

Storying professional identity

from an interview with
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This paper describes the implications of shifting a counsellor education program at Waikato University in New Zealand, to a narrative or poststructuralist orientation. One of the key implications has been to open up the possibility of viewing counsellor education as a process of storying professional identity.

Keywords: *counsellor education, professional identity, poststructuralism, narrative therapy*

As I begin this interview, I am conscious that I am speaking about work at Waikato University that is the product of teamwork. Some years ago, Wendy Drewery, Kathie Crocket, Wally McKenzie, Gerald Monk and I, with David Epston in the background as a consultant at times, embarked on a process of transforming the counsellor education program in which we worked to one shaped by narrative and poststructuralist ideas. This was a departure from the previously eclectic educational approach that is common in most counsellor education programs. At the same time, we made a commitment to work, teach and write as a team. I continue to treasure this commitment. I hope it will be understood that the stories I share here are the product of collective endeavour.

Looking back

It may be helpful to describe the particular social context in which we decided to shift our orientation to narrative ideas. In the early 1990s, Wendy Drewery was already teaching within the counselling program at Waikato. Having been immersed in feminist theory, Wendy was engaged with the feminist critiques of counselling that were happening at that time. These feminist critiques concerned how conventional psychology did not take adequate account

of constructions of gender and power relations in counselling knowledge. While some counselling theories acknowledge the effects of power and gender in environmental factors, these remain separate from 'internal' psychological issues. It was seen as reasonable to consider issues of power in external structures, on the outside of the individual, but counselling was understood to consist of 'internal' work separate from the domains of sociological or sociopolitical concerns. Wendy's engagement with poststructuralist feminist writers (for example, Weedon 1987; Fraser 1989; Davies 1991) offered other ways forward, particularly with regard to the construction of subjectivity and the influence of gender relations in such construction. No longer was power only an external matter but intricately involved in the ongoing construction and re-construction of identity and relationships.

At the same time, in the early 1990s, there were challenges to counselling that were coming from Maori in New Zealand, who were pointing out that conventional psychological approaches were not relevant to Maori ways of seeing the world (e.g. Durie 1989). Individualistic understandings of problems and individualistic solutions were seen by Maori psychologists to be separating members of their community from one another and from their cultural knowledges. Many forms of counselling were imposing western categories of self and identity upon Maori people. A

particular senior Maori woman, Hinekahukura (Tuti) Aranui, encouraged us to listen to these critiques. This too contributed to a determination to find alternative ways of approaching counselling education.

Wendy then began gathering practitioners around her including Gerald Monk, Wally Mackenzie, Kathie Crocket and me. Together we decided that the narrative therapy approaches developed by David Epston and Michael White (1990, 1992) represented the direction that we were interested in and wished to pursue. It seemed to us all that narrative ideas offered an alternative to the modernist rationalist approaches that had up until then dominated counsellor education. While we knew that a narrative approach would not necessarily resolve all dilemmas in relation to both feminist and Maori critiques of counselling, we felt that it was the most promising framework from which to respond. The fact that narrative approaches were being developed in our part of the world was an extra incentive. We felt that as a New Zealand university, it would be appropriate, in fact almost a responsibility, to take these local ideas seriously. The generous support and enthusiasm of David Epston also made a considerable difference to this. David Epston and Johnella Bird were already playing an influential role in developing a community of people interested and engaged in narrative ideas in New Zealand. David has had a background but significant influence in the shifts that our program has made through the years.

A theoretical shift

Having made the shift to a narrative approach we then began to grapple with the questions, 'How do we teach this perspective in a way that does not conflict with the perspective itself? How can we give an account of the practice of counsellor education that is similarly informed by a narrative metaphor?'

We developed our program piece by piece, rather than all at once. Wendy and Gerald started by developing a new counselling theory course. We wished to convey that there is a range of theoretical ideas that therapists need to engage with in order not to simply reproduce the individualistic, modernist approaches which are automatically familiar to (most of) us. The theory course that was developed draws on postmodernism (e.g. Lyotard 1984), social constructionism (Burr 1995; Gergen 1994, 1999; Shotter 1993; Shotter & Gergen 1989), post-structuralism (Foucault 1978, 1980;

Davies & Harré 1990), narrative theory (Bruner 1986, 1990), and introduces students to methods of discourse analysis (Burman & Parker 1993; Fairclough 1992; Gee 1999; Parker 1992). In many ways, this counselling theory course is a philosophical course. This is a departure from previous counselling theory courses which were generally eclectic and taught a range of counselling approaches as if they had an abstract existence and could sit alongside one another. There was, we decided, a hazard to this eclecticism in that practitioners often couldn't explain what they were doing in their therapy (Drewery & Monk 1994). They could not make the link between a certain question they had asked and how this linked to a particular way of thinking, or philosophy. This new counselling theory course sought to question this.

