Poststructural Inquiry: Narrative Therapy’s De-Centered and Influential Stance

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Abstract This chapter unpacks narrative therapy’s “de-centered and influential” stance. The de-centered and influential description is a response to the apparent ethical dilemma of not wanting to impose normative judgments in therapeutic conversations while simultaneously recognizing the impossibility of participating neutrally. Michael White, widely considered a founder of narrative therapy, highlights how certain practices of curiosity provide a way past this apparent philosophical dilemma. In this stance, narrative therapists take responsibility for their participation through the intentional use of questions that help deconstruct internalized stories and re-author alternative ones that clients identify as preferable. The author uses an extensive practice example to illustrate how de-centered and influential curiosity allows him to maintain his preferred narrative therapy stance.

Background

I was introduced to narrative therapy (White 2007, 2011), and its poststructural foundations, in 1994 during my first MFT theory course at Colorado State University. I was drawn to it because of the way the approach centers poststructuralist perspectives on power and social justice (Combs and Freedman 2012; White and Epston 1990). Narrative therapy (Monk et al. 1997; Morgan 2000) has helped me know what I wish to strive for as a person and professional ever since. It has helped me understand the history of abuse I experienced as a child in ways that have been helpful, and it has helped me meet people in my work in ways they tell me has helped them. Though it has been my passion for over twenty years, I am still regularly challenged to live congruently with the ideas and ethics that are the center of narrative therapy.

While reflecting on understandings about power from a poststructural perspective, Michael White eventually came to describe the narrative therapist’s stance as
“de-centered and influential” (White 1997, 2005). Many folks, including myself, have struggled to understand how it is possible to be both “de-centered” and “influential.” It is this apparent contradiction that I address in this chapter. I illustrate my understandings about this ethical, political, and social-justice stance primarily through a detailed example from my work. Names and identifying information in this example have been changed to honor people’s rights to privacy and anonymity. Before doing so, however, a brief review of key poststructural assumptions that underpin narrative therapy may be useful.

Poststructuralism and Power

White drew his poststructural understanding about power primarily from Michael Foucault (Foucault 1980; Foucault et al. 1988, 2008; Rabinow 1991). Foucault, who was a French historian of ideas, helped extend understandings about power beyond popular and singular perspectives, if we understand power simply as the ability to influence. Popular notions of power in relationships typically have to do with concepts of domination and oppression, through practices of force and overt control (White 1997). The use of physical force, or its threat, is a power that shapes people’s thoughts, feelings, and actions. If a woman is assaulted by a man, he can call on this form of power by saying, “If you tell anyone, I will kill you and your family.” The threat of physical force to cause harm can powerfully influence the woman’s potential response to the act of abuse.

Poststructural perspectives add a constitutionalist perspective to this popular power/force understanding (Dickerson 2014). Constitutionalist forms of power draw on meaning-making to influence people’s behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. In the abuse example above, the man can call on this form of power by stating, “You are worthless, and no one but me would ever love you.” The belief, or threat, that he might be “right” or represent “the truth” has the potential to influence the woman’s experience of the abuse.

Popular understandings of power/force repress action through the threat of harm, while constitutionalist/poststructuralist understandings of power/knowledge produce “reality” through truth claims. Of course, both power/force and power/knowledge coexist today and are often tightly interwoven. Force is often used as a tactic to sustain privileged meanings, and privileged meanings are often used to justify the use of force.

Internalizing Discourse and Normalizing Judgment

In poststructural theory, “discourse” is a word/concept used to identify and analyze domains of power/knowledge (Burr 2015; Hall 2001; Madigan and Law 1998; Polkinghorne 1988). Discourse describes those sets of meanings that have become
culturally taken for granted about how things should be correctly understood. We know a discourse is present whenever forms of “should” are evoked or universal truth claims are expressed. Grounded in normalizing judgments, discourses do not typically feature concerns about diversity or context. Subjectivity is marginalized, and objectivity is privileged. Normalizing judgments often become internalized as objective truths, reflections of reality, or natural laws, and, therefore, frequently operate below people’s awareness.

Perhaps a personal example can help illustrate discursive power and its operation through internalized normative judgment. When our son was in 5th grade, he decided to get his ear pierced. We were at the mall because his younger sister wanted to get pierced ears. She was caught by fear. Spontaneously, her brother told her that if it would help, he would get his ear pierced too to show her that it would be okay and not hurt too much. The next day after school, he came home in tears. His peers, boys and girls, teased him throughout the day. They derided him for being a girl and/or for being gay.

