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# Re-authoring narrative therapy: improving our self-management tools

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# Re-authoring narrative therapy: improving our self-management tools

## **Abstract**

Narrative practices have the potential to play a robust part in strategies for self-managing psychosocial well-being. Narrative therapy in particular seeks to empower groups and individuals, providing them with the resources and skills needed for positively improving their own well-being and coping with a wide range of life challenges. However, narrative therapy is in need of a philosophical update and some theoretical finetuning. Re-authoring some key elements of narrative therapy's official narrative will not only improve our understanding of it but increase the chances of a wider uptake of self-management strategies. Some features of narrative therapy's self-understanding invite and require clarification or adjustment in order to benefit from new thinking in philosophy and the cognitive sciences.

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# RE-AUTHORING NARRATIVE THERAPY: IMPROVING OUR SELF- MANAGEMENT TOOLS

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GALLAGHER



**ABSTRACT:** Narrative practices have the potential to play a robust part in strategies for self-managing psychosocial well-being. Narrative therapy in particular seeks to empower groups and individuals, providing them with the resources and skills needed for positively improving their own well-being and coping with a wide range of life challenges. However, narrative therapy is in need of a philosophical update and some theoretical fine-tuning. Re-authoring some key elements of narrative therapy's official narrative will not only improve our understanding of it but increase the chances of a wider uptake of self-management strategies. Some features of narrative therapy's self-understanding invite and require clarification or adjustment in order to benefit from new thinking in philosophy and the cognitive sciences.

**KEYWORDS:** narrative therapy, folk psychology, self, self-management, cognitive science

**H**OW WE NARRATE OUR LIVES can affect us, for good or ill. Our narrative practices make an undeniable difference to our psychosocial well-being. All so-called "talking cures" – including traditional psychoanalytic and psychodynamic approaches to therapy and newer techniques – are motivated by this insight about the power of personal narratives. All therapies of the discursive ilk make use of narratives, in one way or another, as a means of enabling individu-

als to frame, or reframe, and to manage their life circumstances in richer or new ways (Lock & Strong, 2012).

Narrative Therapy (hereafter NT), an important sub-class of talking therapies, breaks faith with more traditional psychodynamic approaches in adopting a not-knowing interactive stance. NT, developed by White and Epston in the early 1990s, stands out in seeking to empower individuals and groups by getting them to look again at their habits of self-narration and to explore the possibility of telling new stories about their individual or collective lives: "As people become more narratively resourced . . . they find that they have available to them *options for action* that would not have otherwise been imaginable" (White, 2011, p. 5, emphasis added). The aim of NT is to expand the individual's or group's "options in self-formation" (White, 2004, p. 43).

NT practitioners pursue this aim by helping individuals or groups to re-author or re-story conversations, enabling them to see new avenues for action and by improving their capacities to respond to such affordances. In terms of its ambitions and style, NT "seeks to be a respectful, non-blaming approach to counseling and community work, which centers people as the experts in their own lives" (Morgan, 2000, p. 4). In short, NT uses

special techniques in order to provide the tools that enable people take responsibility for their own mental to health and exercise their agency in maintaining it in positive ways. NT equips individuals with powerful tools that can enhance the self-management of mental healthcare.

Although NT is very much in the mold of “talking cures”, it does not seek to understand past causes of current trauma through such means. NT’s working assumption is: “Change the overarching narrative representation and deeper and more extensive opportunities for engaging in novel behaviors can be achieved” (Russell et al., 2004, p. 215). Consequently, its main aim is to use narrative techniques to get people to construct a more positive “future trajectory rather than achieving past accuracy” (Graham, 2010, p. 14).

Decades after its inception, NT is now well established in practice. NT is widely used as a basis for personal, family and community intervention and treatment around the world. It is especially popular in Australia and New Zealand, where it originated, having its main base in the Dulwich Centre, Adelaide which was founded in 1984. Other Centers and Institutes of NT have been established in parts of the English-speaking world, Canada, the UK and USA. Although there is limited scientific evidence of the efficacy of NT, it enjoys a reputation as providing an attractive means of supporting people from diverse backgrounds. For example, NT has been used to help people deal with a wide range of problems, from asthma, anorexia, bulimia, depression and other psychiatric illnesses to trauma (Murdoch, 2009, p. 494). As such, it has the potential to inform approaches to self-management in mental health care. This is especially so on the assumption that the sorts of narrative skills, once acquired, can be deployed independently, without continued reliance on therapists.

