

## Building Peace Through Narrative Therapy.

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper sought to explore how narrative therapy can be used to enhance peacebuilding in post-conflict situations. It is a qualitative research paper based on review and analysis of available literature about peacebuilding through narrative perspectives. Findings showed that through narrative therapy, people are able to identify their values and skills and are able to effectively confront their past. Dominant discourses that claim to shape peoples destructive ways are challenged. When telling their story, clients are helped to realize that they are not only telling it to a therapist but also that they are telling it to themselves. The paper establishes that narrative method allows for first-hand data as they go deeper in their research using life stories, personal stories, and interviews. It is out of this understanding of senses that produce changes in beliefs, attitudes, and behavior of the subjects under study hence building a peaceful environment. As a result, this paper recommends the use of narrative therapy in peacebuilding research as a valid tool, though it should be used with caution in order to avoid harming both the clients and the researchers. In this process, the healing should be client driven rather than researcher initiated.

**Keywords** - Narrative, peacebuilding, therapy, storytelling and healing.

### I. INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to highlight probable reasons aimed at enhancing peacebuilding through narrative therapy. Narrative dates back to the 1970s, a period when dramatic developments happened in cultural anthropology, when changes were experienced in both therapy and community development (Santos *et al.* 2009). Anthropologists feigned curiosity about researchers' objectivity in addition to how one's own ethnicity, culture, class, gender and power influenced their research outcomes (Matos *et al.* 2009). Alternative approaches to earlier psychotherapy were advanced including ethnomethodology aimed at helping improve the meanings and interpretations accorded to study objects. Narrative therapy is grounded in the work of Foucault (1990) who advanced that, dominant discourse turns an individual into subjects which can be re-worked on. The main assumption in narrative research is to separate problem(s) from the person. This is possible when we respect the dignity and worth of a person and not "labeling" them as bad people. David Espton first used the approach in (2001) when he attempted to research on problems and the relationships that people had with problems other than people themselves. His focus was on the problems that people faced. When a problem is identified, and named, it is separated away from the person hence helping a therapist to have a better and broader view of the problem. This allows one to develop a broader world view of alternative solutions to the problem. Narrative therapy has since helped individuals to critically evaluate their lives and come up with alternative and empowering life stories that aim to keep the problem in its place (Pia 2013). This study commends the use of narrative therapy as a mechanism of enhancing peacebuilding in order to help people recover from effects of conflicts. This paper therefore investigated the methods used in narrative therapy, their purposes and challenges.

## II. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Conflicts have become the norm of the day in many of our societies and they are characterized by a period of suffering and victimhood. In most instances, such conflicts leave us with unanswered questions about what happened, how it happened, why it happened, and what can be done to move on with our normal lives. Little has been done in the quest to respond to these questions which are pushed by individuals into the unconscious mind where they continue to cause havoc. Narrative therapy has been found to be a powerful tool in enhancing peace in the society yet; it is one of the least used mechanisms. Through storytelling of our life experiences, our sense of self-identity is enhanced allowing us to reflect and interpret our lives making it more meaningful. It is against this backdrop that the researchers sought to explore how narrative therapy can be used to build peace in the society. The outcome of this study would contribute to generation of new knowledge in the field of peace and conflict studies with focus on strengthening the link between narrative therapy and peacebuilding. Besides, the study sought to reveal how self-reflection and interpretation can transform our lives into more meaningful ones.

## III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In quest to explore how peacebuilding can be enhanced through narrative therapy, this paper was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How can narrative therapy enhance peacebuilding in our society?
- 2) What are the challenges associated with the use of narrative therapy in peacebuilding?
- 3) What is the impact of narrative therapy on peacebuilding in the society?

## IV. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This section is about the methods that have been used in this study, and explains the approaches that were used in order to understand how peacebuilding can be enhanced through narrative. This is a qualitative study primarily based on the analysis of available literature about peacebuilding through narrative perspectives.

