Narrative Therapy and Cultural Democracy: A Testimony View

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In this article I discuss my personal introduction to narrative therapy as an African American family therapist and my discovery of the similarities between narrative practices and my own approaches to therapeutic work. I also examine the cultural relationship between narrative therapy and the therapies of a growing number of communities outside of European dominant culture. The article questions the dominant approach to multiculturalism in the field today and introduces the idea of cultural democracy as an alternative approach to managing the relationship between narrative and other Euro-culture grounded therapies and the therapies of non-European peoples which may be similar to, yet culturally unique from, Euro-cultural therapies. This difference is not superficial or inconsequential. The article argues that a cultural democracy view challenges the emotional/psychologically colonizing links based in presumption of Euro-cultural superiority of the ideas of Europe over the rest of the therapeutic world. This cultural democracy perspective creates a relationship of mutual respect and cross cultural influence between narrative therapy and other Euro-cultural therapies and the therapies developed by non-European peoples.

Keywords: de-colonizing, cultural democracy, multi-culturalism, testimony therapy, narrative therapy

Key Points
1. Practitioners of discursive therapies agree that people’s lives are constituted through the stories we tell and that stories are socially constructed. However, in addition to stories being socially constructed, how stories are told is mediated through our unique ethnic cultures.
2. The cultural domination of the lives of the peoples of Africa, Asia, South America and the Pacific and Atlantic islands requires a decolonization of the therapeutic lives of these peoples and centering European cultural norms and metaphors from therapeutic practices of non-European descendant peoples.
3. In recent years there has been a flowering of ideas and therapeutic practices derived from the cultural knowledge of indigenous peoples which contributes to narrative practices.
4. The flowering of indigenous therapeutic practices and expression of self-agency in the field are examples of a growing cultural democracy within the narrative and family therapy community being fostered by people from these indigenous, non-European communities.
5. Cultural democracy moves practice beyond notions of multi-culturalism or the simple inclusion of non-European cultures and ideas into a Euro-cultural dominated field of practice. Cultural democracy provides room for equally respected voices and cultural experiences to influence narrative and family therapy practice.

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I was first made aware of narrative therapy in 1996 when I met Canadian therapist Stephen Madigan at a professional conference in Atlanta, Georgia, in the United States. As I sat in Stephen’s workshop I became intrigued by his work and how famil-

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iar it seemed to my own approach to therapy. He focused on the importance of discourse and the social construction of ideas and the importance of privileging the clients experience in the therapeutic relationship. I was fascinated and eager to learn more about this work that I witnessed and I was pleased to be invited by Stephen to come to Toronto the next spring to attend a conference he hosted called Therapeutic Conversations to present my own work.

At that conference I was introduced to Charles Waldegrave and Kiwi Tamasese two therapists from Aotearoa/New Zealand who practiced their own brand of therapy, Just therapy, which was very much derivative of the Maori, Samoan and Pakeha culture and history of New Zealand (Waldegrave, Tamasese, Tuhaka, & Campbell, 2003). These therapists insisted that I should plan to attend the Narrative Therapy and Community Work conference in Adelaide, Australia, the following November. It is at this conference that I first met Michael White, Cheryl White and David Denborough of the Dulwich Centre. This series of unexpected meetings across cultures, histories and experiences was the beginning of a long and beneficial relationship and dialogue between myself as a practitioner of Testimony therapy (Akinyela, 2008) and my friends and colleagues who work through narrative approaches to therapy.

Since those early meetings, much of my writing and speaking on the subject has focused on demonstrating both the similarities and differences between narrative and testimony approaches to therapy and the reasons that this explication of sameness and difference is so important.

At subsequent conferences and international gatherings I have continued to meet and dialogue with colleagues from the international community. This has given me the opportunity to discuss and share therapeutic experiences and the meaning of narrative from various cultural contexts and understandings. What has become abundantly clear for me is that while we all agree that people’s lives are indeed constituted through the stories we tell, and that stories are socially constructed, how those stories are told, how they are understood and the metaphors which define our stories are culturally mediated. While socially constructed ideas can be shared across our many cultures, they find their specific meanings for our various communities through the particular lenses of the histories and cultures through which we are shaped.

