

# Narrative Therapy (NT)



# Introduction

○ Narrative Therapy is a therapeutic approach that places emphasis on the clients experience in a central position of importance.

It was created in the 1970's and 80's by Australian Michael White and New Zealand born David Epston.

The narrative therapy focus upon narrative and situated concepts is the therapy. The narrative therapist is a collaborator with the client in the process of discovering richer ("thicker" or "richer") narratives that emerge from disparate descriptions of experience, thus destabilizing the hold of negative ("thin") narratives upon the client.

Narrative Therapy is a therapy approach that builds on the idea that people live their lives according to stories (narratives) that they construct about who they are, and what their lives are, (and can be) like.

# Introduction cont...

These stories can act like a lens, filtering out new and different stories which don't fit the main story.

Metaphors play an important part in Narrative Therapy. People present for counselling when the lens gets stuck on a problem story and the person becomes stuck too.

Narrative Therapy uses the stories people bring about themselves and their lives, to re-shape new lenses, new stories, new experiences and new futures.

# The Basis of Narrative Therapy

Narrative therapy seeks to be a respectful, non-blaming approach to counselling and community work, which centres people as the experts in their own lives.

It views problems as separate from people and assumes people have many skills, competencies, beliefs, values, commitments and abilities that will assist them to reduce the influence of problems in their lives.

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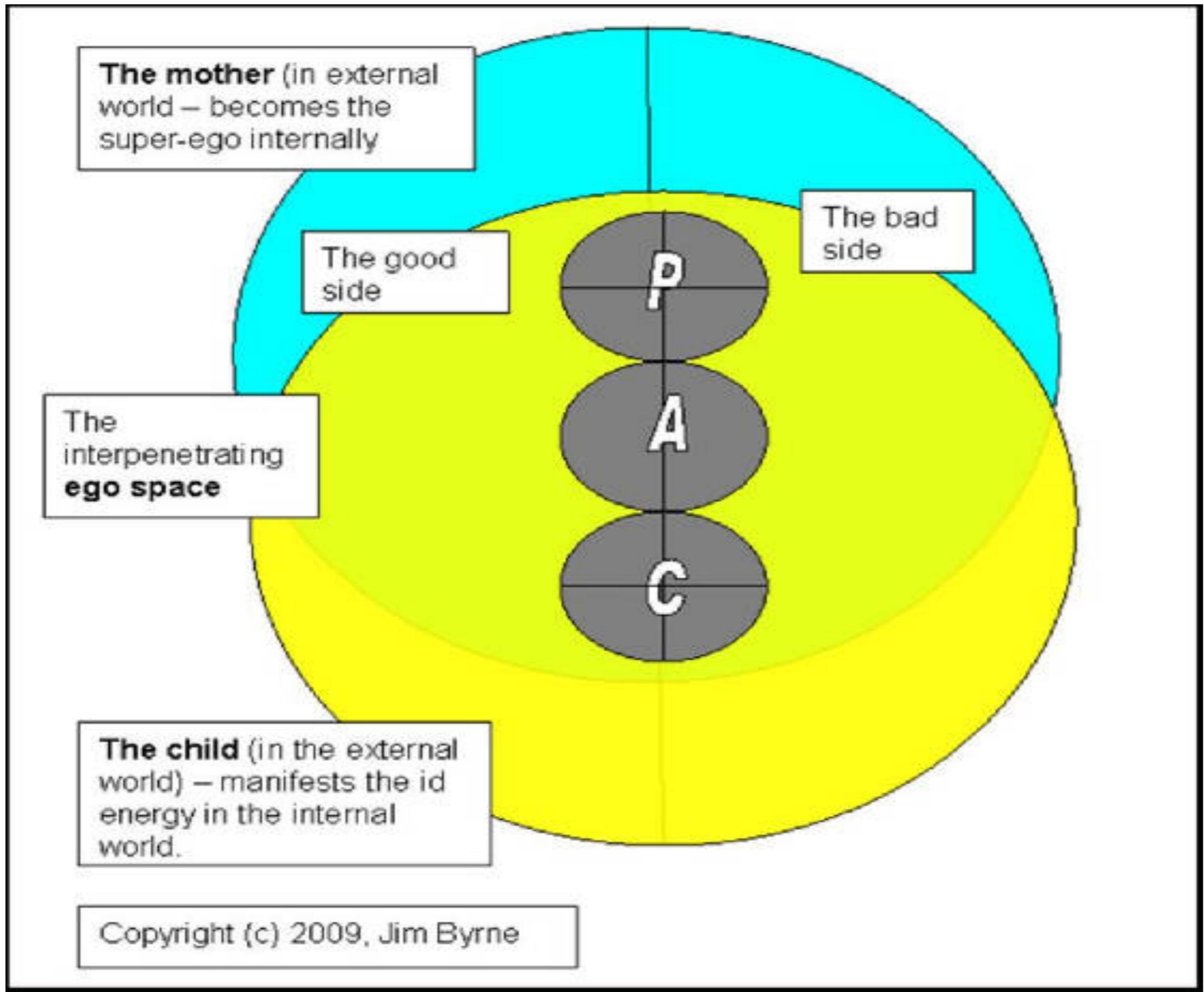
There are various principles which inform narrative ways of working, but there are two that are particularly significant: always maintaining a stance of curiosity, and always asking questions to which you genuinely do not know the clients. I invite you to read this book with these two principles in mind. They inform the ideas, the stance, the tone, the values, the commitments and the beliefs of narrative therapy.