Clearly these young people had already internalized “truths” (i.e., culturally dominant discourses) that claim our son should understand he belongs in a category called “boys” and he should understand that wearing earrings is not what boys do, and he should understand it is bad for boys to be anything like girls and/or gay, which he should also understand are undesirable identities. These young people had already successfully internalized discursively generated, culturally venerated “norms” regarding gender and sexual identities. And, having been successfully internalized, those discourses were there to shape how these young people made sense of and responded to our son showing up at school with an earring.

The children in our son’s class became agents of social control for the discursive truths linked to the patriarchal and heterosexist discourses that have emerged through contested histories of meaning-making. The children “policed” our son’s act of wearing an earring, read by them as “abnormal,” and acted to “correct” his failure to understand how he should know himself. Their tactics to bring things back to normal included acts of derision and teasing.

In the example with our son, at the local site of a predominantly white, liberal Montessori school classroom in a financially and educationally privileged community, the dominance of patriarchal and heterosexist discourses influenced how things were being measured and understood. What’s so insidious is that these children, and likely their parents, if asked, would probably say they do not support patriarchy or heterosexism, and yet, those normative truth regimes were powerfully influencing what was actually taking place.

Sadly, the policing of our son worked. He decided to take the earring out the next day. He told his friends that I had made him get it. Even more sadly, the story about him being a person who cared about helping his younger sister was stolen by these gender and heterosexist truth claims. Though my wife and I did our best to help him understand the problem from this perspective, we were not going to force him to wear an earring to protest normative judgements and endure more abuse. His prize, for taking out the earring, was being welcomed back to “normal,” its modicum of “moral worth,” and the associated absence of derision and other forms of abuse!
**Helping Professions and Power/Knowledge**

Discursive power has the potential to operate wherever relationships take place, including between therapists and clients. A narrative therapy approach helps conceptualize problems in terms of the *relationship* between people and stories, not in terms of individual pathologies, irrational cognitions, or dysfunctional family systems (Bird 2000; White 1995). Problems, from a narrative perspective, are understood as internalized stories that have negative effects on the life of the person and/or the people in their lives. Internalized stories are invariably supported by culturally dominant discourses.

Narrative therapists are interested in helping to create a separation between people and internalized stories so people can explore the effects of their relationships with these stories on various domains of their lives (Bird 2008; White 2007; White and Epston 1990). From this position, “clients” can critique and revise their relationships with stories according to their preferences. In doing so, it becomes possible for them to develop alternative relationships with stories they identify as preferable.

Since all relational activities involve storying, therapists cannot take a position of neutrality in their contributions to these alternative stories. We are at risk of acting as agents of social control for discursive truths linked to professional perspectives. We are implicated in whatever preferred stories may be emerging in helping contexts. This raises the question of how therapists are going to both acknowledge the impossibility of neutrality while simultaneously holding a preference for not “imposing” stories on clients’ lives, including normative professional ones.

With this question in front of us, we can begin to unpack the de-centered and influential stance White described (Morgan 2006; White 1997, 2005). The “de-centered” dimension has to do with an awareness of whose knowledges are privileged in any conversation. In a therapeutic context, clients’ lives are the subject; thus, clients’ knowledges take priority over therapists’ knowledges. Clients are positioned as primary authors when it comes to loading meaning onto events in their lives.

The “influential” dimension has to do with the therapist’s response to the meanings that clients are offering. In narrative therapy, “influence” involves responses that help create a relational space between clients and stories, and that help clients develop alternative stories that feature their values, hopes, intentions, purposes, and commitments (White 2007).

One of White’s most significant contributions was showing how curiosity in therapeutic contexts allows us to be radically respectful and non-judgmental while meticulously opening new possibilities for people to live through alternative stories. These skills of curiosity take place in two broad domains of narrative practice: deconstructing and re-authoring.

Curiosity skills in deconstructing feature questions that have to do with carefully unpacking the real effects of the internalized stories on clients’ lives and relationships, and re-contextualizing the internalized stories back into the histories of their
subjective constructions. For re-authoring, questions allow clients to link events in their lives with intentional state understandings that help form a counterplot for people to shape their lives and relationships in preferred ways. In both cases, skills of scaffolding are critical.

Scaffolding is the ability to adjust questions so that clients are able to answer from their domains of knowledge and imagination. Scaffolding skills involve listening to a client’s expression and forming questions that are linked to the particular expression in the service of either deconstruction or re-authoring. And, if a person is unable to answer a question, scaffolding involves therapists adjusting questions so it becomes more possible for clients to answer.

