

A REFLECTION ON THE USE OF THE NARRATIVE

ANALOGY IN COUPLES' COUNSELLING:

A CASE EXAMPLE

BY

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SUMMARY

In this study the use of the narrative analogy in couple's counselling has been outlined.

A literature study situates the narrative analogy within a wider philosophical framework. The underlying assumptions of the narrative analogy, both in general and in the work with couples, as well as the role of the counsellor using the narrative analogy, are explored.

A case example is described to illustrate the use of the narrative analogy.

KEY CONCEPTS

Narrative; narrative analogy; narrative counselling; couples' counselling; post-modernism; constructivism; social constructionism; action research; action learning; narrative assumptions

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Chapter 1

Situating The Research Framework Of The Study

1.1 Intention of the study

We interpret our world and experience from an “interpretative framework” – our analogies or maps, as reflected in the following abstract:

“Thus the analogies we employ determine our examination of the world: the questions we ask about events, the realities we construct, and the real effects experienced by those parties into the inquiry. ... In privileging one analogy over another, we cannot resort to criteria such as correctness or accuracy, since such attributes cannot be established from any analogy. However, we can, at least to an extent, investigate the analogies through which we live by situating our own practices within the history of social thought and by examining and critiquing the effects of these practices.”

(White & Epston 1990:5.)

We experience life from day to day. We interpret these experiences in order to give meaning or to make sense of our lives. We express these meanings in the form of stories (White 1998:1).

Counselling is one such life experience. As a counsellor I hear people’s stories through which they give meaning to their lives. I interpret these stories from a specific framework or analogy. There are multiple frameworks from which I can choose. The framework or analogy chosen shapes what I notice, who I see, the questions I ask and the language I use. My choice has a real effect on how I, as a counsellor, experience myself, on how I experience my clients, and ultimately on how my clients experience themselves (Zimmerman & Dickerson 1996:11).

My choice of analogy is influenced by many factors, for example current trends, the university at which I studied, my values, preferences and previous experience. I cannot base my choice on criteria such as correctness or accuracy, as each framework is simply another interpretation of experience. But, in order to be accountable to myself and my clients, I can explore the analogy I

use through forming a clear understanding of the position of my analogy within wider frameworks of thinking and the assumptions on which it is based. I can then consciously use these assumptions in practice to consider whether the analogy is consistent with my values and is useful for my clients.

The intention of this study is to make sense of my experience as counsellor by gaining clarity on the narrative analogy, by exploring whether I am using this analogy during counselling, and by assessing whether it fits (see §1.11) with my own values and assumptions.

1.2 Subjective motivation for the study

Through exposure to different epistemologies, systemic family therapy and the client-centred approach during my MA (Mental Health) studies, I became aware that I was still seeing the world and my work from a positivist perspective. This awareness was the start of a paradigm shift and a gradual and painful process of personal growth, in addition to a quest for an analogy that would fit me.

I realized that I was comfortable with the non-positivistic client-centred approach which emphasized the capacity of the client to solve his/her own problems, the importance of respect, acceptance and understanding of the client, as well as the facilitative role of the counsellor in assisting the client to experience behaviour as consistent with his/her self-structure (Rogers 1951:481-524).

As we studied systemic family therapy I found the best fit with the Milan approach. I liked its focus on the potential of clients to solve their own problems as well as on the role of the meaning that families ascribe to their experiences, assumptions and myths.

I developed an awareness of some of my values and beliefs or assumptions about the world, namely:

- There is no single truth, as all “realities” are constructed. This leads to some uncertainty, but at the same time provides many alternatives and opportunities.

- Everything is constantly changing and one needs to respond innovatively to life from moment to moment.
- Every person has the potential to grow and to choose his/her own direction in life.
- Each person has a right to his/her own values and decisions. Nobody has the right to play God over the lives of others. Thus people need respect.
- Relationships are precious and should be preserved as far as possible.

(See “window on the world”, Figure 4: §1.6.1.1.)

I realized that these attitudes and values had to underpin my approach to counselling. I discovered and began to explore therapy using the narrative analogy. This analogy advocates listening carefully to the stories people tell about their lives, and assisting them in retelling these stories until they find a narrative that fits their own experience (Weingarten 1998:4). This analogy seemed to fit with my own values and assumptions. I learnt more about it and started applying it in practice with the help of supervision (see “bag of tricks”, Figure 4: §1.6.1.1). Through this study I intend to become more aware of the way in which I use the narrative analogy in couples’ counselling by examining an example from my own practice.

1.3 Research framework

Research may be done for the sake of knowing, of predicting the future or behaviour, or for determining ways of dealing with the world and the people in it (Bawden in Zuber-Skerrit 1991:19). Different research frameworks reflect different notions of the way the world is, the nature of knowledge, the goals of doing research and the role of the researcher. A distinction is made between systematic methods of experimental, positivistic, reductionistic, deterministic natural science on the one hand, and methods of post-positivistic, empirical, constructivist, interpretative science on the other hand (Bawden in Zuber-Skerrit 1991:21). Fraser (1992:11) refers to the categories as “positivistic research” and “research from a constructivist framework” while Reason and Rowan (1981:xiii) use the terms “old paradigm” and “new paradigm” research.

Old paradigm research is based on the following assumptions:

- An objective reality exists, that the researcher can describe.
- If the researcher can observe an object under controlled conditions, knowledge can be generalized and be seen as the “truth”.
- The researcher is not part of what is being observed.
- The goal of research is to discover the “truth” and to control behaviour.

(Fraser 1992: 7-8)

In my study I will be using the new paradigm research approach, which is characterized by the following:

- “Reality” is constructed by the researcher. There are multiple perspectives of the same phenomena. (Fraser 1992: 8-9).
- The observation made by the researcher is only one perspective and cannot be seen as “truth”. During observation the social context is taken into account. (Burr 1995: 161).
- The researcher is part of what is being researched. The respondents participate in the observation, which is often recursive and holistic. (Steier 1991: 7).
- The goal of the research is an expansion of understanding, but it is also “knowledge-in-action”, aiming at usefulness in bringing about change for those who need it. (Steier 1991: 9).

1.4 Research questions

As I used the narrative analogy in counselling, I realized that I needed to become more aware of this method. I needed to learn more about the narrative analogy as an interpretive framework. I wanted to explore whether, in fact, I do use the narrative analogy by comparing an example from my practice with the theory mentioned previously. Finally I wanted to reflect on whether the narrative analogy fits with my own values and assumptions about the world.

In order to address these needs, I formulated the following research questions:

- How does my counselling compare with the theory on the narrative analogy?
- Is the narrative analogy consistent with my values and assumptions about the world?

1.5 Research aims and objectives

The aims of the research are to use a literature study to become more familiar with the narrative analogy, and to compare an example of my counselling to the theory on the narrative analogy.

The objectives of my study may be formulated as follows:

- to conduct a literature study on the narrative analogy;
- to use the narrative analogy in my counselling;
- to study an example from my counselling in order to compare this with theory of the narrative analogy; and
- to consider whether the narrative analogy fits my own values and assumptions about the world.

1.6 Research method

After considering different research methods from the new research paradigm for example, “constructivist inquiry” (Guba & Lincoln 1989:163-183), the “cycle model” of Rowan (Reason & Rowan 1981:93-106) and the “experiential model” of Heron (Reason & Rowan 1981:153-166), I decided on a simplified version of the action research method, also called the experiential learning method, as described by Bawden (Zuber-Skerrit 1991:10). This method refers to action research as “a particular way of critically learning about events in this world in order to change them”. This choice will ensure some consistency between the worldview used in the research framework and the narrative analogy being studied. The action research method is ideally suited to the purpose of this study i.e. to explore whether I do use the narrative analogy during counselling by comparing it with the surrounding theory, and, then to use this knowledge to render more effective service to my clients. I will therefore critically learn about the method I use during counselling in order to adjust or change it, as is necessary.

1.6.1 Action research as learning

The basic premise of action research as learning is: "Research is learning and learning is researching." According to Bawden (Zuber-Skerrit 1991:19) action researching is learning with the special intention to achieve social action while adding to public knowledge. The learning method described below thus becomes a research method if the action taken is social action and the outcome is shared as public knowledge.

Action research as learning can be explained as a series of cycles in which the original action is reflected on and learning takes place. Thus learning is a progressive process and builds on previous learning. Applied to my research, it can be illustrated as follows:

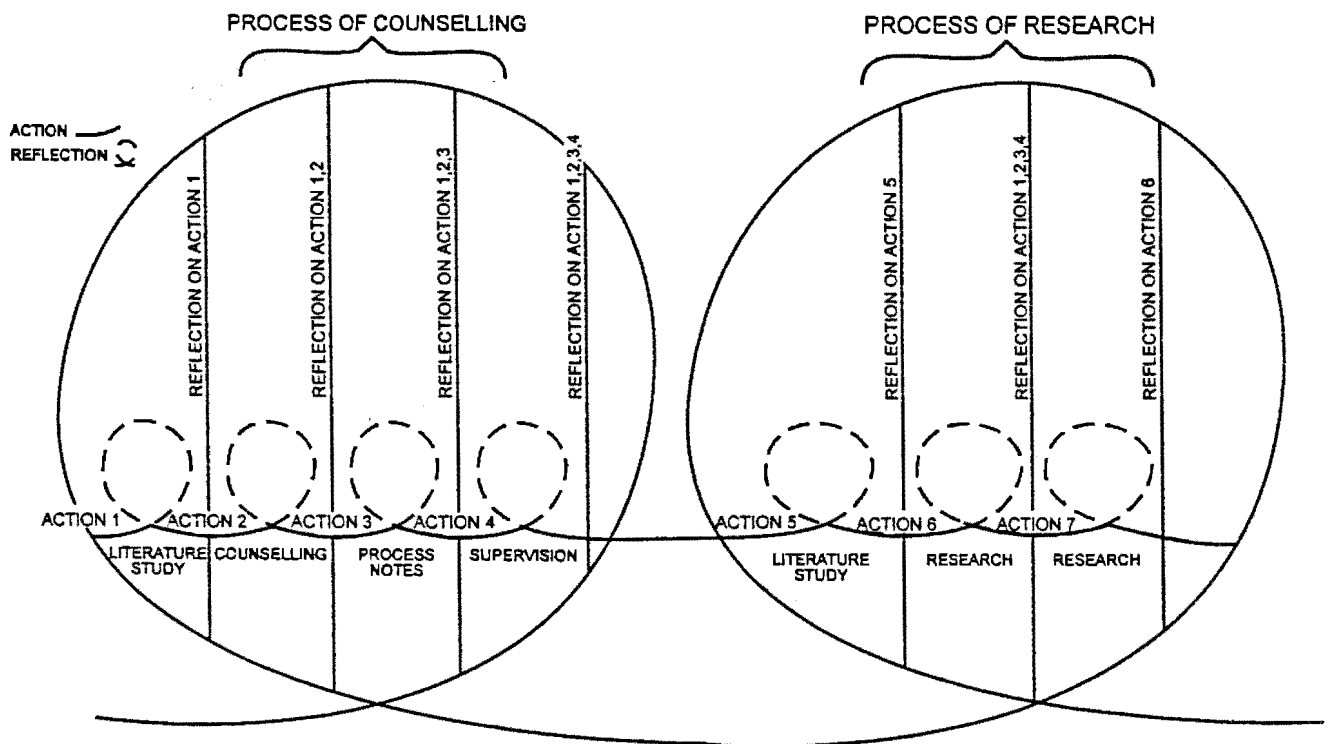


FIGURE 1: ACTION RESEARCH AS LEARNING ADJUSTED FROM HOPE & TIMMEL (198:60)

During my study I will reflect on my counselling in order to learn for future practice.

A distinction can be made between different types of learning: experiential learning (learning for being), propositional learning (learning for knowing), practical learning (learning for doing), and

intuitive learning (non-rational learning, which includes our values, likes and dislikes). All these types of learning are interrelated and form part of experiential learning (Bawden in Zuber-Skerrit 1991:19; Heron 1981:159).

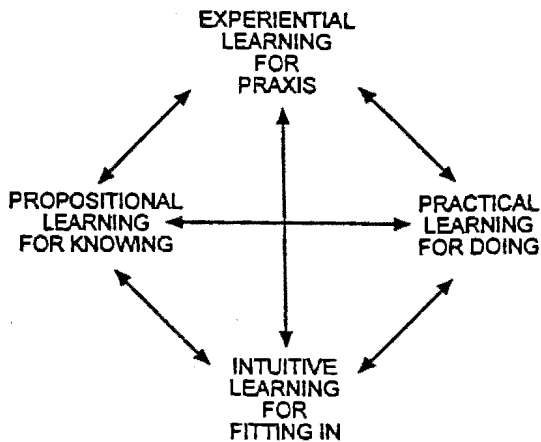


FIGURE 2: INTERRELATED WAYS OF KNOWING. (BAWDEN IN ZUBER-SKERRIT 1991:17)

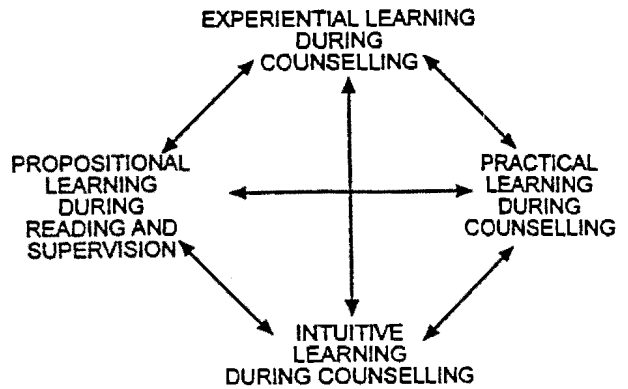


FIGURE 3: WAYS OF KNOWING DURING THE PROCESS OF COUNSELLING.

During counselling I will experience practical, experiential and intuitive learning while propositional learning will be part of reading and supervision.

1.6.1.1 The first learning cycle

Learning is a synthesis of finding out and taking action, of the concrete and the abstract. "Learning is a dynamic process: a flux between sensory experience and making sense of the experience, between sensing and making sense." (Bawden in Zuber-Skerrit 1991:11-13.)

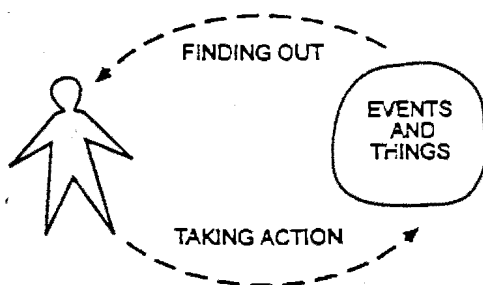


FIGURE 4: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING (BAWDEN IN ZUBER-SKERRIT 1991:12)

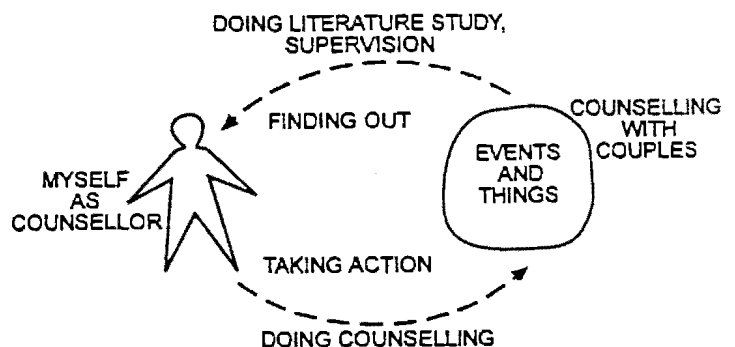


FIGURE 5: LEARNING DURING THE PROCESS OF COUNSELLING.

As counsellor I will “find out” about counselling with couples by conducting a literature study and receiving supervision. I will “take action” by doing counselling.

Because each of us has unique experiences, makes sense of the world in our own way and acts in a unique fashion, learning is a very personal process. Each person sees his/her “reality” through a “little window”, coloured by values, culture and experience (see §1.2 regarding my own values and assumptions). This not only influences our perspective of the world, but also what we “find out” or learn. Our meaning perspective and the way we go about making-meaning will naturally influence our choice of issues to address (Bawden in Zuber-Skerrit 1991:11-13).

As learners we constantly transform the information gathered from the world around us into constructs or “maps”. The outcomes are explanations, hypotheses or interpretations – “theories” which we set out testing, using a “little bag of tricks”. What we do in the world is thus determined by the theories we construct from our experience (Bawden in Zuber-Skerrit 1991:14).

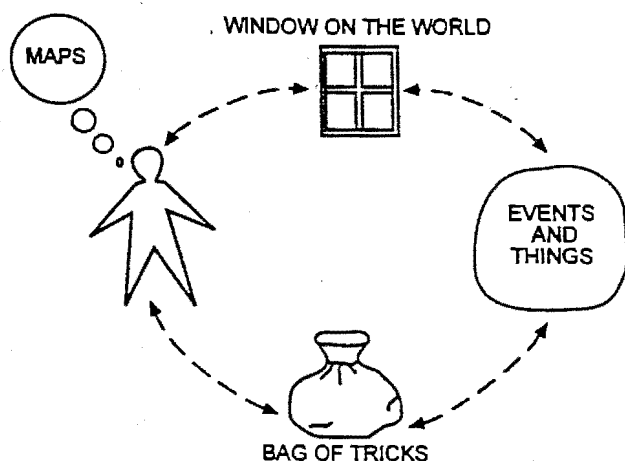


FIGURE 6: THE RECURSIVE CYCLE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING (BAWDEN IN ZUBER-SKERRIT 1991:14)

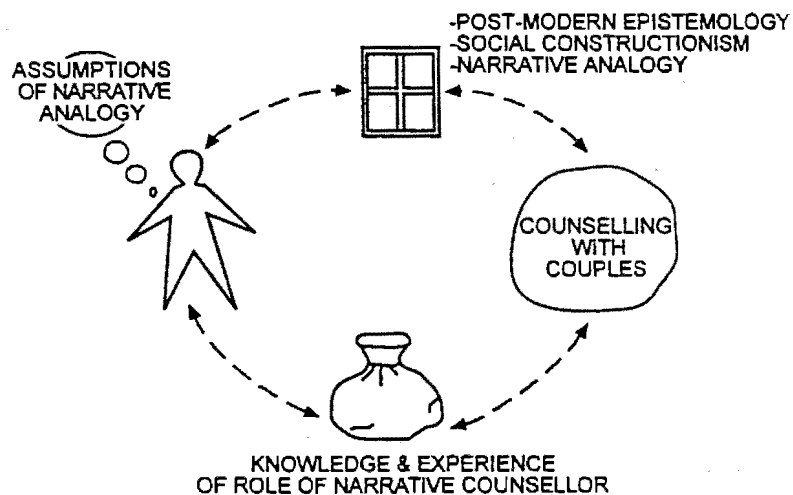


FIGURE 7: THE RECURSIVE CYCLE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING DURING THE PROCESS OF COUNSELLING.

I will interpret the stories told by the couple during counselling through the narrative framework and test these interpretations when doing counselling using my knowledge and experience of the role of the narrative counsellor.

A model of experiential or action learning can thus be described as an ever-recurring process, forming a cycle between four different but integrated phases: we investigate the “facts of the matter”, turn it into “familiar patterns in our minds”, translate this into appropriate “models for action” and “take action” in order to address the original “facts of the matter”. Each of these phases is influenced by our social and cultural context. In practice, the cycle may not be as clear – with us moving backwards or forwards (Bawden in Zuber-Skerrit 1991:15).

