

**NARRATIVE APPROACHES
IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

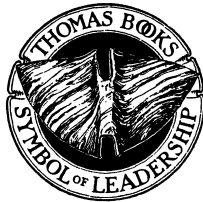
NARRATIVE APPROACHES IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

A Life Span, Culturally Centered, Strengths Perspective

By

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Narratives

A narrative is like clear water
seeking its' own level;
reflecting the sun's healing glow
as it tumbles downhill to natural resting places—
where its musical splashing yields to silence.
There water reflects on its journey,
on its way of meandering around
yesterday's rocks and thorns
and leaving unexpected gemstones in its wake.
For tomorrow.

Edith M. Freeman

PREFACE

Freedman and Combs (1996) indicate that narratives define a sequence of experiences or events, as well as relationships, which individuals tend to remember as an often emotionally-charged and complex whole. The purpose of this book is to explain the process in which individuals tell and retell their narratives, especially during developmental and other transitions in order to create meaning and continuity in their lives. The life span framework assumes that such transitions are opportunistic because they allow individuals and families to examine and revise their life narratives during critical times within their natural environments.

Another purpose of the book is to clarify the nature and types of narratives that emerge in people's natural environments during such transitions and during counseling sessions with social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors, nurses, and other service providers. The book's discussions on postmodern and social construction theories help to expand the conceptual framework that explains clients' narratives and their unique realities, as well as the narrative helping process itself.

The book's purpose is also to describe practical narrative approaches and skills. It includes relevant case examples to illustrate how those approaches have been applied effectively in social work and other helping professions. For example, these narrative practice applications have been effective in a range of practice settings in which time limitations, the nature of clients' challenges, environmental constraints, and helpers' preferred practice approaches often vary. Individual, family, community, organizational, and cultural narratives are included in the book, along with other story forms such as poetry, metaphors, proverbs, parables, letters, personal journals, art, and music.

The book's discussions demonstrate respect for clients' resilience and other natural resources, consistent with the values and orientation of social work and with the strengths perspective. The narrative approaches included in the book build on clients' valuable local knowledge about their experiences, as one source of their self-empowerment and self-healing. Empowerment also occurs because of the collaborative nature of narrative work in

which practitioners acknowledge clients as experts and partners in their work together.

The book's social construction framework draws attention to the cultural context in which clients' narratives emerge naturally. This framework is used to analyze how social justice barriers can impact upon clients' lived experiences and upon their efforts to narrate and heal from those experiences. The framework also helps practitioners to elicit exception narratives in which clients have successfully coped with and overcome these and other challenges.

The cultural context of such narratives may involve a combination of significant cultural factors, such as a client's race and ethnicity, language, religion and spirituality, gender, age, sexual orientation, disabling conditions, social class, and/or location. Moreover, the book suggests that effective practitioners should focus on this expanded cultural context related to all clients' narratives, including the narratives of African Americans, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, European Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Middle Eastern people.

The discussions on the cultural context of clients' narratives encourage helping professionals to reexamine and redefine the concept of cultural competence. Some of the current practice literature defines cultural competence narrowly, that is, as effective practice with clients of color. This book, however takes a broader perspective. It analyzes the effects of cultural factors such as location and spirituality on cultural groups such as white ethnic groups and African immigrants, which are seldom addressed in the literature. The book defines cultural competence as a practitioner's ability to understand, support, and help clients and other providers to consider a broad combination of cultural and other factors during assessment and intervention. This broader and more positive view of culture builds on the strengths perspective literature. It demonstrates how attention to the intersection between culture and narratives helps practitioners to build on and enhance clients' individual skills and abilities, cultural resources, and other strengths.

The book's life span framework enables practitioners to help clients normalize life course transitions and their efforts to narrate those transitions, while challenging their beliefs that the expert knowledge of professionals is more valuable than their own local knowledge. Moreover, this normalization and power-sharing process helps clients to clarify how narratives that emerge during transitions are an opportunity for managing those transitions.

For example, such narratives may reveal clients' strengths and other resources, unfinished issues, or developmental skill gaps from previous transitions that can be addressed during the current transition. Family system problems identified in those narratives may support or inhibit clients' abilities to narrate their transitions, explore the meaning of their narratives, nor-

malize those experiences, or continue their self-healing process. Large systems barriers and supports may also be revealed in clients' narratives which practitioners can help clients to address during current transitions or to anticipate during future transitions.

Based on those multisystem analyses, the book describes strategies that can be used at the micro or direct practice level with clients, the mezzo or community level, and the macro or large systems-institutions level. In the process, the book addresses the effects of the community context, organizational policy and administration, and social policy on clients' narratives. The discussions include analyses of the narrative strategies used by practitioners in specific client, organizational, and community vignettes as well as examples of clients' narratives that are part of those vignettes.