After immersing students in social constructionist and poststructuralist writings, students then use methods of discourse analysis to engage with different approaches to therapy. For instance, we take a range of approaches to counselling and then ask the following deconstructive questions about them:

- What kind of subjectivity is produced from this way of thinking?
- What kind of gender relations does this particular approach to counselling privilege?
- What kind of entitlements or privileges does this particular approach support?
- What metaphors or understandings of identity and relationship are constructed?
- How does this approach contribute to or counter ongoing processes of cultural colonisation?

To make these considerations more personal, students are also asked to deconstruct an incident from their own life in terms of the discourses that were operating to shape their experience of this incident. We regularly receive feedback from students that this deconstruction of their own experience transforms their understandings.

Significantly, this counselling theory course takes place on a *marae* (Maori sacred meeting ground). Students live, sleep, eat and have classes on the *marae* for one week. In honour of the Treaty of Waitangi, it is now a requirement of all counselling courses in New Zealand to provide students with a *marae* experience as part of their training.

At around the same time, Wally McKenzie and Gerald Monk began teaching a new family therapy course in the

degree that specifically focused on the ideas and practices of narrative therapy. This course continues to be a central feature of the program for developing students' thinking about, and ability to work with, family relationships. At first there was a very thin literature available for this course. In the last ten years, that has changed dramatically.

Since then, all of our courses have been gradually been infiltrated by narrative and constructionist ideas and we are applying these ideas to basic counselling skills, to group work, and to mediation.

Storying professional identity

Over time, we have begun to conceptualise the task of counsellor education as that of assisting students to story a professional identity as 'counsellor' (documented in McKenzie & Monk, 1997; Winslade, Monk & Drewery, 1996; Winslade, Crocket, Monk & Drewery, 2000). We think of a professional identity as consisting of a set of values, attitudes, ideas, knowledge and skills. Enabling students to put these all together and to make meaning of them through storylines makes it possible for them to articulate, 'This is who I am as a counsellor and this is what I'm trying to do in the world'. From this perspective, the task of counsellor education then becomes one of co-authoring (students and counsellor educators together) a story of professional identity development. In order to develop such an identity, certain skills must be learned; certain thinking must be done in relation to current theoretical conversations; and certain relationships must be formed with the community of counsellors of which they hope to become a part. Development of a professional identity involves fostering self-descriptions consistent with the performance of the values and skills of counselling practice. We believe it is possible to structure a context that provides opportunities for the storying of professional identity and this keeps us, as practitioners of counsellor education, alert to the moments that can arise for story development. These range from selection interviews, to exercises in class, to mid-year interviews, to the practice of interviewing skills, to meetings with supervisors, to participation in reflecting teams interviews, to the creation of final portfolios, and so on (see Winslade, Crocket, Monk & Drewery 2000).

In conceptualising the storying professional identity, we do not invite students to construct a self-contained notion of identity, one that is owned within the individual and independent of how they are experienced by those

consulting them. Instead, we are interested in storying identities that are constantly formed in relationship. This is a constructionist understanding of identity (see Shotter & Gergen 1989).

Throughout the program, we construct a range of opportunities for students to story their professional identity through conversations and interactions with clients, with supervisors, with peers, and with the academic staff. The storying of identity also occurs through processes of reading, talking about the reading with others, and articulating a considered response in writing. It also involves consistently seeking feedback from those who are consulting us, and shaping our work in response to this feedback.

There are many different contexts which the program structures to enable the storying of professional identity. Here I shall focus on three: (1) Students sharing videotapes of their work; (2) being interviewed by a faculty member with a reflecting team of their peers; and (3) creating a portfolio of their work.

Sharing videos of their work

Within classes, students show videotape examples of their counselling work with individuals, couples or families. Other students, and faculty, then make comments and offer reflections on this piece of work which are in turn taken back to the client(s) involved. This process is a part of storying a different type of professional identity. It demonstrates the ways in which the views and experiences of clients can be central even to the supervision process.

