

# A Brief Overview of Social Construction and Narrative Psychotherapy

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## Abstract

**With the rise of postmodernism, some therapists have begun to question the traditional conception of psychotherapy as seeing the client as problematic. Social constructionism is the metatheory of postmodernism, and narrative psychotherapy was born from the postmodernist trend, therefore, social constructionism and narrative psychotherapy are inseparably linked. In this paper, we try to briefly explore narrative psychotherapy from the perspective of social constructs, hoping to further explain the theoretical basis behind the positive effects of narrative psychotherapy and to develop a deeper understanding of narrative psychotherapy.**

## Keywords

**Social Construction; Psychotherapy; Narrative Therapy.**

## 1. Introduction

In the mid-20th century, as the Western developed countries began to move from modern industrial society to post-industrial society, their cultural thinking also shifted from modernism to postmodernism. In the mid-20th century, as the Western developed countries began to move from modern industrial society to post-industrial society, their cultural trends also shifted from modernism to postmodernism. As a result, narrative psychotherapy emerged as a postmodernist model of counseling and treatment. Narrative psychotherapy is fundamentally different from psychotherapy in the field of modern psychology, and it is a deconstruction of the modern psychotherapy model.

Social constructivism and its main ideas

Social constructivism refers to the idea that individuals actively construct their own understanding and knowledge in a sociocultural context and in interaction with others. Like other constructivist theories, social constructivism also views learning as a process constructed by individuals themselves, but it focuses more on the social aspect of this construction process (Yang, 2003). Its main ideas are as follows:

1. Individuals and society are interconnected and inseparable

Social constructivism believes that the individual subject and society are interconnected and inseparable, and in line with the growth of the individual, the human subject is formed through the interaction between each other, so, in a sense, there is no exact metaphor for the completely isolated individual psyche. Instead, the most accurate metaphor for social constructivism is "the person in dialogue-that is, the person in meaningful linguistic and hyperlinguistic interaction and dialogue." Here, the formation of the human psyche is seen as a part of the social context: the "social construction of meaning" within the social context. Similarly, the social constructivist account of the model of the world is such that the socially constructed world creates a shared experience of the fundamental physical reality, while the objective reality constructed by human power is in constant revision and interaction with the ontological objective reality, although it can never give a true picture of the world.

## 2. Knowledge comes from social construction

In a sense, although social constructivism also regards learning or the acquisition of meaning as a process constructed by individuals themselves, it pays more attention to the mediation of social objective knowledge to the process of individual subjective knowledge construction, and pays more attention to the interaction between the micro and macro contexts of society and the internal construction of the self, beliefs and cognition, and regards them as an inseparable, cyclical, mutually reinforcing and unified social. The social constructionist view of knowledge as a social process. Social constructivism views knowledge as a social construct, based on:

- (1) Knowledge is based on linguistic knowledge, conventions and rules, and language is a social construct;
- (2) Human knowledge, rules, and conventions play a key role in determining the truth of knowledge in a given domain;
- (3) The subjective knowledge of an individual is transformed into objective knowledge that is acceptable to others by publication. This transformation requires the social process of interpersonal interaction, and therefore objectivity itself should be understood as social;
- (4) Published knowledge must be examined and judged by others before it can be re-formed and become objective knowledge accepted by people, i.e., subjective knowledge can only become objective knowledge if it is socially accepted;
- (5) The subjective knowledge possessed by individuals is, by its nature, internalized and reconstructed objective knowledge, even if the objective knowledge acquires subjective inner expression;
- (6) The individual can play an active role both in the process of constructing and creating subjective knowledge and in participating in the process of judging and re-forming the knowledge published by others.

## 3. Learning and development as meaningful social negotiation

In the early studies of social constructivism (B. K. Fang, S. S. Zhang, 2006), the "person in dialogue" was seen as the most appropriate metaphor for social constructivism, giving humans and their language a proud status in terms of individual cognitive development. From the point of view of Vygotsky's symbolic interactionism and activity theory, which pioneered social constructivism, the individual psyche is the product of the accumulation of language. Thus, in a large number of psychological and educational psychological studies in mathematics, there is a growing interest in the role of language, and a deep understanding that learning and teaching are directly mediated by language. Even the operational learning emphasized by Piaget and Bruner takes place in a meaningful language-mediated social context, and is closely linked to social negotiation and understanding. As Paul Ernest, a leading British mathematics educator, has pointed out, the central thesis of social constructivism is that development is possible only when individually constructed, uniquely subjective meanings and theories are "compatible" with the social and physical world. This is because the primary medium of development is through meaningful social negotiation resulting from interaction. Thus, as the study of social constructivism progresses, the term "person in dialogue" is gradually replaced by "social negotiation", which becomes the corresponding metaphor for individual learning and development. Metaphor.

