

An Exploration of Knowledge and Power in Narrative, Collaborative-Based, Postmodern Therapies: A Commentary



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Cody J. Sanders

Given the increasing popularity of narrative and collaborative therapies, this article undertakes an examination of the postmodern theory underlying these therapies, giving particular attention to issues of power and knowledge in therapeutic practice, examined both within clients' narratives and within the therapeutic alliance.

Knowledge and power, terms used frequently in every-day vernacular, carry particular nuanced meaning and significant weight in discussions of postmodern therapies. Narrative therapies, in particular, bear the marks of significant shaping by notions of knowledge and power that are given particular form through a process of postmodern critique. While narrative therapy¹ and other collaborative-based, postmodern therapies have much to offer in the way of *method* for counseling practice, one would miss the significance of methodological structure without first understanding the philosophical underpinnings. While postmodern thought is often referred to in a unified manner, it is important to note that postmodern influences on therapy do not stem from a unified system or philosophy called “postmodernism.” Instead, postmodern influences may be most clearly articulated as a critique of the assumptions of modernism. Modernist thought can be traced throughout the foundations of the psychotherapeutic theories and modalities that have dominated the field from Freud to the present. While narrative therapy certainly runs counter to many modernist assumptions in counseling, it is sometimes difficult to see the significance of postmodern influences without first illustrating how they provide a critique to modernist assumptions. As McNamee (1996) states, “We often do not recognize the mark of modernism because it has inscribed itself on our way of living” (p. 121). Thus, it is necessary at the outset of this exploration to provide a contrast between modern and postmodern thought as it relates to the field of counseling in order to more fully articulate the importance of the concepts of knowledge and power in the theory and practice of narrative therapy.

Modern and Postmodern Thought in Counseling

“The pursuit of truth over meaning as humankind’s highest achievement,” as Parry and Doan (1994) characterize the modern turn in history, “probably began with Plato” (p. 2). In this pursuit of truth, modernist thought conceives of knowledge as pointing to or representing an objective world that exists independently of the mind and feelings of the individual. In this framework in which knowledge is attained through the process of observation and verification, “the knower is autonomous and separate from that which he or she observes, describes, and explains” (Anderson, 1997, p. 30). From this perspective, Anderson (1997) pictures modern knowledge as a pyramidal structure with a hierarchy of truth. Barbara Held (1995), a critic of postmodernist influences in counseling, characterizes modernism and postmodernism in terms of realist/antirealist divide. “The realist doctrine,” she holds, “states that the knower can attain knowledge of an independent reality—that is, reality that is objective in the sense that it does not originate in the knower, or knowing subject” (Held, 1995, p. 4).

¹ While there are many variations and forms of therapy that are signified by the title’s plural “therapies,” at this point the paper will begin to refer to narrative “therapy” (singular) for convenience. The reader should note that this designation does not refer to one theorist’s conceptualization of a narrative approach, but refers to the myriad ways in which narrative and collaborative-based therapies are practiced. All approaches implied are influenced by postmodern thought and critique.

Cody J. Sanders, NCC is a doctoral student at Brite Divinity School in Ft. Worth, Texas. Correspondence can be addressed to: cody.j.sanders@gmail.com.

Michael White and David Epston (1990), proponents of the turn to postmodern thought in counseling argue that social scientists turned very early on to the positivist physical sciences for examples upon which to base their own work in the interpretation of the social systems. This, they believed, would provide necessary legitimacy for their own work as a science. This positivist commitment leads counselors into the process of observing, describing and explaining human behavior in ways that are deemed objective and places them in the position of master observer describing and assessing the client's story as it "*really* is and *ought* to be" (Anderson, 1997, p. 31). According to Anderson (1997), this places both counselor and client on the hierarchy of knowledge and truth, marking the client the subject of inquiry and observation and the counselor as the superior expert observer. In this modern construction of the therapeutic alliance, counselor and client are "separate static entities...and not interactive participants in a joint endeavor" (Anderson, 1997, p. 32). Furthermore, the language often used to describe the client's reality is a deficiency-based language assumed to be an accurate representation of behavioral and mental reality.