Deconstructing and re-authoring practices are both in the service of rich story development, which is the expressed purpose of narrative therapy. White (2007) offers various maps of practice for achieving rich story development. These maps of practice include externalizing conversations, re-authoring conversations, and re-membering conversations, among others. All of these conversational maps implicitly include a de-centered and influential position because privileging clients’ knowledges and accepting the impossibility of conversational neutrality is a foundational ethic in narrative therapy.

I like to imagine what a world might look like if we took turns being de-centered and influential with one another, rather than policing each other according to cultural norms. In this imagined world, I like to think our son would have his earring met by his peers with questions about what wearing it meant to him and how it was connected to what he valued.

A Practice Example

About nine months ago, I received a call from Linda wondering if I could help her 13-year-old son, Ben. We didn’t have much time to talk, and I said I didn’t know if I would be able to help but that I would be happy to try. I asked if she wanted to meet to discuss her concerns more thoroughly. She thought that might be a good thing to do, and I asked who she thought might make sense to attend this initial meeting. She thought it best to start with herself and her partner, David. She and David lived together with Ben and his older brother, Tim, and two older sisters, Jen and Wren.

Meeting 1

At our first meeting, Linda and David described Ben as a person who is “competitive and combative”; “socially way behind”; “disrespectful”; “not someone who follows through with things”; “very immature”; and “insistent that his way is the right way.”
I noticed Ben was being characterized according to pathological narratives, and problems were being located in Ben’s “self.” I was not surprised these ways of understanding were what was most available to them. In Western culture, undesirable actions and feelings are most easily storied as evidence of a disordered self (i.e., irrational thinking, mental illness, and trauma). I don’t support these internalized ways of understanding. Equally important to me is not locating the problem in Linda or in the family.

So, I inquired with Linda about how her wish to tell me about these problems was linked to what is important to her. She explained she was worried about the quality of Ben’s life if he continued on his current path. She explained that she didn’t think he was able to face difficult feelings and shared, “He hides away anytime he feels angry, sad, or upset. He crawls into cabinets and stays inside them for a very long time.”

I inquired about some of the significant events in the history of Ben’s life. Linda explained that she and Ben’s father, Brad, ended their relationship about ten years previously. Brad now lives in another country, and Ben in past years moved back and forth between his mom and dad. Currently, there is no intention for Ben to return to live with Brad in the future. In this conversation with Linda and David, whenever Brad was spoken about by Linda, there were vague references to him being “different.”

At the end of the first meeting, it was decided that Linda and Ben would attend the second meeting together, without David, since Linda and Ben seemed to have a close relationship and Linda thought that might help Ben feel a bit more comfortable. After this meeting, it was clear to me that Ben was facing differing crises at home, in school, and especially around his identity.

Meeting 2

I try to take time to orient my thinking before meetings. In this case, while reviewing my notes from the meeting with Linda and David, I was clear that I did not want to make sense of Ben’s behaviors as manifestations of some developmental or mental disorder. Rather, I considered his actions as performances of stories he had internalized. I assumed these internalized stories were ones that he had been recruited into and not ones radically made up by him alone. I assumed it was unlikely he had a history of being invited into a position where he was the primary author of his life. I assumed whatever stories he had internalized did not necessarily reflect his preferences.

I also wanted to be respectful of Linda’s concerns about the problems she witnessed and experienced, and especially her care for Ben’s life. So, when Ben arrived with his mom at the next meeting, I asked whether he shared his mother’s care and concern about his life and his life’s path. He said he did indeed still care and was pretty uncertain why things were the way they were currently.
I shared that I had learned from his mom that he had lived in different countries and with different family members. I asked him permission to learn more about some of the history of his life up to this point. I wondered what it had been like for him to be such an experienced international traveler at such a young age. I wondered whether that had been easy or hard, or not something he had thought about.

He shared that living with “different rules” had been pretty hard. I learned that he had to endure and respond to some significant bullying in his previous school when he was living with his father. He explained that he had gotten into some trouble and was sent to a “bad kid” school, which also had been hard. I asked what happened that got him sent to a “bad kid” school. He said a teacher was looking at his sister in a “creepy” way so he pushed the teacher to make him stop. The teacher was so outraged he insisted Ben be expelled from school. At the end of our initial meeting, Ben asked if he could come alone for our next meeting. I agreed, assuming there was some important intention on his part for this request, though I didn’t know what it might be.

Meeting 3

*My intention in preparing for this meeting was to (1) maintain a de-centered and influential stance, (2) help deconstruct totalizing problem-saturated identity stories, and (3) help re-author some alternative story that Ben would prefer and that would enhance his sense of “personal agency.”*

Ben I was on the bus yesterday thinking about something I want to talk with you about.

