

Narrative therapy, difference and possibility: inviting new becomings

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Introduction

When people come along to seek out therapeutic conversations, it is generally because they are not happy with how things are going in their lives and they would like things to be different. This paper explores some broad implications for practice which arise from understandings about identity which emphasise difference and possibility, and describes how these connect with the intentions and practices of narrative therapy. In particular, the paper considers how the ideas of Gilles Deleuze invite an orientation to therapeutic practice which supports the people we meet with to move from 'how things are' to 'how things might be'; from 'being' to 'becoming'.

Structuralism and identity

In developing narrative therapy, Michael White drew from a range of post-modernist philosophical ideas about identity which together offered an alternative to the 'surface/depth' metaphor of identity proposed by the modernist project.

Modernist thought posited the notion of a 'true self'. This idea is connected with structuralist understandings of life which imply that beneath the surface of action and experiences there is a core set of structures that 'drive' our sense of self. In relation to identity, the assumption follows that internal psychologised states such as needs, traits and motivations are fundamental structures which can be searched for, identified and categorised as explanations for our experiences, actions and choices in life.

Michel Foucault suggested that these structuralist or modernist theories about identity have been taken up into a set of normalising 'truths' which have the power to shape our lives and relationships. The influence of these ideas on the development of narrative therapy has been extensively documented (e.g. White, 1990). Foucault suggested that dominant discourses and associated sets of normative expectations about how life should be lived are reproduced and sustained in all aspects of life, including health, social and therapeutic work contexts. They have gained a truth status against which people measure themselves and each other as normal or successful and this has the effect of privileging the interests of people whose lives and choices fit within their narrow confines, whilst marginalising those people who live their lives in different ways. Foucault referred to this as the operation of modern power.

Therapist positioning and power

These understandings of the ways in which power and normative expectations operate in people's lives are key considerations of the narrative approach. Structuralist understandings of identity offer an invitation for therapists to focus on 'what is': what is the matter with this person, family or community and how can it be fixed? How does this sit in terms of what is normal? These normative expectations and discourses are reflected and sustained in the assessments, reports, outcome measurements, judgments and advice that workers are invited to deliver. In this way, speculations about people's lives

and identities can become defining truths. This has the effect of limiting the directions available for people to choose in their lives, and of narrowing experience and possibilities for 'becoming' into set fields of life that are circumscribed by judgement, proclamations of failure and thin conclusions of a person's worth.

If we wish to promote a sense of personal agency in people's lives, and support them to live a range of possibilities, including, at times, those possibilities that are outside of normative discourses, then we need to notice and take a position on the relationships of power that are inherent in the operations of the unnoticed 'truths' of normative discourse. We would also be interested in alternative notions of self which support us to adopt this position.

Non-structuralism, identity and the narrative metaphor

A range of thinkers connected with what has come to be known as post-modernism, have proposed alternative non-structuralist notions of identity that are in contrast to the modernist understandings of the 'core self'. Post-modernist thought suggests that our sense of self is constituted through social relationships and is the outcome of the stories that we develop through life. White (1990) has drawn on these ideas to suggest that our experience of life is mediated through the stories that we tell, and that are told, about who we are. These stories take shape in a social and relational context and meaning is constantly being made as our experiences are storied: that is, when events are linked together over time according to a plot or theme. However, there is not one single story that could possibly encompass the whole of our lived experience and although some accounts of our lives become dominant and privileged over others, we are all composed of many stories and live multi-storied lives.

This means that when we are hearing a single storied problem account of someone's life, we can listen out for clues to alternative stories. There is an intentionality and agency to stories and it is possible to select which particular stories or accounts of our identity we *prefer* to live our lives by. We can ask questions about how these preferred stories fit with people's intentions, hopes, dreams and what it is important to them. The development of rich accounts of these 'concepts of life' that are important to people

can contribute to a sense of agency and clarity about those ways of living and directions in life that more closely fit with them. These categories of intentional identity reflect what it is that people give value to and are in sharp contrast to the non-intentionality of internal psychologised states: they offer opportunities for 'becoming' rather than simply 'being'.

Becoming

If we consider identity not as fixed or single storied, but as multi-storied, fluid and always in the process of 'becoming' something else through the social and political experiences of life, then we can position ourselves in relation to people in a way that is enabling of their preferred possibilities for living.

Giles Deleuze was a contemporary of Foucault whose ideas have had an influence on the most recent developments of narrative practice (White, 2008). Deleuze was a philosopher who was concerned, amongst other things, with possibility, difference, multiplicity and the notion of becoming. He proposed that structuralist ideas about identity and the processes which seek to categorise, measure or label who or what we already are, not only have the effect of marginalisation, but also limit the possibilities for who or what we might become.

