develop gaps that allow people to see beyond the problems to other events that may be openings to preferred stories and so that problems do not take over people's identities. One very basic practice of deconstruction is externalizing. Through externalizing conversations we unpack problem identities that are constructed through psychological and linguistic practices that identify people as problems (Epston, 1993; White, 1988/1989; Russell & Carey, 2004).

For example, a family came to therapy because in their words, Sean, the 7-year-old was "fearful." His father had worries that a boy at the end of first grade who was afraid to spend the night at a friend's house, clung to his parents' legs at the top of the sledding hill as the other kids reveled in the snow, and would not go on a class field trip unless one of his parents went along, was likely to be made fun of by the other kids and that that was just the beginning of things that Sean deprived himself of.

At the beginning of my conversation with Sean he didn't answer verbally but he did nod for yes and shake his head for no. In this way we determined that he agreed with his parents that the fears were a problem and that they were even responsible for denying him a voice in the conversation with me. When I asked Sean if the fear talked to him he shook his head no. When I asked if it showed him pictures, first he shook his head again but then stopped and said, "Sometimes."

"Wait a minute. I thought I heard something. Was that you Sean?" I asked.

"Uh huh," he said.

"That was you again?" I asked.

Sean nodded.

"And the fears have kept you from speaking, but you spoke anyway. Is that right?" I asked.

Sean nodded again.

"Did you use your bravery to speak?"

Sean nodded.

"Well, I want to find out more about that, and I also want to know about the pictures the fears show you. We'll come back to the pictures. Can I ask you more about the bravery first?"

This was a segment of an externalizing conversation in which we talked about the fears as being separate from Sean. We deconstructed Sean's identity as fearful. Rather than addressing him as a fearful boy, we addressed Sean as a boy with a relationship with fear. This helped create a gap through which we could see beyond the fear to moments of bravery.

As we have deconstructing conversations such as this we are helping the person who may have been thought of as problematic to recognize his or her relationship with the problem, which also implies that he or she has choices about how to relate to it. We are also offering the people in the witnessing position the opportunity to see the problem as separate from their family member. This new view may help family members join in responding to the problem and it may help them recognize when the problem is not in play. In this example, their recognition can help keep the spark of new story (that Sean has a relationship with fears but can use his bravery to do things anyway) alive and growing.

As we engage in these conversations it is important that we keep some of our attention on the family members in the witnessing position so that we can have some impression about how they are taking the conversation. The nonverbal expressions we see may alert us to ask more about something before proceeding to a conversation with the witnesses or to choose which of the witnesses we might want to address first.

After the brief conversation with Sean I turned to Maureen, Sean's mother and said,

"We talked about the fearfulness but not the bravery. Did you know about Sam's bravery before...? Do you think it might have been at play in some of the events we discussed where we recognized the fears?"

"I hadn't thought about this before," she said, "but maybe just being willing to go on the field trips and go to the sledding hill took bravery. Maybe Sean has been brave all along."

"Do you think so?" I asked.

"Maybe so," she answered.

During both parts of this conversation I was aware both of who I was talking to and of the family members who were listening. My allegiance is always to preferred stories. I want to make sure to support people in describing the problems they experience and their effects, while also thinking about the questions I can ask that will give both the person answering and those witnessing the opportunity either to understand the problem in new ways that offer more possibilities or to first glimpse and then develop preferred stories.

After hearing Maureen's comments about Sean and his bravery I turned back to Sean and said,

"What's it like to hear your mom talk about your bravery?"

He nodded.

"Would you say that's a good thing or a not so good thing?"

"Good," he said.

"Do you think it will help you use your bravery to know that your mom recognizes it?"

He nodded.

"Do you think your dad recognizes your bravery too?"

Sean nodded again.

I turned to Dan, Sean's father. "Dan, we've talked about how it takes some bravery for Sean to speak and to even go places that the fear makes hard for him. Is this something you knew

or is it new to hear about this?"

"It's new," he said. "I guess I've been focused on the bigger actions and I still think those are important."

"Is it good to know that even if the fear has stopped Sean from bigger actions, he's still using his bravery?"

"Yeah I guess it's good."

"Why is it good?"

"It gives me hope."

"So you are hoping he can build on that bravery... use it more? Is that right?"

"Yeah. I think so."

The witnessing structure, which encourages people to *listen*, rather than join in talking, helps create space for new stories. Which questions we ask, especially when we turn to someone who has been in a witnessing position, are crucial. Asking, *Do you agree with what was just said?* or *What were you thinking as Mary was talking?* may be useful at times but at other times questions as broad as these can completely negate what we could have accomplished with the witnessing structure. If what we are interested in is the telling and retelling of preferred stories, it may be much more useful to choose a unique outcome—something that would not be predicted by the problematic story—that emerged in the conversation and ask questions about it, both to make sure that it is witnessed and not forgotten, and to offer the possibility of thickening it through more conversation about it.