It is a turn away from this pursuit of a hierarchy of knowledge and positivist search for objective reality that is at the heart of narrative therapy's conceptualization of knowledge and power. What narrative, collaborative-based and nearly all postmodern models of therapy hold in common is the belief that an objective reality that stands apart from the knowing subject can never be fully arrived upon. Simon (1994) postulates, "The first, and perhaps defining attitude of postmodernism is the belief that knowledge is power and hidden concepts may exist in a theory or text that justifies the use of power" (p. 2). Narrative theorists are indebted to Michel Foucault, notes Catrina Brown (2007), when it comes to Foucault's "insistence on the inseparability of power and knowledge and his efforts to study the way humans govern and regulate themselves and others through the production of truth" (p. 3). By way of Foucault and a myriad of other philosophers who influenced the postmodern critique of modernism, narrative theorists see through "a postmodern lens" in which knowledge is not hierarchical, objective or observable by an expert, rather it is "multiple and only ever partial" and "understood to be socially and historically specific and inseparable from social relations of power" (Brown, 2007, p. 5).

Foucault (1977/1994) attempts to trace how hierarchies of power are constructed in modernist thought and to uncover their effects on individuals. He sees the process of power relations taking place when modes of inquiry try to give themselves the status of sciences through objectivizing ways of approaching subjects under study. Secondly, Foucault (1982/1994) points to "dividing practices" within society and scientific disciplines that seek to divide the subject inside him- or herself or from others. Finally, he points to the ways in which individual human beings are made into subjects through these practices. In examining the power relations at work in this process, he states,

This form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word "subject": subject to someone else by control and dependency, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to. (Foucault, 1982/1994, p. 331)

This understanding of power and knowledge put forth by Foucault is not the repressive power of force so commonly spoken of in every-day uses of the term "power." Rather, as White and Epston (1990) point out, "Foucault argues that we predominantly experience the positive or constitutive effects of power, that we are subject to power through normalizing 'truths' that shape our lives and relationships" (p. 19). This power makes us into subjects by delimiting the ways in which we are able to conceive of our identities; it provides the language with which we determine the content of our self-knowledge and self-concepts. Foucault (1977/1997) argues that we must cease describing power in negative, repressive terms and, instead, see that "it 'excludes,' it 'represses,' it 'censors,' it 'abstracts,' it 'masks,' it 'conceals.' In fact," says Foucault, "power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (p. 194).

White and Epston (1990) explain that Foucault is postulating ideas about human beings that claim the status of objective truth are, in fact, constructed ideas that are given the status of truth. These "truths" are then used as the norms around which persons shape or constitute their lives, thus making them subjects. White and Epston (1990) further state that this subjugating knowledge "forges persons as 'docile bodies' and conscripts them into activities that support the proliferation of 'global' and 'unitary' knowledges, as well as the techniques of power" (p. 20). Thus, power as Foucault describes it is inseparable from knowledge and is sometimes represented in Foucault's writing as "power/knowledge" or "knowledge/power." This construction of power/knowledge in the work of Foucault and in postmodern thought in

general prompts Neimeyer (1995) to claim that the modern notion of an existential self—“an individual ego who is the locus of choice, action, and rational self-appraisal” (p. 13)—no longer carries any weight in a landscape influenced by postmodernism.

Holzman, Newman, and Strong (2004) argue that some counselors and theorists have attempted to avoid the topic of power altogether, believing it to be the fundamental flaw of modernism. Postmodern theories such as narrative therapy, however, cannot simply eliminate power by denying its presence. Anderson (1997) views narrative, collaborative-based, postmodern therapies taking account of power by recognizing within the therapeutic relationship how power evolves from interaction between the client and others (including the counselor) and through communication between persons. She states, “Knowledge, including self-knowledge or self-narrative, is a communal construction, a product of social exchange... From this perspective ideas, truths, or self-identities, for instance, are the products of human relationships. That is, everything is authored, or more precisely, multi-authored, in a community of persons and relationships” (Anderson, 1997, p. 41). The intended focus of the remainder of this exploration is to locate issues of power and knowledge within clients’ narratives and to examine how narrative therapy approaches these relations of power, as well as to examine the dynamics of power and knowledge that exist within the therapeutic alliance and the ways in which narrative counselors conceive of and deal with these relations of power.