While as a family therapist I have found that I have the greatest affinity with my friends in the international field of narrative therapy and community work, I still find it important to be clear that I am not a narrative therapist. I first began to articulate my reasons for making this distinction in an article (Akinyela, 2002) in which I called for de-colonizing the therapeutic lives of non-European peoples. In this article I argued the need for decentering European cultural norms and metaphors from the therapeutic practices of non-European peoples. This article was an early attempt to articulate the need to create collective stories of cultural independence for the collective communities of indigenous descendants of Africa, Asia, North and South America and the Caribbean and Pacific Islands.

This article was never a call to disassociate our clinical practice from the ideas of narrative and other progressive therapies, but it was a call for respect of the cultural ideas and healing practices of non-European descendant peoples. This respect would first need to begin among the people themselves, hence the call for decolonizing our lives. Cultural hegemony has often created a sense of inferiority among peoples of colour about our own cultural practices and ideas and an inordinate sense of gratitude.
and the overwhelming sense of superiority toward the therapeutic ideas and practices that are grounded in European descendant cultures.

Since that article, however, I have become aware that ‘many flowers are blooming’ in the therapeutic garden. Around the world, indigenous therapists are asserting the power of their own traditional ideas and meanings and applying them to therapeutic practices. I believe that this is evidence of cultural democracy in practice. Far beyond just multi-culturalism, which tends to be simply the inclusion of cultures and ideas other than European ones into the arena created by Europeans, cultural democracy is de-colonization in practice. As the peoples of Asia, Africa the Americas and the Islands reclaim their own voices and speak their own special truths about therapy and healing, we are finding that we have similar experiences, similar ideas and even similar outcomes, which we can share with each other and with our Euro-descendant colleagues gladly. However, because we are now able to speak in our own voices and our practices are mediated through our own traditional cultures, we also find that we are able to offer healing methods to our own communities that are received as familiar and authentic.

One of the most pressing issues facing our society today is the question of managing this increasingly culturally diverse society with equity and justice. In this paper I posit that cultural democracy is the most appropriate expression of social justice in a multi-cultural society. The United States of America is experiencing an explosion of cultural diversity in its population. In light of this explosion, a key question becomes, How do we maintain social justice in such a manner that the cultural expressions and ideas of one community does not dominate and have privilege above all others? Ramirez and Castaneda (1974) write that:

Cultural democracy is a philosophical precept which recognizes that the way a person communicates, relates to others, seeks support and recognition from his environment (incentive motivation), and thinks and learns (cognition) is a product of the value system of his [sic] home and community. Furthermore, educational environments or policies that do not recognize the individuals right, as guaranteed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, to remain identified with the culture and language of his cultural group are culturally undemocratic (p. 23).

The above definition of cultural democracy is a good starting point. However Darder (1991) argues that this definition must be refined to reflect the critical question of power relationships in a multi-ethnic society, which includes a dominant cultural group and culturally subordinate communities. Darder writes:

Although [Ramirez and Castañeda's definition] argues for changing the cultural realities of classrooms, it fails to address critically the necessary shift in power relationships required in [society] in order to involve bicultural [communities] in an active process of empowerment, assist them in finding their voice, and support the development of a spirit of social solidarity (p. 62).

Darder argues that culturally democratic practices must move beyond simple inclusion of diverse cultures (multiculturalism) and must focus on the asymmetrical relationships of power that actually exist between oppressed communities and the larger European culture dominated society.

I would argue that this need to move beyond inclusion is particularly important in the therapeutic community. This means that a part of the work of narrative and other discursive therapists and community workers is to recognise the imbalance of power.
which is evident in the production of knowledge and approaches to therapeutic practices grounded primarily in Euro-cultured language and metaphors, which are then imposed on non-European communities. This is why it is so significant that other voices are being identified as world communities speak on behalf of their own healing in their own cultural languages with their own cultural meanings.

I believe that this also means that the conversation as it develops should and will be not only between narrative therapists of European descent, but also between therapists of Africa, Asia, the Americas and the Islands, amongst and between ourselves sharing our own knowledge and experiences with our indigenous healing practices.

As cultural democracy becomes the norm and the imbalance of cultural power is corrected, it is likely that we will see another shift and growth in the family therapy and narrative therapy fields, as new ideas and effective creative practices introduce useful practices to the field.

References