

THEORY

Narrative Family Therapy: Practical Techniques for More Effective Work with Couples and Families

Eric G. Suddeath
Alexandria K. Kerwin
Suzanne M. Dugger
University of Mississippi

This article provides counselors with an introduction to the knowledge and skills involved in providing narrative family therapy (NFT). Following an overview of the theoretical foundations undergirding this therapeutic approach, a case study is used to illustrate the use of numerous NFT techniques. These techniques include eliciting stories to meet families apart from their problems, recognizing cultural discourse and its impact on family narratives, externalizing the problem from the family, and re-authoring the story through the identification and understanding of exceptions and unique outcomes and the identification and enactment of preferred narratives. The article concludes with recommendations for further development of competence in this area.

Despite the fact that many client issues stem from, involve, or affect family relationships, therapists have predominantly focused on the individual when providing counseling services (Ivey, D'Andrea, & Ivey, 2012). This focus on the individual has its roots in the early development of psychoanalysis and continues to be reflected in training standards such as those generated by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2016). Historically, this emphasis on individual therapy has its basis in the influence of Freud and many of his colleagues (Nichols, 2013). These pioneers recognized the correlation between client symptoms and early negative interactions with family members, and this contributed to their erroneous conclusion that it would necessarily be more difficult for clients to resolve their issues with family members present in the therapy room (Nichols, 2013).

Although contemporary counselors may not agree with this conclusion, their professional preparation continues to emphasize individual approaches. Indeed, there are only two standards addressing family or systems issues in the

Eric G. Suddeath, Department of Leadership and Counselor Education, University of Mississippi; Alexandria K. Kerwin, Department of Leadership and Counselor Education, University of Mississippi; Suzanne M. Dugger, Department of Leadership and Counselor Education, University of Mississippi. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Eric Suddeath, Department of Leadership and Counselor Education, University of Mississippi, University, MS 38655. E-mail: egsuddea@go.olemiss.edu

entire set of CACREP standards for the eight common core areas. One standard requires that accredited counselor preparation programs address “theories of individual and family development across the lifespan” (CACREP, 2016, F[3][a]). The second standard calls for attention to “a systems approach to conceptualizing clients” (CACREP, 2016, F[5][b]). With only these two standards addressing family or systems, counselor preparation programs typically dedicate relatively little time to these topics. Therefore, new counselors often enter the field less prepared to provide counseling services to couples and families than to individuals and groups.

However, when practicing in agency settings, counselors are highly likely to be assigned to counsel couples or families, and counselors in private practice settings will often encounter requests for couple and family counseling. In a study examining the types of services delivered by clinicians working with managed care clients, respondents indicated that 30.0% of cases were couples and 47.5% were family cases (Christensen & Miller, 2001). Given this and the ethical responsibility counselors have to maintain “high standards of professional competence” (American Mental Health Counselors Association, 2015, C[1]), there is an ongoing need for counselors to expand their areas of competence to include couples and family counseling. Counselors must continue adding to their cache of tools to ensure that they remain current and competent in working with a wide range of clients. When seeking to add to their metaphorical toolbox, professional counselors should select tools with sufficient scientific evidence supporting their use (Patel, Hagedorn, & Bai, 2013).

Narrative family therapy (NFT) is one approach from which professional counselors may draw in order to effectively serve couple and family clients. Narrative therapy was co-constructed in the early 1980s by White & Epston (1990). This approach grew in popularity during the 1990s and is now a widely practiced modality of therapy (Madigan, 2011), with considerable research examining its application with multiple populations. Specifically, researchers have found narrative therapy effective in working with blended families (Gold, 2016; Jones, 2004; Shalay & Brownlee, 2007), treating couples impacted by infidelity (Duba, Kindsvatter, & Lara, 2008), addressing adoption issues (Stokes & Poulsen, 2014), assisting families in which adolescents have come out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Saltzburg, 2007), reducing parent–child conflicts (Besa, 1994), supporting homeless families (Fraenkel, Hameline, & Shannon, 2009), and improving the family functioning of couples (Rabiee, Zadeh & Bahrami, 2008). Thus, although more research is needed to achieve inclusion in the National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2016), research supporting the use of narrative therapy approaches with families does exist.