Those analyses and the tables and figures included in each chapter illustrate specifically how particular narrative strategies can be used with clients, while the book includes examples of effective as well as ineffective applications by providers. The book also clarifies how to use those approaches in combination with other practice frameworks, including family systems, task-centered, crisis, solution-focused, group mutual aid, cognitive behavioral, and brief theoretical approaches.

This practice text is organized into two sections. Part One is focused on the theoretical foundations of narrative practice and on five basic principles. Chapter 1 sets the stage by describing the book's first basic principle on the natural emergence of narratives over the life course, and the timing and context in which such narratives surface. Explanatory conceptual and theoretical frameworks presented in that discussion include life span, social construction, spirituality, and cultural perspectives. The sharing of narratives by clients is viewed as part of their ongoing development over the life course. Factors that affect how they experience those transitions and their ability to narrate and heal from them are also highlighted.

The other four chapters in Part One address four other basic principles. Those principles clarify the shared experience and transformation from sharing and listening to narratives, naming and unpacking narratives for assessment and intervention, exploring the meaning making nature of narratives, and implementing socio-political-cultural interventions. Fully developed practice examples and clients' narratives are used in each of the four chapters to illustrate the relevant principle. The chapters in Part One are written in a "how to" format to address basic questions that many practitioners typically ask about the use of narrative approaches.

Although those chapters are organized separately and sequentially for learning purposes, the book encourages practitioners to draw upon the principles in a more organic and integrated manner. Hence, narrative work with a particular client may include combined and simultaneous applications of

one or more of these principles, based on a practitioner's judgment about what is required in the situation. Part One can stand alone as a resource for enhancing the professional development and learning curves of beginning practitioners. However, Part One can also be used as a resource by more experienced practitioners who wish to integrate narrative approaches with other practice frameworks they are already using.

The six chapters in Part Two demonstrate the application of advanced narrative skills in practice with clients who are challenged by various life span transitions. The focus is also on systems issues, such as the practices and policies of service organizations and other large institutions. Clients' narratives are included in each chapter to illustrate particular advanced narrative skills and major discussion points. While the focus is on advanced narrative skills in Part Two, those discussions explain how each chapter builds upon principles and narrative strategies from Part One.

The chapters demonstrate the use of narrative strategies and skills with individuals, groups, couples, and families across the life span, for example, with children, adolescents, young and middle adults, and older adults. The discussions in those chapters also include narrative strategies involving communities and large institutions. Many cutting edge practice issues are discussed related to narrative work with clients in different modalities and at different developmental stages. The narrative practice illustrations in both Parts One and Two can be applied by practitioners incrementally in order to monitor and evaluate client outcomes more effectively.

Edith M. Freeman

References

- Freedman, J., & Combs, G. (1996). *Narrative therapy: The social construction of preferred realities*. New York: W. W. Norton.

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The development of this book is based on my many years of teaching courses on narrative practice, and providing consultation and training to various practice organizations that implemented narrative approaches with their clients. I would like therefore to acknowledge the rich and incredibly gifted contributions of those graduate students and the agency staff and administrators whose paths crossed mine. I am also thankful to the anonymous clients whose life experiences and narratives students and agency personnel shared with me as part of our narrative learning communities over the years. I hope I have captured in this book the essence of what I learned from them, as well as what they concluded they learned from me about narrative practice. Therefore, I am forever grateful to them.

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**NARRATIVE APPROACHES
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Part One

**BASIC PRINCIPLES AND THEORETICAL
FOUNDATIONS OF NARRATIVE
PRACTICE APPROACHES**

Chapter 1

OBSERVING AND ANALYZING HOW CLIENTS' NARRATIVES EMERGE OVER THE LIFE COURSE: THE NARRATIVE KNOWLEDGE, TIMING, AND CONTEXT PRINCIPLE

What should you do if you find you are
riding a dead horse? Dismount!

—Native American Proverb

A social worker was concerned about an elderly hospitalized client who told the same story every time she met with him. His story involved a recent house fire that destroyed all of his possessions and led to his heart attack and hospitalization. Her goal was to encourage the client to participate in discharge planning since his cardiac condition had improved. Possibly, the client's goal was to renarrate his loss experience in order to explore its meaning, provide some continuity in his life, and also, help him to heal from several traumatic losses and life transitions (Bahyham, 2003; Thornton, 2003). Those losses included physical functioning, the family home and possessions, and the family's relocation from a familiar rural area. Such impasses are missed narrative opportunities because, in this situation, the practitioner's efforts to maintain focus prevented her from hearing the client's narrative and understanding the conditions that affected the timing and context in which it emerged spontaneously (Freeman & Couchonnal, 2006).

This chapter's epigraph suggests such impasses can be resolved when practitioners reevaluate their preassumptions about how a situa-