## 4. Cultural and social contexts play a huge role in children's cognitive development

Social constructivism locates the human psyche as a product of individual and social activities, and sees learning as a fundamental process of cultural adaptation in a community of practice, as a "reasonable marginal participation". Therefore, in social constructivism, culture and social context play a huge role in children's cognitive development. Culture gives children cognitive tools to meet their developmental needs, and the type and nature of these tools determine how and how fast children develop, with adults such as parents and teachers and language as the

source of cultural cognitive tools. The cognitive tools provided to children by culture include cultural history, social context, and language, as well as today's electronic forms of information access, among others, and social context is an important resource for children's cognition and development.

In short, the study of social constructivism takes a complex series of positive ontological philosophical paradigms that rely on a questionable epistemology that treats traditional knowledge as alive and socially acceptable. Methodologically, it is eclectic, but it argues that all cognition is problem-based and without any advantages or privileges. Similarly, pedagogically it is eclectic, but it recognizes the inextricable effects of the interaction of macro and micro social contexts, and the intrinsic construction of the human self, beliefs and perceptions.

## 2. Conceptual Background of Narrative Psychotherapy

### 2.1. What is Narrative Psychotherapy?

Narrative psychotherapy emerged in the late 1980s in Australia and New Zealand as a result of the thinking and practice of family therapists such as Michele White and David Epston. Today, narrative psychotherapy has become an important international activity in the field of counseling, and its influence extends to English-speaking countries and regions such as North America, the United Kingdom, and South Africa. In Taiwan Province of China, narrative psychotherapy has become a required part of the counseling profession. In Hong Kong, social organizations such as the Hong Kong Social Workers' General Union and the Hong Kong Christian Council, which are tasked with counseling, also attach great importance to the development of narrative psychotherapy concepts. Nowadays, narrative psychotherapy has also attracted widespread attention from psychology researchers and clinical practitioners in mainland China.

However, narrative psychotherapy is not a therapeutic approach, or a theoretical system of psychotherapy, nor is it a set of psychotherapeutic techniques or a philosophy of psychotherapy. It is not a unique response in a particular therapeutic situation, nor is it a development of any one set of therapeutic methods or techniques. It is not the monopoly of one person or another, it is not unique to one school of thought, and it may not even be limited to one part of the therapeutic field in psychology.

At the same time, however, narrative psychotherapy is within each of the categories described above and cannot be separated from them. So what exactly is it?

David Epperson argues: "Would it not be better to define this doctrine (narrative psychotherapy) as a worldview? Perhaps, but even so, it is not enough. Perhaps it can be seen as an epistemology, a philosophy, a personal commitment, a strategy, an ethic, a life, etc."

Erik Sween argues that the "big question" of "what is narrative psychotherapy" can be answered as follows:

- (1) Often the process of such exploration reveals stories about a person's life that are easily overlooked - stories that surprise that person's history of brilliance.
- (2) Each approach to psychotherapy takes some aspect of life as the basic unit of study, for example, behaviorist therapy focuses on behavior, cognitive therapy focuses on thinking correctly, and narrative psychotherapy views stories as the basic unit of experience.
- (3) Narrative psychotherapy sees people's lived experience through certain specific stories about their selves, much like a video camera through a lens. These stories have a filtering effect in that they bring certain life experiences into focus and filter out others. These stories about identity will be extremely stable, no matter how much the actual situation varies.
- (4) As human beings, we are inevitably meaning makers. We have an experience and then we attach a meaning to it, and that is the story. Narrative therapy is very interested in the stories

in which we live - those stories about who we are and what matters most. Narrative psychotherapy wants to discover these stories, understand them, and retell them.

(5) Much of psychology places great emphasis on the process of individual self-naturalization. They believe that the construction of a person's internal world is done almost by himself. The theory of narrative psychotherapy is the opposite of this view. Narrative psychotherapy considers identity as a co-construction in the process of communication with others, with one's own history, and with culture. Narrative psychotherapy is concerned with the extent to which a socially constructed identity (identity) is appropriate for a person.

(6) Narrative psychotherapy seeks to understand the stories or themes that shape an individual's life. Narrative psychotherapy believes that only those experiences that are part of a larger story have a significant impact on a person's lived experience (lived experience). Narrative psychotherapy therefore places importance on building a plot that unifies a person's lived experience.

(7) A person's life is full of invisible story threads. Narrative psychotherapy seeks to identify these story threads and expand on them. Some questioning styles are used to focus the conversation on aspects of a person's life that are significant, often including intentions, influential relationships, turning points, cherished memories, and relationships between these aspects. Eric Swayne believes the list could go on ad infinitum. He says that if you can say in three sentences what narrative psychotherapy is, then you haven't really understood narrative psychotherapy.