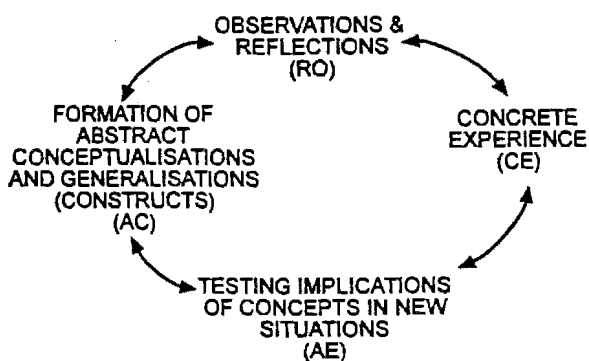


FIGURE 8: THE FOUR STAGES OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING. (BAWDEN IN ZUBER-SKERRIT 1991:15)

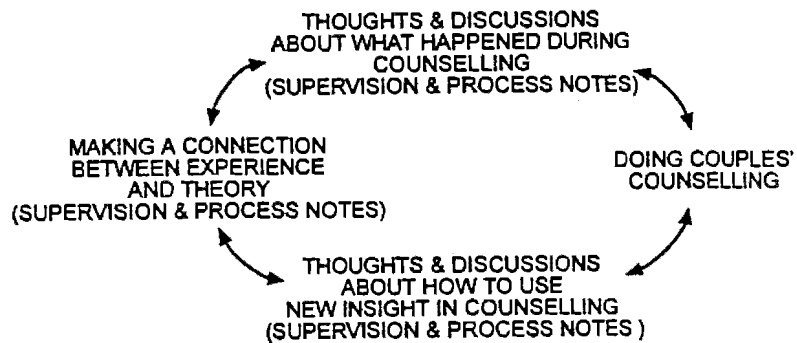


FIGURE 9: THE FOUR STAGES OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN THE PROCESS OF COUNSELLING.

I will experience these stages by doing couples' counselling, by thinking about and discussing issues that arises during counselling, by establishing a connection between experience and theory, and by thinking about and discussing about how any new insights should be used in counselling.

In the first order cycle we learn to:

- involve ourselves fully in experience - in this instance, doing counselling;
- investigate this experience from as many different perspectives as possible - in my case example this refers to the counselling, supervision and process notes written after each session;
- pattern our observations into meanings, theories or interpretations as a basis for informed action. In doing so we access “public knowledge” – scientific theories already existing. In my case, this would mean interpreting my observations in terms of the theory of the narrative analogy; and
- put the theories into action - in this instance, improved counselling in future.

(Bawden in Zuber-Skerrit 1991:15)

1.6.1.2 The second learning cycle

When action learning is used as a research method an additional learning cycle can be added. There is a “first order” learning cycle which relates to the situation being explored (couples’ counselling) as well as a “second order” learning cycle, which relates to the way we inquire about the first order cycle. We must find out about finding out; take action to improve the situation and take action to improve our action taking (Bawden in Zuber-Skerrit 1991:21). In this way we become reflective practitioners.

In the “second order cycle” we learn to question:

- the relevance of the way in which we gather “the facts of the matter”, and whether the questions we ask are relevant;
- the characteristics of the meaning perspective or philosophical framework we use as we proceed with our enquiry;
- our thinking, our thoughts on thinking and meta-theories as we access the work of other writers; and
- “the way we are going about the way we are going about our learning.”

(Bawden in Zuber-Skerrit 1991:22)

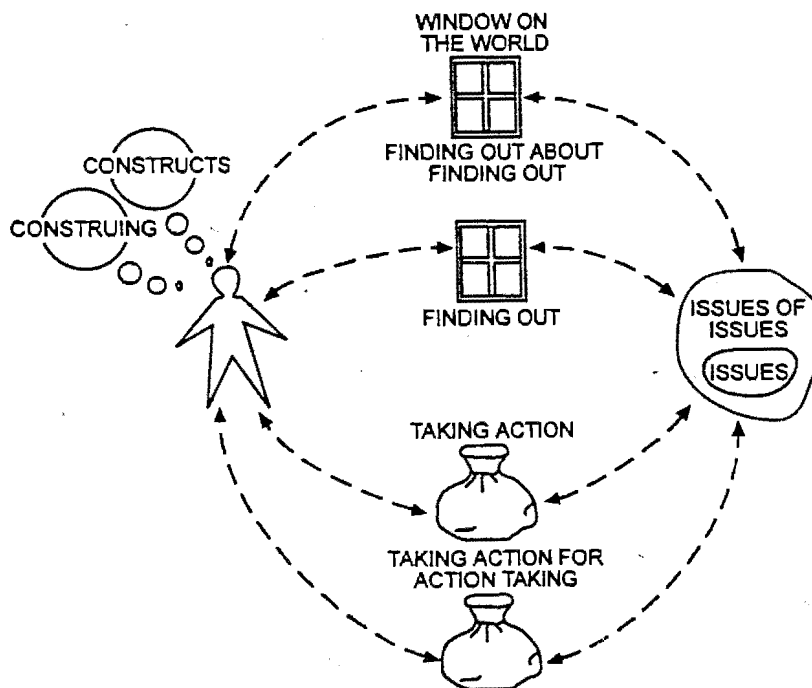


FIGURE 10: THE SECOND ORDER LEARNING CYCLE
(BAWDEN IN ZUBER-SKERRIT 1991:22)

While I focus on the first learning cycle in this study, this paragraph was included in order to give a complete picture of the theory as described by Bawden (1991).

By means of the above figures, I illustrated how the action research method, as described by Bawden (1991) applies to my own research. The advantage of using this method in my study is the recursive movement between literature/theory and practice/ doing, which will enable me to compare a theoretical analysis of the narrative analogy with my practice. The action research method thus seems appropriate to the aims of this research.

1.7 Method of data collection and reflection

From January to November 1998 I did couples' counselling at the Family Life Centre. I used the narrative analogy in all my work, but asked permission from two couples in particular to tape the process. One case example was specifically selected since I saw it as a better example of the use of the narrative analogy. I recorded 16 sessions a period of 9 months. Supervision was received once a month.

Data sources consisted of:

- Transcriptions of audio tape recordings of the 16 counselling sessions held between 23/4/1998 and 3/11/1998.
- Process notes that I wrote after each session.
- Transcriptions of audio tape recordings of supervision sessions held between 16/4/1998 and 27/8/1998.

I used content reflection to select material from the above-mentioned data sources. I selected clusters of interaction between the clients and counsellor that illustrate the use of assumptions underlying the narrative analogy (in future referred to as narrative assumptions), as well as the role of the counsellor using this analogy. I selected a few clusters of interaction between myself and my supervisor illustrating my understanding of the narrative analogy. Where applicable I also referred to reflections from my process notes illustrating my thinking on the counselling process.

1.8 The value of the study

During my literature search, I found only a few authors who have specifically focussed on the use of the narrative analogy in couple's counselling. My research can thus contribute to the extension of the knowledge base in this specialized area. I have not yet encountered any author reflecting on whether the narrative analogy fits his/her own values and assumptions. My research can thus contribute by emphasizing the fit between the analogy used by the counsellor and his/her own values and assumptions about the world.

1.9 The limitations of the study

The following limitations influenced my research process:

- The study is of limited scope as only one case example has been used to illustrate the use of the narrative analogy in couple's counselling.
- Although 16 counselling sessions and 7 supervision sessions were recorded, only certain parts of 2 recordings were usable due to a lack of clarity in the recording.
- The counselling took place over a period of 7 months. For the last 2 months the supervisor was not available for supervision which limited available data on supervision.
- My research questions require that a specific timeframe is adhered to. I intend first of all, to compare my counselling with the theory on the narrative analogy. However, this theory is not a static body of knowledge, but is constantly changing as new ideas and perspectives are continuously added. I also aim to see whether this analogy is consistent with my own values and beliefs. But my own values and beliefs are also constantly changing. In trying to overcome this limitation, I will refer to the theory of the narrative analogy as described in the literature I consulted in the period from January to November 1999. My values and beliefs will refer to assumptions held by me at the time of writing my thesis.

1.10 Content of the study

This thesis is constructed as follows:

Chapter 1: Situating The Research Framework Of The Study.

Chapter 2: Situating The Narrative Analogy Within A Philosophical Context.

Chapter 3: The Narrative Analogy: Situating Narrative Counselling.

Chapter 4: Situating Couples' Counselling Within The Narrative Analogy.

Chapter 5: Situating A Case Example Within The Narrative Analogy.

Chapter 6: Conclusion And Recommendation.

1.11 Concepts

A short description of particular concepts used in this study is provided below. It must be noted that the description of each concept is particular to this study. Some of these concepts will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 2, 3 and 4.

Alternative story: The story that develops in counselling in contradiction to the problem-saturated story (White & Epston 1990:301).

Analogy: An interpretive framework or map that we use to interpret our world and experience. The analogy used determines the questions we ask and the realities we construct (White & Epston 1990:5). Although *metaphor* is sometimes used as a synonym for *analogy*, the meaning of analogy in this context is wider than that of metaphor.

Audience: People – this could be the client, the counsellor and/or significant others who witness and appreciate the development of the new story.

Assumptions: A belief or an idea taken for granted or assumed to be the “truth” which serves as the basis for an argument or theory.

Cluster of interaction: An expression of one person followed by the response of another.

Co-authoring: The process in which the client and counsellor share responsibility for the development of alternative stories (White & Epston 1990:301).

Constructivism: The view that knowledge (that which is known), cannot be the result of passive receiving, but is a product of observation by the observer or subject (Atkinson & Health 1987:9).

Deconstruction: Unpacking assumptions which are taken for granted and ideas accepted as truth and reality.

Discourse: A set of ideas that has evolved over time, contributed to by all of us and shaping us in a way that we take for granted, “as if it was always there” (Zimmerman & Dickerson 1996:62).

Epistemology: A set of “rules” or ideas used by a specific group of people to refer to a universal reality (Auerswald 1987:321).

Externalize: A problem is externalized when it is spoken of in a way that separates the person and the problem. The problem is spoken of as if it was a distinct entity or even a personality in its own right. The relationship between the person and the problem becomes the focus (White & Epston 1990:303).

Fit: Within the context of constructivism the word *fit* was used by Von Glasersfeld (1986:87). He explained it by referring to a key fitting in a lock. As a lock may be opened by numerous keys, so a variety of constructions will fit a given set of experiences. One construction may be chosen because it fits the way we see or have already constructed our world.

Landscape of action: Direct experience or events out of which we fashion our stories (Freedman & Combs 1996:186; White & Epston 1990:303).

Landscape of consciousness: Reflection on direct experience or “experience of experience” (Freedman & Combs 1996:186).

Modernism: An epistemology which focuses on small units of lived experience and ignores larger, social contexts. Clarity, order and analytic abstraction are seen as important (Doherty 1991:39-40).

Narrative: Organized experience. Experience can be organized in different units, for example a story told during a therapy session or a life story. It can also refer to the process of organizing experience during a therapy session.

Paradigm: A set of “rules” or ideas used by a specific group to refer to a sub-unit of the universal reality (Auerswald 1987:321).

Positivism: A view that knowledge, or what is known, is a representation of facts and events in a “real world” (Hoffman 1990:3).

Post-modernism: An epistemology which doesn’t recognize an “absolute truth”, but regards the validity of social theory within a particular historical context and value system. Eclecticism, elaboration and inclusiveness are valued (Doherty 1991:39-40).

Reflection: Referring back in careful thought to an experience. It is an intended process of conceptualization and reasoning (Hope & Timmel 1994:126).

Relative influence questions: Questions asked about an externalized problem to describe the relationship between the person and the problem. It aims to describe the influence of the problem on the person and/or vice versa (White & Epston 1990:303).

Research framework: A set of “rules” or ideas about the nature of knowledge, the goals of doing research and the role of the researcher.

Research method: The steps a researcher takes to gain new knowledge or to describe existing knowledge.

Theory: A set of ideas that actually or potentially contribute to a paradigm (Auerswald 1987:321). A theory is also referred to as an *approach* or *perspective*.

Situate: To describe something within its context.

Social constructionism: A view that the creation of knowledge is not an internal process, but an inter-subjective social process, where perceptions co-evolve through the use of language within a network of communication (Fraser 1992:26).

Unique outcomes: An aspect of lived experience that lies outside of or is in contradiction to the problem story (White & Epston 1990:306).

Unstoried experiences: Experiences that have gone unnoticed, or aspects of lived experience that lie outside the realms of the dominant story (White & Epston 1990:306).

Voice: To speak for oneself.

Chapter 2

Situating The Narrative Analogy Within A Philosophical Context

2.1 Introduction

“All products of human thought are products of their time and place, and theories of psychotherapy are no exception.” (Neimeyer 1993:221.) Any analogy or map used for counselling is situated within a philosophical context or *zeitgeist*. Within my research framework this would refer to a part of the “window on the world” (see Figure 4: §1.6.1.1).

2.2 The philosophical context

A philosophical context consists of changing *epistemologies*, *paradigms* and *theories*. When defining these concepts, Neimeyer’s (1994:238) description of definitions as “working fictions” which classify or punctuate experience in ways more or less useful to the person or language community adopting that definition, comes to mind.

Different authors describe these concepts differently (Dell 1985:1; Rober & Migerode 1992:187; Neimeyer 1993:221; Auerswald 1987:321). I find Auerswald’s description (1987:321) the most useful in this context. According to him *epistemology* denotes a set of “rules” used by a specific group of people to refer to universal reality. A *paradigm* denotes a set of “rules”, again used by a specific group, to refer to a sub-unit of a universal reality. A *theory* denotes an idea or set of ideas that actually or potentially contributes to a paradigm. A theory is also referred to as an *approach* or *perspective*. A guiding *metaphor* is often used as part of a theory to organize one’s thinking and perceptions (Freedman & Combs 1996:1).

Modernism and *post-modernism* are two epistemologies which form part of this description. *Positivism* can be seen as a paradigm within the modernist framework, while *constructivism* and *social constructionism* can be placed within the post-modern paradigm. Within the field of psychotherapy several theories contribute towards each paradigm. Examples of the first would be

psychoanalysis, cognitive theory and family systems therapy, while the narrative perspective, personal construct theory and constructivist family therapy would share a constructivist paradigm. It is important to note that these distinctions are not discrete, but are overlapping. As a counsellor, you can situate yourself within the *modernist* or *post-modernist* framework, or where the post-modernist epistemology is still influenced by the modernist one.

To understand the philosophical context of the narrative analogy, the difference between a modernist and post-modernist epistemology will be illustrated, a comparison between positivism and constructivism will be made and the difference between constructivism and social constructionism will be indicated. In order to narrow the context further, the move within counselling from a modernist to a post-modernist epistemology will be described.

2.2.1 The difference between a modernist and post-modernist epistemology

The modernist epistemology was characterized by a belief in one truth. Physicists of the late nineteenth century believed that the rules of thought describing physical reality had been laid down through work done by Isaac Newton. This modernist epistemology focused on the individual and on microcosmic detail rather than on macrocosmic movements of social and political life. In the 1950's the "*New Criticism*" emerged within the literary movement, leaving larger cultural or historical issues aside to focus exclusively on the literal meanings in a given text. In architecture clean lines were emphasized, in painting and sculpture abstract forms were preferred. Scientists favoured universal theories. From the mid-60's through to the 70's *Structuralism* played an important role. It derived in part from the work of French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, American literary criticism as well as linguistics and psychology. This movement attempted to identify the universal codes and structures underlying and governing all human languages, customs and behaviours (Auerswald 1985:1-5; Doherty 1991:36-42; Gergen 1991:27-42).

The movement in science from a modernist to a post-modernist epistemology began when Max Planck proposed the quantum theory. It became clear by experiment that both the Newtonian physics and the new physics introduced by Planck could be seen as "true". A new rule was

demanding - a rule that defined truth as heuristic. Post-modernism, which emerged in the 1970's and the 1980's, highlighted elaboration, eclecticism, ornamentation and inclusiveness, including the importance of context. Artists blended different ideas, often combining painting, sculpture, photography, even music and dance in one work. *Deconstruction*, the literary movement of post-modernism, dismisses structuralism and the attempt to find an absolute reality beneath language. According to this movement words can only refer to other words, not to something outside themselves. Deconstructionist critics like Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man state that multiple competing themes can be uncovered within texts. A word or a phrase can be seen as subtly contradicting the one before it. Internal contradictions exist in all meaning attached to literature, art or phenomena in the world itself. This implies that there is no understanding of a text without context. Likewise social scientists claim that no social theory can be valid outside a particular historical context. Post-modernist historian Michel Foucault even proposed that explanatory theories about the world don't represent truths, but are instruments of social power (Auerswald 1985:1-5; Doherty 1991: 36-42; Gergen 1991:27-42). The new communication technologies of the 20th century, telephones, automobiles, radios, faxes and personal computers have contributed to the creation of a post-modern world. The individual's social and cultural worlds expanded and people came in touch with worlds of new ideas, values and beliefs. Pluralism, democracy, religious freedom and increased mobility had a cumulative effect, and people became "shoppers in the great market place of realities" (O'Hara & Anderson 1991:20).

The modernist epistemology was thus characterized by a belief in one truth, a focus on the individual and detail, as well as the identification of universal, underlying structures in human languages and behaviour. The post-modernist epistemology is distinguished by a belief in multiple truths, a focus on inclusiveness and the assumption that meaning only exists within a specific context.

2.2.2 A comparison between positivism and constructivism

Some of the differences between the modernist and post-modernist epistemologies are clear from the historical account given in the previous paragraph. To shed further light on these differences,

some elements of the positivist paradigm will be contrasted with that of the constructivist paradigm:

- Positivism can be described as the view that knowledge is a representation of facts and events in a “real world” out there (Hoffman 1990:3). Constructivism can be described as a view that knowledge (that is what is known) cannot be the result of passive receiving, but originates as the product of an active observation (Atkinson & Heath 1987:9).
- According to positivism reality exists “out there”; it is objective and independent of the observer (Fisher 1991:15). There is only one true observation of reality and the observer tries to convince others to accept his view. Constructivism states that realities are construed as subjective experience (Fisher 1991:15). Each observer is responsible for his own punctuation of reality and the acceptance of other punctuations as valid (Atkinson & Heath 1987:9).
- Within the positivist paradigm people are seen as reactive organisms. Behaviour is seen as fully determined and could be explained if we understood all relations between all variables (Fisher 1991:15; Neimeyer 1993:223). Within the constructivist paradigm people are seen as proactive, goal-directed and purposive organisms. Behaviour is viewed as indeterminate and is understood through dialogue. People have agency and have choice, but are constrained by recursive relations between self and the environment (Neimeyer 1993:223; Fischer 1991: 15).
- From a positivistic perspective facts are seen as universally true, irrespective of the social or historical context (Efran & Lukens 1988:28). From a constructivistic perspective context is emphasized. If something is removed from its context, and placed in a different context, it will have a different meaning (Efran & Lukens 1988:28;33).

The fundamental difference between positivism and constructivism is thus the view of reality and the relationship between human beings and reality. In positivism reality is seen as a “given out there” to which people react. In constructivism reality is seen as being construed by people who have to choose to change their construction of reality.

2.2.3 A distinction between constructivism and social constructionism

It is often assumed that constructivism and social constructionism are synonymous (Hoffman

1990:2). Although social constructionism had some of its roots in constructivism, the two are based on a number of different assumptions (Terrel & Lyddon 1996:32).

2.2.3.1 Constructivism

Constructivism derives from the European philosophical tradition that includes Berkley, Vico, Kant, Wittgenstein and Piaget. The biologist Maturana, the cognitive scientist Von Foerster and the linguist Von Glasersfeld made valuable contributions to the ideas of constructivism (Hoffman 1990:2).