Steve Wow! I don’t usually experience people thinking in advance like that before meeting with me. What were you thinking we could talk about?

Ben I wanted to ask you what I should do about my anger.

(Long Pause)

Steve You know, sometimes people think that because I am a therapist I have lots of answers to those kinds of questions. But after meeting with many people, I have learned that each person’s relationship with anger is a little different. Would it be okay with you if I take some time to get to know what kind of anger we are talking about here that is creating problems for you? Would it be okay for me to ask some questions instead of me having an answer to your question?

Ben Sure.

Steve Can you tell me anything about this anger that might help me start to understand it better?

*I am intentionally de-centering myself by not taking up the invitation to be an expert on anger, while also acting influentially by locating “anger” in a relational space in my question.*
Ben  It builds up inside me.
Steve  Okay, it builds up inside you. How long would you say it has been building up? Has that been happening for a long time or is this something kind of new, or …?
Ben  It’s been building up in me for a long time.
Steve  So, this anger has been around for a long time. Do you know how or when this anger may have entered your life?
Ben  Well, when I was seven my cousin told on me when I took a cookie from a cookie jar, and I was so angry I started choking him.
Steve  Okay, when you were seven, this anger got you to choke your cousin. This is helping me know more about this anger. Was there something about what happened with your cousin that bothered you or was this okay with you?
Ben  I didn’t like hurting him.
Steve  Were you surprised the anger got you to hurt him or was it something you planned or expected to happen?
Ben  No. It just jumped out.
Steve  So, this anger jumped out and got you to hurt your cousin when you were seven, and it surprised you. And you didn’t like that this anger got you to hurt someone. Would you say this anger has been trying to find ways to jump out of you since that time, or is it something that kind of goes away and makes comebacks?
Ben  It is there a lot but I try to keep it inside rather than let it jump out and hurt people, but it keeps building up inside me.

*Stories (and relationships) have histories that take place over time. Thus, my questions are tracing the history of the development of this relationship while helping Ben characterize anger further. To further deconstruct this story/relationship, it will be helpful to hear about more times the anger had influence.*

Steve  Can you tell me about a time recently when you felt this anger building inside you again?
Ben  Yea, in school today. My teacher was trying to explain something, and I didn’t understand what she was saying.
Steve  You felt anger building when you didn’t understand the teacher?
Ben  Yea.
Steve  Do you have any guesses about how not understanding the teacher might have helped the anger grow?
Ben  I’m not sure.
Steve  Were you hoping to understand the material in class?
Ben  Yea.
Steve  Okay, so you were caring about understanding the material. Did you think about what you might need to do to get the understanding and learning you wanted?
Ben  Umm… I would have to admit I didn’t understand and ask for help.
Steve Are not understanding and asking for help things that would be okay or not okay?

Ben Not okay.

Steve So, do you think anger grew from ideas that it is not okay to not know things and need help?

Ben Yea.

Steve What is not okay about not knowing something or having to ask for help?

Ben It means I am weak.

Steve What is not okay about feeling weak?

Ben It makes me feel sad and sorry for myself.

I have worked to stay de-centered and not load meanings for him. I am not interpreting or suggesting how he might understand anything. I also am asking questions that are influential in the sense they are about what ideas “anger” needs to have power. In other words, my questions are making discourse visible. I am not surprised by the ideas named and exposed, given the dominance of patriarchal and individualist discourses in Western culture. What I don’t know yet is the particular history of how Ben was recruited into such a strong relationship with these ideas and ways of understanding.

Steve Okay, so the anger grew from ideas about it not being okay to not know something and needing to ask for help to learn, and ideas of being weak and sad or sorry for yourself. Were you able to keep the anger from jumping out in the classroom when these ideas and feelings were helping build anger?

Ben Yea.

Steve If it had jumped out, would it have gotten you to hurt the teacher, or you, or both, or neither?

Ben Both. It would have me wanting to hurt her for not teaching me well and me for not understanding.

Steve Okay, so how did you keep it from jumping out?

Ben I just kept it in me, but it is really hard. I didn’t have any place to go hide, which is what I mostly do when the anger builds up inside me.

Steve There are many more questions I would like to ask to learn about how you figured out how to hide to keep the anger from getting you to hurt people, but I find myself wondering where you got the idea that not knowing something and asking for help is not okay, and that feeling weak and sad and sorry for yourself is not okay?

Ben When I lived with my dad he wanted to train me to be an … I guess you could say, “alpha male.”

Steve What do you mean?