Being interviewed about one's work

A significant site for the storying of professional identity occurs when a student is interviewed by a faculty member, with other students acting as a reflecting team (Andersen 1995; White 1995). These interviews explore unique outcomes and dilemmas in the work of the particular student. The reflecting team expresses interest in the developments the student is making in her or his work, and uses questions as opportunities to explore these developments further. The reflecting team avoids objective evaluation and, in the process, plot developments in a counsellor's professional identity story are co-authored.

Creating a folio

A third process through which the storying of professional identity takes place involves students creating a folio of their work. This is the final piece of work that students fulfil prior to graduation. Initially these folios consisted of practitioners collating stories of their work, but over the years the concept of the folio has grown. Folios now begin with a commentary and overall statement of the student's professional practice. Students describe the core values, intentions, beliefs and practices that make up their identity as a counsellor. These are not simply abstract descriptions because they are written up in relation to the context in which students currently work. They then complete a full account of their counselling work with one person or a couple or a family. With a number of other pieces of counselling work, they draw out and illustrate specific aspects of this work which particularly intrigue or interest them, or in which they've developed a new skill. This might, for example, include the particular use of a therapeutic letter. Within the folio, students are also required to present some of their work in roles or activities other than direct therapeutic service. This might include trying to bring about broader change in an institution, engagement with a community project, or acts of advocacy on a particular social issue. Finally, we invite students to participate in a further reflexive process in relation to their work. Students have conversations with supervisors, peers and clients, about their work. This conversation is then documented. The student produces a record, not only of what is spoken about in this conversation, but on the thinking that they've done in response to the conversation, and the things that have changed in their work in response to that conversation. This reflexive element is incorporated throughout our courses, and is built on the constructionist understanding that it is in the articulation of a practice that a practice develops, including professional practice.

Where does assessment fit in this process?

We understand processes and rituals of assessment as part of the development of professional identities. To graduate from a counselling program at our university means that our university believes the graduate will make a positive difference to our community as a counsellor. To graduate a student will be read in the community to mean that we are validating and authorising their work and skills. Viewing assessment in this light, I do not hesitate to take it seriously. I am aware, for example, that the person who I am assessing

may one day be the counsellor for my children, or my children's friends. There is no doubt that practices of assessment are practices of power. As a university faculty, we wield authority. We are conscious of the power relation that is set up between teacher and student, and acknowledgement of this power relation invites us to consider the ethics of how we conduct ourselves in this relation. But we cannot step out of this relation and pretend to divest the positions of power involved. Nor do our students wish us to do so. We have systems in place to ensure that assessments are fair and non-discriminatory, and we take care to manage our relations with students in ways that take account of the effects of our assessment responsibilities.

I try to convey to students that I'm never in a position to make an assessment that claims unchallengeable authority, or that claims certainty. In Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) terms, I am always looking for dialogical processes of assessment rather than monological processes. I am clear to students that after I have made an assessment of their work it is possible to speak with me, to make a case, and to enter into a dialogue about this. Sometimes this means that assessment grades are not finalised immediately.

A university degree validates a professional identity and opens possibilities for people, and there are times we have not graduated students when we didn't believe it was a good idea for them to receive the validation of the university. There have been circumstances when I didn't want to bestow the authority to do what I judged would be damage in the world. I don't assume that everybody can do every kind of work. I don't believe that anybody can be a counsellor. Sometimes it's necessary to make that assessment. Situations where we don't enable a student to pass a course are some of the hardest aspects of the work. We try to ensure that this decision is not framed as a judgement of 'failure'. It doesn't mean that the person cannot at some stage become a counsellor. It just means that at this precise moment in time, in relation to their participation in this particular course that we cannot graduate them. It is not an assessment of their whole self and identity. But these are practices of power that we are considering and we take them seriously. There are also students who have responded to assessments that their work was not up to scratch by re-engaging with their learning in ways that have made a significant difference to their practice. When this happens I have sometimes developed huge admiration for this person's commitment to the development of their professional identity.

It may also be relevant to note that engaging in practices of power in relation to assessment is not only the domain of teachers. Students too can engage in practices of power in relation to assessment. Sometimes faculty members have had considerable pressure applied to them by students to guarantee a successful assessment. This is where ethical and respectful processes to resolve disputes are necessary.