Constructivism reacted against the positivistic assumption that there is a real world which exists “out there” and can be objectively observed. According to Von Glasersfeld (1988:83), who referred to his version as “radical constructivism”, “constructivism is a theory of active knowing, not a conventional epistemology that treats knowledge as an embodiment of Truth that reflects the world “in itself” independent of the knower.” He identifies two basic principles of radical constructivism:

- (a) Knowledge is not passively received either through the senses or by way of communication, but is actively construed by the observer.
- (b) The function of cognition is adaptive and contributes towards the observer’s organisation of the experiential world. The function is not the discovery of an objective ontological reality.

These principles can be used as basis for further discussion. Von Glasersfeld (Fraser 1992:23) believes that the construction of ideas about the world takes place in the nervous system of a person. Observation depends on the biological composition of a person’s nervous system, which implies that each person is thus responsible for his own thinking and behaviour. Nervous systems can only perturb each other and then respond as determined by their structure. All interaction takes place between “informationally closed” nervous systems that can only influence each other in indirect ways (Hoffman 1990:2-3; Fraser 1992:23).

The constructivist position is distinguished from *solipsism*. The solipsist view is that the world is made up entirely of our constructions, with no reference to an external world. The constructivist

position does not reject the existence of an ontological world. What is rejected is the notion that we can have direct access to that world through objective observation (Atkinson & Heath 1987:9).

Von Glasersfeld (1986:87) used the word *fit* and explained it by referring to a key fitting into a lock. As a lock may be opened by numerous keys, so a variety of constructions will fit a given set of experience. One construction may be chosen because it fits the way we see or have already constructed our world.

The most important contribution of constructivism is that it doesn't see reality as objectively observed, but as a construction by the observer. It sees this construction as taking place in the nervous system of the observer. Constructivism doesn't take into account the role of social interaction in this construction of reality.

2.2.3.2 Social constructionism

Social constructionism is a development of an earlier branch of sociology, called sociology of knowledge, and has been influenced by the work of Kelly, Berger and Luckmann, Gergen and Geertz (Owen 1992:385; Hoffman 1990:2).

Burr (1995:1) sees social constructionism as a theoretical orientation which to a greater or lesser degree underpins alternative approaches to social sciences such as critical psychology, discourse analysis, deconstruction and post-structuralism. According to Gergen (1985:266) social constructionism views discourse about the world not as a reflection or map of the world, but as an artifact of communal interchange. Owen (1992:386) defines it "as a view that states that theories map reality but that the descriptions contained in the theory are not that of reality, but are only accounts of real phenomena. Understandings are socially created by a group of believers."

Hoffman (1990:2-3) emphasizes the difference between constructivism and social constructionism. She states that social constructionists place far more emphasis on social interpretation and the inter-subjective influence of language, family and culture and much less on

the operations of the nervous system. Meanings emerge unendingly from interactions between people and are not “skull-bound”, but are part of “a flow of constantly changing narratives”. Social constructionism, like constructivism, is a reaction against objectivism. It differs from constructivism, however, in that it sees the creation of knowledge not as an internal process but as an intersubjective social process, where perceptions co-evolve within a network of communication (Fraser 1992:26).

Based on the work of Burr (1995:3-5) some features of the social constructionist position can be identified:

- It challenges the view that conventional knowledge is based on objective, unbiased observation of the world.
- Categories and concepts used to understand the world are historically and culturally specific. Context thus plays an important role.
- Since the social world is a product of social processes, the nature of people or the world is not predetermined. There are no essences inside people or things that make them what they are.
- Knowledge is a product of social processes and interactions in which people are constantly engaged with each other through language. Language is seen as a pre-condition for thought and as a form of social action. When people talk, the world gets constructed – language thus has a performative role.
- Different social constructions invite a different kind of action from people – some patterns of social action are sustained by certain descriptions of the world, while others are excluded.

Social constructionism thus shares certain assumptions with constructivism for example that knowledge is not based on an objective observation of the world, but differs in other regards for example that knowledge is socially constructed, not in the nervous system of the individual.

2.3 Counselling: the movement from a modernist to a post-modernist epistemology

Counselling was traditionally based on modernist assumptions. An assumption of “normality” was made and the task of counselling was to repair the social defect. The counsellor was seen as the expert who decides on a specific intervention or strategy. In family therapy the analogy of a

system was used to describe the family, which was seen as a system with hierarchies, boundaries and transactional patterns. Terms like *homeostasis* and *circularity* explained how entities stayed the same. The counsellor objectively identified the problem, which could be seen as a dysfunctional family structure or interactional pattern or inadequate generational boundaries. Social structure and role defined the target of treatment (Doherty 1991:40; Anderson & Goolishian 1990:158).

From the early 1980's *second-order cybernetics*, which stated that the observer could not be separated from the observed, became a popular concept. Counsellors began to question their privileged role and began to see the point of view of the client as equally privileged. Authors such as Hoffman (1990:9), Anderson and Goolishian (1990:159) and White (1990:4) began to question the mechanistic analogy used by family therapists. Terms like *homeostasis* and *circularity* didn't accommodate the process of dynamic change. The mechanistic metaphor gave the counsellor enormous power – the family didn't have access to a complex system of grammar.

With the adoption of the social constructionist approach a new analogy was suggested from the field of human science, specifically the language arts – the *narrative* or *story*. This analogy was seen as particularly useful as narratives evolve through time and are fluid – in the same way as people progress through life. The narrative analogy thus uses experience as central variable (Zimmerman & Dickerson 1994:235).

Within this analogy, systems do not exist in an external social reality, but in language interaction. Problems are in the inter-subjective minds of all that are in active communicative exchange and are constantly changing. Counselling is seen as a process of expanding and saying the “unsaid” – the development of new meaning or an alternative story. The role of the counsellor is that of “participant manager of conversation” (Anderson & Goolishian 1988:380-385; Zimmerman & Dickerson 1994: 235). Counsellors using this analogy adhere to the following assumptions:

- Reality is socially created through social interaction.
- The client defines what is normal.
- The role of the counsellor is to collaborate with the client in order to co-construct new stories that hold new possibilities.

- The client is the diagnostician who does the assessment.
- The therapist is transparent.
- The client has many selves.
- The client has a problem in living, which persists because the client does not know how to fix it.

(Atwood 1997:13.)

With the movement from a modernist to post-modernist epistemology, assumptions underlying counselling changed – specifically assumptions about normality, the problem, the client’s self as well as the role of the counsellor. Within a modernist epistemology there is a definite definition of normality, the problem lies within the system, the self of the client has different aspect, and the counsellor is seen as the expert who brings about change. Within the post-modernist epistemology the client defines normality as well as the problem, the client has many selves and the client is seen as the expert in solving the problem, not the counsellor.

2.4 Reflection

In this chapter a view from my “window on the world” was explored – the narrative analogy as used within couple’s counselling was situated within counselling, the constructivist, and specifically, the social constructionist paradigm as well as the post-modernist epistemology. As far as my research questions are concerned, I have thus gained clarity on the philosophical context of the narrative analogy.

In order to start answering my second research question, I will have to reflect on the implied values and assumptions of post-modernism, constructivism and social constructionism in particular and compare this to my own values and beliefs. Three of my values or assumptions can be addressed:

- I assume that there is no single truth, as all realities are constructed. Constructivism states that realities are constructed as subjective experience, while social constructionism sees realities as socially constructed.

- I assume that everything is constantly changing and that one needs to respond to life from moment to moment. According to social constructionism meaning emerges unendingly from interactions between people, through language. This implies that reality is constantly changing.
- I assume that each person has the potential to grow and to choose his/her own direction. Within the constructivistic paradigm, people are seen as proactive, goal-directed organisms who have a choice.

Three of my values or beliefs are consistent with certain values or assumptions underlying constructivism and social constructionism. The others cannot yet be addressed.

From §2.3 it was clear that a move from a modernist to a post-modernist epistemology also implies change in both the assumptions underlying the approach and the role of the counsellor. In the next chapter I will describe the underlying assumptions of the narrative analogy and the role of the counsellor using this analogy in more depth in order to situate my own practice as a counsellor.

Chapter 3

The Narrative Analogy: Situating narrative counselling

3.1 Introduction

During recent years scholars from diverse disciplines, for example, anthropology, communication, education, history, literature and psychology have been using the narrative metaphor to describe a wide range of human phenomena (Terrel & Lyddon 1996:28). Different writers and theorists within the field of psychotherapy have approached the narrative metaphor differently. Although it could not be claimed that there exists a single, identifiable narrative perspective, a number of common concepts and themes can be identified (McLeod 1996:176).

In this chapter the focus will be on the concepts *narrative* and *narrative counselling*. A few of the different approaches to the narrative perspective will be highlighted to illustrate the diverse perspectives on the narrative analogy. To further my attempt to situate my own practice as counsellor, I will describe the assumptions underlying the narrative analogy which forms a further part of the “window on my world” (see Figure 4: §1.6.1.1) as well the role of the counsellor using the narrative analogy which sheds light on my “bag of tricks” (see Figure 4: §1.6.1.1).

3.2 The *narrative*

A starting point in the exploration of the narrative analogy is to define the concept *narrative*. Family Word Finder (Reader’s Digest 1975:531) defines *narrate* as the telling of a story, giving an account of something or describing.

In the literature authors describe the narrative or story from different perspectives. Some authors have focussed on the definition of this concept, as illustrated below :

Angus and Hardtke (1994:191) understand the term *narrative* in three ways: (a) as referring to individual stories clients tell counsellors during counselling sessions; (b) as the thematic story

line which weaves together many different stories or narratives into a coherent whole; and (c) to describe the modes of inquiry or cognitive/affective processes which help clients to understand themselves and their relationships with others in a more comprehensive manner – thus referring to the therapy process. Freedman and Combs (1996:32) describe a story as being constituted by remembered events, which together with other stories constitutes a life narrative.

Other authors have highlighted the functions of the narrative. According to Bruner (Freedman & Combs 1996:30) we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings in the form of narrative: “stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing.” Bathes (in Polkinghorne 1988:4) states that at an individual level, people have a narrative of their own lives which enables them to construe what they are and where they are headed. At a cultural level, narratives provide cohesion to shared beliefs and transmit values. White and Epston (1990:10) see the function of the narrative as making sense of life – people face the task of arranging their experiences of events in sequences across time in such a way to arrive at a coherent account of themselves and the world around them. The narrative provides a person with a sense of continuity and meaning in their lives, and this is relied upon for the ordering of daily lives and for the interpretation for further experiences.

Other authors have identified different kinds of narratives as well as the elements of a narrative. Zimmerman and Dickerson (1996:29) refer to “personal stories of individuals, therapy stories of therapists and cultural stories influencing groups of people.” De Shazer (in Freedman & Combs 1996:30) mentions that each narrative has a beginning, a middle and an ending, or at least a sense of an ending. The narrative is held together by patterns involved, thereby forming the plot.

Having reviewed the literature, I perceive a narrative as experience that can be organized in different units for example a story told during a therapy session or a life story. Narratives can be shared by different people and have different content. For this reason different kinds of narratives can be described for example personal stories, therapy stories and cultural stories. A narrative can have several functions – it can organize and add to experience, it can create a sense of identity and it can provide cohesion through shared beliefs.

3.3 Situating the use of the *narrative* in counselling using the narrative analogy

In the narrative analogy *narrative* or *story* forms part of other concepts. These concepts are defined to further the understanding of the narrative analogy. The *problem-saturated story* or *narrative* refers to the problem experienced by the client, which is often described as “in” the person. It is also referred to as the dominant story (Zimmerman & Dickerson 1996:48). *Alternative stories* are stories developed during counselling, stories with new meaning that the client experiences as more helpful and satisfying than the problem-saturated story (White & Epston 1990:15). The *preferred story* is the alternative story which best satisfies the needs of the client. The *dominant story* refers to a set of assumptions that has become so widely accepted within a culture that it appears to represent ‘reality’ (White & Epston 1990:303). *Unstoried experiences* refer to experiences that have gone unnoticed or lie outside the realm of the dominant story. The client *restories* his life when he gives new meaning to his experiences.

3.4 Diverse approaches to *narrative counselling*

There is no single definition of *narrative counselling*. A diversity of perspectives on narrative counselling can be found in the literature. In order to illustrate this diversity, it will be useful to describe a few approaches to counselling using the narrative analogy.

3.4.1 Counselling as therapeutic conversation

According to Anderson and Goolishian (1988:371-391) people who are “in language” about something that is a problem for them will go for counselling. This social unit is described as a *problem-organising problem-dissolving system*. The problem is not seen as a characteristic of the person or family, but as occurring within the inter-subjective minds of the people in communication.

Counselling is seen as a linguistic event that takes place in a “therapeutic conversation”. The therapeutic conversation is a mutual search and exploration through dialogue. This dialogue is a two-way exchange of ideas in which new meanings are continually evolving towards the ‘dis-

solving' of problems and thus the dissolving of the therapy system, and hence the *problem-organising, problem-dis-solving system*. Change is seen as the evolution of new meaning through dialogue. The role of the counsellor is seen as that of conversational artist who creates a space for and facilitates a dialogical conversation. The counsellor is *participant-observer* and *participant-manager* of the therapeutic conversation.

For me the essence of this perspective is the creation of new meaning through conversation.

3.4.2 Counselling by changing the meaning system

In the view of White and Epston (1990:38–84) a person's experience is problematic to him when "he is being situated in stories that others have about him and his relationships, and when these stories are dominant to the extent that they allow insufficient space for the performance of the person's preferred stories, which will fulfil his needs. Or that the person is actively participating in the performance of stories that she finds unhelpful, unsatisfying and dead-ended." (White & Epston 1990:14.) These dominant stories influencing the person can be seen as *discourses* – normalized "truths" shaping a person's life.

During counselling the counsellor assists the client to externalize the problem – to objectify and personify the problem in order for the client to see him- or herself as separate from the problem. The client is helped to identify the assumptions or beliefs underlying his/her problem and to identify unique outcomes – "previously neglected but vital aspects of experience" - that highlight the agency and potential of the client to choose and perform a preferred story. The new or alternative story is "thickened" by reflecting on the *landscape of action* (events linked together in a particular sequence through time) and the *landscape of consciousness* (the client's desires, wants, motives, values, beliefs and so on) and inviting other persons to be an *audience* to the performance of the alternative story. The client's experience can be documented and shared with others in similar situations (White & Epston 1990:38-84).

By "linguaging" differently about the problem, the client attaches a different meaning to his/her experience and can perform an alternative story.

3.4.3 Counselling by changing internal conversation

Penn and Frankfurt (1994:217-231) see a problem as a construction – the result of a negative, single-voiced monologue that is absolute and closed for example a self-accusing voice saying “you are hopeless”, “you are incompetent”. However, these authors work from the assumption that we have the ability to discover or invent other, additional voices that can converse with our negative monologue. This inner dialogue can change our conversation with others. If all of our many voices can co-exist at the same time, then all of them are representations of who we are. This co-existence of many selves for many contexts adds stories and voices that could change the negative monologues into internal dialogues.

It is the role of the counsellor to assist the client within their conversation to discover alternative voices. This discovery can be hastened by asking the client to write journals, letters and dialogues. Through writing and speaking a reflective process is set up where each (the writing and speaking) influences the other. A therapeutic narrative called the *participant text* is created. This narrative accompanies the client both inside and outside the therapeutic sessions. The new stories created in this way are then transferred to the client’s troubling relationships (Penn & Frankfurt 1994:217-231).

The focus of this approach is thus on the widening of the client’s inner conversation, creating more options for new interpretation of experience.

3.4.4 Counselling through working towards joint goals

Allen and Allen (1995: 327) introduced re-decision therapy as both a brief therapy and a narrative therapy. Children are born into the story world of their parents and families. These stories become their truth, their reality. These stories often incorporate injunctions (“this is what you must or must not do to survive”) and counter-injunctions (“this is what you must or must not do to make us proud”). These stories that might have been useful for children to “survive”, may not

fit the adult any longer. The client's script or major story is not fixed, but can be recreated in the present.

The major task of the counsellor is to help develop a context that the client can use to modify his or her old story or to develop a new one. This process can involve 5 stages: (a) development of a therapeutic contract; (b) re-enactment of a key early scene, including decisions made by the child ego state; (c) introduction of new information, experience or affect into this key scene; (d) re-decision from the child ego state; (e) affirmation of these new decisions and the associated sense of the self by significant others. The counsellor also encourages the client to give him- or herself permission to continue to reshape his or her story.

In this approach the assumptions of the Transactional Analysis are combined with those of the narrative analogy – the goal of counselling is also to help the client to develop a new story.

From these examples it is clear that there doesn't exist one, singular narrative counselling. I have approached my own counselling by trying to use language in a different way, creating opportunities for clients to change the meaning they attach to experience. Because of this I have strongly identified with writers using a similar approach for example White and Epston (1990) and other authors who follow the same line of thought namely Freedman and Combs (1996); Monk, Winslade and Crocket (1997); Hoyt (1994); Polkinghorne (1988); Freeman (1997); Zimmerman and Dickerson (1996) as well as Parry (1991).

Although it is not possible to provide a single definition or description of narrative counselling, general themes can be identified in the work of narrative counsellors, for example in the underlying assumptions used as well in descriptions of the role of the counsellor. The aim of my research is to do a theoretical analysis and then to compare this to practice. This aim can be achieved by identifying underlying assumptions and perspectives on the role of the counsellor and to compare this with examples from my counselling with couples.

3.5 Narrative assumptions

While studying the literature on the narrative analogy, I identified a selection of both stated and implied assumptions underlying the work of narrative counsellors. I clustered these assumptions into 5 groups according to my perception of common themes. These clusters are by no means exclusive, as one assumption may refer to or imply another assumption.

3.5.1 Human experience is organized through stories and language

People experience events from day to day and make sense of life by ordering these experiences (see §3.2). The following assumptions address the ordering of experience.

3.5.1.1 Human experience is organized and maintained through stories or narratives

According to White (1998:1) the primary focus of the narrative approach is people's expressions of their experience of life (in stories or narratives). All expressions of life experiences engage people in interpretative acts. There are many possibilities for how any given experience may be interpreted (Freedman & Comb 1996:33). Any experience can be given different meanings. The same incident can be experienced as a joke, tragedy, drama and so on. It is through these interpretive acts that people give meaning to their experiences of the world and make sense of their lives. Meaning does not pre-exist the interpretation of experience for example to be adopted (experience) does not necessarily mean that the adopted child will be valued less than the own children of the adopted parents (interpretation). Young (1996:144) emphasizes that the desire to organize understanding seems to be an innate characteristic of humans.

During counselling this assumption is realized by encouraging clients to tell their stories.

3.5.1.2 Human experience is ordered and given meaning through language

The storying of experience is dependent on language (White & Epston 1996:27). Language is shared by society and reflects traditions, power relations and the institutions of society (Hare-

Mustin 1994:23). In the modernist worldview the signs of language correspond in a one-to-one way to objects in the real world. We can use language unambiguously to represent external reality. Post-modernists focus on how the language we use constitutes our worlds and beliefs. "Language does not mirror nature; language creates the natures we know." (Anderson & Goolishian in Freedman & Combs 1996:28.) Vogel (1994:251) uses the following metaphor to describe this idea: "...words are not like labels on supermarket boxes. Words do not simply identify that which has already been packaged and processed. Words are involved in the packaging, organization and construction of the things they represent." People often use metaphors to explore their experience and give it meaning. Sims and Whynot (1997:342) describe a metaphor as any communication, either explicit or implicit, in which resemblance of one thing with another is asserted. This includes gesture, touch, drawing, sculpture and language.