Deleuze proposed a surface self which can be conceived as a plane of 'becoming', as opposed to a notion of self which has an internalised core of 'being'. He described life as 'swarms of difference' that are ever present and can actualise into specific identities and new becomings. White (2008) suggested that these swarms of difference can offer possibilities of new relationships, new stories about our lives and new identities.

Terrains of life

These possibilities can be difficult and unfamiliar for people to consider however, and Deleuze proposes that this is because people live in and inhabit particular terrains, territories or fields of life, which are associated with particular sets of concepts and practices of living.

Deleuze uses the term 'deterritorialisation' to denote an escape, or 'line of flight', from the territory that we are experiencing in order to reach a different terrain of life which offers other possibilities.

"Lines of flight are everywhere. They constitute the available means of escape from the forces of repression and stratification. Even the most intense strata are riddled with lines of flight" (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p. 55).

However, although the acts of difference that might open up these lines of flight are always present and available to us, they may stand outside the particular fields in which we experience life and so might not have been assigned meaning and have been missed or gone unnoticed.

Acts of difference and problem stories: openings to lines of flight

These understandings imply that it is the task of the therapist to look out for these acts of difference as a way to open up lines of flight to other territories of life and preferred stories. When people are constrained by problem accounts of self, what are the ideas which can orientate us to acts of difference? How can we consider those differences which we fail to notice, recognise or conceptualise?

Unique outcomes

The term 'unique outcomes' has been used to denote actions or initiatives that the person has taken in directions that are different or unique in relation to the problem story (e.g. White, 1990).

We can look out for and ask about acts of difference, gaps and exceptions that do not seem to fit with the problem account of self: for example, a time when the problem is not around or appears to a lesser extent, or times when the person has taken a step that accords with their preferences rather than what the problem would prescribe. Such responses can also be identified through direct observation of spontaneous interaction which often happens during therapeutic meetings or community events. Reflections on a person's problem solving activities can provide further openings for discovery that is related to actions of difference (White, 2005).

Absent but implicit

The practice of double listening for what is 'absent but implicit' in the expressions associated with problem stories, also supports us to notice acts of difference (White, 2000). This practice is derived from Jacques Derrida's (1978) proposal that we can only know what something is in relation to what it is not: for example, we can only know despair, if this is in relation to an experience of hope. The absent but implicit offers opportunities for conversations that develop a line of flight into preferred accounts of self and support people to stand in new terrains of life (Carey, Walther & Russell, 2009).

Possibility and preferred stories: from generalities to particularities

Deleuze suggests that a further reason we might miss openings for lines of flight to new possibilities, is because of the way in which we 'heap up' and categorise the particulars of our lives into generalised concepts. Although this tendency to think in generalisations is useful as a sort of shorthand to negotiate our way through everyday life, the heaping up of particulars according to some common feature has the effect of missing out all the differences and possibilities of those particulars.

As therapists, we are interested in notions that are supportive of new possibilities and multiple storied lives. What else might we see or hear in a person's situation, other than a singular description? How can we engage people to consider multiple possibilities and becoming? What part does a focus on the small particularities of life play in the generation of possible preferred directions for story development?

Difference between similarities

Deleuze's proposal that we have a tendency to think in generalisations, can alert us to orientate our enquiry to look for and ask about the particularities in people's accounts of their experiences of life. It offers us the possibility of focusing on the differences between the particulars that make up a story. In relation to therapeutic practice, we can consider how acts of difference and possibilities can be discovered not only by listening out for them when hearing a problem story, but also by listening out for the differences between the events that make up a preferred story.

Whilst the events that are part of a preferred account of self may share similar features which can be storied according to a shared meaning, they also have enough differences to be recognised as distinct from each other. We are here referring

to these differences as a 'difference between similarities'. These differences offer opportunities to bring forth multiple possibilities for preferred ways of living, in a way that is congruent with the notion of multi-storied lives.

In relation to the storying of caring in a person's life we could ask:

Is this an example of the same type of caring as when you cared for your mother or is this a different type of caring?

What makes this caring different from the caring you did for your mother?

How is it different?

What name would you give to this sort of caring?

Or is it an example of something else, other than caring, which is also important to you in life?

What name would you give to what it is that is also important to you?

In this way, an orientation to similarity in events can thicken an already named preferred story, whilst an orientation to the 'difference between similarities' offers the opportunity to generate multiple preferred stories, all of which are available to be further developed and enriched through therapeutic conversation and can generate multiple possibilities for becoming.

What concepts can 'do'

Deleuze (e.g. 1987) suggests that we can orientate ourselves to think about concepts not just as labels or names that we attach to things, but as an orientation for thinking: what possibilities can this concept offer to our lives? When we do this, concepts can offer opportunities to move beyond the known and step into new terrains of living.