### Critical Text analysis

Polit and Beck (2010) highlights that critical text analysis is as an application of rational and logical thinking when we are trying to deconstruct the texts we read and write. The use of text analysis aims at finding out inconsistencies, self-contradictions, paradoxes as well as dilemmas in the text's internal structures. Critical text analysis also reduces the risks of a researcher being biased especially when triangulation is used and provides richness to data analysis which can hardly be obtained when a single method is used (Mikkelsen, 2005:169). Critical text analysis means that all texts used for this study were subjected to scrutiny concerning several parameters including objectivity; exclusion and inclusion; and generality (Polit and Beck, 2010).

### Reliability and Validity

Many comparisons between the data were made to ensure reliability and validity of the study. This involved checking other sources such as other references and information from highly regarded sites from the internet for instance from peacebuilding websites, donor agencies, universities and prominent authors who have been publishing on peacebuilding. Materials used were in line with what was collected from other sources. The information was also reliable in a way that it was collected from trusted sites indicated above. The results were valid since the findings are related to the objectives and aims of the study.

### Materials used

Materials that were sourced in this study were obtained from already published books, articles and journals. More materials were obtained through the internet via various data bases which included: ELIN, LIBRIS, and Google scholar. Official government websites were also used as well as other reputable sources like official website of the United Nations, academic institutions and think tank organizations.

### Evaluation of the sources

This study is based on the set of methodological rules to evaluate the sources of authenticity and these included: simultaneity and independence. While working on sources which normally present various views from myriad authors, it is prudent to remain unbiased while using them as the source of information for the study, but researchers normally find it difficult to deal with.

## V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Research findings show that the ability to narrate personal stories to others is the foundation of autobiographical memory that enables us to create a new insight or experience. Bruner and Turner (1986); Pia (2013), note that our sense of self-identity originates from the storytelling of our life experiences. This allows us to reflect and interpret our lives making it more meaningful. Angus (2012), adds that narrative therapy is a specialized interpersonal activity that aims to transform emotions, construct meaning, and repair stories. Through this process, one acquires relevant information about self which helps to shape identity, emotion, behaviour and personality change. Active listening forms an important component in the process as it allows key thematic areas to be derived (Angus 2012; Pia 2013).

Through narrative therapy, one is enabled to develop a new self-hood that can be shared with others (Pia 2013). This allows us to look at life more objectively and in turn, create a better sense of self. When one narrates his or her story, the narrative scheme connects with the environmental or external changes. Through this connection, a new conscious of "knowing" to life is realized (Angus 2012). The "new knowing" enables us to create meaning to our felt emotions and issues that we have been experiencing.

When we express the deep-seated feelings and thoughts, we begin to open our avenues of reflection and evoking emotion which is a key strategy for intervention hence realizing change (Angus 2012; Pia 2013). It is important to create the narrative into sequences. These sequences (external narrative, internal narrative and reflective narrative) are vital since they help us to set the ground for reflection when we ask the question, " what happened...Furthermore, it highlights personal significance of the story for the client when we ask questions like what was that like to you..., in addition to one being able to reflect on intentions, beliefs, goals, feelings, and actions of self and others that help to facilitate client engagement in productive meaning-making, emotional transformation and story reconstruction – ability to re-write the story. This happens when we ask questions like, what does this mean to me or you..? In responding to these questions, the therapist notes the emotional feeling that the client has been experiencing and how she or he views life afterwards. A story told from a first person's perspective is more appealing and more meaning making (Angus 2012: 12). In the case of a conflict, these questions help the client to unveil the deep-seated feelings of bitterness and find a better way of accepting and moving on with life.

This is confirmed when the person or client experiences moments of change as compared to their previous lives. At the end of narration, after the observers' comments, the clients realize that they are more than what they thought they were before. Narrative therapy, therefore, allows one an opportunity to weave together the previously broken storied experiences to a more meaning-making experience (Pia 2013).

Poole *et al.* (2009), acknowledges that narrative, as an alternative to traditional psychotherapy, helps people to assess their lives, develop empowering life stories, and keep the problem in its place. It assumes that people are doctors in themselves, meaning they have the skills, competence, knowledge, commitments, and abilities required to reduce and or solve their problems. They, however, need to be assisted in realizing this potential in them.