This assumption cautions the counsellor with regard to the language he/she uses during counselling.

3.5.2 The nature of problems

Through the use of language a specific experience can be given the meaning of or labeled a problem (see §3.5.1.1). The assumption that the person and the problem are not the same can influence the whole counselling process.

3.5.2.1 The person is not the problem

An important assumption for the narrative counsellor is that the person is seen as separate from the problem. This is in contrast with the usual perception that the problem is something "in" a person. If people are viewed as problematic, they often feel helpless and out of control. When a person is seen as separate from the problem, he/she is then in the position to see the relationship he/she has with the problem. It creates the space for the person to recognize, evaluate and renegotiate his/her relationship with the problem. By using language that locates the problem in a meaning system, *externalizing* the problem, the client begins to experience himself or herself as separate from the problem (Zimmerman & Dickerson 1996:49;238).

Working from this assumption the counsellor is constantly aware of the way he/she refers to the presented problem and makes use of externalization.

3.5.3 The possibility and methods of change

A person gives meaning to his/her life by organizing his/her experience as a story. By changing the way this experience is organized (the story), the meaning given to this experience also changes (see §3.5.1.1). The following assumptions underlie the belief in the potential and method of change.

3.5.3.1 Change is possible

“...the heart of narrative therapy is its fierce belief in people’s possibility for change...” (O’Hanlon 1994:28). *We* produce the meanings of our lives. Although the way we speak and the things we speak about are part of our culture, we can change the way we speak and, by doing so, we can change much about the way we organize and understand our world (Drewery & Winslade in Monk, Winslade & Crocket 1997:33). White’s (1998:3) view that human beings constantly interpret their experience confirms this line of thought. Experience can be interpreted differently.

In counselling this assumption implies respect for people’s ability to change as well as respect for the power of language.

3.5.3.2 Some experience goes unstoried

The narratives we construct about our lives do not encompass the full richness of our experience. A problem narrative emphasizes certain experiences at the expense of others so that the coherence of the story line can be maintained. The ignored lived experiences go unstoried, the events unnoticed (Monk in Monk, et al. 1996:13). Freedman and Combs (1996:2) agree : “A key to this therapy is that in any life there are always more events that don’t get “storied”, than there are ones that do – even the longest and most complicated autobiography leaves out more than it

includes.” During counselling a narrative can be changed by highlighting different, previously unstoried events.

3.5.4 Other people and society, contribute to meaning-making

People do not live in isolation, but are part of bigger groups that story their experiences collectively (see §3.2). The following assumptions focus on the role of other people in the meaning making of the individual.

3.5.4.1 Meaning is socially constructed

According to White (1998:3) our personal stories or self-narratives are not invented by the individual. It is negotiated and distributed within various communities of persons. We make sense of our lives in the context of our social history, shaping stories about the group we belong ~~to~~. Such stories constitute something of our identity, they are the background context that gives coherence to our lives (Drewery & Winslade in Monk, et al. 1997:32). Parry (1991:46-48) emphasizes that our individual story is inescapably connected to the stories of other people as well as to many larger stories. While each of us is the central character in our own stories, we are also characters in the stories of all those others with whom we are connected whether by marriage, family, friendship or through forming part of the global community.

During counselling a counsellor often listens to more than one kind of story during one session, for example different individual stories, family stories and cultural stories, and can explore the different contexts that have contributed to the construction of a story.

3.5.4.2 Not all stories are equal

Laird (Freedman & Combs 1996:36) refers to the inequality of stories as the “politics of storymaking or mythmaking.” Some individuals and groups with power ensure that particular narratives will prevail in family, group and national life. There are *dominant* and *marginalized*

narratives. Dominant narratives are the “truths” or “taken-for-granted realities” of our lives, which influence the way we think about ourselves, the decisions we make and the actions we take. These truths are the effects of the influence of some cultural *discourse*. A *discourse* is described as a set of ideas that has evolved over time, contributed to by all of us and shaping us —in a way that we come to take for granted “as if it was always there” (Zimmerman & Dickerson 199:62). Examples are “truths” about male/female roles for instance that men are providers and women homemakers.

The counsellor needs to be aware of and to help the client become aware of discourses that are influencing his/her story and life, and thus enable the changing of the meaning of experiences.

3.5.5 The self

The way we organize our experience also has an effect on the way we see ourselves (see §3.2). This assumption comments on the nature of the self.

3.5.5.1 We are different selves, each with its own story or stories

We have no “essential” or “true self”, but different selves or multi-selves that are socially constructed through language and maintained in narrative. The self is not a thing inside a person, but a process or activity that occurs in the space between people. Different selves are constituted in different contexts and interactions. Allen and Allen (1995:333) describe the self as a multileveled text, each story associated with a particular sense of the self. We can thus be seen as a community of selves, each with its own story or stories. There is no self that is “truer” than the other, but particular presentations of the self can be “preferred”. Part of narrative counselling is to work with people to bring forth various experiences of the self and to distinguish which of these selves they prefer in which context (Freedman & Combs 1996:34;35).

A counsellor working from this assumption can help a client to write different self-stories suited to different contexts.

3.5.6 Reflection

These assumptions, which form part of “my window on the world” (see Figure 4: §1.6.1.1), are influenced by the philosophical framework of the narrative analogy. For example, the assumptions described under §3.5.1; 3.5.2; 3.5.3 and 3.5.5 can be seen as reflecting a constructivist perspective on reality, where reality is described as construed by subjective experience and meaning is given through processes of interpretation (see §2.2.5.1). The assumptions described under §3.5.4 reflect a social constructionist perspective, focusing on the role of groups and societies in creating understanding.

In the following section I will explore how these assumptions are actualized in the role of the counsellor using the narrative analogy.

3.6 The role of the counsellor

The role of the counsellor refers to the way the counsellor regards his clients as well as his/her actions or practices during counselling. Within my research framework, this will refer to the “bag of tricks” (see Figure 4: §1.6.1.1).

3.6.1 Narrative stance

The assumptions discussed in the previous paragraph that the person is not the problem and that he/she has the potential to change, contribute to a stance of respect and curiosity (Freedman & Combs 1996:273). Respect, curiosity and an absence of any prejudices are very important in creating a conducive atmosphere in which a client can feel safe to rewrite his/her stories. The language and assumptions that the counsellor chooses will contribute to the co-creation of particular emotional postures in the counselling room.

The counsellor will not take a “knowing position”, but would prefer a investigative, exploratory stance. The aim is to understand the client’s experience as he/she understands it. In order to achieve this many questions need to be asked. The counsellor takes a tentative position based on

what Lynn Hoffman (1990) called *deliberate ignorance*. Prediction, certainty and expert interpretation do not fit with a narrative style of counselling. Genuine curiosity is a safeguard against the use of the counsellor's expertise to steer the process. The client and counsellor can ~~explore~~ the problem in more depth and this gives the client the opportunity to discover his/her ~~strengths~~ (Drewery & Winslade in Monk, et al. 1997:24).

Monk, et al. (1997:64) stress the need for the counsellor to offer ~~courage and patience~~ to make possible the fullest expression of the client's story. The client needs to ~~trust and believe~~ that the therapist will not be consumed by his/her troubles, but will provide safe boundaries.

3.6.2 A collaborative relationship

Related to the "not-knowing" position of the counsellor described above is the ~~relationship~~ between the client and counsellor which is not patronizing, but ~~collaborative~~. It implies a ~~shared~~ responsibility for the shaping of the counselling conversation. The counsellor is not the expert and the client not the follower. The client is the expert on his ~~experience~~ and has the authority to speak in his/her own terms and on his/her own behalf. The therapy can be described as a "mutual ~~meaning-making~~" process (Anderson & Goolishian 1992:30).

According to Anderson and Goolishian (1992:30) the client and counsellor enter a "circle of meaning" – a dialogical process that enables them to participate collaboratively in the co-creation of alternate, more viable client narratives. Monk, et al. (1997:54) use the term ~~co-authoring~~. The client and counsellor move back and forth within the circle of meaning, ultimately giving way to new understanding for both.

3.6.3 Listening

Collaboration is established by means of ~~listening~~. The counsellor is the *audience* to the client's story. Several kinds of audience activities can be described (Monk, et al. 1997:66). Firstly, the counsellor listens to and acknowledges the client's ~~presentation~~ of his story. If the client was previously denied the opportunity to tell his/her own story, listening to him/her can validate

his/her voice. Secondly, the counsellor might offer audience response – perhaps by sharing the impact the story has on him/her. Thirdly, the counsellor might take the role of chorus and invite the client to join him/her to observe and give comment. The counsellor might discuss the client's experience. The counsellor can act as a reviewer – possibly clarifying the role of a discourse. Throughout this process the counsellor can invite the client to become him/her own audience – to listen to his/her own story in a different way.

3.6.4 Transparency

A collaborative relationship is further build by means of transparency. As counsellors we all carry our own set of meanings, values, memories, understandings and experiences that we have interpreted through our cultural lenses. This influences how we do counselling. A counsellor can thus not be neutral (Harker in Monk, et al. 1997:193). To be transparent means that we *situate* ourselves within the counselling relationship. We are prepared to share our own personal experience, theories, biases, viewpoints and our social, cultural, historical and political context. In this way the counsellor can enter the relationship as a fallible human being and not as expert (Freedman & Comb 1996:275).

3.6.5 Reflection

Reflection during counselling promotes experience of experience, and it is through the experience of reflecting on our experience that we make meaning of it. A characteristic of narrative counselling is a movement between direct experience and reflecting. There is a movement from *landscape of action* (direct experience) to *landscape of consciousness* (reflection on that experience) (Freedman & Combs 1996:169;186). In this process the client is simultaneously a performer in and an audience to his/her own performance (White 1990:18). Clients are invited to reflect on their own emerging story, but also their experience of the counselling. A reflecting team or significant people in the client's life can be brought in as an audience to further this process.

3.6.6 Care with language

One of the assumptions discussed previously (see §3.5.1.2) postulates that our experience is organized through language, but that the language used also creates our experience. For this reason the counsellor is careful with the language he/she uses during counselling. Ways of speaking that may isolate the client in her struggle, may imply a personal deficit or a label would be avoided. Preference would be given to the language used by the client rather than to professional jargon. Michael White (in Monk, et al. 1997: 69) speaks of experience-near descriptions. Regarding the client as an expert in his/her own life, the counsellor asks him/her to personalize the problem and give a name to the problem. The problem is *externalized* as something outside him/her having an influence on his/her life. Through discussion the client becomes aware of his/her influence on the problem and *agency* is written into the script. The counsellor is also sensitive to the client's non-verbal language. Communication can be somatically based, for example through movement or posture (Freeman, Epston & Lobovits 1997:170). A slouch could for example be an expression of hopelessness.

From the above paragraphs it is clear that the counsellor regards the client with respect, the counsellor doesn't see himself as the expert or advice giver, but regards the client and his/her experience as central. Through listening, reflection and conscious use of language, the counsellor co-constructs meaning together with the client.

3.6.7 Practices used during narrative counselling

Action taken by the counsellor refers to various specific practices. Different writers have identified different practices used during narrative counselling. All these writers agree that these practices can't be seen as a recipe or prescription, but only as guidelines. If it is used as a formula, clients will have the experience of having things done to them and will feel left out of the conversation (Monk, et al. 1997:24).

Carr (1998:488) identified 9 sequential practices in the work of Michael White: (a) position collaboratively; (b) externalize the problem; (c) excavate unique outcomes; (d) thicken the new

plot; (e) link to the past and extend to the future; (f) invite outsider witness groups; (g) use remembering practices and incorporation; (h) use literary means; and (i) facilitate bringing-it-back practices.

Combs and Freedman in Hoyt (1994:70-76) describes the process as deconstructive listening, deconstructive questioning, listening for and asking about openings, developing new stories and extending the story in time.

Freedman & Combs (1996:101-103) offer a practice format as an idealized shape for a therapeutic conversation: (a) begin with a unique outcome; (b) make sure the unique outcome represents a preferred experience; (c) plot the story in the landscape of action; (d) plot the story in the landscape of consciousness; (e) ask about a past time that has something in common with the unique outcome or the meaning of the unique outcome; (f) plot the story of the past event in the landscape of action; (g) plot the past event in the landscape of consciousness; (h) ask questions to link the past episode with the present; and (i) ask questions to extend the story into the future.

To organize the information from different sources, I integrated some practices and have outlined an alternative distinction in the following section.

3.6.7.1 Taking apart and deconstructing the problem

The word “deconstruction” brings to mind the work of Jacques Derrida. Derrida and other deconstructivists believe that there is no real or true meaning of a text, as all narratives are full of gaps and ambiguities. All stories will thus have many possible meanings. By making clients aware of different meanings and gaps in their stories, people begin to see their stories as constructed and reconstructable (Freedman & Combs 1996:47). The problem-saturated story is often influenced by the discourses or “truth” stories of our families, cultures and society. By deconstructing the problem, the influence of these discourses is discussed and the client can consider his/her preferences more clearly, and decide whether or not the ideas that have influenced them fit them (Zimmerman & Dickerson 1996:69).

The counsellor listens to what White (1990:39) calls “problem-saturated story” in order to really understand the client’s experience. The counsellor then uses *externalization*, an approach that encourages persons to objectify and at times personify the problems they experience as oppressive. In the process of externalization the problem becomes a separate identity and thus external to the person or relationship that was ascribed as the problem. *Relative influencing questioning* furthers this process. The client is asked to map the influence of the problem on his/her life across various interfaces – between the problem and various persons, and between the problem and various relationships. The client is then invited to map his/her influence on the problem. This information contradicts the problem-saturated description and can bring hope that a new story can be written (White 1990: 38-39).

3.6.7.2 Searching for alternative stories

By identifying unique outcomes we invite people to live new stories. Unique outcomes are anything that would not have been predicted in light of a problem-saturated story. These unique outcomes or openings could develop “spontaneously” in the process of deconstructing the problem. If not, the counsellor could inquire about their existence (Freedman & Comb 1996:90-91). Unique outcomes can be searched for in the distant or recent past. The counsellor might ask if any unique outcomes were experienced in between sessions. Another way to bring forth unique outcomes is to notice whether any of the clients current behavior is counter to the problem. If it is difficult to identify a unique outcome in the present or past, the client might be asked to imagine a future time when life is the way he/she would like it (Zimmerman & Dickerson 1996:80-85).

3.6.7.3 Developing a preferred story

Once a unique outcome has been identified, it is important to explore whether this experience is preferred by the client. If so, the client can begin to develop his/her preferred story. By telling the new story, a performance of meaning already occurs. By including detail, for instance, by including more than one modality of experience, a rich meaningful counter-story can be developed. The client can look at his/her story from different points of view – through the eyes of other people, through his/her own eyes at a different age, stepping back and reflecting or looking

back from the future. By moving between the landscape of action (events in sequence through time) and the landscape of consciousness (for example desires, motives, goals, values) new stories are written. Preferred events are linked across time in order to thicken the new narrative (Freedman & Combs 1996:89-101; White 1998:4).

3.6.7.4 Confirming the new story/identity

No story is performed without an audience – we all live in a context. A client can be helped to create a community of persons who can support and notice his/her progress. A member of the family or other supporting cast can become “problem watchers”. These persons can be invited into the session to become audience or to be spoken about. By reflecting on the conversation, the client becomes an audience for him- or herself. According to White (1990:192) this puts the client in a better position to perform the new meaning. A reflective team can create a reflective position or letters and notes can be used to confirm the story as well as the new identity of the client (Zimmerman & Dickerson 1996:109-119).

3.6.7.5 Giving permission for the story to be rewritten

“Who we are is a constantly changing reality” (Drewery & Winslade in Monk, et al. 1997:47). The new story that has been developed is not now the only answer or truth. The counsellor encourages the client to give him- or herself permission to continue to reshape his/her story in a more useful way (Allen & Allen 1995:329).

The above description is my own construction. It is a selection and reordering of the practices as others described them. The practices cannot be regarded as a series of steps that must be taken. They are a description of the “parts” of the counselling process. They are not a recipe but a guideline for a change facilitating interaction with clients.

3.7 Reflection

From the literature study I became aware that different perceptions of *narrative* and *narrative counselling* exist. Several assumptions underlying the narrative analogy can be identified. These

assumptions reflect the values of constructivism and social constructionism and guide the way in which a counsellor uses the narrative analogy. By comparing all this information, I gained more clarity on “my window on the world” as well as “the bag of tricks” available to me when I use the narrative analogy during counselling (see Figure 4: §1.6.1.1).

One of my research questions is whether the narrative analogy fits my values and assumptions. In the previous chapter I began to answer this question by comparing the values and assumptions I hold at the moment (see §1.2) with the philosophical framework of the narrative analogy. I can now further my quest by comparing my values and beliefs with the narrative assumptions:

- I assume that all people are unique and different, but equal. Although this is not explicitly stated in the narrative analogy, it is implied by a narrative stance of respect and curiosity.
- I assume that each person has the potential to grow and to determine his/her own direction. The narrative analogy sees a person as the expert of his/her experience and able to speak on his/her own behalf. The counselling process is seen as a collaborative relationship, a mutual meaning-making.
- I assume that each person has the right to his/her own values and decisions. Nobody has ~~the right~~ to play God over the lives of others. The narrative analogy doesn't see the role of the counsellor as somebody who gives advice.

Two of my assumptions or beliefs – that there is no one truth and that everything is constantly changing – have already been addressed in the previous chapter. The belief in people's potential to grow has also been addressed previously, but is also consistent with the perception that the client is the expert on his/her life. Except for the belief that relationships are precious and should be preserved which has not yet been addressed, there seems to be a consistency between the values on which these assumptions are based and my own values.

In the next chapter the focus will narrow down to the use of the narrative analogy in couples' counselling.

Chapter 4

Situating Couples' Counselling Within The Narrative Analogy

4.1 Introduction

The counselling of couples forms the focus of my practice and interest. Within my research framework this would be referred to as "events and things" (see Figure 4: §1.6.1.1).

A couple may be defined as two people living in an enduring, intimate relationship. There are different kinds of couples, for example married couples, unmarried couples, couples with children, couples without children and gay couples (Jones 1993:99; Kovacs 1994:83).

Couples' counselling is often distinguished as a unique form of counselling due to its characteristics – two people in a very intimate relationship come to the counsellor for help. These two people may have different perspectives on the problem, different levels of commitment as well as different expectations of the counsellor. The counsellor has to form a relationship with both partners without being seen as taking sides or playing the role of judge (Weeks & Treat 1992:4; Atwood 1992:54; De Shazer 1978:25).

When using the narrative analogy with couples the question that arises, is whether the narrative analogy, as depicted in the previous chapter, can be used unaltered or whether some detail must be added. In the course of the literature review, I came across only a few authors specifically describing narrative work with couples – Zimmerman and Dickerson (1993:403-412; 1994:237-244), Parry (1991:46-53), Loos (1991:293-310), Atwood (1997:48-66), Hoyt (1994:191) and Hare-Mustin (1994:19-33). From these sources it is clear that more thought must be given to the assumptions underlying the narrative analogy as well as to the role of the counsellor when specializing in the field of couples' counselling. This clarity will further enable me to answer the question of how my counselling – specifically couples' counselling - compares with the theory of the narrative analogy by comparing this theory with examples from my practice in Chapter 5.

4.2 Diverse approaches in the use of the narrative analogy in couples' counselling

As in the case of the use of the narrative analogy in general (see §3.4), there is a diversity of approaches in the use of the narrative analogy in couples' counselling. A summary of some of these perspectives may be helpful in my efforts to situate couples' counselling within the narrative framework.

