



# Refusing to separate critique from respect

by Kelsi Semeschuk



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## Abstract

This paper provides a brief exploration of the notion of critique within the field of narrative therapy. It raises questions, considerations and dilemmas about how practices of critique might be engaged in without contributing to the dissolution of important relationships. The author draws on some of her own experiences with the hope of articulating how critique and respect can exist alongside each other.

**Key words:** *narrative therapy; critique; respect; agonism*

## Is respectful critique possible?

Because we are right, so right, and they, like  
the villains in the western are wrong, so wrong.  
(Tompkins, 1988, p. 588)

Recent experiences have had me asking the following questions: Is it possible to critique ideas in ways that do not lead to the dissolution of important relationships? Is it possible, as Tompkins (1988) asks, to engage in critique that does not position myself as the *hero*, and the person on the receiving end of my critique as the *villain*? Is it possible to approach critique with respectful intentions and, more importantly, for that respect to be *felt* by the person receiving it?

Specifically, I have been thinking about the effects of critiquing ideas that are held close by respected colleagues and friends. I have been thinking about the potential consequences of critiquing the ideas and practices of the people who taught me narrative ideas in the first place – people who have given me their time, walked alongside me and believed in my potential when I couldn't see it. I have also been wondering about how we can engage in critique of our own practices, and the practices of others, without it diminishing the worth of the work we have engaged in with the people consulting us.

## Hopes

These considerations have led to the creation of a list of principles that I hope to hold close in my future engagements with critique. My aim is:

- to communicate in ways that value questions over answers, and acknowledge the potential generativity of asking questions
- to hold respect for others (their skills, knowledges and preferences) at the centre of any questions, curiosities or critiques
- to remember that even though I am critiquing ideas, I am critiquing ideas that may be close to the hearts of certain practitioners
- to acknowledge that ideas must be understood in context, and thus 'one cannot separate the pursuit of knowledge from the community of scholars engaged in that pursuit' (Tannen, 2002, p. 1665)
- to remember that 'scholarly work is done by human beings' (Tannen, 2002, p. 1666), and

that hiding behind 'objectivity' can contribute to practices of critique that do not acknowledge this

- to step away from engaging in 'policing' practices in relation to the ideas of others
- to do my best to avoid practices of speaking for Michael White, David Epston or any other practitioner
- to avoid statements that speak to a 'capital-T' Truth of narrative therapy
- to engage in critique in ways that aim to avoid harming relationships
- to consider not only the content of our critique but also where that critique *goes* – where it *lands* and upon whom it *lands*; as Alcoff noted, 'One cannot simply look at the location of the speaker or her credentials to speak, nor can one look merely at the propositional content of the speech; one must also look at where the speech goes and what it does there' (Alcoff, 1992, p. 26)
- to be aware of the influence of the ritual of aggressive opposition in academia, and the historical underpinnings of such practices, which are grounded in military, combative and adversarial metaphors (Tannen, 2002)
- to engage in critique with the hope of collectively 'doing better'
- to ask myself:
  - How can I avoid being 'righteous' in my ideas?
  - How can I 'practice what I preach' and take these ideas *outside* of myself and others? (i.e. the postmodern and social constructionist underpinnings of narrative therapy)
  - How can I have conversations about my work in ways that do not convey the message that I believe I am *more* 'political', 'feminist', 'respectful', 'honourable' or 'informed' than others?

Approaching critique with these principles in mind is my attempt to pour energy into something that feels generative, worthwhile and aligned with what I value about narrative ideas; namely, that nothing is above critique, deconstruction and questioning. On this topic, I often like to reflect on what Michael White (2011) wrote about his continuous practice of critiquing and reflecting on his work:

I am not diminishing my work, and I am not putting myself down. It is because I love my work that I am highly motivated to identify any abuses of power and to root them out. I believe that if one is not tripping across abuses of power in one's therapeutic practice, it means that one has gone to sleep. (White, 2011, p. 31)

In addition to his (2011) assertion that critique of one's practice can be linked to 'love' of one's practice, White also noted that 'if people are standing for something, then there's a history to it' (White, 2002). What this phrase has come to mean to me is that we do not develop ideas in isolation, and we do not become skilful in our practices in isolation. Rather, as we take a *stand* – or a seat (with the person consulting us) – there is a history to it. This history, which is founded on relationships, warrants recognition. In this way, the opportunity to engage in critique relies upon the very relationships it can threaten.

In advocating for a type of critique that centres relationships, I am not arguing against the right to disagree, as this can result in a sort of 'agonistic'<sup>1</sup> ideal that 'puts too much emphasis on identities and less on the political issue itself' (Tryggvason, 2018). Rather, my perspective is in alignment with Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe's (2000) concept of 'agonistic pluralism'. Mouffe (2000) wrote that the aim of such a perspective is to:

Construct the 'them' in such a way that it is no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but an 'adversary', i.e. somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question ... An adversary is an enemy, but a legitimate enemy, one with whom we have some common ground because we have a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy: liberty and equality. (Mouffe, 2000, p. 15)

Although these ideas from Mouffe have their origins in the context of democratic politics, I find them quite relevant to engagements with critique within the narrative field. That is, to borrow Mouffe's language, the *ethico-political principles* underlying narrative ideas are so richly described and so central to the work we do that even when we disagree, there is a common ground upon which we stand.

## Concluding thoughts

In her critical essay on the topic of critique, Tompkins noted that 'it's difficult to unlearn the habits of a lifetime, and this very essay has been fuelled by a good deal of the righteousness it is in the business of questioning' (1988, p. 590). Similarly, I want to acknowledge that I do not see myself as exempt from engaging in practices of *righteous* critique, and I am not immune to the *sting* of receiving critique from others. However, I believe that having the opportunity to reflect on our own practices, to gain a sense of clarity about our ideas, and to be able to do this collectively and in relationship, is a special sort of gift, worthy of recognition and respect.

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> There are varying definitions of the term 'agonism', one of which is presented through my discussion of Chantal Mouffe's work on 'agonistic pluralism'. A general description is that: 'Agonism is irresolvable disagreement over political meanings and actions, in which each party does not deny the legitimacy of the other to have an opinion. It is a form of political engagement that acknowledges the permanence of conflict and views this as necessary for democratic politics to function rather than detrimental to it' (McClymont, 2011, p. 3).

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