There is no doubt that practices of assessment are practices of power, but this doesn't make them necessarily bad or repressive. Far from it, they are to my mind an important part of the project of teaching, and the process of storying professional identity.

Reflections on professional identity

Historically, there has been an assumption within the professional counselling world, that somehow counsellors are people who have got their own act together, have gone through enough therapy themselves to be 'better' human beings in some way, more fully 'self-actualised', and that this is what enables them (us) to be able to counsel others. This, often unspoken, assumption I believe produced a kind of hubris amongst therapists that detached us from our own humanity. It created an expectation that we ought not experience the same difficulties that others have in life, and this is a problematic idea. In counsellor education, we think it's much more useful to invite students into a more modest professional identity, one that stipulates that therapists are simply human beings like anyone else. We struggle with the same discourses and we're not free from the everyday struggles of life. So we are not aiming at producing better counsellors by producing more 'self-aware' people.

A more modest professional identity doesn't involve completely separating the professional from personal experiences of life. It could be said that we are interested in taking the modernist notion of the Self down off its pedestal, both for clients and for counsellors. We're not at all interested in creating a professional identity for counsellors that is on a pedestal, that consists of a bounded individual, an heroic prime-mover in the world. Instead, a more modest sense of self might include the notion that I am, as a counsellor, living my own life struggling in the same kind of discursive context as those who consult me. This doesn't mean our experiences are equivalent. We will sometimes occupy different discursive positions and there are notions of professional privilege to consider. What's more, there's an

ethical duty to centre in counselling the experience of the person consulting me. But I'm not a super person, and the notion of self isn't as stable as it is made to sound within conventional psychology. Shifts and changes occur and it may be me who seeks out a counsellor next week.

The joys of teaching

Approaching counsellor education as a project of storying professional identity has enriched our experience as teachers. Thinking about my job as creating opportunities for students to story their professional identity means my task involves interest, respect, curiosity and exploration. I am placed in a position of trying to learn about what students are doing with ideas, how they are making sense of them, and how this is shaping their work and their identities. Rather than simply evaluating whether they have 'received' the knowledge I am 'imparting', I am instead engaged in an exploration of the meaning that they are making of the process of learning, and the process of becoming a counsellor. This is so much more interesting, particularly because there are always surprises! Students make meaning of the ideas and practices in ways that I would never have imagined, and they take narrative practices in directions I wouldn't have thought of. I still have a role of instruction at times. I have a responsibility to introduce students to fields of knowledge and experience and stories of life that they may not have come across. This is best thought of as introducing a new person into a conversation that is well under way. It is necessary for someone who is new to a conversation to listen to what the others are talking about and to look for places where they can join in. I have responsibilities to provide opportunities for learning. But in understanding teaching as involving the construction of a professional identity, I also have a role of inquiry and this brings joy to my experience of work.

The joys of teaching are slightly different from the joys of being a therapist. As a therapist, I experience joy when witnessing people take strides in overcoming difficulties in their lives. As a teacher, it involves witnessing the steps students take in their professional practice. Witnessing the full scope of such developments often takes time. Sometimes it may be eight months, a year, two years until I learn about the work that a student is engaged in. When I see people do kinds of work that I could never do, or that I could never imagine myself doing, or could never be in the position of doing, this brings great sustenance to my work

as a teacher. To realise that our training program is contributing to the building of a community of practice is exciting. I recall the recent experience of going into a school and meeting with a school counsellor (who was also a student in our training program) and a school principal. When I asked the principal how the counsellor was doing in her work, the school principal said quietly but clearly, 'This person has been instrumental in changing the culture of violence in the school'. I nearly fell off my chair, but instead recovered to listen to the stories of the work of this therapist. The joys of teaching lie not in taking credit for the work that students are doing, so much as in bearing witness to developments and achievements in ways that give them greater recognition and acknowledgement. In this way they continue to develop in the lives of our students, in the lives of the people who consult them, as well as in our own understandings.

Note

1. John Winslade is a faculty member of Waikato University Counselling Education Program in Hamilton, New Zealand. John is also the co-author, with Gerald Monk, of the influential book *Narrative Mediation*, and co-editor with Kathie Crocket, Gerald Monk and David Epston of the book *Narrative Therapy in Practice: The archaeology of hope*. He and Gerald Monk also wrote *Narrative Counseling in Schools*, and with Lorraine Hedtke he has a new book in press called *Remembering lives: Conversations with the dying and the bereaved*.

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