The purpose of this article is to introduce counselors to the knowledge and skills involved in providing NFT. This article will begin with an overview of the theoretical foundations undergirding this therapeutic approach. The authors will then introduce a case study and illustrate the use of numerous NFT techniques. The article will conclude with recommendations for further development of competence in this area.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF NARRATIVE FAMILY THERAPY

There are two primary theories that have influenced approaches to family therapy: systems theory and social constructionism. Systems theory is the basis of traditional family therapies, while social constructionism also informs more contemporary, postmodern approaches to family counseling (Gehart, 2014; Ivey et al., 2012).

Systems Theory

Systems theory focuses on the complex and reciprocal influences of family members on one another, the attachment style and boundaries within a family system, the external impacts on the family system, and the family system's tendency toward homeostasis. Counselors wishing to practice NFT will benefit from understanding family stories through the lenses of these system theory constructs. For example, the concept of circular causality will prompt exploration of how the complex interactions among family members result in reciprocal, bidirectional influences on each member's stories. In hearing these stories, counselors will also be wise to notice the attachment styles and types of boundaries that exist among the family members. Similarly, it will be essential to conceptualize the family as a system within a wider cultural and contextual ecological system and to consider the importance of societal or environmental messages and events, both for the family's stories and for the stories of each individual family member. Finally, in helping families understand, challenge, and change their stories, it will be important to recognize the dual importance of stability, through the maintenance of homeostasis, and change, via growth and adaptation, to the rewriting process. These concepts, drawn from systems theory, are essential to the effective practice of NFT. Additionally, counselors must understand concepts associated with the epistemology of postmodernism and the theory of social constructionism.

Postmodernism and Social Constructionism

Counselors engaged in the practice of NFT are less interested in facts and more interested in the stories families and individual family members have constructed. This is due to the integral role social constructionism plays in the practice of narrative therapy. Social constructionism, and the postmodern epistemology on which it is based, contends that the seeking of facts is futile. Unlike modernists, who believe in objective truth and contend that there is a correct or incorrect way of viewing reality, postmodernists contest the notion that truth can be objectively known (Becvar & Becvar, 1999; Hansen, 2015). Rather than focusing on discovery and understanding of an objective reality, postmodernists champion the exploration and understanding of multiple, sometimes differing, but always valid views of reality. Social constructionism is based on postmodernism and places particular emphasis on the impact of social and cultural contexts in shaping perceptions of reality and creating shared knowledge (Hoyt, 1988).

The nature of reality. From this perspective, reality and meaning are co-constructed through interaction with others within a social and cultural context (Nichols, 2013). One's beliefs and values become internalized as "reality" through this process. Although their clients may present their stories as "reality" or fact, narrative therapists seek to help clients recognize how their "realities" are simply internalized "stories" that have been influenced by their familial, social, and cultural contexts. Narrative therapists empower clients to build on this recognition by considering alternative ways of viewing their situation. This philosophical lens offers greater flexibility and power to consider other interpretations of the stories clients tell about themselves, others, and their problems (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Hansen, 2015). Given that a family's truths are socially constructed, they can also be deconstructed and reconstructed. These concepts are essential to the process of NFT (Hansen, 2015).

The importance of language. It is also important for narrative family therapists to recognize the language that clients use in their stories and the impact of this language for understanding and labeling their experiences (Jones, 2003). In fact, it is so important that narrative family therapists use *story* and *language* not only as nouns but also as verbs, perhaps in recognition of the impact each can have. In this sense, language is the medium by which family members *story* (create meaning from) their experiences, and how families *language* (express meaning about) their interactions is largely dependent on the dominant cultural discourses available to them (White & Epston, 1990). These stories, which are based in societal and cultural messages or mores, often reflect people's beliefs about their own identities as well as each of their family members' identities.