4.2.1 Counselling by inviting individual members to change

In the description of couples' counselling by Zimmerman and Dickerson (1993:403-413) the counsellor begins counselling by joining the couple, spending time learning about the couple, their interests and commonalities. Each member is asked to describe the problem. Usually the member describes the problem as the behaviour of the other. Each person's behaviour or habits of interacting is seen as reciprocal invitations for the other's behaviour and is externalized and located in family-of-origin context as well as gender discourses. Relative influence questions are asked of each member of the couple individually, with the other as audience. Through noticing the influence of the couple on the problem, unique outcomes are identified as entry points to a new story. Each member is invited to work on their "end of the problem" – each person engages independently in a process of restoring. The counsellor responds to the new story by noticing unique outcomes as small steps away from the problem towards a new story. The new story is thickened over time as new behaviours and habits reoccur. "It is not the system (couple) that changes, but the individual members who change themselves and justify the change with a new story. If the changes are reciprocal and suit the other, the couple/system will begin to change or develop. If not, each person might decide to go his/her own way." (Zimmerman & Dickerson 1993:412.)

The uniqueness of this perspective thus lies in the invitation to members to change individually and then to decide if these changes fit both partners.

4.2.2 Counselling by changing the couple's marital meaning system

Atwood (1997:48-66) bases his "social constructionist" counselling on the concept "marital meaning system". Meaning systems are created and maintained by interaction with significant others and is a process that begins at birth and continues to death. The person's marital meaning system determines the content of his/her marital script. A script is a device for guiding action and understanding it. Therapy focuses on the couple's marital meaning and script, viewed from the past, present and future.

Atwood (1997:56-66) describes the following process in counselling couples where extramarital affairs (EMS) have been identified as the presenting problem:

The counsellor joins the couple's meaning system – he listens to and learns the couple's story. The notion of a marital meaning system is proposed to the couple. Three different stories are identified – the couple's story about their family of origin, the story about their present relationship and their story about what they see for their future. Knowledge around each of these three stories helps the couple to understand their meaning system. The problem (in this instance EMS) is externalized and past issues – childhood events affecting the person's marital meaning system around the problem are laid to rest. The counsellor invites the couple to explore their present meaning system and to tell the story of their current relationship. The focus is on how they combined their meaning systems and behaviour scripts to co-create a couple script. The counsellor can focus on themes and metaphors which run through the couple's construction of their meaning system. The couple is guided through an exploration of their experience from different perspectives.

The counsellor invites the couple to expand their meaning system by focusing on the effect of the problem and in this way the problem is externalized. Exceptions to the problem can be found and amplified by focusing either on the whole of the couple's meaning system or on parts of it. Working with the whole, a metaphor can be used to explore the individual and couple's meaning system in detail. Through exploration, expansion and rewriting of the metaphor, the couple can begin to reconstruct a new metaphorical image of their relationship – one without the problem. Focusing on parts, alternative ways of behaving in a given situation can be explored. The new

– meaning systems are amplified by exploring exceptions to the problem in depth. Partners can also be asked at the end of each session what they appreciated about the other that day. The new meaning systems are stabilized by asking questions about future trends and choices – the future is made more real and stable. The couple generates different scenarios for the future, but without the problem. At the end of counselling a ritual for a fresh start may be helpful, for example, rewriting marital vows or choosing a new anniversary date.

The couple is thus invited to explore their discourses around specific marital issues – in this instance extramarital affairs.

4.2.3 Counselling through working towards joint goals

In his article “Construing couples: the challenge of marital therapy” Loos (1991:293-311) describes the following co-authoring process: while couples usually differ on the presenting problem, the first step is to co-define the problem. The problem that is defined in the counselling room is a product of the therapeutic conversation or story. Separate individual or a joint “couple problem” can be defined. The problem/s can also change over time. The counsellor connects with the relevant system. Loos (1991: 298) states that the therapeutic system is not limited to the conjugal couple. Many people participate in the co-authoring of the couple’s story. The counsellor must know everyone involved in defining the problem and what their positions are towards the problem – this may include family members, ex-spouses, friends or professionals. The counsellor should know how the couple have incorporated or rejected the views of others into their narrative. Small, specific goals are co-developed. Goals can change and life is viewed as an authoring process that is not complete. Counselling will stop not when all the goals are reached, but when a new narrative has been developed in which the clients are no longer struggling over what was originally defined as the problem. The counsellor is often expected to play the role of judge, expert or teacher. The role of the counsellor is co-developed in conversation with the couple – the counsellor needs to maintain flexibility. New alternatives are constructed. The counsellor can facilitate new possibilities by for example introducing uncertainty regarding the definition of the problem or proposed solution, asking reflective or

circular questions, using exchange grids or asking about the future. The “not-yet-told” stories that emerge can provide new, effective options to the couple.

In contrast with the perspective of Zimmerman and Dickerson (1993:403-413) (see §4.2.1) the members of the couple work together on goals that have been co-developed.

It is clearly not possible to give one description of narrative counselling with couples. But as is the case with using the narrative analogy in general (see §3.4), common themes can be identified, which refer to underlying assumptions and the role of the counsellor. As one of the aims of my research is to compare the theory of the narrative analogy with examples used specifically in the work of couples, I need to explore how the underlying assumptions and the role of the counsellors differ during couples’ counselling.

4.3 Narrative assumptions as used in couples’ counselling

When reading the theory on narrative couples’ counselling, it becomes clear that although all the assumptions discussed in the previous chapter apply, some of these assumptions (see § 3.5.1.1; 3.5.4.1; 3.5.4.2 and 3.5.2.1) require extension for use in couple’s counselling. This is explored in the following section.

4.3.1 Human experience is organised and maintained through stories or narratives (see §3.5.1.1)

When working with couples, it is not only the experience of one person that is being storied. Three stories can be identified: two individual or personal stories and a couple’s story. “When two people decide to cast their lives together in a conjugal relationship, it becomes more than two stories seeking to coordinate. The two stories will remain. Each as storytelling beings will continue to retain that central element in consciousness by storing his/her own experiences. However it is hoped that each will reach a point at which a couple story will emerge and become the common story for both, while remaining an integral part of one’s individual story.” (Parry 1991:46.) Each person’s individual story also contains information on family-of-origin

experiences that will influence the couple's story (Zimmerman & Dickerson 1993:409). The meaning each person makes of the other's response and their interaction forms part of the couple's story (Zimmerman & Dickerson 1994:243).

4.3.2 Meaning is socially constructed (see §3.5.4.1)

The meaning couples attach to marriage or living together can be influenced by the stories of their family-of-origin – parent's expectations of each other, the closeness/distance observed between parents, the manner in which conflict was handled, whether emotions were encouraged or denied, traumas in the parents' marriage such as affairs, incest, unresolved grief or medical problems (Weeks & Treat 1992:14). Childhood myths and fantasies of happy endings may colour expectations of partners (Parry 1991:47).

4.3.3 The person is not the problem (see §3.5.2.1)

When a couple comes for counselling, one partner may feel that his life has been lived less by his own experience than is accorded by the other's description of his experience – this person may feel he “has lost his/her voice” or “has no story”. One or both partners may also experience the other's actions as betrayal – the partner has refused or neglected to play a part for which he/she was chosen or he had “agreed” to play. As soon as one person experiences the other as failing to play this role, especially if he/she is convinced he/she is loyally playing his, he/she is apt to be less willing to play the part he/she agreed to (Parry 1991:37; 48). Partners often see their behaviour as the only option and choose specific incidents or “small stories” from their past to justify their present behaviour (Zimmerman & Dickerson 1993:403). The counsellor can focus on a problem pattern, where each end of the pattern is externalized, and the effects of the problem on each partner are discussed. The couple is separated from the problem and is thus teamed up against the problem (Zimmerman & Dickerson 1996:51;52).

4.3.4 Not all stories are equal (see §3.5.4.2)

There co-exist several different discourses that define what is expected of men and women in

relation to each other. The dominant discourse of masculine and feminine difference views women as essentially caring, close to nature, and orientated to meet the needs of others, whereas men are essentially independent and achieving. Thus the husband is seen as unable to help with household chores because he needs to recover from the stresses of work or the wife does the cleaning because she is compulsive about the way the house appears (Hare-Mustin 1994:22;27).

Parry (1991:49) refers to “the story of marriage during the time of patriarchy” in which men offered women and their children economic security and physical protection in return for their services, which included making a comfortable home, looking after the children and providing sexual favours. The so-called male sexual drive discourse sees the women as the object that arouses and precipitates men’s sexual urges. Men’s sexual urges are assumed to be natural and compelling – the male is expected to be pushy and aggressive in seeking to satisfy them. Couples may have specific expectations of the partner’s role based on these or other discourses.

Refinements thus make provision for two individual stories about the problem and possible solutions as well as expectations and ideas about marriage or intimate relationships.

4.4 The role of the counsellor

According to Loos (1991:293) the primary task of marital therapy is to work together with couples in co-authoring or co-constructing a story that (a) is specific to the concerns of each spouse; (b) is meaningful to the two of them as a couple; and (c) provides new options for effective action in the situation confronting them.

Roth and Chasin in Hoyt (1994:191) see the role of therapist as helping the couple to expand the breadth and openness of the narratives they can develop, both separately and together, as well as to strengthen their sense of agency through experiencing alternative possibilities.

Although the role of the counsellor remains basically the same, ideas in §3.6.2; 3.6.3; 3.6.4 and 3.6.7 as discussed in the previous chapter, can be thickened to make provision for the special challenges of couples’ counselling.

4.4.1 A collaborative relationship (see §3.6.2)

The counsellor co-authors with both partners. As is clear from the role description by Loos (1991:293) the story that is co-authored must be specific to the concerns of both partners and must be meaningful to both. Where one person has been unable “to find his/her voice” with which to describe his/her experience, the goal of counselling is to facilitate a process in which ~~he/she~~ finds his/her own voice to tell a story of *his/her* descriptions of *his/her* experience (Parry 1991:43; 44).

4.4.2 Listening (see §3.6.3)

The counsellor needs to listen to both partners, but often finds that the mere act of listening to the partner’s account is seen by the other as taking sides. Being of the same gender as one of the partners might indicate to the other that the counsellor is in alliance or coalition with the partner.

The counsellor might also experience a constant “pull” to take sides – almost like a judge (Jones 1993:102). According to Loos (1991:295) the challenge for the counsellor is to validate each person’s position regarding the problem and at the same time contribute to the formation of a ~~broader~~ broader perspective.

4.4.3 Transparency (see §3.6.4)

Transparency during couple’s counselling would imply that the counsellor is aware and open to his own experience and views on intimacy, sexuality and hetero- or homosexuality. Some counsellors might be influenced by a “marriage-must-be-saved” discourse. Co-authoring the couple story requires that the counsellor is “open-minded” and “curious” about the outcome of the work – that is, whether the relationship will improve or be broken up (Jones 1991:102).

4.5 Practices used during narrative counselling (see §3.6.7)

Narrative counselling with couples is also divided into different practices by different authors. As

described in §4.2.1 Zimmerman and Dickerson (1993:403-413) distinguish the following practices: (a) joining; (b) externalizing the problem; (c) relative influencing questioning; (d) responding to the new story.

Atwood (1997:48-66) describes 6 practices: (a) joining the couple's meaning system; (b) proposing the notion of the couple's meaning system; (c) inviting the couple to explore their present meaning system; (d) inviting the couple to expand their meaning system; (d) amplifying the new meaning system; (e) stabilizing the new meaning system.

The following 5 practices are discussed by Loos (1991:293-311): (a) co-defining the problem; (b) connecting with the relevant system; (c) co-developing small, specific goals; (d) maintaining flexibility; (e) constructing alternatives.

In the light of this, I have added some detail to my own distinctions of the practices used during the process of narrative counselling as outlined below.

4.5.1 Joining the meaning system of the couple

This phase, identified by Zimmerman and Dickerson (1993:403-413) as well as Atwood (1997:48-66) is added because it is important for the counsellor to form a collaborative relationship with both members of the couple. The counsellor spends some time learning about the couple, what pleases them, what interests them, and how they construct their reality. The counsellor comes to understand the couple as more than their problem-saturated description (Zimmerman & Dickerson 1993:404). Both feel that the counsellor hears both "voices" and will co-construct a story that addresses the concerns of each member (see Parry 1991:43).

4.5.2 Taking apart or deconstructing the problem

The members of a couple may describe the problem differently. One or more problems can be co-defined or a problem pattern can be described and externalized (Loos 1991:295 and Zimmerman

& Dickerson 1993:403). The relative influence of the problem or problem pattern on both members need to be considered.

In deconstructing the problem, the role of other people, for example, family or friends, the influence of family-of-origin beliefs and gender discourses are to be taken into account (Parry 1991:47; Hare-Mustin 1994:22; 27).

4.5.3 Searching for alternatives

Unique outcomes can either form part one member's experience or from part of the interaction between the couple (Zimmerman & Dickerson 1993:404). The focus is here on behaviour or habits. Atwood's (1997:48-66) contribution in exploring the couple's marital meaning system through the whole by means of a metaphor or through parts by identifying unique outcomes in specific situations can be very useful.

4.5.4 Developing a preferred story

Although both members can focus on alternative individual stories, a preferred couple's story need to found for the relationship to continue (Zimmerman & Dickerson 1993:412).

4.5.5 Confirming the new story

This phase corresponds with practice 6, "Stabilizing new meaning systems" of Atwood's (1997:64) framework. The people who have been identified in practice 2 as having an influence on the problem, can be invited as audience – either personally or by being brought into the conversation. The new story can also be confirmed by means of a ritual.

4.5.6 Giving permission for the story to be rewritten

Loos' (1991:301) view that goals change and that life is an authoring process that is never completed corresponds with this practice.

All that is added to the descriptions of practices in developing an application for couples' counselling, is the joining of the meaning system of both persons, the understanding of both persons' experience of the problem, and the search of a preferred story that will fit both. As in the case of the assumptions, the couple's expectations from or perceptions of marriage or intimate relationships need to be considered.

4.6 Reflection

When doing narrative counselling specifically with couples, some colour needs to be added to the "window on our world" and a few more "tricks to our bag" (see Figure 4: §1.6.1.1). Although the assumptions and the role of the counsellor remain basically the same, as described in the previous chapter, provision must be made for a co-authoring process involving two members of the couple as well as the counsellor.

In the previous chapters I compared my own values or beliefs with those underlying the narrative analogy. A value of mine that has not yet been addressed, is my assumption that relationships are precious and should be preserved as far as possible. This is not implicit in the underlying assumptions of the narrative analogy or in the literature on couples' counselling. The ending of a relationship would be seen as one of several options open to the client. In working with a couple who wants to separate, I will have to be aware of this value of mine and perhaps be transparent about it.

In Chapters 2, 3 and 4 I have completed my literature study on the narrative analogy in general and as used in couples' counselling specifically. In Chapter 5 the focus will move from theory to practice, and I will compare a case example from my practice with the theory described in the previous chapters.

Chapter 5

Situating A Case Example Within The Narrative Analogy

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters I outlined my interpretation of the narrative analogy and its application to couples' counselling. Special attention has been given to the assumptions underlying narrative counselling and the role of the counsellor.

In this chapter I will briefly describe the 16 counselling sessions as the context in which the selected examples are situated. These are clusters of interaction from the counselling that illustrate the assumptions underlying the narrative analogy as well as the role of the counsellor using the narrative analogy. Throughout the chapter I will reflect on my experience of using the theory in practice.

5.2 The couple and their story

J. and C. met 7 years ago in Barcelona. J. is an artist who inherited money which enabled him to practice his art for years without having to earn a living. Three years ago the couple came to South Africa where C. started her own business as an editor. J. took care of the household and spent the rest of his time painting. One and a half years ago J.'s inheritance dried up and C. became the sole provider, working 10-12 hours a day. C. was very angry at J. because she had to take all the responsibility to support them, while he could do what he liked. C. had regular emotional outbursts, blaming J. for all the stress she had to cope with. J., who experienced difficulty adjusting to South Africa, had an anxiety attack and was referred to Family Life by a doctor for counselling.

During the sessions both complained that they felt isolated and unable to communicate with each other. C. felt that J. didn't fulfil her needs – she wanted a child but he didn't; she wanted to write a book which was not possible with the long hours she had to work. Two years ago J. had a

serious alcohol problem, but stopped drinking for four months. J. drank a glass or two every evening, but went overboard during weekends. C. didn't see her way open to "support somebody who is drinking himself to death". C. saw a psychologist on a weekly basis and described this as part of her personal growth. The couple previously consulted a counsellor, but discontinued after two sessions when he told J. to first get a job and then return. J. wasn't very keen to come for counselling at Family Life, but "only came to please C."

5.3 An overview of the counselling sessions

The counselling process consisted of 16 sessions of about 60 minutes over a period of 7 months.

A summary of the content of the sessions, "my story" of the "counselling story", is provided as context in which each quoted example is situated.

23/4/1998

During the first session I joined the couple's meaning system and listened to their problem-saturated story. C. did most of the talking and, being more familiar with French, J. often spoke French to C. to confirm his understanding. In my process notes I reflected that C. "had taken his voice". We identified and externalized "responsibility" as one of the problems. C. worked 10-12 hours a day to support them, while J. practised his art. We looked at the effect "responsibility" had on both of them. C. found their "role reversal" – she being the breadwinner and he the housekeeper – unacceptable.

30/4/1998

During the next week C. spoke to her sister who confronted her with the rigid position she had taken towards their "role reversal". C. described her emotional outbursts or "explosions", as we called them, and once again we explored the effect it had on both partners. This made J. "unable to speak". C. was overwhelmed by J.'s paintings hanging all over the house. For J. his paintings were his way of expressing emotions. Both were overwhelmed by the intense emotions ("explosions") of the other. For homework I asked C. to learn more about her relationship with her "explosions" – when could she control this relationship and when did it control her.

6/5/1998

C. described an experience which I identified as an unique outcome. During the week she was very stressed, but instead of letting the “explosions” control her, she became aware that she felt vulnerable and overwhelmed. Instead of distancing herself from J. and making him her enemy, she asked him to help her with her work. J. and C. teamed up against the problem and became “colleagues in battle”.

11/6/1998

There were fewer “explosions” and we focused on their goals as a couple – how they would like to see themselves in two years’ time. J. wanted a job and hoped for an improvement in communication between them. C. desperately wanted a child and wished to write a book. She blamed J. for not knowing what her needs were. J. did not want a child – as a man he was supposed to be able to provide for his children. I wondered if the couple was ready to plan for the future. J. indicated that he would not come for counselling again. I helped the couple to discuss different options – counselling could be terminated, C. could come on her own or they could continue counselling together. They agreed to decide at home and let me know.

25/6/1

They returned for a further 5 sessions. J. brought his portfolio – he was “speaking with his own voice”. C. felt very overwhelmed by her workload. I put my briefcase on her lap as a metaphor of the heavy load she was carrying. (She kept it on her lap for the whole session.) Part of the weight was the negative atmosphere at home. We put colourful stars on cardboard and tried to identify what could contribute to a more positive or bearable atmosphere. Both could show more interest in the work of the other; C. could open up more and find ways to reduce her stress. C. needed future direction, but J. didn’t want to plan for the future before the present problem had been resolved.

9/7/1998

I asked them to show me how they felt towards each other. J. stood up and put his hands around C.’s face and kissed her on the forehead. C. sat with her legs crossed, her body turned away and

her eyes closed. We continued with the stars – trying to thicken a future story. For C. the most important was a child, while for J. this seemed impossible. We listed income possibilities for J..