Despite its successes, NT is in need of a philosophical update and some theoretical fine-tuning. By re-authoring some key elements of narrative therapy’s official narrative, the therapy itself will be afforded new possibilities for development and wider uptake. This paper provides an initial analysis of some features of narrative therapy’s self-understanding that invite and require clarification

or adjustment if it is to benefit from new thinking in and a wider engagement with philosophy and the cognitive sciences.

Section 1 reviews NT’s official story about its working methods and theoretical assumptions. Section 2 shows that certain of NT’s central assumptions – about science, folk psychology and the self – are in need of revision so as to enable NT’s further theoretical and practical development. Section 3 supplies first pass answers about how NT might revise its narrative concerning these assumptions in order to become more internally coherent and to enter into a more positive and cooperative relationship with sciences of the mind. The concluding Section 5 briefly summarizes how the future development of NT along the theoretical lines we propose opens up promising new possibilities for NT to feature in self-management mental healthcare strategies.

## NARRATIVE THERAPY: THE OFFICIAL STORY

One of NT’s central tenets is that deficiency-centered stories limit options for action (White, 2004, p. 34). Such stories pathologize and disempower people by making it seem as if their problems are an essential part of who they are. In general, prêt-à-porter narratives – those inherited uncritically from the surrounding culture – tend to foster such negative and limited ways of thinking. Such narratives restrict a person’s vision and capacities for self-understanding by presenting only a limited array of options. Those who operate with such “thin” narratives perceive fewer of the genuine possibilities for action, fewer affordances.

The danger, as NT practitioners point out, is that “All too often, the stories we believe about ourselves have been written by others” (Denborough, 2014, p. 8). In passively buying into and repeating narrow and negative narratives we unnecessarily restrict our life possibilities. NT guards against this by questioning such narratives, insisting on the need for people to reclaim and take back their “storytelling rights” (Denborough, 2014, p. 8, 10, 22). The practices of NT help people to reclaim these rights, by enabling them “to break from thin conclusions about their lives,

about their identities, and about their relationships” (White, 2000, p. 4). This way of seeing the landscape of therapy is connected to one of NT’s grounding post-structuralist assumptions that “it is not one’s motive that shapes action, but one’s account of one’s motive that has been socially derived in narrative negotiations that does so” (White, 2000, p. 4).

Chief amongst NT’s tools for combatting such life-limiting stories is that of externalizing conversations that “open options for people to redefine or revise their relationships with a problem” (White, 2004, p. 32; Murdoch, 2009, p. 501). NT’s favorite slogan is that “the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem” (Denborough, 2014, p. 26). The crucial move in getting clients to see this is to get them to abandon the idea that the problem is a crippling, essential feature of the individual or group and come to treat it as something apart and distinct from themselves – something that can be addressed and dealt with by means of a number of strategies. NT thus “refuses to locate problems inside people . . . [it] refuses to pathologize people” (Denborough, 2014, p. 26).

The main NT strategy is to find new, richer stories to tell about one’s life, and thus augment one’s resources; this involves finding and attending to so-called “unique outcomes” – those “sparkling moments” – in which one’s problem did not impede the living of life; those times at which one had the strength and means to deal with it effectively or to put it aside (Murdoch, 2009, p. 500; Denborough, 2014, p. 49). The end result of this process of re-storying, if all goes well, is increased “response-ability” – enabling people to become “more able to respond” (Denborough, 2014, p. 36). This involves developing and mobilizing one’s practical know-how and life skills (White, 2004, p. 39, 40). Once these new self-management capacities are established, further NT conversations help to provide the necessary support and scaffolding to ensure that the new, richer storylines and the expanded possibilities for action associated with them take root and flourish.

