

The Narrative Metaphor: A Report of Experience

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I'm not sure whether I'm the only contributor to this symposium who positions her/himself as a 'becoming' narrative therapist, but, given this possible and lonely position I struggled to know how to contribute. I wasn't even sure I had anything to say. I read the other contributions but (as Carmel Flaskas suspected) this debate isn't one that's current in the UK scene. Here, narrative therapy has a smaller foothold in therapeutic practice and systemic therapists do not, I believe, experience a divide.

What would be an interesting way (for all of us) for me to respond? I couldn't find much energy for an academic contribution; but just telling my story might not seem academic enough. So I made a list of some possible ways to contribute:

1. Speculate about the hopes behind the systemic or systemic—narrative authors' contributions. Were they wanting dialogue? If so why? Did they wish to learn more about narrative ideas? Did they wish to understand why a systemic therapist might choose a narrative path for her/himself? Did they hope to warn off other therapists from the dangers of such a commitment? Were they fearful of the dangers to all of us if separate interests evolve?
2. Speculate why it's apparently been so hard to enlist contributions from narrative therapists to the symposium. I even contacted The Dulwich Centre, where they were aware of the symposium but not aware of anyone wishing to participate. What could this mean? Would participation suggest bravery, naïveté or what? And why would I want to participate?
3. Make a list of the criticisms levelled against narrative therapy, narrative therapists and Michael White and address them individually.
4. Explain why I have set myself in this direction and the advantages that I have experienced in my professional life, my clients' lives and my personal life.
5. Compare my feelings now about narrative vs. systemic metaphors with my feelings fifteen years ago (after I had abandoned a structural model for a Milan model) and my lack of interest then in debating Structural vs. Milan.
6. Make some neat remarks like 'Therapists choose models to suit themselves, not clients'; or 'No-one ever changed their model because of an outcome study'; or 'There's been too much reading between the (narrative) lines and not enough reading the lines'.
7. Mount a counter-critique about systemic therapy's reluctance to respond to developing ideas that might require a shift in comfortable old positions and practices, and how the old revolutionaries in family therapy risk becoming the new establishment.

As, in my opinion, choice of working style is more to do with the fit with the therapist than anything else, I'll tell you about what has seemed to fit for me rather than the other options.

When I abandoned trying to develop a structural style in 1984, it was more than a change in therapeutic style and more than a changed attitude to work: it was a wholesale change in the way I viewed the world and the structure I used to interpret and relate to the world. Reading *Paradox and Counterparadox* (Selvini-Palazzoli, Prata, Boscolo and Cecchin, 1978) led to a discovery that there existed a style that fitted better with my views, my experiences of life, and my preferences for action. Equally importantly, I preferred Milan ethics. I learned that it was possible to help others with their dilemmas without acting so prescriptively or with a preferred outcome, without so much pushing or pulling. I had experienced how unhelpful prescriptive actions had been in relation to my own life. Milan ideas felt more respectful of others' ideas and knowledge and less reverent of cultural or therapist norms about how people should behave (others may interpret Milan and Structural ideas differently but that's not the point).

I felt better about how I was working, and excited about the potential for more respectful kinds of action. And I had little interest in debating theory or practice issues with those who had remained loyal to structural ideas. Why should I want to? Do structural therapists debate with behavioural therapists? I had no interest in converting others, nor discussing issues from a perspective I was trying to move away from. Such discussions seemed to offer me little, perhaps they would even reduce my concentration on learning the new things I wished to learn. Yes, I think I even feared I might be tempted back by the structural model's authority and clarity, and the lure of the familiar.

So now, having moved on again, I'm not surprised that many narrative therapists seem to have little energy for contributing to this symposium. I'm not interested in trying to promote narrative therapy as more effective, more ethical, more exciting or more or less anything than systemic therapy. I'm just interested in doing it better. And I have no interest in contributing to dividing or joining the family therapy movement. This is simply not my agenda.

My regard for the usefulness of purely systemic ideas hasn't changed, but these ideas alone aren't helping me move in my preferred direction, build the kind of identity I seek, or learn the practices that fit with narrative ways. (Of course I could try and be very narrative AND very systemic, but this sounds like a different direction and one of those integrations that involve giving up as much as you take on. To get the most from the ideas, I need to explore them through commitment, not compromise.)

