

APSAD 2025 CONFERENCE

Supporting dignity: Deconstructing and reconstructing people's stories

Notes and Resources

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Narrative Practice

Some themes, examples and resources

Principles and theory

Contemporary counselling practice based on relational approaches, consider not only the relationship between counsellor and person being supported, but also relational understandings of identity, experience, knowledge and power. Without acknowledging the role of culture and society on these, their influence on a person's experiences and on the counselling relationship itself, may remain invisible.

Relational understandings in counselling reflect developments in relational anthropology, sociology, epistemology and research.

A summary of some important themes and sources of theory underpinning relational counselling practice is provided in Table 1.

Themes Of Narrative Practice

Michael White and David Epston drew on a range of philosophers, anthropologists, and other authors interested in the relational understandings summarised in the attached Table. They explored individual and community orientations to identity, knowledge, experience and power. They drew on a narrative metaphor to explore and support agency.

Some themes of narrative practices:

Stories shape our lives

We all hold multiple identities, related to the communities, organisations, cultures and social groups of which we are part. Our lives contain multiple 'story lines', extending over times and circumstances of our lives. For people who face challenges in life, these can include deficit-based 'dominant' stories. These sit alongside 'alternative stories', often obscured, which reflect resilience and agency.

Narrative practices support peoples to explore these identities, themes and 'alternative' story lines, in ways that support a person's agency and preferred directions in life.

Naming injustices

Relational and narrative practices seek to acknowledge operations of power, including inequalities injustices, oppressions and exploitations. These are explored in such ways as bring to light actions of resistance, resilience and agency.

For more about this, click here:

Externalisation

These perspectives help people being supported by counsellors to explore their *relationships* with problems and challenges in their lives.

This is radically different to encouraging people we support, to explore challenges and problems as being located as part of their identities (i.e addict, offender, victim, depressed person ...), or as a personal lack (of skills, motivations, insights ...) or other 'labels'.

Whilst sometimes trivialised, this approach underpins all relational and narrative practice. Peoples are supported to explore their relationships what they value in life: people, places, identities, cultures, values, activities ...

This approach supports people to explore the dynamic nature of life: such things are never 'static' and always changeable. People are supported to explore the agency that has assisted them to maintain their relationships with what they have held important to them, irrespective of the challenges they have needed to deal with. By exploring these commitments, resilience, 'standing up against', in some detail, skills and strategies can be given prominence, along with ideas about how these relationships can be further strengthened.

Exploring the effects of problems

Part of this process is to ensure that 'problems' are not trivialised. The effects that problems have on the lives of individuals need to be acknowledged and explored – both as a way of acknowledging the extent and impacts of hardship, and as a basis to go on to explore the nature, extent and positive effects of directions that are preferred in their life.

Alternative Storylines

When our lives have been dominated by 'problem stories' often associated with negative, internalised understandings of identity, alternative or preferred storylines are often 'suppressed', encouraged by the cultural or political context (eg. colonisation) social setting, or even the assumptions that can underpin support and therapy services.

Resistance, perseverance, skills and knowledge

For this reason, a feature of narrative practice is to bring alternative story lines 'into the light': story lines of determination, cultural identity, ongoing commitments, resistance and relationships with others. These storylines are the basis to proceed in the directions that are important to us.

Collective practice practices

Narrative therapy and community work seek to acknowledge the role of groups and communities who have shared experiences and resources, in responding to challenges and injustices. This works against social practices of isolation and 'individualisation'.

These seek to support alternatives to 'Western' therapeutic practices, which often focus on individual deficit.

Including groups or the experiences of others who have shared experiences:

- supports people to explore the effects of problems in their lives, in particular those associated with social disadvantage, inequalities, colonisation, violence and other challenges
- helps identify the 'counter stories': commitments, skills and strategies that have been helpful in supporting the preferred stories.

These can support people who have contributed to these discussions to proceed with their intentions.

The resources that result can form the basis of resources to support other with similar experiences.

Some resources:

White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice*. Norton.

White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. Norton

Morgan, Sally (2000.) *What is narrative therapy?: An easy-to-read introduction*. Dulwich Centre

Website: *access to a wide range of publications, resources and training*
dulwichcentre.com.au

Some Examples of Narrative Practices

These pages provide some examples of narrative practices that we have drawn on, in our support of First Nations men and women, and peoples of other cultures.