The crucial point is that by shifting one’s thinking, so that problems are externalized, new ways of being and new possibilities for action are put on the table. All of this works because narratives

are necessarily selective. Whichever story we tell about our lives there are always other options – possibilities that were not foregrounded, not mentioned, not attended to. Any story of the days of our lives – even a single day of our lives – is never the whole story. Hence “there are many different events in our lives, but only some of them get formed into the storylines of our identities” (Denborough, 2014, p. 6).

As such it need not be that a dominant story is false; it is enough that a dominant story is limited and partial, occluding alternative storylines that can possibly “provide the gateway or point of entry to the exploration of other knowledges of life and other skills of living or practices of life that are cultural and historical” (White, 2011, p. 9). By taking a fresh and fuller look at their own lives people can explore healthier possibilities for narrating it – they can “rework or rewrite the storylines of identity” (Denborough, 2014, p. 3, 21). Here it is important to recognize that NT does not view the alternative storylines it helps to foster as radically constructed (see White, 2004, p. 43; White, 2011, p. 9). On the contrary, they are deemed more realistic, fuller accounts of one’s life.

## PROBLEMATIC STORIES: SCIENCE, FOLK PSYCHOLOGY AND SELF

Given the way NT seeks to retrain and empower individuals it has great promise to add to the range of self-managed approaches to mental health, but it needs updating. Certain familiar philosophical assumptions about the nature of science, folk psychology, and selves are obscuring a healthier understanding of NT, and are removing or reducing fruitful opportunities for NT to engage with the best philosophy and science of the mind. Put otherwise, it appears that dominant stories about science, folk psychology and selves, embraced or endorsed by leading NT practitioners, may be standing in the way of valuable possibilities for NT’s future theoretical, scientific and practical investigation, assessment and development. We identify three main sources of tension.

## CONFLATING SCIENTISM WITH SCIENCE

NT subscribes to a constructivist framework that promotes the view that social realities are something that we can create and construct for ourselves, even if not radically. In this NT is directly inspired by the interpretive turn made prominent by French postmodernists. In adhering to a post-structuralist framework NT opposes the sort of exclusive scientific realism associated with grand narratives about science (see Murdoch, 2009, p. 491, 494). NT justifiably rejects the idea that there is one and only one true story to be told about ourselves and the world – especially when, to this basic claim, it is added that such a story must be told, in the end, in the vocabulary of the hard sciences – preferably, if possible, only in the language of physics. Following in Foucault’s footsteps, NT practitioners treat this claim as part and parcel of “the ‘grand abstractions’ of reductionist science . . . [abstractions that have] dehumanized and objectified people” (Combs & Freedman, 2004, p. 139).

There are certainly many excellent reasons to be suspicious of and indeed hostile towards exclusive, reductionist “scientific grand narratives” (see Putnam, 1990; Hutto, 2000). Yet those reasons are not good reasons to be suspicious of truth, objectivity or the sciences – when understood in a suitably modest fashion.

Philosophically speaking, if postmodern suspicions about truth and objectivity are overplayed it becomes difficult to make sense of how NT is meant to work in practice in a way consistent with NT’s official story. For it is not as if NT avoids commitment to the idea that there are truths about our lives that outstrip the stories we tell about them. Rather it claims that as, “we retell and rewrite the stories of our life, the facts of our lives won’t change, but their meaning will change” (Denborough, 2014, p. 21). Yet it is not just the meanings we adopt that change in such cases, our practices and underlying skill sets alter too. Something over and above our narrative choices changes in the process. After all, NT assumes that through narrative practice we can reshape our current life and thereby alter future possibilities for engagement. This is precisely why “it makes a *real* difference how we talk about the problems in

our lives” (Denborough, 2014, p. 242, emphasis added).

The stories we tell about ourselves either open up or close down affordances and therefore make factual, existential differences to possibilities for living our lives. We can alter the possibilities for living a life by narrating that life differently. These ideas are at the very heart of NT. Through re-authoring one comes “to attach significance to some . . . previously neglected events” (White, 2011, p. 5). And by attaching significance individuals contribute “to possibilities for significantly different responses to the events of their lives” (White, 2011, p. 6).