Ben then told me stories about how his father put him in situations to “toughen him up.” For example, he dropped him in a forest at 6 years old and told him to find his way home. He took him camping and had him prove his strength by making him take something out of a campfire with his bare hands without showing pain.
Through further inquiry, Ben named and described the various ways of being that are valued in an “alpha male” world. These include a pyramidal structure with one “dominant man” who controls resources, relates through acts of intimidation, does not show feelings other than rage, and engages in random acts of power that remind everyone else they are not the most physically strong person. When I asked about women and girls, he concluded they have such a low ranking in an alpha male world that they are not considered real threats. He spontaneously volunteered that may be why his mom left his dad.

I asked what he thought about these ways of being and whether they were ones he liked or not. He shared that he would intentionally make his dad mad at times as a way to not accept the total submission the alpha male world expected from someone “weaker.” Throughout his sharing, tears were present for him.

I was concerned that he just revealed that he was violating lots of alpha male expectations by telling me these stories and showing tears, for example. How would he know whether I am a man who stands for or against alpha male ways of being? I didn’t think it would be neutral for me to say nothing. I didn’t want to leave his understanding to chance; however, I also was concerned about putting myself at the center of meaning-making.

Steve Would it be helpful to know what I think about the alpha male world, or would you rather not know?
Ben It would be good to know.
Steve I believe I have spent my whole life trying to find places to live that are outside the alpha male world because I was really hurt by the alpha male world as a boy. I am strongly against the alpha male world. Part of the reason I became a therapist is because I want to build a different world than the alpha male one. Can I ask how it is for you to learn that I stand against the alpha male world?
Ben It’s a huge relief.
Steve Do you know why it might be such a big relief?
Ben I don’t feel alone and I was afraid to say how I really felt.

For him to be able to take a position against the alpha male world, he must have at least some knowledge about some other possibility. Every knowing is a discernment and no single story can account for all lived experiences. Whatever subjugated knowledges he has, however, I believe are not well developed. He must have subjugated stories about different possible ways of being that he might prefer.

Steve So if you had a say for yourself, would your preference be to stand for an alpha male world or some other world?
Ben Some other world.
Steve Have you seen or experienced anything other than the alpha male world during your life? Like in books or families, or animals, or movies, or …
Ben Yea. I have seen them on TV and in movies but they aren’t real.
Steve If there was a real world that was outside the alpha male world, would that be something you would want?

Ben It’d be great.

Steve What name might you give these other worlds that you’ve seen on TV or in the movies that may or may not be real?

Ben I don’t know, …maybe… I guess… a “moral world.”

*Alternative stories start with words and descriptions that through inquiry become much more richly developed.*

Steve Okay, a moral world. (Pause) Can you describe how a moral world might be different from an alpha male one?

Ben No.

Steve Would it be okay for me to ask some questions about what might be in this moral world if you got to have a say about it?

Ben Sure.

Steve In the alpha male world, if I understand right, ideas about not knowing and needing help are not okay. Would you want them to be okay or not okay in the moral world?

Ben They would be okay.

Steve What about feelings like sadness, would they be okay or not okay in the moral world?

Ben It would be okay to show emotions.

Steve So, I just want to see if I understand correctly, the tears that were present when you were telling me about the stories with your dad that caused you pain would be okay in the moral world?

Ben Yes.

Steve I also was learning that in the alpha male world, only one man gets to be most important, and that other men are always threats that need to be kept in place, and that women and girls are not equal to either men or boys. In the moral world, would this be how things were ordered, or would you prefer something else.

Ben Everyone would be equal.

*Newly developed stories require careful capturing for people to be able to keep extending and reflecting on them. I am thinking we have covered a lot of territory and it might be a good time to summarize our conversation. This allows him a reflecting surface to develop his thinking further.*

Steve Okay, in the moral world everyone would be equal, and it would be okay for people to have feelings like sadness, and for people to not always know things, and sometimes feel weak. I’m just wondering how people would be relating to each other when there were problems in this moral world that you are describing, which I’m finding myself more and more interested in. In the alpha male world, things are worked out through actions that include intimidation and physical strength. Would these be as important in a moral world, or would there be other ways people would work things out together?
Ben  I guess there would be talking and listening, and negotiating. My brother
doesn’t care that smoking pot affects me. I don’t want to bring my friends
over ever because the house always smells like pot and I would be
embarrassed. My brother doesn’t care. My mom doesn’t listen when I tell
her this is a problem for me.

*I want to maintain my preference for separating problems and people, and I don’t
want to locate the problem in Linda or his brother. Instead, I think that the problem
has to do with different stories that foster different ways of being and skills for
relating.*

Steve  In this moral world we are imagining together, would your brother and
mother be responding differently than they have been?

