



BOOK REVIEW

Jill Freedman and Gene Combs

Narrative Therapy
W.W. Norton. N.Y. 1996

It is very possible that we are on the brink of a "Brave New World of helping." We clearly are on the brink. The social welfare system "as we knew it" is being dismantled, and powerful corporations are prowling the corridors of power, chafing at the bit, eager to channel their bids for the most lucrative portions of the phased out programs. We no longer have to worry about people falling through the systems safety net, they have been flung off the safety nets. And while we pray they will somehow survive, we anticipate that there will be increased stress, personal catastrophes as well as social, class, and ethnic divisiveness and, an increased need for help. Should we leave helping to the "Privateers?" What have we to offer? Not much, helping is tough, success rates for some problems have barely inched into the two digit figures, and our results are nothing to brag about. It's time for something new and maybe Freedman and Combs have an answer, at least on what has come to be called (forgive me) the micro level.

In a sense the use of personal stories as a means of helping is not new. Freud used the stories told him from dreams to unravel the roots of patient problems. Future oriented therapists have long asked the clients to present a story of themselves in the future, and three generation

geneograms has been a way of using generational stories to help clients understand some of their present situation. In community organization the sharing of childhood games, or common foods are often used to bring diverse groups together as a beginning helping dialogue. Numerous other approaches such as fables, parables, folk tales, paper bag dramatics, and client drawings, are only a few of the ways stories have been used to help. Only recently, however, has there been an integration of the diverse material into a theoretically based, concentrated approach to use narratives as a therapeutic approach, standing on its own.

The work of Epston and White, the major contributors to what has become known as Narrative Therapy, is at the forefront of a paradigm shift in the reformation of clinical practice. While their work is still relatively unknown in the counseling field, *Narrative Therapy* should bring their work to the attention of a much broader audience. Although their popularity has increased through workshops they have done in the United States, and their book *Narrative Approaches to Therapeutic Helping* (1990), most of their recent work has been published in South Australia, and has not been readily available.

While this book's opening

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chapter pays tribute to some of the early roots of narrative therapy, particularly the work of Erickson and the family therapists who have been at the forefront of change in Family Therapy, such as Lynn Hoffman, it is soon clear who the heroes of the narrative therapy story are. Evolutionary trends in family therapy lead to concerns of power, which leads to Foucault, which leads to social constructionism, and ultimately to White's belief that we must accept that the helping situation is a "political" situation enmeshed in the use of power (often misused).

The authors pursue the work of Epston and White, augmenting the ideas with ample case material and examples from their own practice. They discuss the various techniques they use to amplify the stories that clients tell, and approaches to helping clients "reauthor" their stories. Their work follows closely the work of Epston and White. They give their own versions of letters to clients, declarations and certificates of participation; techniques written about in *Narrative Approaches*. Certain of these techniques such as "externalizing the problem" are based on White's dictum, that "The Person is not the problem, the problem is the problem." White is heavily committed to free the client of blame. This is done at times by naming an external enemy, such as "Sneaky Poo" in the case of a child who soils frequently. He works with the clients to help them find ways to trick and overcome these enemies, asking why they want to hurt the client or have their way. He might ask how "Anorexia" became such

an expert on what a client should eat." When faced with an enemy external to themselves, they are more able to energize a plan to combat that enemy with the support of the worker, the family, the community and even imaginary institutions. They are ready to "reauthor" their lives.

Some of White's work reflects the idea that helpers must accept the political situation that may have led to clients being in need of help. For many female clients, the male dominated society frequently is enmeshed in the problem. The clients are helped to recognize this, similarly with racist and class factors. This has led White into a more community oriented approach with the use of other clients who are used to contact the client through letters or imagined groups. He has started to work with, and help train aboriginal groups in Australia in some of the narrative approaches, utilizing their own history and stories. Including the recognition of the story of their abuse and devaluing. Epston has used letters to clients extensively after conferences. They often serve as the only conference records. He suggests that research indicates letters are equal to two or three sessions in their value to the client. Could we initiate such a technique in some of our bureaucratic agencies which require many formal records, or forbid putting such things in writing to clients?

White alerts the worker to the political nature of the helping process in our society. How can the helping contact not reflect the society of which it is a part? Epston and White use therapy in its broadest sense of not only in-

dividual, but community healing, social healing, societal healing. That is what might make the "Brave New World," a world in which we are not craving for "soma," but for social justice, a world in which helpers need to recognize that the part they play can either further erode, or promote efforts to evolve effective helping approaches.

Freedman and Combs offer an amplification and pulling together of narrative approaches and discuss the emerging developments of other leaders in the field. While the paradigm is not developed further, a lack of familiarity with the earlier works of Epston and White will lament, the book's down to earth style and case material will prove a worthy source for those willing to explore the narrative approach. This is a new approach, perhaps a new paradigm, not a bandwagon, but it is well worth listening to the notes. □

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