Practically speaking, the hostility some NT practitioners bear towards scientific grand narratives has apparently led, through guilt by association, to unnecessarily hostile relations between NT and the empirical sciences. NT practitioners typically shun formal, empirical assessments, allegedly for two main reasons: “First, traditional models of assessment assume a single reality to which the therapist has access. Second, these processes tend to be pathology-oriented and may ignore cultural or other contextual factors” (Murdoch, 2009, p. 499). A bad consequence of NT’s steering clear of the empirical sciences, however, is that “little traditional theory testing or outcome research can be found that is specific to NT counseling” (Murdoch, 2009, p. 513).<sup>1</sup> The lack of proper empirical credentials has in turn resulted in NT not being deemed a scientifically respectable form of therapy by mainstream researchers and practitioners.

The mutual antagonism between NT and scientific approaches to mind and mental health works to keep NT “outside the mainstream elaboration of psychotherapy by university-based research and training programmes” (Polkinghorne, 2004, p. 53, Vromans & Schweitzer, 2011, p. 5). By developing healthier relations with the sciences of the mind, NT can avoid being “on the fringe” – of being the sort of approach that mainstream mental health and policymakers are likely to systematically ignore, or at least marginalize. Addressing this is important to prevent them from overlooking and underrating NT’s unique story-based and valuable form of therapy.

### SHALLOW AND CULTURALLY BIASED FOLK PSYCHOLOGY

Another major reason why NT is not better and more widely received is that it is fundamentally committed to folk psychology (hereafter FP) (White, 2004). The trouble is that FP “hasn’t fared that well in the arena of professional psychologies. It is lowly ranked and marginalized by these psychologies” (White, p. 2004, 20). FP is arguably best thought of as a kind of domestic anthropology – one “mired in biases of local culture” (see e.g., Stich, 1983, Hutto, 2008). As such, FP explanations don’t run very deep. Let’s consider these worries in reverse order.

There is every reason to doubt that FP explanations get at the true causes of action. Hence, if it is assumed that NT’s main therapeutic task depends on having a deep understanding of the mind then NT runs into trouble since FP explanations are “not up to the sophistication and rigor required by modern psychology” (White, 2004, p. 20). Essentially, when it comes to explaining the basic mechanics and dynamics of the mind, FP is viewed as being unscientific and naïve in its conceptions. In a word, FP is just too shallow and “folksy” to be a respectable part of a proper science of the mind needed for illuminating the basis of psychopathologies. For:

mind has an existence and substantive character that goes well beyond, and is independent of our best commonsense interpretative practices. Hence knowing the truth about the mind requires a great deal more than informed reflection on those practices. In fact, it requires cognitive science (Carruthers, 2011, p. xiv).

We agree with Carruthers that cognitive science, not folk psychology, reveals the basic nature of minds. We disagree with him in thinking that cognitive science will end up endorsing some form of classic cognitivism. Nevertheless, the above remarks highlight the need for NT to take stock of debates about the fundamental nature of minds if it is to properly situate its form of therapy and justify it within a wider set of possible approaches. Making this effort would also allow NT to benefit from new findings in cognitive science that could shed light on how narratives play their part in changing attitudes and habits.

What about the cultural bias worry? NT is “shaped” and “informed” by an FP tradition that lays great stress on notions of (1) personal agency as driven by (2) intentional attitudes (beliefs, desires, hopes) and how they interact (White, 2004, p. 20, 28, 49). To construe FP in this way, and to make it foundational to the thinking behind NT – part of its very basis – renders NT culturally biased and skewed, despite its best intentions.