23/7/1998

After discovering a mistake in her work during the week, C. “collapsed”. She cried and cried. I again put the briefcase on her lap and asked her if she could allow J. to take it off. She said she felt like a baby – crying and crying and nobody came to nurture her. We explored her experience further and identified some unstoried aspects. J. did nurture her in his own way and she also had the responsibility to nurture herself. It was not easy for C. to let J. take some weight off.

30/7/1998

J. found an opportunity to make mosaic tables. C. experienced the need to plan in detail, but J. didn't want to be disappointed. J. felt very depressed. I put the briefcase on his lap. He took it off immediately, but we used the metaphor to explore his experience. It was difficult for him to see C. with her heavy burden and not able to do anything about it. This feeling of helplessness was to him like a heavy bag on his lap.

6/8/1998

C. blamed J. for not understanding her burden. J. felt that this was like a sword in him heart. Both experienced the burden, but in different ways. We evaluated the change that had taken place: the “explosions” were under control; C. saw their “role reversal” in a different light; they identified goals; J. had started to make mosaic tables; C. had started to nurture herself and had realized that J. did nurture her as well; there was a better understanding of each other's “bags”.

13/8/1998

We discussed J.'s work. C. thought that J. didn't regard himself as a success, as somebody capable of making money. He saw himself as a poor artist, a “guy of the 70's, not fitting into the 90's”. The possibility of seeing himself as both an artist and a businessman was explored.

27/8/1998

The “child story” was thickened during this session. C. demanded a child from J. If he didn’t want a child, she wanted a divorce. The following questions were explored: Why was this important?; What would the implications be for both?; Would a child strengthen “responsibility” or make it smaller? If J. didn’t want a child, were there other ways of having a child?; What if she couldn’t have a child?

22/9/1998

J. had difficulty with his permit. Both felt distanced from each other. “Explosions” showed it’s head again. C. again blamed J. for not working. In spite of this, C. and J. continued to work on their relationship. They decided to make time to talk and go for a walk every afternoon.

29/9/1998

C. used the metaphor of a wall to describe the distance between them. We explored this description and discussed the “bricks” in the wall: his painful past (his mother died when he was 28 and his grandfather couldn’t accept him; he had difficulty reaching his father); his sense of humour was different from C’s; J.’s alcohol problem – he drank in the evening, but especially over weekends; their sexual relationship; their different backgrounds – J. being French and C. South African.

6/10/1998

J. came on his own. He spoke for himself! J. shared his feelings of being a foreigner and the difficulty he had in adjusting to South Africa. He mentioned the video “The Pink Wall” as providing some commentary on his life. He referred to a unique outcome – during the week he and C. had “really communicated”. They found a gate in the wall, they could reach each other through the wall. We discussed his alcohol problem and the meaning it had for him and C. (During the next week I took out “The Pink Wall” in order to better understand J.)

27/10/1998

I saw C. on her own. She had decided to ask for a divorce. They had been on holiday together and J. had drunk a lot. She would only continue with the relationship if J. would go for treatment. We

reflected on the gains and losses of divorce. C. asked my advice. I said only she and J. could decide about their own lives. If they did divorce, "responsibility" might still be there, but in a different form.

3/11/1998

Both C. and J. came. They had decided to separate. The wall had become too thick. I checked twice with both if this was really what they wanted. J. had already notified his father of his intended return to France. The plan was that C. and J. would go to France in December to discuss the separation with J.'s father. C. asked J. to leave earlier in order to reduce tension in the house. J.'s permit would be granted in January and he planned to return to South Africa. If he did come back, C. asked him to stay on his own and support himself. It was important for both to remain friends. They wanted to separate, but didn't want to plan for a definite divorce. The possibility that the separation might lessen "responsibility", which could bring them closer again, was discussed.

10/11/1998

~~C.~~ phoned to cancel the session. J. didn't want to come again. He would be leaving for France within a short period. I offered them both individual support at any time.

(I met C. at a shopping centre in February 1999. They went to France to meet J.'s father. J. stayed there, but she experienced difficulty adjusting to stay on her own. I once again invited her to make an appointment when she felt the need.)

Reflection

- Considering the whole of the story, a theme of distance and closeness comes to mind – both felt very isolated, distanced from each other. C. time and again expressed her need for closeness, but when J. came closer, she pushed him away. Later in counselling, the metaphor of a wall was used to describe this distance.

As far as change is concerned, there appeared to be slow, but consistent change to the end of August. There were fewer “explosions” and J. took more responsibility – to me it seemed as if the distance between them became less. But C. showed more and more discontent with the relationship and at the end of October she decided to separate. Later J. also indicated that he wanted to separate. In my assessment, the couple increasingly used the wall metaphor to interpret their experience, and this in turn increased their awareness of the distance between them.

5.4 Clusters of interaction from supervision sessions illustrating my understanding of narrative counselling

Before counselling started and after the first three sessions, supervision time was used to discuss the reading I had done on narrative counselling. Through these discussions on, for example, the focus of the narrative analogy and the nature of change, I could clarify my understanding of the theory in order to apply it. I became aware of the window through which I regarded counselling.

16/4/1998

Supervisor: “What do you understand under the narrative?”

Counsellor: “It is the idea that life is seen as a story. Counselling can also be seen as a story. If we look at the marital story, we can help to bring about change by helping them to discover options. By using language we help them to open these options. Through language, using externalization, you also separate the person from the problem and help them to be their own author. I don’t know, how do you see it?”

Supervisor: “I would say one of the most important things about the narrative for me, is that you “language” your life. In order to narrate it you use language. I think language is the biggest and most powerful tool – it is like a soldier without a weapon. I think in life reality is created through the use of language and I think that the Milan school’s reframing was the first indication or understanding of how language can be used to bring about change and to empower a person to see a problem as something else.”

30/4/1998

Supervisor: “One of the assumptions of the narrative model is that things can change. It doesn’t matter how shit things are now, things can change. Institute the idea that things can change, because when people come to you they are stuck, they can’t see change.”

Counsellor: “One can focus on their ability to change.”

Discussions during supervision on the narrative analogy made me aware of my thinking about the assumptions underlying the narrative analogy and helped me to go back to the counselling situation and implement this approach – sometimes without being consciously aware of it at the time of counselling.

5.5 Clusters of interaction from counselling illustrating narrative assumptions

In the following paragraphs I will first identify the assumption, refer to relevant theory and quote clusters of interactions to illustrate the use of narrative assumptions in couples’ counselling. I will also reflect on my experiences using the narrative assumptions in counselling.

5.5.1 Human experience is organized through stories and language (see 3.5.1)

Two assumptions form part of this cluster. I used both during the period of reflection after the counselling to interpret experiences.

5.5.1.1 Human experience is organized and maintained through stories or narratives

People express their experience in stories (White 1998:1). When working with a couple, three stories emerge – two individual and a couple’s story (Parry 1991:46).

I identified two *individual stories* (5.1.1.1 & 5.1.1.2):

5.5.1.1.1 C.’s story

↳ shared the history of “explosions” in her family-of-origin:

C.: "... I mean, all I can say, I used to have, when I was an adolescent, I used to have quite traumatic fights with my father. Funny enough, my sister and I, we resolved our relationship; we used to have a terrible relationship. She was very bossy and controlling and you know I felt she had my parents there. I had a sort of very difficult relationship with my father, we used to have these horrid fights... and it seemed that I can't get to the source, it feels like. But it feels like something that goes so deep that it gets threatening." (30/4/1998)

5.5.1.1.2 J.'s story

J. told me the story of his difficulty in coming to South Africa:

J.: "... because of what happened two years ago, I couldn't really express myself, what was happening, she was sort of mad, you know ..."

Counsellor: "The explosions made it difficult for you."

J.: "Yes. All the time, daily, I mean, there was not one day, it was a total wall of aggression, ... it was totally degrading me ... I was arriving here and I was not at the point ..."

Counsellor: "You were very vulnerable?"

J.: "Incredibly vulnerable, you know. I had a bit of money, but my money was used for the container we used to move our furniture from Barcelona. And I was arriving in this country looking OK, but instead I was getting a daily aggression and madness that was not helping me to adjust in this country. This is what I went through." (6/10/1998)

Usually in a relationship a common *couple's story* emerges (Parry 1991:46). In this case C. and J. could not really reach the point where a common future story emerged:

5.5.1.1.3 The couple story

C.: "... J has no vision of what he wants to give me, you know he doesn't like to talk about the future, he doesn't believe in the future. Explain your thinking about the future."

J.: "I just think that we, we should solve the present problem before thinking about the future."

C.: "It is the most ridiculous logic in the world."

J.: "It is mine."

C.: "It doesn't make sense."

Counsellor: "Is it possible to picture the two of you in ten year's time?"

C.: "That is what marrying is about – a commitment to the future or we shouldn't have married. But I don't know if you remember what we said when we got married – that it is all about the future? We've got no sense of our future together."

J.: "The question is not about that, the question is do I imagine us in ten years."

C.: "You don't."

J.: "It is difficult." (24/6/1998)

This lack of a common future story, possibly contributed to their decision to separate.

During *supervision* my supervisor and I reflected on the stories told during counselling and identified a common theme:

5.5.1.1.4 Reflection on a theme

Supervisor: "One of the broader themes, and I can give it to you, is the theme of near and far. Within the context, near and far, she asks him to be near, but pushes him away...". (28/5/1998)

In supervision we thus organized or interpreted my experience during counselling. It became a "supervision story" on the stories told during counselling.

Reflection

I could really identify with this assumption and tried to give C. and J. the opportunity to tell their individual stories. C. spoke a lot and didn't need any encouragement. I sometimes had to ask J. questions or ignore C. in order to facilitate J. sharing his experience. I was aware that my belief that relationships are precious and must be preserved as far as possible influenced my continual search for a couple's story, even where it had not really emerged.

5.5.1.2 Human experience is ordered and given meaning through language

The storying of experience is dependent on the use of language (White & Epston 1996:27).

C. and J. gave expression to their experience of distance and of isolation by using the metaphor of a wall as a barrier between them:

5.5.1.2.1 The wall

C. was the first to use this metaphor:

C.: "... J. was drinking and as the evening progressed, he pulled something down in front of him. It made me realize there is such a wall between us ... it is clearly about pain ..." (29/9/1998)

And

5.5.1.2.2 "A thousand walls"

The metaphor was extended to describe several walls:

C.: "... OK I will tell you what our problem is, money and the financial pressure on me. That has been one problem. Another has been J.'s isolation, his wall between himself and the world."

Counsellor: "And the wall between him and you."

C.: "And the wall between him and me, the wall between him and South Africa, the wall between him and Spain, and linked to it is the alcohol problem ..."

Counsellor: "So you are saying the drinking is another wall?"

C.: "Another thousand walls..."(3/11/1998)

And

5.5.1.2.3 Bricks in the wall

The metaphor became more complex – the wall between C. and J. consisted of different bricks or obstacles in their relationship:

Counsellor: "So what she is saying, the wall has different bricks, there are lots of bricks of which drinking is one brick."

J.: "Is it not the whole wall?"

C.: "It is not the only one, for me it is a very big one." (3/11/1998)

I would argue that the ordering of their experience in the form of the wall metaphor intensified their experience of being far from each other (also see §5.3).

I would also like to give an example from the supervision sessions, where this assumption was discussed within the context of my case experience:

5.5.1.2.4 The burden

On 25/6/1998 I put my briefcase on C.'s lap as a metaphor of the heavy burden she was carrying. My supervisor and I discussed this and she suggested that I should extend this metaphor:

Supervisor: "This is wonderful. You can even go further. Take different bags next time – they could have a choice. Take a bundle, a nap sack, a baby bag ... You can create a narrative. You can say to C.: "You want a baby, now put the baby bag on your back." Don't speak of responsibility, speak of bags. He has a language problem, you can find other ways to communicate." (23/7/1998)

I saw the couple again on the same evening. I did take different bags – a baby bag, an art bag, an outdoor bag, as well as my briefcase. I put it all under the table, out of the couple's sight. C. started to cry and I again put my briefcase on her lap and asked her if she could allow J. to take it off. I never used the other bags. I couldn't find I fit between the "supervision story" of the bags and my experience with the couple during that counselling session.

Reflection

For me this is one of the most important narrative assumptions. It also corresponds with the role of the counsellor in taking care with language used. I find that the use of a metaphor such as for example the wall or the brief case can help clients to explore their experiences further or can lead to a new story.

5.5.2 The nature of the problem

Only one assumption forms part of this cluster. I used this assumption during reflection to make sense of the interaction between C. and J..

5.5.2.1 The person is not the problem

One or both members of a couple can experience the other's behaviour as the problem. By externalizing the problem, the couple is separated from the problem (Parry 1991: 37;48):

5.5.2.1.1 Introducing "Responsibility"

C. blamed J. for not working - she had to take all the responsibility to earn money.

Counsellor: " ... so what I hear is that you have not lived with Responsibility before, Responsibility wasn't part of your life before, Responsibility is lying on your shoulders ... it is weighing you down ..."

J.: "It is not just that, also to see her so unhappy and working in such an inhuman way and you know once she had bronchitis and she said she wished she was at her parent's. It hurt when she said you don't understand what I am feeling, I said I do understand at times in a way you never imagine, you know ..."

C.: "It doesn't sound like it."

J.: "It doesn't sound like it, but it hurt when you said I don't mind."

C.: "I've said vicious things, I do, but I think you are avoiding what Petro is saying. She tries to focus on you and your relationship with Responsibility."

Counsellor: "What you said, the fact that you see Responsibility lying very heavy on C., that hurts you."

J.: "Of course."

Counsellor: "Because of the effect that Responsibility has on C., that makes it difficult for you."

J.: "And that causes the trouble."

Counsellor: "It's lying on you both, it is influencing you both, it's standing in between you."
(23/4/1998)

We externalized this problem by calling it "Responsibility" and looking at the effect it had on the couple. By separating the problem from the person, it was hoped that the effect of the problem on both persons could be recognized. The possibility for change was introduced, and hopefully the paralyses evoked by blame was removed.

Reflection

Although the assumption made a lot of sense to me, I initially felt a bit self-conscious when externalizing the problem, until I saw that it fitted the clients. When using this assumption I sensed a feeling of relief from the clients, not to be blamed or seen as the problem. This assumption also fits my belief in people's potential to grow – they should not be stuck in or labeled as the problem.

5.5.3 The possibility and methods of change

These two assumptions were used consciously during counselling. The clients actually also voiced these assumptions without being aware of it.

5.5.3.1 Change is possible

People change when they change the way they speak; they can change the way they understand the world. New possibilities can arise (O'Hanlon 1994:28):

5.5.3.1.1 A new look at the wall

During the last session I tried to create a further possibility for change by changing the way we looked at the metaphor of the wall:

Counsellor: "In the video "The Pink Wall"... at the end the wall was broken, destructed... Would the split in a way, maybe a way of breaking the wall so that you can reach each other in a different way, in greater distance maybe. When C. doesn't feel the responsibility, feeling the weight she is feeling, it may be easier for you both to live and be closer to people as such. So could it be in a way a renewal... a breaking of the wall?"

C.: "Possibly, I can't see anything pleasant at the moment, I think it is a nightmare." (3/11/1998)

This didn't fit the couple then, but it could still influence their future thinking.

5.5.3.1.2 Making money

J.: “No, no, but I mean a job.”

C.: “Don’t talk about job, talk about income possibility, not a job.”

J.: “You can’t miss out on the fact that I need a job.”

C.: “Ways of making money.” (23/4/1998)

J. didn’t find a job, but he started to make mosaic tables.

When discussing J.’s work situation, C. created a possibility for change by referring to making money and not a job.

Reflection

I see this assumption as a key thought within narrative thinking. It is also linked to the assumption that human experience is ordered and given meaning through language. Yet I haven’t used this assumption much and have had difficulty to find examples. I would like to make it a goal to use this assumption more often when doing counselling.

5.5.4 Some experience goes unstoried

Certain lived experiences go unnoticed or unstoried (Monk in Monk, et al. 1996: 13):

5.5.4.1 Feeling unnutured

C.: “I feel like a child, crying and crying ...”

Counsellor: “And nobody comes to console her.”

C.: “Nobody nurtures me...” (23/7/1998)

C. felt that her needs were not met, that she was not nurtured.

5.5.4.2 Becoming aware of unnoticed experiences

J.: “I am nurturing her in a way.”

C.: “The food. You nourish, ja, you nourish, ja.”

J.: “Yes.”

Counsellor: “That is one way and a very important way.”

J.: “It is because sometimes she eats a little bit and I say okay you must eat. That is basic ...”

Counsellor: “And that is basic nature.”

C.: “What a baby needs.” (23/7/1998)

C. didn't notice some lived experiences - J. did nurture her - she just hadn't “storied” these experiences. I guided her recognition of these experiences:

5.5.4.3 Becoming aware of more unnoticed experiences

C.: “... one of the things, you make me think, I must admit it. I don't think I am good when it comes to a certain point, I am not good at looking after myself. I know there are things that I can do that would make me feel better.”

Counsellor: “Looking after, caring for yourself ...” (23/7/1998)

It was only after our discussion that C. also realized her own responsibility to nurture herself.

By helping C. to story these previously unnoticed experiences, she discovered that she was not as “unnurtured” as she thought.

Reflection

I was totally comfortable using this assumption. Helping a person to become aware of previously unnoticed experiences can create many opportunities for new stories – this assumption thus also underlines a person's potential to grow and choose a new direction. But I think it is important that this assumption is used in a collaborative way, so that unnoticed experiences are almost co-discovered.

5.5.5 Other people and society contribute to meaning-making

Two assumptions are clustered together. I used these consciously during counselling and while reflecting on counselling. The first assumption was used by the clients without their conscious realization.

5.5.5.1 Meaning is socially constructed

People's social history and the stories of the group they belong to form the context in which they give meaning to their experience (Drewery & Winslade in Monk, et al. 1997:32):

5.5.5.1.1 J.'s art story

J.: "... I paint for myself, but it is not selling. You expect someone will be curious to look at your work."

C.: "Since 1990 it is a post-painting business."

J.: "Yes, yes."

C.: "... they are using videos and computers, it is very difficult, they are moving away from the typical methods, I do think it is not so popular anymore."

J.: "Yes and no. It is not what it used to be in the 70's and 80's." (8/8/1998)

The difficulty J. experienced in selling his paintings can be interpreted in the context of painting not being the popular art method it used to be. Although I didn't use the assumption in practice, I could use it to interpret J.'s experience.

Reflection

Although I find this assumption meaningful, and know that J., for instance, made sense of his experience in South Africa against his French background, I couldn't find clusters of interaction illustrating this assumption other than the example above.

5.5.5.2 Not all stories are equal

There are many dominant stories or discourses around the roles of men and women in marriage. One is that men are supposed to provide economic security for their wives and children in return for the women looking after the household and the children (Parry 1991:49).

5.5.5.2.1 Discourse: role of men and women

C.: "But with J. I always felt safe with him and I always felt he will look after me. Now I am reconsidering that. He looks after me in almost a role reversal type of way, he looks after me in the sense that he does the shopping and cooking..." (23/4/1998)

I used this assumption to identify the presence of the discourse around the roles of male and females.

5.5.5.2.2 Challenging the discourse

C.: "L., my sister, said ... I said to her that I really battle with idea of earning the money, being the breadwinner and she said you know we have some friends in England and some friends in France who are in the same situation and who are in quite functional relationships ..."

J.: "That is a important point."

C.: "That is a very important point, they said there are lots of families where only one person is earning the money, and at the moment it happens to you, why is it so terrible? ... What I like when J. has got money, he used to give me perfume and earrings, I really miss that..." If it is going to be like this for ever, and I have to buy my own perfume, I'm using perfume as a symbol of something, for the rest of my life, it actually chokes me, I have to say."

