

# PERSONAL NARRATIVES AND PROFESSIONAL HELPING:

## Guidelines for Writing Autobiographical Narratives

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The helping process generally begins with a story (Howard, 1991). We ask clients "What brings you here?" By training and personal characteristics, professionals are skilled at inviting and eliciting clients' personal narratives about their problems, struggles, and lived experiences. Yet when retelling clients' narratives — whether in written reports, case conferences, supervision, or "shop talk" with colleagues — we typically translate these accounts into "professional stories", using concepts from human behavior theories, diagnostic categories, counseling techniques, or research findings.

Unfortunately, this recasting often edits out our own experience of the helping process. As participants with clients in constructing and deconstructing their stories, we also are engaged in making meaning about our work and identities as helping professionals. Despite the examples of Freud and Carl Rogers, who interwove personal experiences into their professional work (albeit in markedly different ways), helping professionals probably are most comfortable in telling stories for public consumption about clients' progress in relation to the

planned intervention, rather than sharing the private stories we tell ourselves about our growth, struggles, and development.

Writing a personal narrative of the professional helping process is one way of uniting these public and private stories. Autobiographical narratives preserve distillations of our practice wisdom of working with others, and invite the reader to enter into our past thoughts and feelings surrounding the process of becoming professional helpers (Widdershoven, 1993). Through narratives, these experiences are re-enacted, reconsidered, and reinterpreted in light of our present and future needs. Or, as Perlman (1989) puts it, we "look back to see ahead". Through the telling, listening, retelling, reflection, and interpretation, narratives may become universal stories that resonate or "ring true" with later generations of helpers who follow us, through their own unique journeys, along a shared pathway.

The following guide may be helpful when writing an autobiographical narrative. It is an adaptation of the familiar "who, what, where, when,



how, and why" organizational structure used in literature and journalism:

### Who

Narratives typically contain three types of actors: (a) the "characters" from past events being recounted; (b) the present writer of the tale; and (c) the intended audience. From the storehouse of lived experience, we selectively attend to and pitch stories likely to be of greatest interest to our listeners (Riessman, 1993). Although listeners usually are not present when autobiographical stories are being transcribed into written text, they are nonetheless implied. We write to someone, such as to a hypothetical audience of other helpers who might benefit from my experience with this type of client. We also write because of someone. Perhaps, because a professional heroine or mentor who heard us during formative periods in our professional development, we are able to subsequently hear clients' stories in new ways (Coles, 1989).

### What

Narratives are first-person accounts of important experiences or "consequent events" (Widdershoven, 1993) involved in the helping process. Typically, these accounts describe experiences in encountering and/or resolving barriers to delivering help. It is important to note that narratives need not be success stories, since learning from active mistakes is an essential skill of the helping

process (Shulman, 1991).

### Where

Narratives are located at the intersection points where the life trajectories of professional helpers and clients meet and are mutually changed as a result of the encounter (Howard, 1991). Narratives describe the context and place of external social reality (i.e., clients' presenting problem, agency, service delivered) and of our own subjective experience (Rosenwald & Ochenberg, 1992). For example, in working with others from culturally diverse backgrounds (i.e., age, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation), we learn about ourselves in unexpected, perhaps uncomfortable ways (e.g., recognition of unseen sexism, racism, homophobia, etc.). We begin to place our individual stories within a larger context — the great stories of our culture, society, and historical time — which we inhabit and embody (Mair, 1988).

### When

Temporal order in written narratives is more formally presented and circumscribed than in oral stories. That is, the sequence of occurrences corresponds more closely to the order of telling, which makes it difficult to recognize omission, internal contradictions, transpositions and/or telescoping events. Autobiographical narratives, therefore, are not recording historical truths. Rather, through the very act of selecting and sequencing events, narratives

interpret — rather than directly present — the lived experience of the helping process (Riessman, 1993).

### How

Narratives convey the interactional process occurring between clients and helper to illuminate not only "what happened", but also "how things turned out in this particular way". Process information highlights motivations for acting in certain ways in past times, and the parallel process occurring across time about the lessons learned as a professional helper. In this way, others may share in the process of experience and reflection, even when separated by time and distance.

### Why

Crafting free-flowing, multi-layered lived-experience into a written story format imposes an order and sense on that experience. Autobiographical narratives allow the essential meanings of experience to be extracted, communicated, and revived by and between writer and reader in the context of the present (Riessman, 1993; Widdershoven, 1993). □

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