This is ironic, given NT’s appeal to post-structuralism, since the emphasis on personal agency and intentional states is arguably a feature of the Western, Eurocentric “theory of mind” – a “reflection of *this* folk psychology’s theory of mind” (White, 2004, p. 20, emphasis added). White claims that such an emphasis “is still strongly featured in the great majority of folk psychological accounts of human action” (White, 2004, p. 20). That may well be true of WEIRD people (those from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic countries) but there is evidence of divergent practices too, that some people from other cultures favor other styles of FP explanations (see Hutto, 2008; Fiebich, 2014; Hutto & Kirchhoff, forthcoming). As a result, so long as NT gives pride of place to a peculiarly Western form of FP at its basis, “NT can’t just be blindly applied in cultures other than the ones in which it originated” (Murdoch, 2009, p. 511).<sup>2</sup>

It is well known that “Effective cultural consultation requires an awareness of the constraints of [power, prejudice, identity and cultural dissonance] on clinicians’ agency, engagement and positioning as well as on clients” (Guzder, 2014 p. 164). NT therapists actively and sensitively adjust their practices in light of cross-cultural differences. For example, therapists working within an overwhelmingly white Australian culture reshape their therapeutic practice significantly when dealing with Aboriginal communities (see, e.g. Denborough et al., 2006). African and Palestinian NT practitioners – who operate in contexts where the we/I balance differs than in conceptions of Western folk psychology – must modify and even sometimes invent their own forms of narrative practice. Over last 20 years, The Dulwich Centre has actively sought to ensure its approach is appropriately sensitive to such differences in

outlook through cross-cultural partnerships. To complete this work NT also needs to update the official vision of folk psychology that informs its background philosophy in line with these adjustments to its practice.

#### SUBJECTED SELVES

NT focuses on opening up possibilities for active and creative self-development through re-authoring. As such it requires an understanding of selves that is more protean and open-ended than the modern, Western conception allows. Thus it sets its face against a tradition of thought that identifies selves as enduring egos, entities that persist and survive unscathed through change – it rejects the picture of an “adamantine self – obdurate and unchanging” (Kirmayer, 2003, p. 179). In place of this notion of the self, NT looks to postmodernism for inspiration.

The intellectual links between NT and post-structuralist/postmodern theory are so tight that NT is sometimes dubbed “postmodern therapy” (Polkinghorne, 2004, p. 54). Accordingly, NT is fundamentally anti-essentialist when it comes to thinking about selves. It is highly critical of “Western culture’s taken-for-granted understandings that construct a self at the center of personhood” (White, 2004, p. 32).

There is a tension, however, between adopting standard postmodern visions of the self and NT’s fundamental commitment to the possibility of personal transformations. Commitment to the idea that individuals and groups can transform themselves “separates these therapists from what has been the view of postmodern philosophers that the subject is a passive creation of social discourse” (Polkinghorne, 2004, p. 65). Again, there is a need to re-author NT’s official story: Polkinghorne goes on to argue that “[narrative therapists] need to be less impressed by the version of postmodernism developed in the work of. . . French postmodern philosophers and more aggressive in their presentation of their own version of an existentially informed postmodernism of human self-creation”. The challenge, then, is for NT therapists to become “more assertive in their rejection of the empty and powerless subject,” (Polkinghorne, 2004, p. 65).<sup>3</sup> NT needs to say more precisely how we should

conceive of the self that is, at once, both the agent and the patient self-management.

#### ALTERNATIVE STORIES: SCIENCE, FOLK PSYCHOLOGY AND THE SELF

In the limited space available, we want to sketch some positive revisions to NT concerning the three topics identified above that will overcome the sorts of theoretical and practical difficulties NT currently encounters. This is a prolegomena for future work and deeper investigations.

#### SCIENCE NOT SCIENTISM

The existing scientific literature lends broad empirical support to NT’s working assumption that certain narrative practices, those involving particular kinds of rich storied content, used in particular ways for particular purposes, correlates positively with mental health. A number of findings demonstrate that people “who are able to narrate the emotional events of their lives in more self-reflective ways show better physical and psychological health” (Fivush et al., 2010, p. 46). Other findings also reveal that choice of narrative is important to our well-being, showing that “How we remember the stressful events of our lives has an impact on our ability to cope” (Fivush & McDermott-Sales, 2006, p. 125; McDermott Sales et al., 2005). Coping is not here to be understood as merely a backward looking matter of dealing with a past event – it is also a forward-looking matter dealing better with other, similar stressful future happenings.