The study attests to the fact that life narratives have been the potential to understand personality and development. In his attempt to understand individual lives, Freud used narrative therapy (Atkinson, 1998). Human life is interpreted into stories (MacIntyre 1984). Life is lived based on a certain script. The script allows one to make it more meaningful and sensible. Like a play, a clear plot should be drawn to allow for translation from unclear pre-understanding to a clearer understanding. It is important to observe that the role of life cannot be negated in creating meaning. The implicitness meaning of life results into explicit stories (Lai, 2014). A pre-reflective experience –self-awareness prior to reflection are key in the reflective notion of life experiences (Zahavi 2003). Life is the foundation of a story- meaning that the stories we tell are interpretations of our lived experiences. Through sharing them, we attach new meaning to make them appear more meaningful and comprehensive (Santos *et al.* 2009). For example, a woman who is a victim of violence when she shares her story through narration, it may appear challenging to reveal what exactly happened until she is assured of confidentiality and trust. Once this is assured, she gets relieved of the deep-seated bitter feelings and realizes that it was not her but the problem itself.

Collingwood's theory of re-enactment (Collingwoods 1993, cited in Lai 2010) presents the irony in life. Since we cannot go back and understand our past events, we try to rethink about the kind of lives we lived and the experiences that we underwent (flashback). When we re-enact our past experiences, we can interpret human experiences. A story is, therefore, a reconstruction of life where we sieve and remove the essentials and

leave the non-essentials. The aim is to uncover the unconscious mind or the deep-seated feelings and beliefs that continue to make our lives unfavorable. In telling our stories, dialogue plays a major role. Life is like a text, and when reading a text, we dialogue with it. We read and question what we are reading. This is similar to life since we question every aspect of lived experiences (Dostal 2002). When we dialogue, we can unravel the truth. Unraveling the truth means that one tells the truth to make it clear and can change our lives.

Once the truth is told, we deconstruct the past and re-write a new script which allows for transformation. Life history has no coherence when it is being told. It is like a worn out dress whose parts must be woven together using a thread to make it more meaningful and presentable. The aim of weaving together is not to reconstruct experience but to transfer and bring it together into a new fabric (Widdershon, 1993 cited in Lai, 2010). When a person is narrating his or her story, she or he is not only talking to the therapist but also to him or herself. Probing is, therefore, an important aspect of getting to understand the emotional attachments to that story.

It is vital that when analyzing the story, one works with what is said and what is not said and how such words are expressed to represent the lived life (Riessman 1993, cited in Lai 2010:78). This is an indication that one is not undermining the strength and potentials of the client but respects the clients' self-determination of interpreting themselves. A therapist is in a better position to decode the words said, recognize, and re-contextualize those words to help the client reach a new and meaningful interpretation of that raw data and experience (Josselson and Lieblich 2007). In analyzing the story, it is important to analyse it from a broader perspective – a holistic view. This allows one to answer questions like what happened, why it happened, and who participated?

Further to this, narrative inquiry allows one to question gender inequalities/injustices that continue to pervade the society today. Such inequalities may include; gender-based violence, oppression, a power relation, harmful cultural practices among others that we take for granted hence; they have a far-reaching effect on the society in relation to conflicts (Santos *et al.* 2009).

Life story narrative allows one to get in-depth information. However, it may cause harm to the client since; one may get overwhelmed by the process and reveal more than they had earlier consented to say. This may lead to some psychological disturbance to the client. Also, life story narratives entail that, one gets to organize several meaningful sessions that will allow a client interpret himself or herself and find a better self (Josselson and Lieblich 2007). The major aim of life story narrative is to give voice to experiences through speaking about one's life with a view of translating or rewriting it into a new page.