Ben  Yes. They would listen and care.

Steve  We learned about the principles that are most important in the alpha male
world, would listening and caring be important in a moral world?

Ben  Yes. And fairness would be important too.

Steve  Okay, that is helpful for me to know. Fairness is a principle that would be
important in a moral world. If listening and care were offered to you as
responses to how your brother’s smoking pot is affecting your life and
relationships with your friends, what effects do you think it might have?

Ben  I don’t know.

Steve  Do you think it might create some feelings or thoughts?

Ben  Some feelings, I think.

Steve  So maybe some feelings. Can you imagine what one feeling might be that
listening and caring might create for you?

Ben  It’s hard.

Steve  It’s hard to know what the feeling might be?

Ben  Yea.

Steve  What name might be a good one for the feeling that is hard to imagine?

Ben  Sentimental, I guess.

Steve  Okay, can we use sentimental for the time being? Would this sentimental
feeling be a good thing, not so good, or something else?

Ben  It would be a good thing because it is not hard for me to say good-bye to
people or let go of people. If someone were saying good-bye to me and I
knew I wouldn’t see them ever again, I would just say, “bye,” not, “I love
you.” Like, when my grandfather died. The next day was just another day.
I didn’t have any feelings.

Steve  Would you say that not having feelings could have been an outcome of
alpha male trainings, or something else?

Ben  I hadn’t thought about that, but yea, alpha male training. Maybe it’s an
instinct now from being brainwashed.

Steve  How much training would you say you have had for growing sentimental
feelings?

Ben  Zero.
Steve: If you had more training for sentimental feelings and more of a chance to live in a moral world, do you think that could be helpful in some way?

Ben: Yea. I could have more of a conscience. I really don’t know my identity.

Steve: Could caring about having a conscience be part of your identity?

Ben: Yea.

Steve: Would standing for a moral world, fairness, caring, and listening be something that could be part of your identity, or would that not be something you would want?

Ben: I like that!

Steve: Would supporting emotions like sentimentality and standing against ideas that claim weakness is bad and not knowing something is bad also be part of how you might like to become what you stand for as a person?

Ben: Yea!

Steve: I’ve been learning so much and I have so many more questions, but I am wondering if the next time we meet we could explore whether what we have been learning might give us some possible answers to your question about what to do with the anger that builds up in you and might want to jump out and have you hurt people, or that gets you to have to hide to keep from hurting people?

Ben: For sure!

Steve: How has this meeting been for you?

Ben: It’s been really nice. I don’t have people to talk with about these things that I think.

Two juxtaposed stories are now beginning to come alongside one another, allowing Ben to potentially experience more choices for thinking, feeling, and acting. The dominant alpha male story is being a bit troubled by the emerging moral world one.

Meeting 4

Steve: Has it been more of an alpha male world or moral world since we last met?

Ben: My brother’s girlfriend threw my laundry from the washing machine on the floor because she wanted to clean her clothes. I tried talking nicely to my brother and asked him to tell her not to do that again.

Steve: How did it go?

Ben: He didn’t care.

Steve: Did anger jump out or did you hide or did you find a third way?

Ben: I started yelling.

Steve: Was that from anger building up?

Ben: Yea.

Steve: What do you think the anger might be connected to that was important to you?
Ben A better chance of being heard.

Steve So you were caring about being heard. What is it like to not have him care or listen?

Ben It’s degrading.

Steve Okay, degrading. If your chances of being heard and cared about are low by people who are stuck in an alpha male world, do you have some other ideas about how you might respond to degrading acts?

Ben No. If I calmly say, “I don’t appreciate how you are talking to me,” I won’t get heard and when I try to tell my mom, she says, “Don’t let it bother you.”

Steve Do you find the suggestion to not let it bother you helpful?

Ben No.

Steve How come you wanted to tell your mom?

Ben I’m hoping she might tell him it isn’t okay for his girlfriend to do things like that and to basically get him to stop doing things that bother me. But, when she talks to him he just blows her off. I think she has given up on him.

Steve Do you think there might be any other things she could do that might help, other than telling him to stop, when she hears that you are experiencing a problem with how you are being treated?

Ben I don’t know.

I am starting to think and learn about some of the real predicaments and challenges that Ben is up against in linking his preferences for a moral world. I think Ben has a right to have these challenges acknowledged and responded to in some way.

Steve Does anyone else come to mind who might have ideas about how to respond when you feel degraded?

Ben Not my dad or David. I want to leave and be on my own but I don’t have the money or independence. I have to just wait.

