



The one-minute question: What is narrative therapy?

Some working answers

by

Erik Sween¹

It is a familiar scenario. Some well meaning person asks, 'What is narrative therapy?', and then glances at her/his watch to indicate s/he only has time for a short answer. It is a dilemma I think every narrative therapist has faced. Each time it happens I want to cringe. What should I say? I search for the right words, scan the memory banks, and try my best. But I rarely feel my answer communicates any adequate representation of narrative ideas. Too often my response has drawn a polite nod and an awkward silence. Somehow I want to find a way to share some of my interest and enthusiasm about narrative therapy with the people who ask me the question.

Perhaps there is no answer to the one-minute question. At the same time, I am not comfortable dodging the question. Although I have used this strategy more than I like to admit, somehow, in my discomfort, I like the question. It poses a challenge. Can I explain what I do in public language? Can I use words that can be understood by non-experts? Of course, it is easier to communicate with narrative colleagues because of the common language and world-view we

share. But that involves a 'preaching to the choir'. Another aspect of the challenge comes from my belief in the power of narrative therapy. I feel these ideas have something valuable to offer people who are unfamiliar with them. In that way, I do not want to be part of turning people away from the ideas. Some of them may eventually be as grateful as I have been for understanding narrative concepts.

So, here are my best attempts at responding to the one-minute question. Each response is intended to stand on its own. Multiple answers are provided for different days of the week or for different audiences - whichever proves more useful. Order is arbitrary and not meant to signify importance.

1. If narrative therapy had one slogan, it would be: 'The person is never the problem; the problem is the problem'. This phrase captures the importance attached to who a person is, regardless of his or her circumstances. Narrative therapy involves exploring the shaping moments of a person's life, the turning-points, the key relationships, and those particular memories not dimmed by time. Focus is drawn to the intentions, dreams, and values that have guided a person's life, despite the set-backs. Oftentimes, the process brings back stories that have been overlooked - surprising stories that speak of forgotten competence and heroism.
2. Every type of psychotherapy designates a different aspect of life as the basic unit of experience. For example, behavioural therapy focuses on behaviour, cognitive therapy focuses on logical thinking, while systems therapy focuses on family interaction as the basic unit. In this way, narrative therapy holds up the story as the basic unit of experience. Stories guide how people act, think, feel, and make sense of new experience. Stories organise the information from a person's life. Narrative therapy focuses on how these important stories can get written and rewritten.
3. Narrative therapy proposes that people use certain stories about themselves like the lens on a camera. These stories have the effect of filtering a person's experience and thereby selecting what information gets focused in or focused

out. These stories shape people's perspectives of their lives, histories, and futures. Despite information to the contrary, these stories of identity can be remarkably stable. Narrative therapy provides a means to refocus the lens on this camera and help reshape a person's stories and life.

4. As people, we are inescapably meaning-makers. We have an experience and then attach meaning to it. Since time immemorial, and the days around the campfire, we have been telling stories. Stories are our most familiar means of communicating the meaning we find in our experiences. Narrative therapy is interested in the stories we live by - those stories we carry with us about who we are and what is most important to us. Narrative therapy involves unearthing these stories, understanding them, and re-telling them.
5. Many forms of psychology and therapy place enormous emphasis on the process of individuation. In this way, the individual is believed to construct her or his internal world almost single-handedly. Narrative therapy provides a contrast to this perspective. Narrative therapy proposes that identity is co-created in relationship with other people as well as by one's history and culture. Thus, being seen by others in a certain way can contribute as much as seeing oneself in a certain way. We come to see ourselves by looking in the mirrors that other people hold up for us. In this way, a person's identity is said to be socially constructed. Narrative therapy focuses on the degree to which that socially constructed identity fits for that person.
6. Narrative therapy consists of understanding the stories or themes that have shaped a person's life. Out of all the experiences a person has lived, what has held the most meaning? What choices, intentions, relationships have been most important? Narrative therapy proposes that only those experiences that are part of a larger story will have significant impact on a person's lived experience. Therefore, narrative therapy focuses on building the plot which connects a person's life together.

7. A person's life is criss-crossed by invisible story-lines. These unseen story-lines can have enormous power in shaping a person's life. Narrative therapy involves the process of drawing out and amplifying these story-lines. Questions are used to focus on what has been most meaningful in a person's life. Common areas of inquiry include intentions, influential relationships, turning-points, treasured memories, and how these areas connect with each other.

8. ...

Obviously, this list could keep going. But these are my current working answers. The last number is left blank to indicate a 'work in progress' as well as the multiplicity of possible answers. While I am not searching for a definitive answer or one that will appeal to everyone, I feel the question keeps me on a creative edge. It keeps me trying to articulate these ideas without using jargon and trying to communicate with people outside of the narrative therapy community. It also reminds me of the words of my dissertation adviser from long ago: 'If you can't explain the idea in three sentences to your grandmother, the idea is not clear enough in your own mind'.

Note

1. Erik can be contacted c/- PO Box 7861, Aspen CO 81612, USA, email: erik@aspeninfo.com