It is worth noting that through personal narratives, one can understand the world view surrounding the client and empathize with them. They are important as they answer the how questions like: how has gender-based violence affected you as a person? This should be done during initial interviews. The narrated personal story at this time should incorporate the creation and discovery of our life history, the way the broken pieces either make sense or do not make sense to a person (Rendon and Rendall, 1996 cited in Preez (2008). The purpose of the personal narrative is to help one re-establish their identity in the presence of a willing listener.

Further, narrative interview entails an interviewee being made to recount experiences lived to see himself or herself as a separate situation without being interrupted by interviewers' questions (Preez 2008). It allows in-depth research since; it combines life stories with socio-historical contexts. The strategy allows for a better understanding of the senses that produce a change in the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour that motivate and justify actions of the client. Interviews are unstructured tools. As such, they are in-depth with specific features emerging from the life stories of client and the context in which it is said. Through an interview, one is encouraged and stimulated to tell a "unique event" that she or he has ever experienced in life (Preez, 2008). The interviewer/therapist, in this case, plays the role of a facilitator allowing and respecting interviewee's freedom of expression and self-determination. The interviewer should listen attentively and empathetically to note gaps and points of resentment. It is relevant to use a language in a manner that will not make them feel judged. In this case, using tentative language or paraphrasing what the client has said can help the interviewer to get in-depth information (Muylaert *et al.* 2014). The collaboration built between the interviewer and interviewee is of much importance as it allows for interaction, exchange, and dialogue. This lays the foundation block on what the interviewer wants to find out in an interviewee.

In a narrative interview, the main concern is about the past versus history – meaning that we are concerned with what one can recall and sometimes the unconscious mind of a person (Muylaert, et al 2014). The assumption is that letting out the unconscious mind allows one to change his or her perceptions, attitudes, and behavior towards life and view it from a different context –re-write a new script.

The purpose of the narrative interview is not only restructuring the life history of the interviewee but the context in which it was built and the factors that aided change and motivation in the interviewee (Muylaert, et al 2014:187). In interviewing just like in personal and life story narration, it is essential that the problem is

separated from the person. The problem, in this case, is not the person, but the problem which we are set out to investigate and come to a more fulfilling life. The rapport created from the beginning will determine the kind of a relationship and the information that will be conveyed during interviewing process. It is thus important that the researcher strives to create a warm, trusted, and a genuine welcome. This allows the client to feel comfortable and release any hurtful thought that she or he may have encountered in life (Muylaert, et al 2014: 188).

## VI. CHALLENGES OF NARRATIVE THERAPY

Although narrative interview has been found to be the best tool for obtaining a detailed, in-depth report about an individual or individuals, it can, however, pose a challenge especially where the interviewee feels misjudged and misinterpreted. It is advisable that one pays attention to the clients told and untold words to enable him or her to seek clarity on issues at hand. Also, in cases where more than one client must be used, it should be communicated earlier to make the client not to lose trust in the interviewer/therapist. In addition, it allows for continuity and coherency in the story being told.

It is argued that story telling does not automatically guarantee or create peace in communities because the manner of expression may “in fact intensify social leverages and mistrust and perpetuate structural violence”. In a matter of fact, Senehi further adds that deconstructive story telling perpetuates mistrust and denial (Senehi 2002: 45).

Another challenge of storytelling, as a method of narrative research, is that it can create or fuel conflict in a way that a community's folk stories can create a bad image of an enemy which ends up becoming a conflict. An example given is the Nazi Germany folklore studies which became a tool for spreading racism. Closely related, it is also argued that in communities where there is inequality, storytelling in books; televisions and cinemas can be a source of disharmony because the other disadvantaged group is unable to access powerful medium and in the end, their identity is threatened and wiped off (Ibid:49).

Similarly, storytelling in narrative research spreads conflict because family stories about an enemy are told to the children during socialization and this tends to be transmitted so easily from one generation to another. This is because children will grow up with a negative attitude towards the so called enemy. Ultimately, this might justify the conflict through recruiting child soldiers and volunteers (Senehi 2002:49). It is possible to argue that, this is the same means through which trauma is transmitted from one generation to another.