Steve Do you think it might be helpful if we invited your mother to come to a meeting to try to help her understand the kind of challenge you feel like you are facing, and to explore how she might listen in ways that might be different and more helpful, and see if she was interested in joining this project of building a moral world?

Ben Well… I think if we open her eyes too much it could really hurt her, and she has been through a lot already with my dad. And, I’m not sure if she can.

Steve Okay. What do you think it might say about you that despite how much hurt you are experiencing you don’t want to do something to hurt your mom, even if it might help you?

Ben I’m not sure.

Steve Would it be okay to share that the word that comes to my mind is “kind”?

Ben Yes. Kind. I really do think I am kind but it comes and goes a lot.

At this point, I have a sense that for the moral world story to have a chance to become more “real,” it is necessary for it to be linked to some community that
might authenticate and legitimize his hopes and intentions, and share knowledges they may have about how they have navigated the challenges they have faced in standing for a moral world (Gaddis et al. 2014).

**Steve**  
I’d like to come back to hear some stories about you knowing you are kind, but before that I am still struck by this real problem that you are up against. I am not sure how you can best respond to being treated in degrading ways if the person who is treating you that way is not interested in caring. I’m not sure what you can do if you are not okay with being treated in degrading ways and can’t find a way to make it stop or find someone who can help you make it stop. I have this weird idea. I am teaching a course to a lot of people this weekend who are thinking about how they might help people who are experiencing problems like the one you are facing. Would it be all right for me to ask them if they have any stories from their own lives about how they might have responded to a problem like the one you are facing?

**Ben**  
Sure!

**Steve**  
Great. I will collect any stories they have to share and we can look at them together to see if there are ideas that you might find helpful and supports your interest in living in a moral world.

**Ben**  
Cool.

*I did not want to leave him without any response to this dilemma. There were many options I could have chosen but in this moment I decide to briefly center myself. I share a story from my life in a way that locates it in my subjective experience and then re-position him to see if he can relate and, if so, why, which would return him to the center of the conversation.*

**Steve**  
You have me thinking about times I think a similar problem was messing with me. Would it be all right to share it with you?

**Ben**  
Sure.

**Steve**  
Could we agree that these are things that helped me and they may be different from things that could help you?

**Ben**  
Sure.

**Steve**  
Well, I hadn’t thought too much about this before our conversation, but as I think back, I guess I felt pretty trapped when I was your age. I didn’t like the alpha male world and did not feel like anyone really knew how to help me, including me. I think I listened to a lot of music and when I think back on the music I liked, it had a lot to do with keeping me close to the kind of world I wanted in the future for myself. Even more importantly, I think, I decided I wanted to have a family of my own some day and I didn’t want to pass any of the things that hurt me onto my own children. I think that dream really helped me keep connected to what I wanted for my life. I don’t think anyone saw it, however, which made it harder for me to keep it in my own awareness.

**Ben**  
Hmmm.
Steve I’m really happy you’ve helped me think about this right now because when I think back on my 13-year-old self, I would want to tell him that was a smart way to stay close to his hopes and that eventually it worked out really well. What is it like for you to hear me tell you this story from my life?

Ben Really good.

Steve Why?

Ben I don’t feel so alone, and it gives me something I can think about for myself.

I followed through and gathered many letters from the students in my class about his hopes and predicaments. He found these letters quite moving. Following his positive reaction, I wondered if he might be interested in having a meeting with another person who I meet with in my work. I explained to Ben that Bobby was someone who had come to see me because he was unhappy about how Anger was getting him to treat members of his family. I told him that Bobby’s life had been significantly negatively affected by the alpha male world and that he was someone who has worked hard to re-claim his life from the brainwashing he received. I concluded that I knew Bobby highly valued caring and kindness, especially if it meant contributing to the well being of young people.

Ben was very interested, so after getting permission from his mother, this meeting took place. It was full of tears and sharing stories. After the meeting, Bobby wrote a letter that Ben found highly meaningful. Ben reported to me that he was surprised that someone would continue to think about him and take the time to do something for him in that way.

After getting Bobby’s letter, Ben thought he would like to invite David into a meeting to catch him up on his intentions to live in a moral world. David agreed and we had a powerfully moving time together where David expressed a complete interest in joining in on this moral world project.

Throughout these meetings, I was doing some co-research with Ben (Epston 1999; Gaddis 2004). We were studying whether the development of his interest in a moral world was having any real effects in his life.

Ben told me stories about choosing different kinds of friends based on his evaluation of their position in either an alpha male or moral world. For instance, he told a story about a friend who was very “accepting and calm” and “not trying to control things,” and how he downgraded a friend who “always insists I do what he wants to do” and thinks it’s “fun to kneel me in the stomach whenever he wants.” He distinguished people who are interested in “just taking” from people who are interested in “give and take.”