We can interview one family member serving as a witness about what he or she heard and then go back to the original family member for reflections on what the witness said or we can ask questions of many family members serving as witnesses before asking the original family member for reflections on what the witnesses have contributed. We are guided by what we think will be most useful in rich story development—the telling and retelling of preferred stories. We are quite influential in setting up this process and in the questions we ask but family members are at the center. We ask about what they want to talk about and invite them to evaluate the usefulness of our conversation.

POSITIONING THE WITNESSES

In almost all therapy conversations with more than one person I use a witnessing structure. But sometimes it seems that although family members are quiet when one of them speaks, they don't really listen to each other. They simply wait for their turn. In those situations, it is unlikely that the conversation will be useful. People are simply repeating what they have said in previous conversations. If these conversations had been helpful, they probably would not have sought therapy.

When this occurs I've found it very helpful to talk with people about listening in a different way. I might give the example of my partner at times saying, *I wish you would listen to me right now the way you listen to someone who comes to you for therapy!* I often talk with the family about how we listen differently depending upon our role or upon the context, but that these positions are available to us at other times. Then I negotiate a particular position with family members from which to listen. We can set up this position very quickly, we can spend a whole

therapy conversation setting this up, or it can be something that family members work on between times. There are a couple of considerations in how much time we spend setting up a witnessing position. Of course, it is important that we take the time required to make sure that the position is meaningful and that the witness or witnesses can access the position experientially—that they can truly listen from inside a particular position. It is also important that we don't take so much time that the family members who have come for help go away wondering how what we've talked about relates to their concerns.

WITNESSING AS A FRIEND

There are many positions that are possible. We may directly suggest a position or negotiate one with family members. A position that I have used often is that of a friend. First we have a brief discussion of how we listen to a friend. This conversation may include being in touch with how we want the best for our friends, how we strive not to judge, how we stay in touch with what is important to them, how the listening is about them, not us, and so on. We may talk about a particular friendship in which they have experienced themselves as supportive and understanding.

I have found this position helpful in many contexts. For an example I will describe my work with a family in which the mother and father discovered drugs hidden in their son's room. The parents' initial response was extremely critical and punishing. The son's only response was to accuse them of betraying all trust by going through his private things. By the time this family came to therapy they were barely speaking to each other and the only agreement they had reached was in their description of the parent-child relationship as hostile. I negotiated with Frank and Julia, the parents, to listen to their son, Eric, from a position of friendship. I assured them that later, when I interviewed them and it was Eric's turn to listen, they would have a chance to talk about their parental concerns. They agreed to listen to my conversation with Eric as they would listen to a friend—trying to understand, wanting to be supportive, staying in touch with what Eric cared about and did outside of this new discovery.

In this atmosphere, Eric, after talking about the betrayal he felt about his room being searched, talked about the drug use, including his confusion about whether it was a problem, and his acknowledgement about what it would be like for parents to discover hidden drugs. From the position of friendship, Frank and Julia could show that they understood how Eric became involved in taking drugs and what the attraction was. They also raised some questions about possible effects and consequences, which Eric acknowledged in his response to their reflections. When I switched and interviewed Frank and Julia while Eric listened as a friend, Julia described the guilt she felt about having gone through Eric's things. She was able to explain her motivation in doing that as she saw her son change before her eyes. Speaking as a friend, Eric could understand why his mother searched his room and to connect with her concerns as a parent.

These were not easy conversations. I had to remind all three family members, repeatedly, about the positions they had agreed to, from time to time interrupting and saying something such as, *Listening as a friend, Eric, what do you think Julia was caring about*

in searching your room? Also, these initial conversations did not resolve the problems that the family members struggled with in relation to drug use. However all three participants agreed that they were useful. Eric said that his parents' understanding made it much more likely that he would talk with them. He was surprised that he found himself talking about his own misgivings and they did not jump on that as the whole truth. Frank said that he felt reassured that Eric was thinking about these things and was not completely taken over by drugs. Julia said that she was most happy that it felt like they could work together. They did continue to work together both in therapy and in their own conversations at home.