Narrative therapists encourage clients to question these messages instead of automatically judging themselves by what society deems right or wrong, good or bad, and normal or abnormal. Toward this end, narrative therapists aim to help individuals recognize their selective attention to societal and cultural messages. Depending on the predominant cultural discourse influencing the family, the story and the language may differ dramatically. Instead of noticing only what fits their problem narrative, clients are encouraged to consider ways in which their narrative might be enriched by a strengths-based perspective (Gehart, 2014).

Based in systems theory, postmodernism, and social constructionism, narrative therapy is an intentional and dynamic dialogue in which new meaning can be created (Hoyt, 1998). These principles are evident in a variety of techniques and interventions used by narrative family therapists. The remainder of this article will use a fictional case study to describe and illustrate the counseling process using NFT techniques. It will conclude with recommendations for further development of expertise in NFT.

CASE STUDY: THE HENDERSON FAMILY

When couples or families seek counseling, it is not uncommon for them to arrive not only with a description of their complaints but also with an idea

of the problem. Such was the case with the Henderson family, a fictional composite of actual families with whom we have worked.

About two years after they married, Steve and Anna Henderson sought couples counseling. Aged 35 and 32 respectively, each of them had previously been married and divorced, and they were now co-parenting Anna's 11-year-old son, Tony. However, things were not going smoothly. Steve and Anna complained of difficulties connecting and communicating with one another and also reported tension between Tony and Steve. Anna attributed these difficulties to Steve's recent change in mood, and Steve admitted that he had been "on edge" quite a bit lately. Specifically, Steve had become increasingly angry and impatient with Anna and Tony over the last 3 months.

This represented a change from the family's previous level of functioning. Steve and Anna agreed that Steve got along well with Tony when he and Anna were dating and first married, and they both affirmed that communication used to be their strongest asset. Now, though, they were struggling to connect emotionally and physically, and the couple also expressed concern for Tony because of a recent drop in his grades and increased defiance at home. Anna reported feeling torn between wanting to defend her child and wanting to support her husband. She recognized Steve was going through a difficult time but stated that his anger made her want to withdraw, which usually made Steve even more upset.

Faced with such a scenario, professional counselors may find themselves tempted to rely on the bulk of their training, which, as discussed earlier, likely emphasized individual approaches to treatment. In doing so, it would not be unusual for counselors to agree with the couple's working hypothesis on entering therapy: that Steve is responsible for the problems that have arisen in the family. In such a case, a counselor might teach the couple conflict resolution skills, refer Steve for some individual counseling to work on his anger, or, should he refuse, work with Anna to evaluate whether to remain in the marriage. As the remainder of this article will illustrate, however, a systemic approach using NFT techniques may yield far better treatment outcomes.

NARRATIVE FAMILY THERAPY TECHNIQUES

Eliciting Stories: Meeting the Family Apart from the Problems

When many families first seek counseling, they have reached what seems to be an impasse or are struggling with what seems to be an insurmountable problem. As with the Hendersons, the family has often identified one member as "the problem" and hopes that the counselor will form an alliance to overcome or change that individual in order to fix the problem.

However, an overarching goal of NFT is to help family members separate themselves and one another from their problems and to work together to overcome a common problem rather than to change one another. Therefore, although they certainly listen carefully to these presenting concerns during the initial phase of counseling, narrative family therapists also strive to understand how each individual family member perceives the problem and to elicit stories

that may provide examples of the problem. Techniques used in this phase of NFT consist primarily of attending and listening skills, which are foundational to all forms of counseling. While eliciting and listening to these stories, the counselor strives to conceptualize them through the lenses of family systems theory and social constructionism.

Additionally, narrative family therapists not only listen to stories about problems and failures but also elicit stories about strengths and successes. This is referred to as meeting the family apart from the problems (Freedman & Combs, 1996). By meeting family members apart from their problems, the narrative therapist gets to know the family's strengths as well as the social and cultural contexts that may inform their interpretation of experiences (Leslie, 2011). The counselor is interested in hearing about what the various family members enjoy doing, their hobbies, what they like about where they live, how they feel about their friends and family, and what their typical week looks like (Gehart, 2014). The narrative family therapist is also listening for unique outcomes, or times when the family has overcome or minimized the effects of the presenting problem. Although unique outcomes play a greater role in later phases of the counseling process, it is also important for narrative family therapists to be attentive to them in the initial phase (Leslie, 2011; Nichols, 2013).