For example, in relation to the concept of caring, this orientation would invite us not to use an example of caring to define what caring is. Rather we would be interested in exploring the possibilities that this example of caring might open up for somebody, in terms of the new connections it makes for us about our relationships and the new conclusions it offers about our identity.

What other possibilities do you hope that this type of caring might bring into your life?

What differences might this caring make for you in your relationships?

If you were to act in this sort of caring way to yourself, what might this make possible in terms of how you think about yourself at those times when you don't have the energy to clean the house after working all day?

Would this caring make it possible for you to understand yourself as something other than 'lazy'?

So rather than defining what something is, concepts can be creative and can expand difference: rather than thinking in terms of what a concept defines, we can think in terms of what a concept can do. We can consider the possibilities it might offer for living through the new connections it enables.

Rhizomatic enquiry

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) make a distinction between 'arborescent' and 'rhizomatic' modes of thought. The arboric or tree-like mode is proposed as a representation of modernist, structuralist ways of thinking: it is linear, hierarchic and sedentary, with the homogenous whole continually sub-divided

into smaller and lesser categories. Rhizomatic thought on the other hand is non-linear, anarchic, and nomadic, characterised by horizontal branching that establishes new elements; not as divisions of the whole, but as multiplicities that are linked and connected.

Rhizomatic thinking finds openings in established ways of seeing things and has the ability to move in any direction to take up new territory. It can be characterised as networking and linking to other ideas and practices of life.

"A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organisations of power, and circumstances" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 7)

In considering the 'difference in similarity' and the possibilities that concepts can offer, we can draw on Deleuze's use of the rhizome metaphor to think about the storying of life. In relation to therapeutic practice, we can consider how lines of rhizomatic enquiry can initiate off-shoots of stories which can then take root and develop as distinct but linked accounts of preferred story. A broad ground of storied terrain can be developed that is territorialised by these 'difference-becoming' possibilities and provides new platforms for taking action.

Time travel

Acts of difference and openings to new lines of flights into different terrains do not only exist in the present, they can occur at any point. The human mind has the capacity to travel backwards and forwards in time, and to think about our lives and identities in a way that is abstract from immediate actions or events.

Time as a sequence

As noted above, Deleuze puts forward the idea that for the purposes of everyday life we use a thinking shorthand, which has a tendency towards generalisation. In relation to time, this means that rather than processing all of the differences that make up the flow of time, we edit and 'fold' perceptions around our own sets of established concepts and stories. This forms the basis from which we act in the world: we use time to chart the changes around us, and the past exists as a series of images that we recall in order to live the present and future (Colebrook, 2002).

This relates back to what Michael White described as 'narratives for living', with time as a crucial dimension to the story metaphor.

"This sequencing of events in a linear fashion through time is necessary to the derivation of any "storied sense". Stories have a beginning and an end and between these points is the passage of time" (White, 1990, p. 81).

However in thinking about the events that make up 'the passage of time', narrative practice is not just informed by the idea of a linear sequenced sense of time, but also by additional notions of what time is and what it can do in terms of becoming and difference.

Time as a thickness

Deleuze suggested that we can think about time in a way that attends to, rather than generalises from, the differences and details in our experiences and perceptions, in order to support new possibilities for our lives.

Deleuze draws on Henri Bergson's notion that time is a thickness of which the present is just a part and in which the virtual past and the actual present co-exist. This distinction



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between the virtual and actual is not a distinction between 'not real' and 'real'. A memory can interrupt the actual present only because it sits virtually alongside the present (May 2005).

This implies that although memory is the conscious recollection of past events, these events are not recalled as discrete segments that can be separated into the past, the present and the future. Rather they are remembered in both the time in which the event took place *and* in the entire multiplicity of our lived past, which acts as a context for the memory. We cannot stand outside or apart from these pasts, or from the coming future. Rather than an understanding of 'being' in the present moment, the past and the draw of the expected future are always present: the present is always moving immediately into the past; and both the past and the future are always available to be brought into the present.

"...the past does not follow the present that is no longer, it coexists with the present it was. The present is the actual image, and its contemporaneous past is the virtual image, the image in a mirror" (Deleuze, 1989, p. 79).

We can draw on this idea to explore the possibilities, differences and contradictions of events that make up 'the passage of time'. In asking about the meanings of the actions that people take, have taken, or wish to take in the future, there is the opportunity to draw out 'concepts of life'. Through such reflections on identity there can be the chance for new possibilities to emerge, for an increased sense of personal agency to be established, and for rich or thick stories of self to be experienced.