These practices can support conversations in a wide range of settings. These have included 'counselling' sessions and groupwork.

They have been just as helpful in supporting, for example:

- informal conversations that occur on a day-to day basis
- consulting with women and men in the preparation of court and other reports
- discussions facilitated in activities and visits: camps, and parks, culturally-significant sites
- locations chosen to support reflections drawing on metaphors discussed below, such as Crossing the River.

We describe the practical steps that we find helpful, and how resources have been produced.

Collective documents

In narrative groupwork programs, women and men have produced 'booklets', that record their first-hand accounts of the range of issues discussed above.

Methods: As narrative-based discussions have proceeded in these groups, responses are summarised on a whiteboard, with photos taken to record the content as the group proceeds.

After the sessions, the facilitators can 'write up' the content, arranging the materials according to common themes. These can then be presented at the following group session, for discussion, review and clarifications. These notes become the basis for ongoing discussion. The men and women keep these documents as their own record.

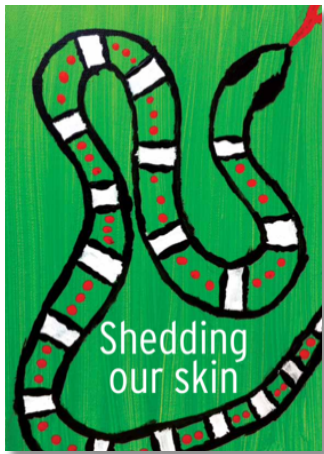
Over a period of time the group can decide to bring these together in a booklet form – we have used A5 format (A4 Folded). The booklets included art work of the people involved, often related to the themes discussed in the groups and booklet.

Booklets can address a particular theme, or purpose – such as a resource for other men and women facing similar challenges, or involved in the similar support services. The booklets may follow a particular metaphor that has been found helpful by women and men as they reflect on their journeys.

Women produced a booklet drawing on the metaphor of butterflies, emerging from darkness and cocoons into forms of grace and colour. Men produced a booklet on the theme of Snakes, using hard times to shed skin (old ways), to develop new ways of being.

Collective documents are a resource to encourage and support people who contributed to them, in their future journeys. These booklets can also be used in other ways, according to the ideas of those involved, including distribution as a resource for other men and women.

Groups have asked them to be distributed to other services and communities, to share reflections and approaches in the hope that they will be helpful for others and for feedback and comment. This can also help people see themselves in the eyes of others, including impacts of negative behaviours on others. In reading accounts by women of the effects of violence and control on their lives, one man responded "Is this what we have done ...?"



Artwork: Bobby

What helps?

To shed our skin, to show new skin, some things help.
 Understanding
 Encouragement
 Tolerance: it can be difficult
 Trust: from others,
 and for yourself.
 Pride.
 And a sense of humour: life
 would be 'shithouse' without it.



Artwork: Nambooka, Bea Edwards

Like a Butterfly

When we first came to this
 rehab,
 We felt like we were in a
 cocoon.
 We had to work our if we could
 trust people here.
 We started to talk.
 We started to become more
 comfortable in our own skin
 We started to spread our wings.
 We started to show our true
 colours.
 We started to be our 'real' self

References:

Denborough, D. (2008). *Collective narrative practice : responding to individuals, groups, and communities who have experienced trauma*. Adelaide, S.A. : Dulwich Centre Publications.

A wide range of collective practices have been documented in the *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work* , Dulwich Centre Publications.

Metaphors

Metaphors are a respectful and non-stigmatising means to support changes a person is making in their life.

Drawn from extensive literatures on identity and narrative practice, metaphors support people to describe and 'position themselves' amongst their experiences, what is important to them, and transitions they are seeking to make. They support agency and building on the person's experiences of relevant supports

The metaphor of 'Crossing the River' has been the most helpful, flexible and popular metaphor we have worked with. It is based on Michael White's application of Victor Turner's rites of passage metaphor to discuss journeys of change.