Helping families to remember parts of their story that are not characterized by conflict or problems aids in instilling hope and helping families enact their preferred narratives later in therapy. In addition to hearing what brought Anna and Steve into therapy, the counselor wanted to get to know them apart from their current problems. One important ritual Tony, Anna, and Steve enjoyed was going on family walks in the cool of the evening. They smiled as they recounted how they would laugh, talk about the day, and enjoy some fresh air together as a family. The counselor tucked this story away for later, when he would use externalizing questions and conversations to highlight unique outcomes.

After taking time to learn more about this family and their lives outside of the context of their problem in the first session, the counselor began to use externalizing conversations and questions to get a better sense of the influence of the problem on the family, the times in which the family overcame the problem, and their vision of how life would be once the problem was gone. While listening to and processing these stories, narrative family therapists use systems theory and social constructionism to guide their conceptualization. Especially important to NFT is the recognition of cultural discourse.

Recognizing Cultural Discourse

As noted earlier, narrative family therapists are guided by postmodernism and social constructionism. Specifically, narrative family therapists recognize that families create stories largely based on their cultural and social contexts, which greatly influence the genesis and maintenance of problems (Leslie, 2011). Therefore, instead of seeking to discover the objective truth, narrative family therapists are constantly listening for the potential impact of social and

cultural discourse on the stories families internalize as truth. Because the beliefs and values of one's culture are internalized as reality, many families develop deeply held negative narratives about themselves that are rooted in cultural discourse (Madigan, 2011).

Later in the counseling process, narrative family therapists strive to help clients recognize how such cultural discourse has influenced their negative beliefs. Narrative family therapists then empower clients to consider alternative ways of viewing their situation instead of judging themselves by societal norms. In order to help families accomplish this, the counselor begins by listening for societal or cultural contributions to the family members' stories for the purpose of case conceptualization and implementation of interventions (Shalay & Brownlee, 2007).

As Steve and Anna shared their concerns, it was clear that they both identified Steve as the primary problem. As the counselor and couple explored this, Steve admitted that he was worried about whether he was really "cut out" for marriage. After all, his first marriage ended in divorce. When the counselor probed to understand more, Steve shared that he had an argument with his ex-wife approximately three months ago. Not only did she blame Steve for the divorce, she also said she felt sorry for his new wife and stepson, as they really got a "loser" in the deal.

This conversation shed light on the impact of cultural discourse on the Henderson family and, more specifically, on Steve. The societal norm that "marriage is forever" contributed to his feelings of failure, and the comments from his ex-wife reinforced his fears that he may not be "cut out" for marriage.

Externalizing the Problem: Separating the Problem from the Family

In the next phase of NFT, the counselor uses questions and conversations to help the family separate itself from its current problems. Family members often believe that problems reside within themselves or their family members, and this perspective often hinders families from solving their problems, as it positions family members to fight for power over one another rather than to collaborate toward a solution to the problem (White, 2007). When counselors use the technique of externalization, which Gehart (2014) identified as the "signature technique of narrative therapy" (p. 405), they ask questions and engage in conversations to understand the history of the problem, the context in which it takes over, the impact it has on the family's life, and the tactics it uses to overthrow the family (Freedman & Combs, 1996; White, 2007). Next, narrative family therapists use language that frames the family's problem as an "external entity" (Nichols, 2013, p. 274). Using externalizing language reinforces that the problem does not reside within the family system or within a single individual. Instead, the problem is external to the family. This allows family members to decrease their need to blame and/or change one another, and instead unifies them around defeating a common problem (White, 2007).