On the face of it, it appears that as long as the goal and methods of scientific work are understood in appropriately modest ways, there is no reason why NT could not benefit from direct empirical assessment. Of course, any investigations would need to be conducted in ways that are sensitive to the nature of NT. This seems entirely possible (cf. Murdoch 2009, p. 509).

Indeed, taking care to identify appropriate measures and assessments, Vromans and Schweitzer (2011) recently conducted the first rigorous empirical investigation of NT. Their findings report effective improvement in depressive symptoms and interpersonal relations after eight sessions



of manualized NT with 47 adults with major depressive disorder. Benchmarking and clinical significance analyses used to evaluate outcomes showed NT gains to be on a par with other widely used forms of therapy, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Psychodynamic Interpersonal, Prolonged Exposure Therapy. However, at a three-month follow-up, it was found that only depressive symptoms and not interpersonal relatedness improvements were maintained.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly NT proponents need to separate scientific wheat from scientific chaff. There are surely ways of elucidating and understanding the scientific enterprise without construing it under the guise of grand narrative scientism.

#### FOLK PSYCHOLOGY AS NARRATIVE PRACTICE

The worry that NT is, at root, culturally biased is motivated by NT's commitment to understanding narrative practices through the lens of a Western "theory of mind" (hereafter ToM). On the face of it, it seems hard to avoid this charge. Michael White, for example, more than flirts with the idea that NT is based on FP as a kind of culturally inherited ToM. He confirms the standard story that we need ToM "to comprehend the selves of others" (White, 2004, p. 38). He also speaks of FP, not as a practice, but as if it were something to be "employed", "put into service" – as something that "equips us with a range of notions about what makes people tick" (2004, p. 19).

To think of FP in this ToMish way encourages a standard vision of how narrative practices relate to and play a part in its development. It typically promotes a ToM-first vision according to which local narrative practices put the icing on a universally sourced ToM cake. Those who subscribe to this view regard ToM as a universal theory about how mental states enable personal agency in our species. ToM is part of the basic equipment of all normally developing individuals, whereas "narratives enable individuals to *interface* their theories of mind in symbolic and literal action" (Russell et al., 2004, p. 214, emphasis added). Accordingly storytelling is a given culture's normative strategy through which a universal ToM is "conveyed, developed and practiced" (Russell et al., 2004,

p. 214). Defending this view would be defending the view that seemingly Western notions of "personal agency" and "intentional states" are in fact truly the universal core of all human FP practice.

There is another, better way for NT to understand the relation between FP and narrative practices – one that allows it to be more appropriately sensitive to differences in those practices across cultures. The alternative way to think about FP gives pride of place to narrative practices in a way that better suits NT, and which better fits the known facts about FP practice and development. The Narrative Practice Hypothesis (NPH) rejects the idea that FP entails the existence of ToMs. It understands FP as a competence fostered by engaging in socially supported storytelling activities (Hutto, 2007; 2008a; 2008b; 2009, Gallagher & Hutto, 2008).

The NPH holds that "storytelling practices scaffold folk psychological reasoning, or reasoning about one's own and others' reasons for acting" (Herman, 2013, p. 94). Yet this does not imply that engaging in narrative practices builds up a ToM that was already present in weaker form. According to the NPH, engaging with narrative practices does not put the icing on a pre-existing, universal ToM cake. Instead it is through participating in narrative practices that such a culturally local FP cake is baked. Thus "it is FP that is facilitated by narrative rather than *vice versa*" (Cobley, 2014, p. 227; see also Herman, 2013, pp. 296–298). FP is not monomorphic – one should expect the forms and norms of our FP explanations to vary systematically in line with local narrative practices (see Hutto & Kirchhoff, forthcoming).

Of course, going this way only exacerbates the worry that NT's commitment to FP makes it shallow and unscientific. How best to respond? Undeniably, an uncritical commitment to FP can promote oversimplified ideas and misleading pictures about how minds really work. Many are attracted to the idea that intentional attitudes – such as beliefs, desires and emotions – are neatly and discretely defined, causally efficacious, content-bearing inner states that figure in nicely staged and sequenced linear processes and operations. However, it seems the mind is messier than that.