It is based on transitions involved in moving away from the 'known and familiar' to the 'unknown and unfamiliar.' This recognises the challenges involved when someone seeks to change long-term relationships with drugs and alcohol and the range of related and social challenges that are often involved. An emphasis is on the time of 'liminal change' between these two positions in life: a time of confusion, change and uncertainty. In groupwork and one-to-one setting, reflective questions based on the model, support people to prepare for this journey, and utilize supports to manage it's challenges.

We have subsequently applied the approach to support many other transitions in people's lives, including relationships with violence and offending. We have also recognised the importance of incorporating in the influence of social inequalities, dominant cultural narratives and societal expectations into the metaphor.

We are interested in providing training in this approach: [Click here](#).

References

- Dulwich Centre. (2004). *Challenging the culture of consumption: Rites of passage and communities of acknowledgement*. Dulwich Centre. <https://dulwichcentre.com.au>
- Hegarty, T., Smith, G., & Hammersley, M. (2010). Crossing the river: A metaphor for separation, liminality, and re-incorporation. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (2), 10–20.
- Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Cornell University Press.

Video records

Men and women can decide to share some of their 'story' with family members: their experiences, commitments, and hopes for the future that they may feel that family members may be unaware of. People we have worked with have found these helpful in talking about matters that would be hard to speak of directly to family members, and hopefully 'heard' differently, in ways that would be helpful.

We have also used videos to record activities such as camps and visits to significant places, with interviews and reflections by the men and women, informed by narrative practices. These become an important records and resources for those involved and others in the community.

Communities of Acknowledgement

Peoples involved in these narrative practices can be offered the opportunity to share their reflections with gatherings of family, peoples with similar experiences and wider community. These can provide public acknowledgement of their experiences, skills, knowledge, stories of strength and resilience, contributions to each other's lives and intentions for the future.

Peoples we have worked with have found these gatherings helpful in acknowledging their experiences and 'alternative stories' of their lives, and in recognising that others attending those events are also better informed and encouraged, as a result.

These gatherings can be used 'launch' booklets developed in group sessions, including readings and songs.

These are a form of 'ceremony' to acknowledge and support transitions of identity.

Additional resources:

Resources

Dulwich Centre. (2004). *Challenging the culture of consumption: Rites of passage and communities of acknowledgement*. Dulwich Centre. <https://dulwichcentre.com.au>

Anderson, Dion; Edwards, Bea; Hammersley, Mark; Sather, Marnie; Smith, Greg (2013) 'Finding The 'Voice' To Speak: Women And Men Talk About Relationships' International Journal of Narrative Therapy & Community Work 2013 No. 1



Community gathering, ST Kilda Town Hall

Other collective documents

On request by Elders, we have worked with communities to record concerns about services to their communities, what is important to them about these services, and changes that they are seeking.

These have been based on direct quotes from community members. Elders have directed how these documents be directed to politicians and senior managers. These documents have had a central role in securing changes sought by those communities.

Song writing

Songs are a powerful way to acknowledge a person's experiences, commitments, positive developments and hopes for the future.

As with group practices discussed above, these were developed from narrative facilitated discussions. These are recorded on onto a whiteboard. After the session, these notes can then typed and placed in a song structure. These can be based on an existing well-known tune, or an original melody. This work is then reviewed at a subsequent session with the person (or people) involved, and edited or extended.

The chorus reflects central themes, such as what is important to the person/ group, what has sustained them or hopes for the future. Verses can then reflect stages or different aspects of a persons journey and experience.

The songs can then be recorded as a CD, an audio track or a an 'unlisted' YouTube channel, as a record and resource for the person.

These songs were often performed by the individuals or groups at community functions, with video recordings made available for those involved.

You're my Sisters

My love for you is unforgettable
You see the best in me
It's your wisdom that keeps me strong
To be the best man I can be

*You're my Sisters, oh my Sisters,
I will carry you love with me
Your my Sisters, oh my sisters,
I will carry your love with me*

All the strength that you have given me
And I'll be strong for you
You are the stars for a better path
Together we'll get through

Koori Sisters keep your spirit strong
The home is at the heart
Keep it beating, keep our culture strong
Together, never apart

...