He said he noticed more feelings of sentimentality and that led him to want to re-connect with a friend from his past who he’d lost contact with. He told me a powerfully moving story of a friend who confided in him that she was feeling suicidal. He said he chose to let himself feel sadness because he thought showing those feelings to her might help her not feel alone and that he wanted to be there for her. He said she seemed shocked that someone would want to go out of their way to care for her.
He reported that he didn’t experience anger building up in him anymore. He explained he now had a different anger but it didn’t leave him feeling like he would hurt anyone, including himself. When I asked what he thought he may have done to get rid of the alpha male anger and replace it with a moral world anger, he shared that he just kept thinking about “the meetings” that we’ve had and the letters that he’s received. He also said he was developing a practice of distracting himself when alpha males tried to bother him.

He told one story about how there was an alpha male peer taunting him and he decided to distract himself by going for a bike ride instead. He said there was a lot of “proof” he was really “transitioning” from an alpha male world to a moral world, and that he guessed he was about 25% of the way there. He shared that he wasn’t having to hide in cabinets anymore. He reported that David was doing things differently, now “going out of his way to notice me and show care.” He volunteered, “I feel like I can be more of ‘kid’ now,” which produced some tears of happiness from me.

I also was asking Linda to let me know if there were any changes in her concerns about Ben’s path. Linda sent me an e-mail reply to my question about whether her worry for Ben was as strong as when we met. She wrote, “I see a very positive change in Ben. That alpha male stuff is hardly around anymore.” I found this very interesting since she and I had never talked about the alpha male stuff.

In our most recent meeting, I asked Ben if I could review the changes that have happened since we met. I believe it is critical to keep telling and re-telling the developing preferred story, since my experience is that the old dominant story will not relinquish its relationship with Ben easily. I prepared a two-page report on all that I had learned from our meetings that seemed important, and when I was finished sharing all the steps he had taken to transition from an alpha male world to a moral one, he stated, “I have a completely different mindset than I did when we first met.” Based on this comment and my wish to continue extending his story into still larger communities of support, I asked Ben if I could share another idea with him.

I explained I was doing some teaching the next week at a two-day workshop. I thought it might be helpful to my teaching if I could share our work and thought people attending might be interested in knowing about and potentially joining Ben’s moral world project. I said one way we could do this was to meet again and videotape a review of our work. I said I also would like to ask him to help me understand more about this “completely different mindset” that he mentioned.

We arranged for his mom to drive him to my office on a Sunday, and I videotaped our meeting. I played the entire 40-minute video at the workshop and asked people to write outsider witness responses to what they watched. I collected 30 letters from workshop participants that we read together at our next meeting. Ben reflected on each letter after it was read. Then, after we finished reading them all, I asked what the effects of these letters were for him.

Ben  “At first it was kind of like, I guess in the beginning it was mostly like ideas. Now it is turning into sort of an ideology.”

Steve  What is the difference between ideas and ideologies?
Ben Ideas, people sort of listen to them, but ideologies are something people try to stay with and try to like almost have responsibility to stay with.

Steve Would you say that is a good thing or a bad thing, or …?

Ben I’d say it is a good thing. There are people who really do believe change is needed, and it is spreading. I feel like after that teaching, they probably went home and their work place and were talking about it with their friends and stuff.

Steve What’s it like thinking you may have contributed to people either remembering or deciding or being inspired to an ideology and commitment?

Ben It is almost like, really crazy, to wrap my head around, because you are always supposed to find your own type of role model, and I’m not trying to be cocky or anything, but it almost feels like I am being other people’s role model.

Steve What it is like to think you may be representing a role model for people?

Ben It is mind-blowing (laughs).

Steve Do you like it?

Ben Yea, it is something I can get even more behind, since I am already behind it.

We put each letter into a clear sheet that now live collectively in a three-ring binder, which he named, “The Moral Pack.” He intends to draw a wolf as a symbol of the pack. He identified the motto for the pack, which is to “Strive, Thrive, and Advance.” As you might imagine, these meetings with Ben have been significantly meaningful to me personally and professionally. This two-way contribution helps sustain me in doing this hard work.

I am grateful for the ways people I meet in my work inspire me and keep me connected to hope for myself and the world. For the past two decades, I have been striving to think and live in ways that are congruent with a Narrative Worldview and its relational ethics and stance. White’s description of a de-centered and influential stance, and its link to poststructural understandings of power, has offered me a language for ways of being that help me move closer to my preferred “self” in all domains of my life.

References


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