

Introducing the 'narrative construal of reality' and the 'club of life'

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This paper outlines two exercises that were used to train a wide variety of staff members in a multi-service organisation for homeless young people. The training exercises present novel approaches to introducing the concepts of the narrative construal of reality, dominant and subordinate stories, re-memembering conversations, and the idea of identity as made up of a 'club of life'.

Keywords: narrative practice, training, youth work, homelessness, re-memembering conversations, unique outcomes, narrative construal of reality, club of life

The following two training exercise ideas were created as part of seven workshops held to stimulate conversations about using narrative therapy in a multi-service organisation for homeless young people, Phoenix Youth Programs (Hartman, Little & Ungar, in press).

Phoenix Youth Programs offers a continuum of care that includes emergency shelter, long-term residential care, health care, advocacy, school-based prevention, youth development, therapeutic recreation, career counselling, and therapy for individuals and their families. While we had experienced narrative ideas being helpful in the more 'traditional' therapeutic contexts, we were curious about their applicability for youth care professionals in the more community-based settings of our program. We wondered, what would narrative practices look like during the other '23 hours' (Trieschman, Brendtro & Whittaker, 1969) of service our organisation provides?

In developing this training, we were engaged by questions such as how might staff have narrative conversations with young people while assisting them in washing the dishes after supper, or doing other chores, in a group living situation? What does de-centred practice look like for case managers faced with a young person in crisis, when action needs to be taken? How can we assist staff in various roles throughout the workplace to open spaces for young people to develop subordinate storylines, who have totalising labels such as 'gang member', 'addict', or 'resistant to intervention'?

What follows is just a snapshot of two exercises we used to introduce narrative ideas across the whole organisation during a series of seven training workshops. While we won't give a detailed explanation of the different questions we used to frame these exercises – similar examples are given in the rest of this special issue of the *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work* – we think that the general approach we use in these exercises offers something new to the realm of narrative therapy teaching and training.

INVESTIGATING NARRATIVE CONSTRUAL USING MOVIES

Movies are one way that we have found very useful to introduce various key concepts in narrative

practice, such as what Jerome Bruner calls the 'narrative construal of reality' (Bruner, 1996), dominant and problem-saturated stories, alternative or subordinate stories, and unique outcomes (see Morgan, 2000; Ungar, 2001, 2006; White, 2007).

In this exercise, we showed workers from various sections of our program a segment of the movie *White Oleander* (Warner Brothers, 2002), which tells the story of a young woman who gets placed in a secure youth facility. The participants were asked to view the segment with an eye to events that might contribute to this young woman being labelled a 'difficult youth' by professionals, other young people, and even by herself. The group considered the labels she would likely carry, such as mentally ill, acting out, attention-seeking, crazy, bad, and borderline, eventually condensing them all into a totalising story of a 'problem youth'.

The participants were then shown the same movie segment, this time with the instructions to look for events where the young woman acted, seemed to be having thoughts, or experienced feelings that were at odds with this description of her as a 'problem youth'. The group was then asked to reach consensus on a possible new 'alternative identity' for this young woman. While it may be easy to understand how this viewing led to a different general outcome, the *specific* effects of such a simple exercise were very noticeable. People not only said they saw and heard different things that they missed the first time around, but also spoke in a way that was far more respectful and honouring of the young woman. Rather than her identity being collapsed as a 'problem youth', she was now a young woman whose life had a social, relational, and political context, and who responded to a range of challenging events with skills and knowledge. In reflecting on the exercise, participants said that they also noticed changes in their own body language, voice, and level of engagement when both viewing the movie clip and discussing it.

We were careful to be transparent about the limitations of this exercise in that it obviously didn't allow for any real interaction with this young woman and, because of this, our meaning and interpretation remained centred in our understanding of her life. The exercise did, however, provide a good example of how young people get assigned problem identities and how, with an

intentionally narrative practice, other possible identities can emerge.

RE-MEMBERING AND THE 'CLUB OF LIFE'

Re-membering practices are often related to the narrative concept of a 'club of life', or a group of people who are accorded 'honorary life membership' in clients' lives. Most re-membering conversations are usually only about one individual who is or was significant in the clients' life. Sometimes, these conversations might be about more than one person – say an elderly couple who lived next door, a family, or two best school friends. Over time, more re-membering conversations may expand this list to include other significant figures.

Whether one person or more, re-membering conversations are related to the concept of creating a 'club of life' of people who have contributed to, or might be supportive of, the subordinate storyline in someone's life. We wanted to create an exercise that not only gave a practice-based experience of a re-membering conversation, but at the same time evoked the concept of this 'club of life' more fully. To this end, we simply asked participants to break into pairs and have a re-membering conversation (using pre-prepared questions that we supplied) about not just one or two people, but about an *actual group*: an association, informal group of friends, team, or club that they had been a part of and that they felt had made a significantly positive contribution to their lives. In this way, the conversation evoked the presence of an existing 'ready made' 'club' of people who could simply and quickly have the history of their connection with the interviewee richly embroidered so that they became

a 'club of life' *en masse*. We were cautious, however, to not exclude anyone by allowing participants who felt that they had not previously been part of a group to evoke a singular friend or significant person. In this way, they did not lose out on the opportunity to experience a re-membering conversation.

Another purpose in crafting the exercise in this way was to also help participants perceive a 'multi-voiced sense of identity', another key concept in narrative practice. In this way, one simple exercise conveyed three interrelated concepts at once: re-membering conversations, the 'club of life' metaphor, and identity as multi-voiced. Participants enjoyed this exercise, with one commenting it had the effect of 'bringing old friends into the room for a visit'.

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