Another challenge observed with storytelling is that it evokes emotions especially in an invent where a touching story is told to someone who lost their loved ones. This can trigger off grief and anger and perhaps stir up hatred. Equally observed, storytelling which can be aimed at justifying intervention may end up aggravating past humiliations and trauma (Senehi 2002: 52).

The use of double listening strategy in narrative therapy has its challenges. This approach, according to Guilfoyle (2015), is not easy to practice, because it is one thing for the therapist to listen to what the client is saying and it is another for the therapist to critically be engrossed into another ‘unknown position’. Similarly, quite often, some clients hesitate into moving from the ‘known and familiar’ position into ‘unknown and unfamiliar’ position. Such setbacks normally emanate from limited therapeutic skills or the client remains pegged on the problematic narrative position (Ibid).

Another challenge that is associated with this approach is that there is a possibility for a client to think that his/her story was not taken seriously or his or her concerns were not given a thorough consideration because the solution did not come from the story given but from another angle of the story (Guilfoyle 2015: 40).

Over a given period of time, the identities determining the connectedness between the interviewer and participants can change as they continue to know each other and this can really affect the nature of the story and how it is told (Hampshire *et al.* 2014: 224). This poses a serious challenge especially on how to manage this relationship in a way that does not affect negatively the outcome of the conversation. For example, one of the questions to ask is how much of personal information can the researcher share with the respondent (Hampshire *et al.* 2014: 226). Whereas, it is clear that the degree of which the respondent knows the research can positively influence the quality of the conversation, it is also possible that the respondent may share the information which she/he thinks the researcher wants to hear. This is obviously a very difficult dilemma to resolve and maybe the best way to think around this would be to come back to the principle that narrative research is not so much advocating for truth as lying more in the objectivity of the story but so much emphasis is put on the capacity of the researcher to reflect on the story having in mind that it is creating certain degree of contextualized knowledge as revealed in somebody's life experience.

The issue of disclosing the researcher's identity becomes more complicated when dealing with sensitive issues that can easily impinge on the security and safety of the researcher –especially that, whereas the identity of the respondents are protected, it is not so with the researcher who must do everything to manage the socio-political space and minimize risks (Hampshire *et al.* 2014: 228). As in every project, risk management and other ethical issues in research especially when involving difficult and sensitive issues is something which the researcher must think carefully about and have the approval by the relevant authorities.

## VII. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through narrative therapy, people are able to identify their values and skills and are able to effectively confront their past. Through narratives, dominant discourses that claim to shape peoples destructive ways are challenged. Narratives are representations of life experiences. The researchers encounter their participants as people engaged in the process of interpreting themselves. They work with what is said and what is not said during the process. Empathetic listening and good questioning skills are critical as they allow a researcher to investigate and probe into a client's problem. When telling their story, a client is helped to realize that they are not only telling it to a therapist but also; that they are telling it to themselves. The role of a therapist is, therefore, to facilitate the client to come to terms with what happened and help them to re-write a new script.

It is worth noting that through narrative research using methods such as life history, personal stories, and interviews, the researcher goes beyond the obvious by not only transmitting the information or content but also; making the experience to be revealed. This is a critical aspect in understanding the content as well as the context being interviewed. Narrative methods allow for first-hand data as they go deeper in their research using life stories, personal stories, and interviews that are unstructured. It is out of this understanding of senses that produce changes in beliefs, attitude, and behavior of the subjects under study hence building a peaceful environment.

Therefore, this study recommends the use of narrative therapy in peacebuilding research as a valid tool; nevertheless, it should be used with caution in order to avoid harming both the client and the researcher. In this process, the healing should be client driven rather than researcher initiated (Guilfoyle 2015: 36) as the role of the researcher should be no more than facilitation.

Perhaps that one major challenge in narrative inquiry and therapy has to do with how to conceptualize the different contextual knowledge created by life experiences and be able to share them. If we cannot put together all this knowledge in a way that the world of researchers can have access to what is being produced, we are in a danger of being separated from one another and the possibility of drowning in a "Tsunami" of sometimes exclusive findings which are hard to navigate through (Josselson 2006: 6).

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