Putting emotion in the spotlight, Baumeister et al. (2007) make this point vividly. They trade the simplistic and intuitively appealing idea that mental states directly cause behavior for a vision of mental processing that understands cognitive influence in more complex, dynamical and holistic terms.

People will explain someone's behavior in terms of "because she was mad" or "because he was afraid", as opposed to saying "anger directed her cognitive processing to focus disproportionately on certain possible outcomes, whereupon her behavioral decision process failed to take certain potential risks into account" or "fear temporarily reordered his goal priorities, causing him to abandon one goal in favor of the seemingly urgent albeit irrational goal of escaping the situation (Baumeister et al., 2007, p. 168).

Let us assume the second analysis is closer to the truth. Even if it is, FP's lack of transparency about the underlying dynamics of mind is only a problem for FP if it is assumed that FP is in the business of trying to give causal explanations of this sort in the first place. FP's explanation will only be deemed shallow if it is assumed that FP and cognitive science are competing on this score. If that is the case then one can motivate eliminativism about FP on the grounds that its explanations are inferior to those of the cognitive sciences.

Once we construe FP as a narrative practice that is not interested in offering causal explanations that compete with those of the cognitive sciences it becomes possible to view the relationship between FP and cognitive science as cooperative, not competing (see Hutto, 2011 for a detailed argument). This fits with Kirmayer's assessment that we are "on the threshold of a renaissance, in which complex-systems thinking will allow us to integrate neuroscience, psychology, and the social sciences" (Kirmayer, 2015, p. 1169). Viewing FP as a narrative practice – one that provides normalizing explanations that are personal and particular as opposed to *causal* explanations of a general, mechanical sort – allows us to see how our narratives can reveal new opportunities for action, just as NT assumes. Embodied, enactive and ecological approaches to mind are perfectly poised to explicate the basis of "skills that are

evident in our ways of living, in our acts of life" (White, 2004, p. 39). New thinking about how we come to respond to affordances in embodied, enactive ways holds out the promise of deeper illumination into how NT works, which may lead to potential improvements.

One goal of cognitive science could be to investigate just how narrative activity manages to affect changes in our skill set, without assuming that FP explanations will form part of the best mature explanation of this process. Adherents of FP can agree, just as eliminativists claim, that propositional attitudes directly causing actions is unlikely to figure in our best developed scientific accounts of the basic nature of minds and how they operate (cf. Churchland, 2007). Hence, to contend that FP doesn't tell us much if anything about the underlying dynamics of the mind is no reason at all to dismiss person-focused therapeutic approaches that make use of FP practices.

#### SELVES AS PATTERNS

Are there ways for NT to get beyond its attachment to post-structuralist conceptions of the decentered self? To embrace the concept of a postmodern self, after all, is self-defeating for NT. Rather than seeing the subject as a locus of control over its individual life, the post-structuralist view understands the subject to be the *subjected* – the product of larger forces of language and power (e.g., Foucault, 1988). But that means that any post-structuralist bid for emancipation or self-management appealing to narrative as a means for self-formation would be seen as an illusion; since language is not something under individual control every individual is shaped by social forces.

In contrast, a pattern theory of self better suits NT in suggesting that things are more complicated than either the Cartesian extreme of total self-governance or the post-structuralist extreme of a completely emaciated self (Gallagher, 2013). It begins by acknowledging that there are determining forces of biology and sociality over which we do not exercise control. The facticity of human embodiment and the fact that we are necessarily intersubjective beings place real (material) limits on the type of identities that we can take on. At the same time, however, these factors are enabling

conditions that allow us to engage in actions and joint endeavors that permit some degree of transcendence and freedom.

Narrative is double-barrelled in the same way. Just as language places limitations on how we can make ourselves understood, at the same time allowing for an infinite number of ways to express ourselves, narrative practices likewise can be conservative and reproductive, and yet offer the resources for criticism and transformation. How is this possible? In this regard, there are two important things to consider: (1) the nature of narrative itself, specifically the concept of narrative distance, and (2) the fact that we are not merely narrative selves – narrators or narrated subjects.