OTHER WITNESSING POSITIONS

Witnessing as inspired by a particular person

Rather than a general category, such as "friend," we can collaborate with people to find a particular person as inspiration for a position. Michael White (2004) in his paper *Narrative practice, couple therapy and conflict dissolution* describes interviewing the person who will be in the witnessing position about someone from whom they have experienced significant acknowledgement, understanding, compassion, or acceptance. He describes asking questions to facilitate a conversation in which they specify this person's relational skills, ideas about life, purposes, and commitments. After such a carefully facilitated interview, the person can often step into that position.

Witnessing as though surrounded by a team

We can also ask people if there was a team surrounding them, helping them stay in a position of listening and understanding, who would be on the team. This might include people they are currently involved with, those from their past, as well as people no longer living, fictional characters, and public figures. Once the team members are named we can ask the witnesses what each of them would contribute. Would there be particular words that they would say or expressions on their faces? We can then ask the witnesses to imagine that these team members are there surrounding them as they listen and offer reflections.

Witnessing using the position of a different context

For some people, naming a different context in which they listen with patience, respect, and willingness to understand is a useful path to finding a witnessing position. Perhaps as part of a worship group or in the context of work a person might experience different ways of witnessing and understanding that could be useful in therapy conversations.

For all of these positions, helping people enter into experientially vivid stories of times they have been in the particular desired position is helpful. We are interested not just in going through different motions, but in people having different experiences of their family members' stories. To this end we may ask people to relate a story about a friendship in which they offered support and understanding. We might ask them how they were able to stay in the position of friendship and what it was like. Or we may ask why they would choose a particular person as a team member and what it was like to be with this person. We may ask

hypothetical questions about what they imagine they would be in touch with about themselves if the whole team were by their side.

Witnessing from the position of what is important

People often elevate being "right" over what is important. Sometimes asking, *Is it more important to be right or to understand each other?* can be useful. For example, I worked with a heterosexual couple in the process of divorcing. Caroline experienced herself as in the right because Al had had an affair during their marriage and had introduced the woman he was involved with to their children as though she was a co-worker. Their daughter was refusing to see Al, but he thought it was his right to see his daughter. He believed that Caroline was poisoning their relationship. It was very difficult to get Al and Caroline to listen to each other until we had a conversation about what was most important. Both of them agreed that what was most important was that their children do well. They also agreed that good relationships with both parents would be best for their children.

Listening from the position of wanting the best for their children, which included relationships with both parents, made our conversations much easier. Al and Caroline acknowledged that there were other issues between them, but they agreed that they could get to those later. What was most important in therapy was that they both wanted to be in the position of doing the best for their children.

Listening from the position of the relationship

With some couples, listening from the vantage point of "the relationship" can be helpful. This position requires listening not as an individual person, but as the relationship. Some people seem to find this easy to do. For others it is quite difficult. One couple who struggled with being in this position wrote a letter from the relationship to themselves as a way of helping themselves move into this position for the next time. I include the letter they wrote from their relationship as an example of the possibility of developing a witnessing position between therapy meetings:

Dear Margaret and Bill,

Sometimes I feel as if you are co-workers. By this I mean that sometimes it's as if you come together to accomplish some common goal but that there is not necessarily a personal bond between you. Like, as long as you get all the needed tasks done then you are on track. But I need to feel that you are special to each other. That there are things about each of you that draw the other closer to you. That sometimes these feelings grow so strong that you can't help but let it out somehow. That when one of you leaves the house or returns home the other is moved in some way that is different than if it were anyone else. That being next to each other sometimes brings an impulse to touch, to caress, to nuzzle, and THIS IS NOT ABOUT SEX, although sex would be one extension of these feelings. Lately I get glimpses of it: after a disagreement or when you are away from home together—a tenderness that is differently warm and enveloping. That marks your togetherness as unique—that no one else could fill this job description or pay this rent. I can see that both of you want more of this. Would it help if you wrote down those things which for each of you are examples of affection, what you do and like to

have done to be romantic and to separate me (your relationship) as different than all others. It strikes me that this could serve as a guide for translation. Instead of English-Spanish it would be Margaret-Bill, the better to understand each other. It seems like a pretty dumb idea but my guess is that there is a lot that you are each missing. Perhaps there are messages being sent that are not recognized for what they are. You love each other. Maybe this means something different to each of you. Isn't it something that things got so low not so long ago and already I can hope that you can learn to understand each other's way of loving. Don't let me down.

With hope,
Your relationship

After writing this letter, both Margaret and Bill found it much easier to serve as a witness from the position of their relationship. They also found this position more available to them in life outside of therapy.

We may ask different family members to be in the same position or in different positions. We may change the positions over time if a new position seems more fitting.