Of course the post-Milan, second order cybernetic and postmodern style that I was trying to work to (Hayward, 1996) was an advance for me on 1980s Milan ideas (and probably an easier approach to move to a narrative practice from) but there were still problems for me that a narrative approach seemed to help with:

Working with a single client. I had had persistent difficulties in sustaining my interest in conversation with individual clients. I never really got the hang of working systemically with individuals. With a narrative hat on, I experienced how exciting conversation with individuals could be for me. And I was interested in how interested I was. Narrative ideas and practices had opened up some new territory to me.

Neutrality and the clinical stance. After many years hard work and self-discipline I had become reasonably competent at being even-handed with *people*, but I could never feel the same even-handedness about different *ideas* and my own actions inevitably gave away the ideas I valued. My postmodern commitment to transparency did have me using reflecting teams but I never felt very transparent and often felt less 'present' than transparency implies. Of course, even-handedness remains important and I'm grateful to my Milan training for its emphasis on this and on curiosity, but I don't think or talk 'neutrality' which is a relief for me (and for some of my colleagues!) And I'm content to retain my previous fascination with circular questioning which reflects

the decentred respectfulness and close attention to feedback that both sets of ideas hold important.

Politics and positioning. I was getting bored with trying to leave politics to the politicians. Feeling more confident in my views (or perhaps less concerned about what others thought) I wanted to feel I could openly commit myself to politics and positions I supported. Perhaps unlike Cecchin, I wanted to be a therapist and, in a small way, a political activist. The politics I read into narrative therapy suited me well and helped me become much clearer about my views. I learned so much about what I thought and believed in from reading about what others believed in. One colleague said 'I've waited so long for these [narrative] ideas' and another said "I've waited all my life for these ideas to come along". Many of us are discovering ourselves through discovering narrative ideas. Milan politics (or lack of them) had given rise to awkwardness with some colleagues who, lacking a Milan persuasion saw this position as immoral rather than amoral (the latter being preferred). Narrative politics and principles seem more acceptable to colleagues, even if adopting the practices that these principles require is a harder shift.

With clients (what a dreadful word) I find myself much more sympathetic to their situations, much more appreciative of their successes, and interested in friendship as well as therapy. The old clinical (dis)stance has gone.

Narrative ideas have also had an effect on my *professional relationships*. With some colleagues I experience a new collaborative partnership, with others a closeness that is much more personal. These changes have come directly from how narrative ideas invited me to see and relate with others. Old distinctions and boundaries have fallen away, my professional and personal personas are merging.

Narrative ideas have taught me to *notice different things*, e.g. ways people have of standing up for what they believe in, protesting against injustice, and keeping close to important people from the present and the past, that my previous training never let me see. I can also see the attempts I have made to stand up for what I believe in, protest against injustice I have witnessed, and keep close to important people from my present and past.

No change this big comes easily, though, and doubts and challenges have included:

Can I learn how to engage families and not just individuals in a narrative conversation? Especially at the beginning, I struggled to retain a narrative frame with just one person. As happens when you're learning, it becomes easier over time. Later it began to seem possible to hold a narrative frame and more than one person in mind.

Are my questions (which are more likely to be suggestive than previously) undermining people's options to choose their own paths? Are these questions over-influencing of possible meanings? This possibility

conflicted head-on with my postmodern principles and caused me serious doubts. Only after repeatedly experiencing the appreciation of people consulting me who knew just how these ideas made sense of their experiences did I feel this was a justifiable loss of 'neutrality'. 'Neutrality' had been getting in the way of usefulness.

Can I become a student again and return to not-knowing-and-not-having-an-idea-in-my-head? Do I want to give up hard won confidence to re-experience fumbling and incompetence? Certainly I got back in touch with aspects of student experience and re-appreciated some student dilemmas. And having a colleague who continues to share this narrative therapy foray meant I was, at least, supported through the most traumatic time!

Well, I think I've told my story, or at least some of it. It would have been interesting if I could have compared 'usefulness' of styles but we'd probably share concerns about the 'science' of such 'measures', even if they were readily available.

This exercise has made me more aware of the risks of a 'divide' growing in this other corner of the world and the possible ways I might work to avoid it happening. I now intend to talk more about the systemic ideas that my practice values, the systemic training and experience that made access to narrative ideas easier, and the ways all our styles share the promotion of choice in lifestyle, identity, problem-solving and meaning-making. And I want to thank Amanda Redstone for her partnership in exploring the narrative metaphor.