In this way, externalizing conversations, questions, and language help family members view the problem as the problem instead of viewing a partic-

ular family member as the problem (Gallant & Strauss, 2011; Leslie, 2011). By viewing the problem this way, family members can keep their identities separate from the problem (Gehart, 2014). Rather than viewing the problem as residing within the individual family members, “externalization open[s] up possibilities for them to describe themselves, each other, and their relationships from a new, non-problem-saturated perspective; it enable[s] the development of an alternative story of family life, one that [is] more attractive to family members” (White & Epston, 1990, p. 39).

Because anger appeared to be at the center of many of the Henderson family’s conflicts, the counselor decided to begin to externalize this experience. The transcripts excerpted in the following sections further illustrate how the counselor utilized externalizing conversations and questions to understand the influence of the problem more clearly.

Exploring the Influence of the Problem

To better understand the influence of anger on the family, the counselor asked about the history and contexts in which anger showed up, the impact it had on their lives in the past and present, the ways (if any) in which anger influenced or related to other parts of their lives, and the tactics anger used to influence the family. In this session segment, the counselor helped Anna and Steve explore the influence of anger on their relationship.

Counselor: So, anger sometimes unexpectedly jumps in the middle of your conversations?

Anna: Yeah, it comes up at some of the most inopportune times. Even when we are being light-hearted or just talking about our day . . . it makes it hard to want to talk to Steve.

Counselor: Mhmm . . .

Steve: When she pulls away, it makes me even more upset. I know we are both trying hard to connect, but lately it seems it always ends in me being angry and her shutting down. I hate it. I don’t want to lose Anna or Tony, and I’m afraid what will happen if things don’t change.

Counselor: So anger tries to pit you against each other, even despite your best efforts and desire to connect.

Both: Yeah.

Counselor: Steve, what things is anger trying to distract you from?

Steve: What do you mean?

Counselor: Does anger’s influence cover up other things that are going on inside of you?

Steve: Hmmm, I never thought about it that way. Maybe. I guess after my argument with my ex-wife, I have been feeling overwhelmed and worried if I am actually a good father and husband. I usually keep what’s going on inside me bottled up because I don’t want to burden Anna or Tony. I try my best to hold it in, but I think sometimes it causes me to be short with them both.

Counselor: Anger distracts you from the fear of losing your family and being a good husband and father.

Steve: (With his head down) Mhmm.

In the next session, in which Tony was also present, the counselor helped the Henderson family explore the influence of anger on the relationship between Steve and Tony.

Counselor: Tony, I really appreciate you coming in again today. I remember from our last session that you said you liked watching cartoons about ninjas. Can you tell me what a ninja looks like?

Anna and Steve: (Looking at me, puzzled)

Tony: Mmm... Yeah, I think so. They dress in stuff that makes them hard to see, and they attack you when you least expect it!

Counselor: Right, they are super sneaky, and their clothing makes it hard for anyone to know their true identity.

Tony: I remember watching a cartoon about it once, it was about a ninja named Sam. He would go around stealing people's candy. He was finally caught, and turns out he was just really hungry.

Counselor: Sounds like you've had some experience with ninjas! I know this may sound crazy, but did you know that anger is kind of like a ninja?

Tony: (Leaning in)

Counselor: Yeah, it sometimes sneaks its way in between people when they are least expecting it and makes them really upset or hurt at one another. Has anger ever snuck in between you and Steve?

Tony: It has, and sometimes it even feels like a karate chop to the stomach!

Counselor: So, the anger ninja not only comes between you both but even makes your stomach hurt.

Tony: Mhmm. Especially when Steve yells at my mom or me. That makes me really angry too. I sometimes yell or get sarcastic with him, but I usually just go back to my room and play video games. That's what I used to do when my dad and mom would argue.

Counselor: Sounds like the anger ninja really tries hard to keep you two at odds. How has the anger ninja interfered with you being able to have the kind of relationship you and Steve used to have?

Tony: Well... I guess it stops me from wanting to spend as much time with him. It's like the anger ninja steals all of the happiness out of Steve and my mom. I really miss having fun with him.

Counselor: The anger ninja has tried really hard to steal away the kind of relationship you really want with Steve.