HELPING PEOPLE STAY IN A WITNESSING POSITION

Once we agree on a witnessing position, and it becomes experientially available to people through their telling stories of past experiences, answering hypothetical questions, or other means, it is our job as therapists to help them stay in the position while witnessing. We divide our attention between the person we are talking with and the witnesses, and if we think a witness may be losing his or her position we say something. We might say, *In a minute I'll be asking you for your reflections from the position of a friend or simply, Keep in mind what is really important here and I'll ask you some questions in a few minutes.* It is also helpful when we turn to a witness to remind them about the position they have agreed to speak from. We might say, *Surrounded by your team, were you surprised to hear that Brian has already taken some steps to address the situation?*

Although we generally use a witnessing structure throughout therapy, it is not unusual as therapy proceeds to no longer use particular positions. Especially at the beginning of therapy, or at any time when there is a great deal of conflict and disagreement between family members, positioning can be very helpful. When people have repeatedly experienced understanding from each other, and they are engaging more and more in rich experience and development of each other's stories, we can often use the witnessing structure without particular positions.

RELATED PRACTICES

Using a one-way mirror

The purpose of witnessing and positioning is to give people space to speak and to help others attend and understand. In extreme situations, it can be quite difficult to accomplish these purposes

even with witnessing and positioning. There are several other measures we can take if need be.

One possibility is to use the one-way mirror. This works best when more than one therapist is working with the family. One therapist can interview a family member while the rest of the family witnesses the interview from behind the mirror. The co-therapist can make sure that family members behind the mirror are oriented to the interview and that they are not talking to each other. With a mother and teenage daughter who were involved in a highly conflictual relationship that featured name-calling and blaming, using the mirror in this way transformed the therapy conversations. Without the mirror there was constant interruption, contradiction, and bickering. Once we began to interview the daughter in front of the mirror while the mother witnessed from behind and then interviewed the mother in front of the mirror while the daughter witnessed from behind, both the mother and daughter responded to therapist questions. They began to hear each other to some degree. Each stated begrudgingly that the mirror made therapy more useful. Over time, we began to use it only for the most difficult conversations.

Using video

We can create even more distance between the family member being interviewed and those witnessing by using video. We can video an interview and then watch it later with those in a witnessing position. We can then interview the witnesses on video for the original family member to watch. This is cumbersome but, we found it to be tremendously helpful in work with a heterosexual couple dealing with violence.

Les had acted violently towards Rhonda. Rhonda was not sure if she wanted to stay in the relationship. Les had begged her to come to therapy. We negotiated an agreement that I would see Les individually and make videos of our interviews and then meet with Rhonda to view the videos. She could decide whether and when to respond and also use her experience of watching the tapes to determine if it would be safe for her to re-enter the relationship. I set up the therapy this way so that Les could be accountable to Rhonda for what he had done and Rhonda could determine whether Les was changing in ways that would allow her to be in a position of safety. When Rhonda believed that Les was making some changes, I interviewed her about her experience of the violence. It was essential that Les witness this, because at moments of violence in the past he had not recognized women as people. It was very difficult for Les to hear Rhonda describe her experience.

Although I am describing the usefulness of this process, I think it is important to also say that this was difficult. There were times when Les was taken over by anger and accused me of creating a process that was not fair. Rhonda, at times, felt hopeless watching the videos and at a loss about how and whether to respond.

Eventually Rhonda decided that she did not want to go back to the relationship, but she did acknowledge the work Les did and the changes he made. She wished they had come to therapy earlier. It just felt like too much had happened and it was too late for her. Although Les was very disappointed, he was glad to have participated because through the process he felt he had grown as a person and he believed that he would not use violence in a relationship again.

Another format for witnessing involves using an outsider witness group or reflecting team. The therapist interviews a family member. The outsider witness group reflects and then we ask the family members who are witnessing to respond only to what the outsider witness group has said, not to the interview of their family member. We might begin by asking them what stood out to them from what members of the outsider witness group said and whether their comments sparked images of what might be important to the family member who had been interviewed, and so on. Just as many of the practices I have described invite witnesses to see their family members through other eyes (the eyes of a friend, through someone who has shown compassion, etc.) in this practice we invite witnesses to see their family members through the eyes of a reflecting team.

CONCLUSIONS

For therapists guided by the narrative metaphor it is important to create a context in which stories can be told and developed and meaning-making can be shared. Family therapy can be a wonderful arena for this kind of story development. Much can be lost if family members only focus on their own stories and do not really attend to the stories of other family members. A witnessing structure can be a great help in ensuring that family members hear and understand each other, so that family therapy is a context for rich story development. Sometimes, helping family members listen from particular positions can also help the process. This paper offers a number of possible positions.

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