Developing alternative perspectives

Both these notions of time: a sequenced time based on generalised thinking, from which we can act in everyday life; and the time of memory, which holds all the events and becomings of life, can be drawn together in therapeutic conversations which develop alternative perspectives on life.

Deleuze saw new connections and becomings being possible through the creation, arrangement and re-arrangement of perspectives. White (2008) expressed interest in Deleuze's proposal that 'swarms of difference' can be organised into specific and particular knowledges, which can be actualised through thought. This organisation is a 'fold of difference' and these folds of difference can be developed through thought into knowledges that go beyond what was previously known. We can create and organise knowledges based not on who we are, but on what we wish to become, and actualise these as actions in our lives. This contributes to our appreciation of what we are doing in the narrative practice of re-authoring: the rich story development of the understandings or concepts of life that people give value to (White, 1990).

So memories can be understood as opportunities to interrupt our usual understandings and habits of thinking, and to disrupt familiar problem storylines. We can ask about the specific details of remembered events and actions, and invite people to attribute meaning to these. We can then 'refold' these differences



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into new storylines and plots from which people can act. Such conversations connect action with meaning as a way of enquiring into 'How do we do what it is we wish to become?'

We can also use these ideas to support our understanding of practices which connect people through time around what is given value to, in order to thicken preferred stories. In re-mem-bering conversations (White, 1997) we can ask about the lived and actual experience of a relationship with a significant figure from the past, who remains a virtual member of our 'club of life' in the present and thus plays an actualised role in how we go about life. Re-mem-bering conversations represent just one of the practices of narrative therapy which act to bring significant figures and experiences from a person's past into the present conversation in order to more richly render the themes of the 'now'. Through the 'folding' of pieces of the past into the present moment, we are contributing to a rich experience of subjectivity in the present.

Cartography in practice

Deleuze has described his ideas about identity, difference and possibility as a 'cartography of becomings' (Deleuze, 1987) and a number of the terms he uses are drawn from a geographical or spatial metaphor.

This has resonance with the way in which narrative practice has been developed as a series of maps to support therapeutic conversations (White, 2007), and supports us to understand these maps not just as therapeutic techniques, but as an orientation to

practice which is based on a particular set of understandings about life, identity and relationships.

We can use the maps of narrative practice to scaffold conversational pathways which travel backwards and forwards through the thickness of time to discover acts of difference which offer multiple possibilities for lines of flight to new terrains. We can set out to follow and disentangle these lines, and fold and refold differences that open out into new possibilities. Instead of re-confirming familiar territories, we can work with people to look elsewhere for what links or weaves these acts of difference together so that new meanings are made about their identities. In this way, we can chart new possibilities in relation to identity and becoming.

Conclusion

The ideas of Gilles Deleuze can support us to listen out for and to understand exceptions to dominant stories as acts of difference that may be located in different fields, waiting to be drawn together into some other preferred story shaped by what it is that people give value to in their lives.

In this paper, we have set out to 'map' how therapeutic endeavours associated with notions of difference and possibility do not have the intention of revealing an underlying identity or truth, but instead aim to enable becoming in a way that frees us from fixed ideas about identity and opens up new possibilities. We hope that this adds to an understanding of how narrative

practice can support workers in their conversations with people in therapeutic contexts.

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Sarah is employed as a Narrative Therapist in East Lancashire Hospital Trust CAMHS. She is also a director of the Institute of Narrative Therapy and offers training in the UK and internationally as a member of the Institute's teaching faculty. Sarah often meets with people in their homes and is always struck by how the seemingly ordinary events of life offer opportunities to hear about the most extra-ordinary accounts of hopes, dreams and what it is that people hold as precious in their lives. These experiences have led to an appreciation of the way in which non-structuralist ideas inform her practice in the community within which she works, and how the community in which she works in turn shapes developments in her practice. She is interested in explicitly exploring a consideration of what these connections can 'do': the possibilities and opportunities they offer for practice, and regularly joins with other practitioners to develop and share ideas. Sarah can be contacted via e-mail: info@theinstituteofnarrativetherapy.com

Maggie has been engaged in narrative practice since the early 90's when she first experienced the excitement at what a narrative approach could offer to therapeutic conversations. A central focus of her practice has been working with people's responses to the experience of violence and abuse in their lives, and this has been with women and with children and also with men who are wanting to separate from the use of violence. Maggie has also been involved in many community projects where a narrative approach has been used and had the opportunity to work alongside Michael White in a number of these community gatherings. Maggie has been teaching in various parts of the world for the past 12 years and was an associate of Michael's in the new centre he established prior to his death in 2008. She is based in Adelaide and can be contacted through Narrative Practices Adelaide's website: www.narrativepractices.com.au