J.: "But I told you, I never accept the idea, you know it is a temporary situation, that I want to change, because I feel very uncomfortable myself. I told you that ... In South Africa it is very badly regarded that the women is making the money and the man is cooking, you know ..."

Counsellor: "What your sister said is like a mind shift for you."

C.: "... I don't know if that has happened It is deep inside, ... I think I'm still battling with it, because ... in some very perverse way it means that I have to give up some kind of central control, because at the moment I'm controlling, because I'm the one that are saying we can do this, we can't do this ..." (23/4/1998)

Both C. and J. were oppressed by this dominant discourse and disregarding the discourse would also mean a loss of power for C.. C.'s sister made her aware that there are other "truths", other ways to think about the place of men and women. I more than once referred to her sister's input to reinforce the challenge of the discourse.

Reflection

This assumption fits me well, perhaps because I sometimes tend to be a bit of a rebel. I welcomed the input of C.'s sister and used it to further awareness of the influence the discourse could have on them. But as far as I am concerned, respect for the client's right to make his/her own decisions is very important.

5.5.5.3 The self

I used the assumption consciously during counselling and in reflecting on what happened. Although C. became aware of her different selves, we didn't explicitly discuss the underlying assumption.

5.5.5.3.1 We are different selves, each with its own story or stories

People have different selves which are socially constructed through language (Freedman & Comb 1996:34,35):

5.5.5.3.1.1 C's two selves

J. tells about C.'s "explosions" and describes two "selves" of C.:

J.: "Why are we together? Because I am in love with you."

C.: "J., I mean are you?"

J.: "Yes, yes, Because somewhere I feel there is a sweet little girl which is dominated by someone else."

Counsellor: "J., do you feel it is almost as if a woman, a hateful woman is influencing this sweet little girl?"

J.: "Ja, ja". (30/4/1998)

J. experiences C. as a sweet little girl and a hateful woman. With this assumption in mind, I clarified J.'s idea of C.'s two selves.

5.5.5.3.1.2 More selves for C.

C: "... I actually felt like a child ..."

Counsellor: "You feel you should be an adult?"

C: "I think I am quite often a child. I think when I am not in my adult mode, I become almost like being inconsolable ..."

Counsellor: "The vulnerable child."

C: "The vulnerable child, I think the thing of being a bit abandoned. Yes, maybe that child has to be noticed." (23/7/1998)

In some contexts C. experienced herself as an adult, while in others, she thought of herself as a child. She accepted the child self and wanted it to become heard. I assisted her with this.

Reflection

This assumption fits my belief in people's potential to grow. Because we have different selves, we can choose to live different stories in different contexts. As a counsellor I feel I should equally respect all the selves of the client and assist him/her to consciously choose which self to be in what context.

Summary

- From the above I have become more aware of some aspects of my "window on my world":
 - It was quite easy to select illustrations that reflected most the assumptions of the narrative analogy. I read this as an indication that the narrative analogy makes sense to me and is used in my practice. I had difficulty in finding examples of "change is possible" and "meaning is socially constructed". I decided to use the assumption "change is possible" more often during my practice. It seems that I do use "meaning is socially constructed" to interpret the experience of clients, but that it doesn't really influence my behaviour during counselling.
 - Sometimes the assumptions were used consciously during the sessions – in these instances it guided my behaviour.
 - At other times it was used unconsciously, only being identified during reflection on these events after counselling.

- The narrative analogy seems to be accepted by the clients. The assumptions were in some instances used by the clients themselves, without their realization. (I am aware that this is my interpretation – it may be interpreted differently by another observer.)
- For me the three assumptions “Human experience is organized and maintained through stories of narratives”; “Human experience is ordered and given meaning through language”; and “Change is possible” are the most meaningful. These capture the essence of the narrative analogy – people can change by “linguaging” their lives differently and thus telling an alternative story.
- The assumptions link with each other and with aspects of the role of the counsellor using the narrative analogy.

5.6 Clusters of interaction illustrating the role of the counsellor using the narrative analogy

As in the previous paragraphs, reference will first be made to theory. Clusters of interactions will then be selected to illustrate the role of the counsellor. Reference will be made to my process notes, where applicable. I will also reflect on my experience as a counsellor using the narrative analogy.

5.6.1 Narrative stance

The counsellor using the narrative analogy takes a “not-knowing” position, explores and investigates in order to better understand the client’s experience (Freedman & Comb 1996:273):

5.6.1.1 Exploring through questions

I asked a series of questions in order to understand C’s experience of trust:

C.: “I spent a lot of my time with friends outside the home.

Counsellor: “Did you trust them?”

C.: “Yes. It seems easier for me to trust friends than men.”

Counsellor: “Were there instances when you have trusted J?”

C.: “Yes, lots and lots.” (9/7/1998)

Part of a narrative stance is also respect. J. was French and sometimes spoke to C. in French, especially when he had difficulty understanding. I respected this and didn't insist on knowing what was said. J. and C. in turn respected me and usually translated what was said for me.

Reflection

I found it quite easy to keep a narrative stance. For me this relates to the assumption that human experience is organized and maintained through stories. To really understand the client's story, I found curiosity and an exploratory stance helpful.

5.6.1.2 A collaborative relationship

The relationship between the clients and counsellor is collaborative. The counsellor is not the expert who can give advice. The client is the expert on his/her experience (Monk, et al. 1997:54):

5.6.1.2.1 C. as the expert

C.: "Having listened to us, and from your experience working with couples, do you think we should divorce?"

Counsellor: "I can't tell you if the relationship will work."

C.: "Or won't work."

Counsellor: "Or won't work. I mean you are the person living it, I am not. I see a lot of pain."

C.: That is right." (27/10/1998)

After C. had decided to divorce, she asked for my "professional opinion" on whether divorce would be the right step. In my process notes of the day I wrote: "She wants an answer from me! I can't give it to her. I am not God." As counsellor I could not give such advice.

In couple's counselling a collaborative relationship also implies that the therapist is co-authoring with both partners (Loos 1991:293):

5.6.1.2.2 Giving J. his own voice

Counsellor: "What happens, J., does she shout at you, does she push you around ... what happens?"

C.: "She does get to me. Well I think she is mad one more time. You know, I would like to speak, it is impossible to speak when she starts shouting ... And also being a foreigner, that my English, sometimes I don't understand things and you (addressing C.) speak with a speed of I don't know what, so if I say "What?", you seem to get worse."

Counsellor: "In a way that is more frustrating for you because you can't understand what she is saying to you ..." (30/4/1998)

From the first session I thought that C. had taken J.'s voice - she spoke for him. He confirmed this and I tried to facilitate him in telling his story in his own voice.

5.6.1.2.3 Discussing J.'s experience

Counsellor: "What do these "explosions" do to you?"

J.: "It's like, you know, knocking on a dog, all the time, you know, what are you expecting ..."

C.: "Is that really how it feels?"

Counsellor: "Tell me, how does it feel to be knocked on like a dog?"

C.: "J. says knocking, but he means biting."

J.: "Fighting."

C.: "No, hitting."

Counsellor: "Feeling like a dog, does it make you feel inferior?"

C.: "And helpless?"

J.: Answers in French. (30/4/1998)

C. was very verbal and it was easy for her to express herself. But for the relationship to truly be collaborative, I facilitated J. to express his feelings. I felt I worked hard to get J. to discuss his experience.

5.6.1.2.4 My responsibility

During supervision we explored the responsibility of the counsellor:

Counsellor: "I tend to work a lot with the client. I have to try not to work harder than the client. I feel I should bring about change."

Supervisor: “One must learn to accept – even if the clients don’t want change. If it is OK for them, it is OK. Remember, you can bump the clients, but you don’t know where they will jump.”
(16/4/1998)

Part of a collaborative relationship is not to work too hard on behalf of the client.

Reflection

To me a collaborative relationship stands central in the work of a counsellor using the narrative analogy – this might be the reason for the many examples. This fits my belief that each person has the right to his/her own values and decisions. It is not the task of the counsellor to give advice or to play God. But I need to be aware of my tendency to “work hard” – this might endanger a collaborative relationship in that I might “take over” some of the client’s responsibility.

5.6.1.3 Listening

The counsellor is the audience to the stories of the clients (Monk, et al. 1997: 66).

Through listening I tried to really understand the meaning both C. and J. were giving to their experience of the same situation:

5.6.1.3.1 Acknowledging J’s need to paint

Counsellor: “Are you enjoying your work, are you enjoying painting?”

J.: “Much more than that, it is a passion, it is a passion.”

C.: “Passionate ...”

J.: “Passionate ...”

Counsellor: “It is like a calling, I mean it is your life.”

J.: “It is in my blood, I mean in my soul, it is part of my soul ...” (23/4/1998)

I listened to better understand J.’s need to paint.

5.6.1.3.2 Acknowledging C.’s frustration

J.: “... I have to paint, it is sort of mental hygiene.”

C.: “Okay, so what do I need for my mental hygiene, do you ever think about that? Did you ever think about that? You got the right to be passionate and to have the need for mental hygiene, but what right do I have? That is part of my problem. I think J. spends 99% of his time thinking about himself and his art and I just have to be there to support him.”

J.: “Art is not myself.”

C.: “It is an extension of yourself.”

J.: “But it is not selfish, it is something generous ... trying to communicate ...”

C.: “Oh, I see, and that is supposed to fulfil me emotionally instead of you?”

Counsellor: “So what you are saying is that you are not fulfilled ...”

C.: “Not emotionally.”

Counsellor: “Not looked after?”

C: “No I actually am not.” (23/4/1998)

Later in the same interview I listened in order to understand C.’s frustration.

By listening I validated both experiences, J.’s need to paint and C.’s frustration that she must work to enable J. to fulfil his need, without having her own needs fulfilled.

Reflection

Listening is part of my “bag of tricks” as a social worker and has almost become part of my personality. I see it as a way of showing respect. For me it also links to the narrative stance and a collaborative relationship. The counsellor needs to really listen to and be curious about the client’s story. The counsellor needs to really listen in order to hear the client and to be part of a dialogical meaning-making process.

5.6.1.4 Transparency

Counsellors have their own meanings, values and experiences. A counsellor is transparent when he/she talks about this (Freedman & Comb 1996:275).

As counsellor, I tried to be honest about my own experience during counselling:

5.6.1.4.1 Trying to “fix” it

C.: “Just a lot wrong. There is really a lot wrong.”

Counsellor: “But I would like to lift the burden. How can we reach you, what can we do to lift that heavy burden?”

Sometimes I desperately wanted to help C., to relieve her of some of the weight she carried.

5.6.1.4.2 Focussing on the counselling process

Counsellor: “I thought a lot about you during the week, and I think we are focusing a lot on you, C. and your burden, and not enough on J.” With this I put my briefcase on J.’s lap, in the same way I had done during a previous session when we used it as a symbol for the weight C. was carrying. Although J. immediately removed the briefcase from his lap, we focused on his experience of “heaviness”. (6/8/1998)

I commented on my thoughts around the counselling process.

By doing this, I hoped the couple could see me not as an expert, but as a partner in a collaborative relationship.

Reflection

Transparency doesn’t come easily to me and I found it difficult to find examples of such instances. I need to be more aware and transparent about my own experiences, values and cultural context. To a certain extent, the writing of this thesis is for me an exercise in transparency – I explore my own practice and my own values and share this with the reader.

5.6.1.5 Reflection

Reflection can be described as “experience of experience” – it is through reflection that we make sense of our experience (Freedman & Combs 1996:169).

5.6.1.5.1 Reflecting on the divorce decision

C.: “What is for you the crisis? Why is it a crisis for you? Why can you not continue like this? What is the problem for you?”

J.: “You said yourself, if something is broken, seriously broken, how can you fix it?”

C.: “Because I just feel that one of the biggest factors for me is that I think you have a very serious drinking problem. I think you don’t realize how serious, and I think if I stayed with you I will just support that problem.” (10/11/1998)

In the last session, after they had already expressed their decision to separate, C. and J. reflected on their decision and tried to understand why they came to this crisis point. I facilitated his reflection through a narrative stance.

5.6.1.5.2 Reflection in process notes

In my process notes I also reflected on what happened during this session: “It was a very painful session for me. I have a lot of conflict in myself. Could I have handled this session differently? Could I have said something differently? Could I have forced the story in another direction? Maybe my own values are playing a role here. It is not my role to keep them together. If separation is the right decision for them, it is the right decision.” (10/11/1998)

By re-experiencing the session their decision to separate became acceptable to me.

Reflection

I find the movement between the *landscape of action* (direct experience) and the *landscape of consciousness* (reflection on that experience) really meaningful. By thinking about his/her story, the client gives meaning to experience. As far as I am concerned, reflection doesn’t only form part of the counselling process, but continues afterwards – for example, when I write process notes or for the clients when they go home and think about their experience during counselling.

5.6.1.6 Care with language

The counsellor needs to be careful with the language he/she uses and the influence it can have on the clients (Monk, et al. 1997: 69).

5.6.1.6.1 Be careful to use the word “story”

During supervision we reflected on whether or not the counsellor should use the word “story” during counselling:

Counsellor: “What I want to ask you, I haven’t yet used the word “story”. Maybe I should ask “let’s talk about the story”. Use story as a metaphor and refer to the “old” and “new” stories.”

Supervisor: “What would be your reason for doing this?”

Counsellor: “To give them an idea that is a new step/phase To challenge them to look at the future, at what the new story means to them. To look at some themes in the present story and how they see it in their future story.”

Supervisor: “I think it is very valuable to look at what the relationship can look like without the problem. I speak a lot about the “story” in methodology, but don’t use the word during therapy. ... Sometimes it can be a bit unempathetic, because story isn’t real, storybooks are usually fictional, whereas their experience is real to them.”

Counsellor: “They might feel you are not respecting their lives.”

Supervisor: “You must be careful, although it might be useful in some therapies.”

This discussion was valuable to me in that it made me more aware that we create “realities” with the language we use.

Reflection

I am able to identify with the need to be careful in my use of language. This also relates to the assumption that human experience is ordered and given meaning through language. I would like to be even more aware of the language I use during counselling and make better use of opportunities to open up new meaning for clients through the language I use.

5.6.1.7 Practices used during narrative counselling

Using my own description of the practices used during narrative counselling, it appears that all the different practices were used, but that they didn't follow each other in the sequence outlined. This seems to be because more than one problem was tracked, sometimes separately, sometimes simultaneously.

5.6.1.7.1 Joining the meaning system of the couple

During the first session it took some time to form a trusting and collaborative relationship with the couple. For example I asked them whether this was their first experience of counselling. We discussed their previous experience – what they found positive and what not. I explained that I ~~was~~ working from the assumption that they know their own lives best – I could not give them advice or a ready-made answer because their experience would be totally different from that of other couples I had seen. We could explore their situation together – in this way co-constructing meaning. I thus situated my approach toward counselling and they seemed quite happy with it. J. apologized for being French and for not speaking English very well. I joined his meaning system by remarking that we were in the same boat since I am Afrikaans and my English isn't very good. (I also asked permission to tape our sessions.) (23/4/1998)

Reflection

I consider this an essential practice – it forms the foundation of a future collaborative relationship. I found it useful to discuss their expectations of counselling and to situate my own approach. In this way we negotiated a common meaning around counselling.

5.6.1.7.2 Taking apart and deconstructing the problem.

Monk, et al. (1997:43) see deconstruction as looking for hidden meanings, gaps and evidence of

conflicting stories – the challenging of the taken-for-granted. The members of a couple may see a problem differently (Loos 1991:295). Externalization is seen as a deconstruction practice as it challenges the truth of problems existing in persons (Zimmerman & Dickerson 1996:63).

5.6.1.7.2.1 Both sides of the problem-saturated story

C.: “I do think you will discover all about J.’s history – he has been very removed from having to make money, so all the pressure is on me ... It is very expensive to support J. completely on my own, that is what I have been doing for the last year and a half, and it is very stressful and I think that has messed things up.”

Counsellor: “J. where would *you* like to begin ... What would *you* think are the most important things?”

J.: “I think the problem is cultural and financial. Okay, cultural because I have a very different cultural background than her. The job that I could do is morally accepted in Europe, but not here. So the reason of course is the lack of money, it is creating a lot of tension.” (23/4/1998)

Although both agreed that lack of money was a problem, C. focused on her burden to support J., while J. emphasized the cultural differences between them. I thus listened to both sides of the problem-saturated story – this helped to “take the problem apart”.

5.6.1.7.2.2 Thickening the problem story

Counsellor: “You’ve got different views on just about everything ...”

C.: “About everything basically.”

Counsellor: “So the problem is wider than just money.”

C.: “It is wider than this. The money is a symptom of the problem.”

We explored different problems or aspects of the problem, for example, C’s emotional outbursts, the issue of responsibility, J.’s search for a job, C.’s need to have a baby and their poor communication. As we continued to explore, the problem story which I helped the clients to thicken, became more complex.

5.6.1.7.2.3 Externalization

Counsellor: “What is the effect of the “explosions” on you J., it almost ... takes your voice away, you don’t have the opportunity to speak, you don’t have the opportunity to act, it almost makes you helpless. Am I right?”

J.: “Yes.”

Counsellor: “It is so overwhelming and powerful that you can’t act?”

J.: “No, I mean ... if you try to speak to someone mad and aggressive, there is no positive objective ... Some other guy will knock her on the face, but I’m not that kind of person, I refuse.”

Counsellor: “... Because of who you are, if you were someone else, you would have knocked her down, because you are you, you feel overwhelmed.”

A bit later:

C.: “... I’ve made him feel very bad about money, in the rage I will tell him how much he owed me. Now, that’s below the belt.”

Counsellor: “And the effect of the “explosion” on you, the guilt ...”

C.: “Guilty and horrible, horrible. I feel like a horrible person.”

Counsellor: “When you look back, you don’t like yourself and you feel helpless ...”

C.: “I do.”

Counsellor: “It is not only J. that feels helpless, the “explosions” also make you feel helpless.”

C.: “Yes.” (30/4/1998)

I used *externalization* to separate the person from the problem. We referred to C’s emotional outbursts as “explosions” and explored the *relative influence* of this on both of them.

In these examples I listened for different perceptions of the problem, developed a more detailed description of the problem, externalized it and explored the relative influence of the problem on C. and J..

Reflection

I have found from my practice that it is important to first “hear” the problem story and understand

~~the~~ meaning the clients attach to the problem and not to move too quickly to searching for alternative stories. From my experience the clients come back to the discussion of the problem story until they feel you have “heard”. In these examples I have focused more on the “taking apart” of the problem and not on deconstruction. With deconstruction, referring to the unpacking of taken-for-granted assumptions and ideas, the example discussed under §5.5.5.2.2 will be more applicable.

5.6.1.7.3 Searching for alternative stories

By identifying unique outcomes, people are invited to live new stories (Freedman & Comb 1996:90;91).

5.6.1.7.3.1 Unique outcome

C.: “Yesterday I could have launched out at J., but I didn’t. I became aware of feeling out of control, overwhelmed ...”

Counsellor: “Vulnerable?”

C.: “Yes, vulnerable.”

Counsellor: “What did you do then?”

C.: “I became aware of a need to distance myself from J. I see him as my enemy.”

Counsellor: “You became like a “ystervarkie”. What is it in English again?”

C.: “A warthog. Do you understand, J?”

J.: “Yes, like a cat with claws.”

Counsellor: “You became aware of this feeling, what did you do then?”

C.: “Instead of lashing out or shouting ... I was on my way to a client and I was late. Then I asked him to take me and he did. I felt closer to him.”