Power/Knowledge in Clients’ Narratives

The telling of stories by clients is a key component of nearly every theory of counseling and psychotherapy. Whether one attends to the unconscious psychodynamics, the rationality of thought processes, the behavioral outcomes, or the affective dimensions of a client’s story largely depends upon one’s theoretical orientation. From a narrative perspective, Brown (2007) suggests that hearing clients’ narratives must move beyond a simple telling of clients’ stories “to an active deconstruction of oppressive and unhelpful discourses” (p. 3). As postmodern critique has demonstrated, the relationship between knowledge and power is inextricable and takes shape in the form of discursive systems in which individuals are divided, classified and come to author their lives through narrative components that are available within dominant discourse. Discourses, Brown (2007) reminds us, are both constituting—giving us language and concepts by which we come to know ourselves as subjects—and constraining—allowing some stories to be told and affirmed and others to be hidden and overlooked.

The process of deconstruction in therapy involves the analysis of these discourses and the “hidden element of power in all organized systems of knowledge” (Simon, 1994, p. 2), making relations of power clear and bringing them into the awareness of those involved with a system of knowledge. Bringing to awareness the hidden elements of power and the effects of discourse on the lives of clients does not have as its aim *escape* from relations of power. Indeed, escape from power relations is impossible. Awareness of these relations of power within systems of knowledge, however, allows for a fuller range of actions to be taken by the client and uncovers diverse narratives that are often subjugated or hidden by the normalizing effect of discourse. In this way, Winslade, Crocket, and Monk (1997) point to the significance of listening closely to a client’s story—so closely, one would presume, as to hear the hidden elements of power and the effects of discourse. They indicate that the act of listening calls for the power of the counselor to be concentrated toward the legitimization of the client’s voice where it has been previously excluded and denied. Foucault was closely attentive to the *knowledges* within society that are silenced due to the fact that the voices of some (inmates in prisons, patients in mental hospitals, etc.) are never given a hearing. He called these “subjugated knowledges” (Jardine, 2005, p. 21).

Indeed, power and knowledge in the practice of narrative therapy can be largely located within the narrative the client brings into the consultation room. Brown (2007) argues that the work of the narrative counselor is to unpack and reconstruct these stories, rather than leaving them intact, as these narratives so often reflect dominant discourses and relations of power. She further states that power can never be left out of the work of narrative therapy and that this particular approach is a highly politicized work that seeks to challenge oppression. Rather than inherent truths of early modernist therapies, narrative therapy is interested in the construction of stories. As a part of this interest in construction, narrative therapists are interested in the ways larger discourses—often presumed to be truth—are taken up by clients as formative in their own narratives. Culturally available discourses that shape and form clients’ narratives in various ways are often the sites of the deconstructive work of narrative counselors.

White and Epston (1990) describe the therapeutic methodology of narrative therapy with attention to how many of the techniques accomplish this deconstructive and reconstructive work around issues of power and knowledge. They describe mapping the influence of the problem as a way to expose unitary knowledge through an exploration of beliefs a client holds about him or herself, others and their relationships. Through the process of externalization, the client gains a new perspective of the problem and his or her own life and, accordingly, new options become available to challenge the “truths” that have previously impinged upon the narrative constructs. Exploring the effects of the problem allows the client to identify what might be necessary in order to survive the “problem story.” Finally, unique outcomes that are located by attending to times when the client was not subjected to the techniques of the problem narrative provide a further point of reflection upon the meaning of these times and how that meaning might emerge from subjugation to the dominant problem narrative.