Tony: Yeah. (Sigh)

Re-Authoring the Story

The ultimate goal of NFT is to offer family members an opportunity to re-author their story through the co-construction of preferred narratives

(Gallant & Strauss, 2011). Therefore, in this next phase, the narrative therapist helps families re-author their stories (Gehart, 2014). The re-authoring process involves the identification of exceptions and unique outcomes, is followed by the use of questions designed to more fully understand the context and meaning of the externalized outcomes as well as the exceptions, and concludes with the identification of a preferred narrative.

It is important to note that, in NFT, the counselor is not viewed as the expert on the family's problems or stories. Therefore, the counselor does not provide the family with a re-authored narrative. Instead, through therapeutic dialogue, the counselor facilitates the family's exploration of different perspectives and supports the family's consideration of alternative ways of viewing the situation (Becvar & Becvar, 1999). However, due to the prominence of problem-saturated stories, it is often difficult for families to see alternative story lines (Madigan, 2011). These neglected events and experiences are called *exceptions* or *unique outcomes* (Madigan, 2011; White, 2007).

Identifying Exceptions and Unique Outcomes

As counselors recognize the impact of cultural discourse and assist the family in externalizing the problem and understanding its influence, they also help the family begin to recognize times when the problem is less pervasive and when they have resisted or overcome its influence. This is important because families often present with problem-saturated stories that ignore other more constructive information (Gallant & Strauss, 2011). These stories often reflect people's beliefs about their identity as well as the identities of each of their family members. Counselors using a narrative therapy approach therefore aim to help individuals expand and enrich their views of situations rather than selectively attending only to what fits their problem narrative (Gehart, 2014). Recognizing exceptions and unique outcomes is also facilitated through externalizing questions and conversations. This process includes identifying times when the problem did not occur, asking about what others would say about the prevalence of the problem, inquiring about other situations and contexts in which the problem was less pervasive, and determining whether there were times in the past when they were less susceptible to the problem. The following session segment illustrates the therapeutic conversation involved in helping the Henderson family identify exceptions and unique outcomes.

To help the Henderson family identify exceptions and unique outcomes to the problem, the counselor asked directly about times when Steve was able to resist or outsmart anger, about times when Anna, Tony and Steve were able to connect despite anger trying to get in their way, about what life would look like and feel like if anger did not get the best of their relationships with one another, about how Anna or others in Steve's life had seen him escape the influence of anger, and about whether there were specific times or contexts in which Steve refused to give in to anger's influence.

Counselor: Can either of you think of a time, in the past or recently, when you were able to team up successfully against anger and connect with each other?

Anna: Hmm . . . Yeah, actually. Steve, do you remember a month ago when you, Tony, and me all went to that trail for a walk? We all laughed so hard! It was like the stress of work, school, and ex-spouses were a million miles away.

Steve: (*Smiling slightly*) Yeah that was a great afternoon. I remember feeling so relaxed. Tony and I actually spoke without any arguments about school or his attitude.

Counselor: Then what happened?

Steve: We went back home and had a nice dinner together. That night Anna and I laid in bed and talked to 12 a.m. about everything. I remember opening up about the argument I had with my ex-spouse. We haven't talked like that since we were dating. It was nice.

Anna: Yeah, Steve seemed like his old self. I enjoyed hearing his heart. It made me want to open up too.

Counselor: Wow, it's like anger didn't have a chance that day! I remember you all saying in our first meeting that family walks were a special time for you all. I want to know more about how you all were able to come together to undermine anger's influence that day.

This recognition of exceptions, combined with externalizing the problem and redefining it, aids in the transition to a deeper level of re-authoring the story. Specifically, NFT counselors use *landscape of action* and *landscape of identity* questions to help families more deeply understand the exceptions and unique outcomes. This deeper understanding is necessary to develop alternative story lines and preferred narratives.