## 2.2. Theoretical Foundations of Narrative Psychotherapy

In the 1980s, many social science disciplines adopted narrative methods and narrative concepts to study human life in a certain socio-cultural context. Narrative theory believes that life is full of stories, every human experience is a story, and life is the process of story development. On the one hand, stories enable us to understand the world, others and ourselves. On the other hand, stories shape each person by the social and cultural norms and customs they convey. This demonstrates the power of stories in the socialization of individuals. This function of narrative makes it inevitably of interest to psychology. When the two are closely linked, Narrative Psychology emerges.

Prior to the 18th century, the self was thought to be an inner, immaterial entity that could only be introspected by consciousness. Unlike the body and the world as matter, which can change, the self was fixed in something unchanging and immortal called the soul. Empiricism, on the other hand, holds that conscious reflection in the ego shows that it is not a solid, unchanging inner self, but only a succession of transient mental feelings. The existence of the soul cannot be proved by introspection, and thus can only be a "fiction". However, when the soul is considered a "fiction," the coherent self becomes questionable: how can we explain that the current self is the same as the self of yesterday or ten years ago. Developments in physiological science led to the idea that our states of consciousness are essentially functions of the brain, and the question of how the self is consistent was answered by replacing the self-soul identity with the ego-body identity, and later the ego-brain identity. But ego-brain identity is also challenged: is the cleft-brain person, whose brain operates in one hemisphere independently of the other, dealing with two or one selves? The problem is that, like the soul theory, it implicitly treats the self as something that accounts for the self's continuity in time.

Pep-per has summarized four types of rooted metaphors that have been used to sketch explanations of the world --Formalism, mechanism, organismicism, and contextualism. Whether it is formalism, which sees the self as an object that can be built at will by external forces, or mechanism, which sees the self as a machine governed by precise mathematical laws, or organismicism, which sees the self as an organic whole composed of different components, all are "realist" assumptions.

Social constructivism, which uses contextualism as a metaphor, considers these "realist" assumptions to be problematic. It assumes that all things and knowledge are conditional, and that the self is neither a stable nor an intrinsic entity, but rather a temporary, meaning-filled chronicle that emerges from close connections. Social constructivists further consider that if there is no longer a real "I" self, then the construction of the self and the performance of roles cannot be considered as belonging to the "I". They are, more appropriately, creations of context. Potter and Wothersell argue that "we need to shift our attention from the physical self to the ways in which the self is constructed" and that "the question is not what is the true nature of the self, but how to talk about it, how it is theorized in discourse". The self is inseparably dependent on the language and discursive practices we use on a daily basis to understand ourselves and others. Thus, the self is not a material but a communicative achievement; not a real entity but a linguistically expressed relation, a rhetorical construction subordinated to "a hundred visions and their variants". This "ongoing" self is confirmed in the relationship.

In such a contextual framework, there are narrative metaphors such as Gegen's relational self, Bakhtin's polyphonic novel, and Hubert Hermans' dialogical self. These narrative metaphors of the self embody the basic principles of narrative psychology: people understand themselves through the medium of language, through speaking and writing, and through the process of creating themselves in which individuals are constantly engaged. In short, discursive processes or narratives are the conditions under which the self is produced, exists, and functions.

Social constructionism's focus on context, language, as the self is consistent with the orientation of the narrative approach that underlies and logically extends it: recognizing the central role of language in the formation and construction of self and identity. Narrative psychology assumes: Human experience and behavior are meaningful. In order to understand ourselves and others, we need to explore the "systems of meaning" and "structures of meaning" that make up our spirit and world. The most important aspect of understanding the self is to focus on meaning and interpretation, which is what distinguishes narrative psychology from traditional psychological approaches and characterizes postmodern thinking about the pursuit of meaning in life.

### 3. Summary

Narrative psychotherapy is theoretically grounded in the social constructionist view of the self as formed in discourse. It is on this basis that narrative psychotherapy has been able to subvert the traditional view of the self as a mental entity and to achieve problem solving and treatment of the client by repairing and restructuring the self. Narrative psychotherapy assumes that the self is not an entity, but rather a narrative construction process. It is through this narrative process that the client makes meaningful whole out of fragmented experiences and makes sense of his or her life experiences through the narrative process. The psychotherapist's task is to listen to the client's story, discover ways in which the client can assemble experiences, make meaning out of them, and help him or her construct a more positive story and form a healthy self. Narrative psychotherapy has become an emerging psychotherapeutic approach in the twenty-first century because of its uniqueness in constructing meaning, pursuing value, and creating life, and it can play a unique role in the field of psychotherapy aimed at solving people's real psychological problems and improving the quality of their psychological lives.

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