Curiosity and a willingness to ask questions to which clients genuinely don't know the clients are important principles of this work.

There are many possible directions that any conversation can take (there is no single correct direction).

The person consulting the therapist plays a significant part in determining the directions that are taken.

In Narrative therapy a person's beliefs, skills, principles, and knowledge in the end help them regain their life from a problem. In practice a narrative therapist helps clients examine, evaluate, and change their relationship to a problem by acting as an “investigative reporter” who is not at the centre of the investigation but is nonetheless influential; that is, this therapist poses questions that help people externalize a problem and then thoroughly investigate it.





## Who could benefit from NT

NT is particularly helpful for people experiencing all kinds of life issues such as depression, anxiety, eating difficulties, substance abuse and issues with anger and frustration.

NT can be combined with other therapies to enhance the intervention such as strengths based practice, art therapy, CBT and other brief therapies.

# How does it work?

Narrative therapy is sometimes known as involving 're-authoring' or 're-storying' conversations. As these descriptions suggest, stories are central to an understanding of narrative ways of working.

The word 'story' has different associations and understandings for different people. For narrative therapists, stories consist of:

- Ω events
- Ω linked in sequence
- Ω across time
- Ω according to a plot

As humans, clients are interpreting beings. Clients all have daily experiences of events that clients seek to make meaningful. The stories clients have about our lives are created through linking certain events together in a particular sequence across a time period, and finding a way of explaining or making sense of them. This meaning forms the plot of the story.

# How does it work cont.....

Clients all have many stories about our lives and relationships, occurring simultaneously. For example, clients have stories about ourselves, our abilities, our struggles, our competencies, our actions, our desires, our relationships, our work, our interests, our conquests, our achievements, our failures.

The way clients have developed these stories is determined by how clients have linked certain events together in a sequence and by the meaning clients have attributed to them.

By conceptualising a non-essentialised identity, narrative practices separate persons from qualities or attributes that are taken-for-granted. This process of externalization allows people to consider their relationships with problems, thus the narrative motto: "The person is not the problem, the problem is the problem."

So-called strengths or positive attributes are also externalized, allowing people to engage in the construction and performance of preferred identities.

Operationally, narrative therapy involves a process of deconstruction and meaning making achieved through questioning and collaboration with the clients. While narrative work is typically located within the field of family therapy, many authors and practitioners report using these ideas and practices in community work, schools, and higher education.

# How is NT used?

Narrative therapy is a respectful and collaborative approach to counselling and community work. It focuses on the stories of people's lives and is based on the idea that problems are manufactured in social, cultural and political contexts. Each person produces the meaning of their life from the stories that are available in these contexts.

Stories in a 'narrative' context are made up of events, linked by a theme, occurring over time and according to a plot. A story emerges as certain events are privileged and selected out over other events as more important or true. As the story takes shape, it invites the teller to further select only certain information while ignoring other events so that the same story is continually told.

Often by the time a person has come to therapy the stories they have for themselves and their lives become completely dominated by problems that work to oppress them.

These are sometimes called 'problem-saturated' stories. Problem-saturated stories can also become identities (e.g. seeing someone as a sex offender vs. a person who has sexually offended).

# How is NT used cont....

These kinds of stories can invite a powerful negative influence in the way people see their lives and capabilities (e.g. "I'm hopeless").

Counsellors and therapists interested in narrative ideas and practices collaborate with people in stepping away from problem saturated and oppressive stories to discovering the 'untold' story which includes the preferred accounts of people's lives (their intentions, hopes, commitments, values, desires and dreams).

Counsellors are listening to stories of people's lives, cultures and religions and looking for clues of knowledge and skills which might assist people to live in accordance with their preferred way of being.

Narrative therapy holds that our identities are shaped by the accounts of our lives found in our stories or narratives. A narrative therapist is interested in helping others fully describe their rich stories and trajectories, modes of living, and possibilities associated with them. At the same time, this therapist is interested in co-investigating a problem's many influences, including on the person himself and on their chief relationships.

# Narrative approaches

Briefly, narrative approaches hold that identity is formed by narratives or stories. Identity conclusions and performances that are problematic for individuals or groups signify the dominance of a problem-saturated story.

Binaries such as healthy/unhealthy; normal/abnormal; and functional/dysfunctional ignore both the complexities of peoples' lived experiences as the personal and cultural meanings that may be ascribed to their experiences in context.

# Contexts

Common elements in narrative therapy are:

- The assumption that narratives or stories shape a person's identity, as when a person assesses a problem in her life for its effects and influences as a "dominant story";
- An appreciation for the creation and use of documents, as when a person and a counsellor co-author "A Graduation from the Blues Certificate";
- An "externalizing" emphasis, such as by naming a problem so that a person can assess its effects in her life, come to know how it operates or works in her life, relate its earliest history, evaluate it to take a definite position on its presence, and in the end choose her relationship to it.
- A focus on "unique outcomes" or exceptions to the problem that wouldn't be predicted by the problem's narrative or story itself.
- A strong awareness of the impact of client relations in therapeutic conversations, with a commitment to checking back with the client about the effects of therapeutic styles in order to mitigate the possible negative effect of invisible assumptions or beliefs held by the therapist.
- Responding to personal failure conversations



What's your story?

# References

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