
Storying unstoried experience in therapeutic practice

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Abstract

Sometimes life events resist storying. Although their conversion into narrative form is often recommended as a therapeutic strategy, particularly in the case of trauma, this can be a difficult and complex process. Sometimes emerging stories are associated more with therapist than client knowledges, and therefore may not be experientially resonant, and some clients' narrative habits may predispose to problem-saturated stories and negative identity conclusions. This article uses a case study to explore the notion of unstoried experience, and the ways in which it can inhibit a sense of personal agency. I propose a constitutive witnessing practice, conceived as a constructive and generative rather than objective-observational practice, as a vehicle for the cultivation of ethically infused, but client-led storying activity.

In narrative therapy, we think about identity and experience as storied phenomena. However, we are not always experientially situated in stories, or in the discursive formations that organize them (Guilfoyle, 2016). Experience and story are not the same thing (Bakhtin, 1993; Bell, 1990). This becomes obvious when we have experiences so powerful that they eject us from the stories of our lives, overwhelming our narratives' capacities to contain or organize experience, leaving us lost and bewildered, without the reference points and guidance stories usually provide. Some experiences of trauma, assault, sexual abuse, and grief—and also of beauty and wonder—not only fragment the stories we use to construct experience but also defy accommodation within culturally available narratives and categories. They show us that narratives can only go so far in framing and guiding us through life's challenges. Some recommend the telling of stories in the face of troubling experiences (e.g., Crossley, 2000), but what are we to do when available stories do not resonate. when a good-enough story cannot be found?

This article addresses this question. I begin with a case study, before discussing the notion of unstoried experience. I then examine the possible contribution of constitutive witnessing, conceived here as a generative rather than objective-observational practice, to the cultivation of storying activity.

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