First, narrative has a certain internal structure described in the concept of narrative distance. *Narrative distance* is a concept that goes back to Aristotle's *Poetics*. It indicates how far removed the narrator is from the narrated events (Andringa, 1996; Lothe, 2000). For example, there is less distance between the narrator and the narrated events if the narration is done in the first person versus third person (this is *perspectival distance*); the amount of time between the narration and the narrated events characterizes a *temporal distance*; and the extent and the valence of the narrator's evaluation of the events (*evaluative distance*) can also be a measure of narrative distance. Finally, various interpretive aspects of narration introduce limitations and biases into the recounting of events. All narrative recounting is an interpretation due to factors such as the narrator's interest or purpose, the audience and its expectations, etc. (Bedwell et al., 2011; Gadamer, 1989; Ricoeur, 1981).

The same concept applies to autobiographical (or self-) narrative. Specifically, there is always some distance between the self who narrates and the self who is narrated. When the narrator says, for example, "I had a great journey," the 'I' points in two directions: to the narrator, signifying that the narrator means to say something about herself; and to the person or character whom the narrator was, at some point in the past, during the journey. The narrator implies an identity between herself and the person she is talking about, but there is necessarily some degree of difference or non-

identity involved. Narrative distance allows for some critical space to open up, and this itself can introduce some degree of control and transformation in terms of how I want to understand myself. This kind of critical narrative distance is essential for self-management.

Second, this is not the whole story because we are not just narrative selves. The capacity we have for narrative is only one factor in a pattern of existence that includes biological and experiential factors, social and psychological factors, emotional and situational factors. Narrative practices, and the critical distance they can open up, can give us some leverage for self-management and transformation; but they could provide no such leverage unless we were also embodied beings able to act and to have a sense of agency for such action. And such action would be entirely unmotivated unless we were already in the world and with others, engaged in joint actions or in oppositional reactions, or retreating from such engagements because we are depressed, or broken-hearted, or alienated or traumatized.

A pattern theory of self emphasizes this multidimensional existence where possibilities outlined by narrative are possibilities only because we are embodied actors situated in pragmatic contexts with others. Therapy, or, importantly, self-management can target any of these factors in order to target them all. A change in narrative self-understanding can modulate our intersubjective behaviors; a change in bodily practices can transform our narrative self-understanding; a change in worldly circumstances, or mood, or instituted practice can equally affect all the other factors that make us who we are.

## CONCLUSION

NT is aptly placed to inform approaches to the self-management of mental health. Insofar as NT is based on changing and developing self-narratives, it supports those who abandon the idea that the job of therapy is the expert treatment of afflicting mental disorders and instead see it as working to make individuals more adept and expert in coping with life challenges. NT strategies provide the means for individuals to be actively and centrally

engaged in the enhancement and maintenance of their own well-being.

Unfortunately there has been ‘little focus on what aspects of narrative representation may be most fruitful to target for change or repair’ (Russell et al., 2004, p. 215). Apart from a philosophically informed re-authoring of NT’s official story, another major agenda item is to determine which kinds of narrative (identifying their special properties) and which practices (the way such narratives are used) best aid promotion of psychosocial well-being. Mental health policymakers should be made aware of the promise of NT and take it into account when recommending appropriate courses of self-managed treatment and customized assistance.

#### NOTES

1. Vromans and Schweitzer report: “Currently, no rigorous empirical support exists for narrative therapy. The omission likely arises from fundamental differences in theories of knowledge distinguishing postmodernist from modernist thought” (Vromans & Schweitzer, 2011, p. 4).

2. This raises wider questions about other, epistemic differences in the narrative practices of various cultures about whether and how any given narratives “fit with templates . . . exemplars of ‘good explanations’ . . . external, cultural forms” (Kirmayer, 2003, p. 172).

3. The need for re-authoring is something leading NT proponents accept. Epston raises the worry that NT may be “becoming theoretically passé” (Epston, 2011, p. xxxvi).

4. Vromans and Schweitzer (2011) note that their research “was limited by its small sample” and lacked “generalizability” (Vromans & Schweitzer, 2011, p. 13). This highlights the need for further comparative and more in-depth research designed with larger samples targeting a wider variety of populations and complaints.

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