*You're my Sisters, oh my Sisters,
I will carry you love with me
Your my Sisters, oh my sisters,
I will carry your love with me*

Words: Roland Smith

Like a phoenix

It's a song about hard times
It's a song about life
I remember the dark times
And I remember the light

*"This will not kill me
It will make me stronger
And here I am to tell the tail..
Like a phoenix
ever stronger
Now I can fly
And show the way"*

I remember the slot
I remember the lot
Every little minute
and all the pain
Before passed out
I remember thinking
I will rise
And fly again

Life keeps on changing
Now I feel hope
I've come through darkness
Now I see light

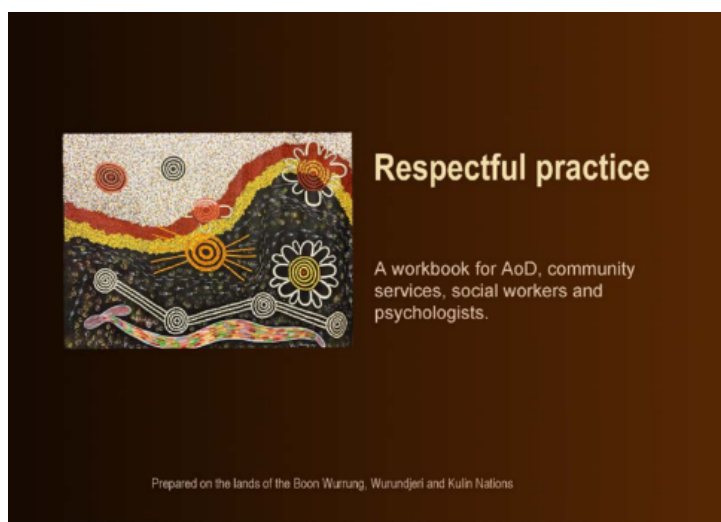
Respectful Practice Workbook

Men we have worked wanted to share their experiences and knowledge about what works, values and practices were respectful and effective. The men and a community reference group was clear that these practices were not about practice with First Nations peoples, but all peoples, irrespective of cultures and circumstances

We supported the men in preparing a workbook to train AOD, community services workers, social workers and psychologists. It is based on the first-hand accounts of men involved in AOD rehabilitation programs. It included reflective questions to support individual reflection and group.

If you are interested We would like to support and 'trial the use of the materials, let us know. We would provide hard copies of workbook and support their use.

To review the materials, click [here](#).



Australian First Nations narrative resources:

Wingard, B., Johnson, C., & Drahm-Butler, T. (Eds.). (2015). *Aboriginal narrative practice: honouring storylines of pride, strength and creativity*. Dulwich Centre.

Wingard, B., & Lester, J. (Eds.). (2001). *Telling our stories in ways that make us stronger*. Dulwich centre publications.

Dulwich Centre (Ed.). (2020). *Yarning with a purpose: First Nations narrative practice*. Dulwich Centre.

Other publications, resources and training:

dulwichcentre.com.au

Table 1. **A framework of relational theory**

<i>Concept</i>	<i>Theme</i>	<i>Influences include:</i>
Experience	Experience as fact	Culture and experience: Clifford Geertz (1979), Arnold van Gennep (1960), Victor Turner and Edward Bruner (1986). Facts of experience: Franz Boas (Eriksen & Nielsen, 2013; Moore, 2012).
	Identity as dependent on the cultural and social setting	Culture and identity: Clifford Geertz (1979, 1983). First Nations and identity: Shawn Wilson (2013), Bagele Chilisa (2020). Social construction of identity: Michel Foucault (1980), Ken Gergen (2001).
Identity	Identity as disparate and multi-faceted	Identity as an “ensemble of social relations”: Karl Marx (1988), Shawn Wilson (2013). Remembering multi-voiced identity, through social performance: Barbara Myerhoff (1986).
	Identity as subject to continual change	Self as performance: Erving Goffman (Raab, 2019; Smith, 2006). Rites of Passage: Arnold van Gennep (1960).
Knowledge	Knowledge as relational	Relational epistemologies: Barbara Thayer-Bacon (2002). Knowledge as a social construct: Michel Foucault (1980).
	Knowledge and power	Knowledge and power: Foucault (1980), Friedrich Nietzsche (Nietzsche et al., 1968), Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015).

Reference: Smith, G., Hammersley M, Stanley L, (2025) In Pursuit of Culturally and Socially Respectful Research: Relational Theory and Practice. The Qualitative Review (in print). [Click here](#)