Counsellor: “So instead of making him your enemy, he became your “colleague in battle?”

C.: “Yes, and I felt good.” (6/5/1998)

I helped C. to explore the unique outcome. As far as the “explosions” are concerned, this did lead to an alternative story – there were no explosions for months; just before they decided to separate C. started shouting again.

It was difficult to identify a unique outcome in the present or past, the client might be asked to imagine a future time when their lives would be as they would like them to be (Zimmerman & Dickerson 1996:80-85).

5.6.1.7.3.2 Future unique outcomes

C.: “I haven’t got a feeling that we are actually going somewhere, ... if I have a sort of destination, it would make a hard road very easy, but a hard road with no destination is worse because you don’t know where the hell you are going. And J. hates the word *future*.”

J.: “No, no, we spoke about that. I can’t think of the future if the present isn’t working well, then it is better that I don’t think about it.” (24/6/1998)

On two occasions I asked the couple to identify these “future unique outcomes”, in order to help the couple to write a couple’s story, but we didn’t succeed.

Reflection

I really enjoyed identifying unique outcomes together with the clients. It gave me a feeling of hope and excitement. As discussed under the previous paragraph, I tended to move too quickly to this practice without having discussed the problem story in sufficient detail. The clients went “back” on several occasions to elaborate on their experience of the problem.

5.6.1.7.4 Developing a preferred story

Once an alternative story has been identified, it is important to explore whether this experience is preferred by the client and, in the case of a couple, by both parties (Freedman & Combs 1996:89).

5.6.1.7.4.1 Separate futures

Throughout the sessions both C. and J. referred to divorce. On 27/10/1999 C. announced that she wanted a separation. (The tape is unclear, so I refer to my process notes.) She felt she couldn’t cope with J.’s drinking problem and he didn’t want to do anything about it. We discussed the gains and losses of separation for her. Possible gains could be less responsibility, a better

lifestyle, perhaps another job. Possible losses could be loneliness, loss of emotional security, she might not be involved with another man, she may not have a child. We discussed the possibility that responsibility might take a different form – she might have to take responsibility for her emotions, otherwise it could overwhelm her. The preferred story was thus not a better future together, as we initially had aimed for, but separate futures. I helped C. to explore the implications of the preferred story.

5.6.1.7.4.2 Exploring the preferred story

On 3/11/1998 I saw both C. and J.. The decision to separate was confirmed by both:

Counsellor: “J. from what I hear you say, this is final?”

C.: “I would say yes, for me it is final. I can’t, I just feel that I get nothing that I want.”

Counsellor: “J.? Do you think this is final, did you decide that you are on the way, do you want to work on the relationship, where are you?”

J.: “No, no what she is saying, I am afraid, it is too damaged ...”

Counsellor: “The wall is too thick? There is no way out?”

J.: “I am afraid.” (3/11/1998)

The preferred story of separate futures was explored and detail was added. I facilitated a movement from *landscape of action* to *landscape of consciousness*.

5.6.1.7.4.3 Thickening the new narrative

Counsellor: “I think every bit is painful, especially after a long time. I mean if somebody leaves, there is a reason and there is a lot of loss for everyone.”

C.: “Mm. Huge losses.”

Counsellor: “So what will make it easier for you now?”

C.: “I think if we have got a plan of action which is not threatening.” (3/11/1998)

The plan was that both C. and J. would go to France in December to discuss the separation with J.’s father. It was decided that J. would go earlier to lessen the immediate tension.

The story of separation was thickened. They decided to perform their story to an audience – J.’s father.

Reflection

This practice fits with my belief in people's right to make their own decisions. As a counsellor I need to respect the clients' decision, even if it is not what I expected or hoped would happen. Based on my assumption that relationships are precious and need to be preserved when possible, I initially found it difficult to accept the clients' choice to separate.

5.6.1.7.5 Confirming the new story

No story is performed without an audience (White 1990:1).

5.6.1.7.5.1 An audience to the story

Counsellor: "So what you are saying, you already discussed this with your father and the implications of this are huge for you."

C.: "Because of his dependency on his father, it is very difficult for him."

J.: "It is not difficult for me."

C.: "But who is going to pay for the container?"

J.: "Ja, OK well."

C.: "Temporary dependency. Your father is going to help you and it is difficult for you."

J.'s father had already become a part of the preferred story. He would take the responsibility of supporting J. over from C..

Reflection

Through the counselling I became aware of the important role that an audience can play in the development of an alternative story. In future I can make better use of audiences to confirm a new story.

5.6.1.7.6 Giving permission for the story to be rewritten

The preferred story is not the only answer or truth. The counsellor encourages the client to

to continue to rewrite his/her story in useful ways (Allen & Allen 1995:329).

5.6.1.7.6.1 Another option

In the video “The Pink Wall Counsellor:”... at the end the wall was broken, destructed...

... Would the split in a way, may be a way of breaking the wall so that you can reach each other in a different way, in greater distance maybe. When C. doesn't feel the responsibility, feeling the weight she is feeling, it may be easier for you both to live and be closer to people as such. So could it be in a way a renewal... a breaking of the wall?” (3/11/1998)

Although I could have done this more clearly, I tried by looking at new opportunities that might be created by the separation

I also invited both to come for individual support should they feel they need it, thereby also giving permission for the story to be rewritten.

Reflection

For me this practice fits my belief that everything is constantly changing and that we need to respond to life from moment to moment – the client's story can be rewritten again and again.

5.7 Summary

From the above I have become more aware of the following aspects of “my bag of tricks”:

- It was easy to find examples on the narrative stance, collaborative relationship, listening and reflection. All of these fit me as a person and counsellor. Most examples were of the collaborative relationship – this aspect of the counsellor's role is also consistent with my belief in each person's right to decide for him- or herself.
- The fewest examples were of transparency. Although I can identify with this aspect on a cognitive level, I find it hard to be transparent during counselling. Writing this thesis gave me an opportunity to practice being more transparent as far as my own experience, values and culture are concerned.

- I am also aware of a tendency to “work hard” and should take care not to take on the responsibility of the clients and in this way sabotage a collaborative relationship.
- For me, respect and a collaborative relationship are very important. In couples’ counselling the counsellor helps both partners to express their stories equally.
- I found examples of all the practices used during narrative counselling, but not in sequence as discussed in theory. This might be because more than one problem was tackled at once.
- As far as these practices are concerned, externalization of the problem and the identification of unique outcomes or unstoried experiences make the most sense to me. Through these practices options for change are discovered.
- The alternative story must be preferred by the client, not the counsellor. This I learned through the process of doing counselling. Initially I identified one of my beliefs as stating that a relationship is very valuable and that it must be saved at all costs. I learned that the preferred story of the clients can also be different, not fitting my values, but could still be respected.
- The story of narrative counselling needs to have an open ending. The alternative story is not the permanent “new” truth. The client can continuously rewrite his/her story.

These discoveries on my “window on the world” and “my bag of tricks” answer my *first research question*. There is a good comparison between the theory of the narrative analogy and my counselling as described in this case example. I found examples of all the narrative assumptions and aspects of the role of the counsellor as discussed in theory. Some were used more extensively than others.

In this chapter I have selected examples from counselling to illustrate the use of the assumptions of the narrative analogy as well as the role of the counsellor using the narrative analogy. Through reflection I have become more aware of the “window on my world” as well as my “bag of tricks”, and answered my first research question. In the next chapter, I will discuss my conclusions and recommendations.

Chapter 6

Conclusion and Recommendation

6.1 Discussion

- As counsellors we interpret our experience from a specific framework or analogy. I work from a narrative analogy. In order to be accountable to myself and my clients I wanted to gain clarity on the interpretive framework I use. I formulated two research questions:
- Does my counselling compare with the theory on the narrative analogy?
 - Is the narrative analogy consistent with my own values and assumptions?

In order to answer these questions I decided to use action research as method, also depicting a learning process.

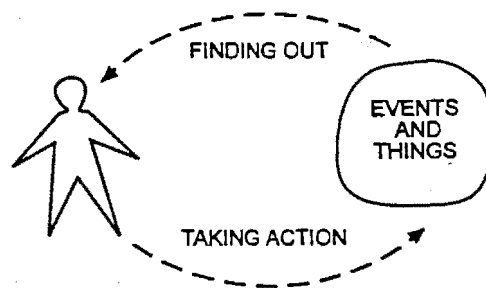


FIGURE 11: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING (BAWDEN IN ZUBER-SKERRIT 1991:12)

Four objectives were identified for the research, which can be stated as the following actions:

- to conduct a literature study on the narrative analogy;
- to use the narrative analogy in my counselling;
- to study an example from my counselling and compare this with the theory of the narrative analogy; and
- to reflect whether the narrative analogy fits my own values and assumptions.

6.2 Literature study

- The first part of my literature study entailed situating the narrative analogy within a wider philosophical framework – describing a part of the “window on my world” (see Figure 11: §6.1). The narrative analogy, as used within couple’s counselling, was described within family therapy, the constructivist, but specifically the social constructionist paradigm and the post-modernist epistemology.

- In the second part of my literature study I explored the theory of the narrative analogy. I found different descriptions of the *narrative* as well as various perspectives on narrative counselling. In spite of the diversity, I discovered common themes in the underlying assumptions as well as in the description of the role of the counsellor. I clustered the assumptions according to themes and explored how the counsellor regards his/her clients as well as the practices used during counselling. Through this information, I gained more clarity on “my window on the world” as well as “the bag of tricks” available to me when I use the narrative analogy during counselling.

- In the third and last part of my literature study I focused on the use of the narrative analogy in couples’ counselling as a specialized field. I discovered that the “window on my world” needed a bit more colour and a few tricks had to be added to “my bag of tricks”. Although the assumptions and the role of the counsellor in couples’ counselling are basically the same as described in the previous chapter, provision must be made for a co-authoring process involving two members of the couple as well as the counsellor.

6.3 Counselling

- When comparing the theory on the assumptions underlying the narrative analogy with my practice, I came to the following discoveries concerning “the window on my world”:
 - It was quite easy to select examples that illustrated most of the assumptions of the narrative analogy. I concluded that this may be an indication that the narrative analogy makes sense to me and is used in my practice. I had difficulty finding examples of “Change is possible” and

“Meaning is socially constructed”. I decided to use the assumption “Change is possible” more often during my practice. It seems that I do use “Meaning is socially constructed” to interpret the experience of clients, but that it doesn’t really influence my behaviour during counselling.

- Sometimes I used the assumptions consciously during the sessions – in these instances the assumptions guided my behaviour.
- At other times I was not aware of using the assumptions consciously, only identifying it during reflection on these events after counselling.
- ✓ • For me the three assumptions: “Human experience is organized and maintained through stories or narratives”, “Human experience is ordered and given meaning through language” and “Change is possible” are the most meaningful. They capture the essence of the narrative analogy – people can change by “linguaging” their lives differently and thus telling an alternative story.
- The assumptions link with each other and with aspects of the role of the counsellor using the narrative analogy.
- By comparing the theory on the role of the counsellor with my practice, I learned the following concerning “my bag of tricks”:
 - It was easy to find examples on the narrative stance, collaborative relationship, listening and reflection. All of these fit me as a person and a counsellor. Most examples were of the collaborate relationship – this aspect of the counselor’s role is also consistent with my belief in each person’s right to decide for him- or herself.
 - The fewest examples were of transparency. Although I can identify with this aspect on a cognitive level, I find it hard to be transparent during counselling. This thesis gave me an opportunity to practice being more transparent as far as my own experience and values are concerned.
 - I am also aware of a tendency to “work hard” and should take care not to take on the responsibility of the clients and in this way sabotage a collaborative relationship.
 - For me respect and a collaborative relationship are very important. In couples’ counselling the counsellor helps both partners to express their stories equally.
 - I found examples of all the practices used during narrative counseling, but not in sequence as discussed in theory. This might be because more than one problem was tackled at once.

- As far as these practices are concerned, externalization of the problem and the identification of unique outcomes or unstoried experiences make the most sense to me. Through these practices options for change are discovered.
- The alternative story must be preferred by the client, not the counsellor. This I learned through the process of doing counselling. Initially I identified one of my beliefs as stating that a relationship is very valuable and that it must be saved at all costs. I learned that the preferred story of the clients can also be different, not fitting with my values, but could still be respected.
- The story of narrative counselling needs to have an open ending. The alternative story is not the permanent “new” truth. The client can continuously rewrite his/her story

These discoveries answer my *first research question*. There is a good comparison between the theory of the narrative analogy and my counselling as described in this case example. I found examples of all the narrative assumptions and aspects of the role of the counsellor as discussed in theory. Some were used more extensively than others.

- The *second research question* was answered by comparing the underlying assumptions of the narrative analogy, as well as its philosophical framework, with the values and beliefs I currently hold:
 - I assume there is no one truth, since all “realities” are constructed. The narrative analogy is grounded in social constructionism which suggests that “realities” are socially constructed.
 - I assume that everything is constantly changing and that one needs to respond to life from moment to moment. According to social constructionism meaning emerges unendingly from interactions between people, through language. This implies that the meanings given to experience or reality are constantly changing.
 - I assume that all people are unique and different, but equal. Although this is not explicitly stated in the narrative analogy, it is implied by a narrative stance of respect and curiosity.
 - I assume that each person has the potential to grow and to determine his/her own direction. The narrative analogy sees a person as the expert on his experience and able to speak on his/her own behalf. The counselling process is seen as a collaborative relationship, a mutual meaning-making.

- I assume that each person has the right to his/her own values and decisions. Nobody has the right to play God over the lives of others. As discussed in the previous paragraph, the narrative analogy doesn't see the role of the counsellor as somebody who gives advice.
- Relationships are precious and should be preserved as far as possible. This is not implied in the underlying assumptions of the narrative analogy. The ending of a relationship would be seen as one of many options open to the client. In working with a couple who want to separate, I will have to be aware of this value of mine and be transparent about it.

It thus seems that all, but one of my own values or beliefs are consistent with the assumptions of the narrative analogy.

6.4 Research

- As part of the study I learned a lot about the process of learning and doing research. Although this was not part of the research problematic, I would like to share some conclusions made in this regard. I concluded that my research process, which can also be depicted as experiential learning, can be depicted as two learning cycles – a first order and a second order learning cycle:

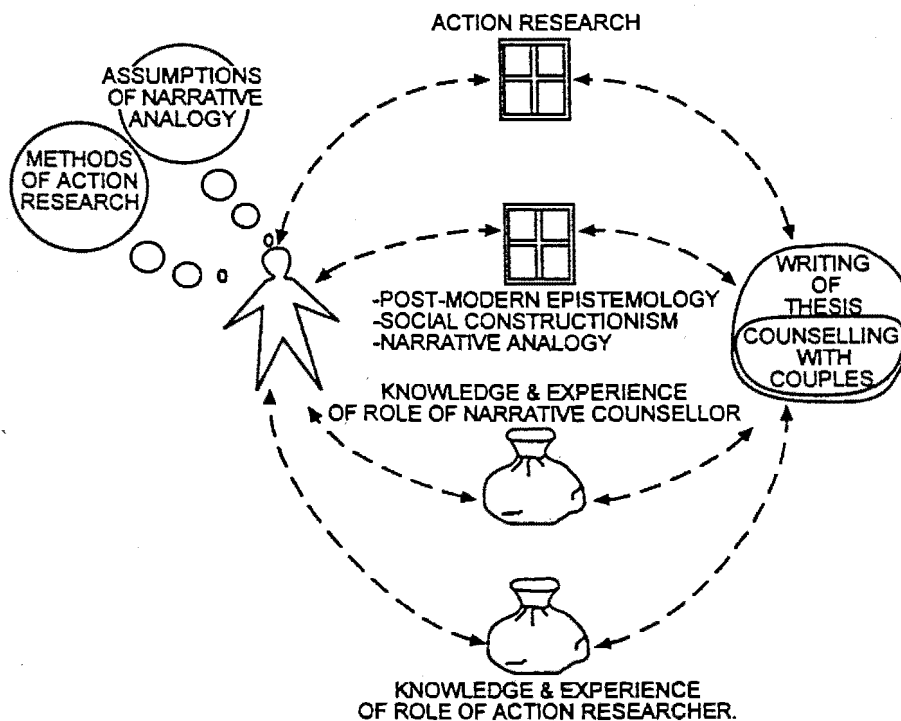


FIGURE 12: THE SECOND ORDER LEARNING CYCLE DURING THE PROCESS OF WRITING MY THESIS.

During the first order learning cycle I:

- involved myself fully in experience - doing counselling;
- investigated this experience from as many different perspectives as possible - discussing it during supervision and writing process notes after each session;
- patterned my observations into meanings as a basis for further action - I interpreted my observations according to the theory of the narrative analogy;
- put the theory in action – I tried to improve my counselling.

During the second order learning cycle I questioned:

- the relevance of the way I was gathering “the facts of the matter” and whether the questions I asked were relevant. I questioned the way in which I gathered data and my research objectives;
- the characteristics of the meaning-perspective or philosophical framework I used, in this instance the research framework I have chosen;
- my thinking and my thoughts on thinking as well as meta-theories as accessed from the work of other writers - the epistemology and paradigms that influence my thinking;
- “the way we are going about the way we are going about our learning.” I consciously reflected on my process of learning.

□ During the research process, I also became aware of different levels of learning:

In the beginning phase of my research, I read about the narrative analogy and applied it when doing couple’s counselling. By reading I “accessed public knowledge” and gained propositional knowledge, knowledge about the narrative analogy and its underlying assumptions. I then applied the narrative analogy in my work with couples. Through this, I gained experiential (using a skill) and practical knowledge (knowing how to use a skill in practice). I also used intuitive knowledge (using my “gut feeling”) when I “went with the flow of the process”. After sessions, while writing process reports, I would reflect on the process, clarifying “patterns in my mind”. During my supervision once a month, we would reflect on my role as counsellor using the narrative analogy. After consulting more literature, I would return to action – my next session with my clients. All of this formed part of the first order learning cycle (see Figure 12: §6.4)

When I started writing my thesis, I became involved in the second learning cycle. In this phase I studied a range of literature and reflected on my research question, the philosophical framework and the theoretical of narrative work I was doing, the research model I was using as well as the learning process in which I was involved. During this learning cycle I also gained propositional knowledge by giving a thicker description of the narrative analogy and I gained experiential and practical knowledge in doing action research. I used intuitive knowledge when I followed the research process, sometimes not knowing where I would end up (also see Figure 2: §1.6.1).

6.5 Recommendation

- The writing of this thesis, provided me with a learning opportunity. I learnt more about myself, I explored the narrative analogy, used it in practice and assessed whether this analogy fits my present values. With a clearer understanding of myself and the theory that I use as a counsellor, I can render a more effective service to my clients and be more accountable to them as well as myself. I recommend that this method of action research or action learning can be used more widely, especially during training when young workers try to find an approach to counselling which fit them.
- This experience affirms the findings of Gottlieb and Gottlieb (1996: 46) that the narrative analogy can be used effectively in couple's counselling. By listening to the individual's stories, as well as a couple's story, it becomes possible for the counsellor to co-author a story that is meaningful to both members of a couple. I can thus recommend that the narrative analogy be used more widely in couple's counseling.

6.6 A final remark

- I have chosen the narrative analogy as interpretive framework for my counselling, but agreeing with Anderson and Goolishian (1988:373), I believe that "...ideas, understanding and practice will always be evolving over time". The narrative analogy is but one approach to counselling. It is currently a useful approach, but over time, through conversation, these ideas will also change and might already be changing. I find it valuable to keep reading and exploring new ideas - to give myself permission to rewrite my counselling story.

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