Landscape of action and landscape of identity questions. The identification of exceptions and unique outcomes is followed by the use of questions designed to more fully understand the context and meaning of the externalized outcomes as well as the exceptions and unique outcomes. To highlight the unique outcomes and draw out alternative story lines, the narrative family therapist first listens for times when the problem could have occurred but did not. The counselor then follows up with landscape of action questions to help map out specifically what actions were taken and by whom (White, 2007). The counselor asks questions to gather details about the event, such as the circumstances, sequencing and timing, and overall story line (Gehart, 2014). As the counselor gathers information about the event, it is also important to remember to *language* the problem as external to the family. Landscape of action questions helped the counselor to understand the circumstances that supported the unique outcome and helped the family see that it was not by accident that the event occurred. An example of a landscape of action question used with the Henderson family was "I'm wondering what situations or circumstances helped your family to enjoy your afternoon walk that day." This

question, similar to others the counselor asked, helped the family to discuss internal and external contextual factors that influenced the unique outcome.

After mapping out the *what* and the *how* of the unique outcome with landscape of action questions, the counselor asks landscape of identity questions (Gehart, 2014). These questions focus on how family members assign meaning and interpret the intentions behind their interactions as well as assumptions about one another's character (White, 2007).

To help the Henderson family strengthen the connection between their preferred outcome and personal identity, it was important to explore the meaning ascribed to Steve's anger.

Counselor: So, Steve, it sounds like that argument with your ex really affected you.

Steve: It really did! I mean, what if she's right? What if I am a loser? What makes me think I can do any better [at marriage] this time around?

Counselor: Anna, did you realize this was going on for Steve?

Anna: Honestly, no. All I noticed was that he's been really on edge and that he seems to get angry at the slightest little thing.

Steve: She's right. I didn't tell Anna how I've been feeling inside.

Counselor: So what she's been seeing on the outside has been the irritable behavior, but that doesn't really match with your internal sense of worry and fear.

Steve: Right.

Counselor: Anna, what does it mean to you that Steve has been so worried about screwing up in this marriage?

Anna: (*tearing up*) It tells me that he cares a lot more than he's been showing and that Tony and I are really important to him.

As illustrated in this session segment, the counselor uses these questions to help family members better understand the motives behind one another's behaviors and to reevaluate their assumptions about each family member's identity. Such questions empower clients to further expand a narrow view of their interactions and problem-saturated narratives.

The goal is to allow each family member "flexibility for multiple interpretations of what he or she might be—allowing both client and therapist the possibility to re-vise, re-collect, and re-member . . . a story" (Madigan, 2011, p. 30). This frees up the family members to re-author the negative story lines they have created about themselves and one another to consider more preferred narratives (White 2007). Using these techniques, narrative therapists help family members who often have multiple, sometimes conflicting and coexisting stories to discover, co-create, and live out the stories they prefer (Leslie, 2011; Nichols, 2013).

Identifying and preparing to enact the preferred narrative. The re-authoring process concludes with the identification of a preferred narrative. The preferred narrative is one that supports healthier functioning and greater satisfaction within the family through the externalization, reframing, and management of problems as a united team. Two techniques used for this purpose are *re-membling* and *definitional ceremonies* (Gehart, 2014).

Re-membering is an opportunity for family members to determine who has power and influence over their identities (White, 2007). This may include people from the family members' past, present, and projected future. This is also a time for each member to examine the extent of others' power and influence and to determine whether they will allow those individuals to have continued influence (Gehart, 2014). Re-membering is a powerful way to enable the family to decide whom they will include in their lives and to what extent those individuals will be allowed to exert influence (Gehart, 2014).

The NFT technique of re-membering was used to help the Henderson family work toward solidifying the new perspectives they had on one another and on their family as a whole. Of particular importance to Steve and Anna was re-membering Steve's relationship with his ex-wife. Steve's doubts about his capability as a father and husband stemmed a great deal from his previous marriage. His ex-wife's comments often led him to believe he was hopeless to perform either role well. The counselor and the family discussed the idea of re-membering how his ex-wife had influenced his identity as a father and husband in the past, how she influenced him currently, and how he would like her influence to impact him in the future. This process included setting boundaries emotionally and physically (e.g., establishing co-parenting strategies and determining preferred communication with the ex-spouse).

Facilitating Definitional Ceremonies

A final way of strengthening the family's preferred identity is through definitional ceremonies (Gehart, 2014). Definitional ceremonies, which "involve inviting significant others to *witness* the emerging story," are generally used near the conclusion of the counseling process "to solidify the emerging preferred narrative and identity" (Gehart, 2014, p. 411). In this intervention, family members choose people to help them develop their future life story and emerging identity. After each family member tells his or her story, the chosen "witnesses" have an opportunity to retell the story they heard while incorporating their own perspectives. The counselor encourages those providing feedback to avoid giving advice, making judgments, or theorizing. Each family member then retells the story, incorporating aspects of the witnesses' perspectives (Gehart, 2014).

The Henderson family began to report improvement as they committed to re-creating times in which they connected in spite of anger, as anger's influence diminished as a result of re-membering Steve's relationship with his ex-wife, as their view of one another shifted from perceiving each other as the problem to seeing the problem as the problem, and as they reframed their understanding of what the anger really meant.

To conclude our work together, the Henderson family engaged in a definitional ceremony that included several neighbors and friends. Some of these friends and neighbors were also blended families, and all were identified as key supporters. In the family's first telling, they talked about the struggles of having been hurt in first marriages and of being a blended family, and about

how overcoming these struggles included working toward the common goal of connecting as a family in ways they most enjoyed. They also discussed how they believed that there was no “right” way to be a family and that comparing themselves to the culture or to previous relationships only hindered them from fully appreciating their relationships with one another.

Their friends and neighbors offered examples of how they had seen the family come through two difficult divorces and the immense strength and love they had seen despite the difficulties they encountered at first. In the family’s retelling, the family members noted how they could not initially see the strength, but that hearing it from those they loved really solidified that they were in fact strong. Tony added, “Yeah, like a ninja family.”

In a final session to process the definitional ceremony, the counselor facilitates a conversation about the action steps necessary to enact these preferred narratives. Follow-up sessions may be scheduled in advance or arranged on an as-needed basis.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

We hope that this article inspires readers to add NFT to their repertoire of professional tools and to seek additional opportunities to develop their competence in using NFT approaches in their counseling practice. Readers interested in developing a deeper understanding of the theoretical foundation and practice of NFT are encouraged to read *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (White & Epston, 1990). This book was the first published collaboration between White and Epston in their development of narrative therapy and is a must-read for those interested in the origin of narrative therapy. White and Epston (1990) provide an explanation for their theory, a rationale for the use of the narrative metaphor in their work with clients, and an explanation of the influence of culture in how clients understand the stories of their lives. The purpose of this book is to provide a paradigm for helping clients re-story their lives and experiences to bring about change and healing.

Another recommended reading is *Narrative Therapy: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities* (Freedman & Combs, 1996). This book allows readers to further their understanding of the history and theoretical basis for narrative therapy. A how-to for conducting narrative therapy, both in attitude and intervention, this classic book also addresses the practical application of this approach, offering clear and helpful clinical examples.

White (2007) also published a very accessible introductory book on the practice of narrative therapy entitled *Maps of Narrative Practice*. This book uses maps as a guiding metaphor for helping clients explore their stories. The chapters are organized according to the phases of narrative therapy and provide brief definitions of concepts and goals within each phase. White’s years of experience are evident in his clinical examples of how to implement narrative therapy.

A final and more recent book on the history, theory, practice, and research base of narrative therapy is Madigan’s (2011) *Narrative Therapy*. This book

provides readers with a thorough understanding of the history and theoretical foundation of narrative therapy and also illustrates the implementation of narrative therapy through several clinical examples. This book also offers a useful summary of the most current research on the efficacy of narrative therapy.

For those interested in the application of narrative therapy with specific populations, relevant sources include articles about utilizing NFT with homeless families (Fraenkel et al., 2009), couples (Gallant & Strauss, 2011), stepfamilies (Gold, 2016; Jones, 2003, 2004), and families experiencing the coming out process of an adolescent (Saltzburg, 2007). It is our hope that this article, supplemented by the recommended readings, will support professional counselors in adding and successfully using narrative therapy as a new tool in their therapeutic repertoire.

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