While narrative therapy has well-articulated ways of addressing the dynamics and relations of power and knowledge in the client’s narrative, there remains the reality that the client and counselor are, themselves, caught up in relations of power. While narrative counselors attempt to deconstruct the power relations between counselor and client by conceiving of the client as expert, this leads to what Brown (2007) sees as the dangerous treatment of “experience” as uncontested truth. Brown (2007) further explains that postmodern feminists caution against such a privileging of individual experience resulting in experience being separated from social construction. They further argue that clients’ stories should always be considered both social and political. The difficulty arises in determining how the counselor can serve in challenging the discursive realities within clients’ narratives without claiming expert knowledge for him or herself. Many counselors, including Anderson (1997), adopt a “not-knowing position” (p. 4) that consists of a distancing from strategies of power found in many traditional therapeutic theories. Brown (2007) is critical of this stance, however, stating that with a not-knowing position of the counselor, clients’ stories “escape the social processes that make knowledge and power inseparable. Seen somehow to be outside of the influence of power, these stories can be taken up as is, as self-legitimizing” (2007, p. 9). This not-knowing position can result in a focus on the individual and his or her story to the exclusion of the social context. If the social construction of clients’ narratives is left unexplored, Brown (2007) warns, “therapy participates in its reification of dominant and often unhelpful stories” (p. 9-10). While an all-knowing stance is certainly to be repudiated, the “not-knowing” stance is not effective for challenging oppressive social discourses or, subsequently, for deconstructing negative identity conclusions or rewriting alternative identities” (Brown, 2007, p. 4). Brown (2007) resolves this difficulty by holding to modern ideas regarding the possibility of an emancipatory social vision, as well as the postmodern idea that knowledge is always partial, located and never neutral. Together, Brown (2007) sees this blend as helpful in taking a position regarding clients’ narratives without suggesting the position to be one of objectivity—at once being positioned while recognizing one’s partiality.

Power and Knowledge in the Therapeutic Alliance

While Brown’s (2007) position in relation to dynamics of power and knowledge in the client’s narrative is helpful, there are further questions that deserve exploration with regard to the relations of power and knowledge within the therapeutic alliance—the relationship between client and counselor. Simon (1994) notes that modernist ideas of rationality and objectivity allowed scientists to feign a transcendent, supracultural view of truth and reality. Consequently, a hierarchy was created in which the scientist—and counselor—was placed above those in society and in the consultation room as rational, objective observer. The scientific viewpoint was privileged and, as a result, the scientist and counselor fell prey to the political, economic and social views of both the scientist and dominant discursive narratives. However, narrative counselors working from a postmodern view point, identify the problematic nature of scientific *objectivity* and recognize, as Mahoney (1995) states: “There is not, never was, and never can be a truly ‘nondirective’ or value-free form of human dialogue. All human perception, learning, knowing, and interaction is necessarily motivated by and permeated with biases, preferences, and valuations (which are usually implicit)” (p. 392).

Even while narrative counselors attempt to divest themselves of positions of power-over the client seen in modernist psychotherapies, the issue of power and knowledge in the therapeutic alliance is still very present. Holzman, Newman, and Strong (2004) note that, if for no other reason, there is a dynamic of power and knowledge present in the fact that the client looks to the counselor for advice, solutions, interpretations, explanations or, in postmodern approaches, a collaborative process that may generate new understanding. This is no doubt, still an appeal to the authority of the counselor and is an appeal that narrative counselors must creatively approach in order to attend to the implicit relations of

power. While some would seek to divest the relationship of power altogether, this is a naïve and potentially harmful way of viewing power in the therapeutic alliance. As White and Epston (1990) warn,

If we accept that power and knowledge are inseparable...and if we accept that we are simultaneously undergoing the effects of power and exercising power over others, then we are unable to take a benign view of our own practices.

Nor are we able simply to assume that our practices are primarily determined by our motives, or that we can avoid all participation in the field of power/knowledge through and examination of such personal motives. (p. 29)

Instead of an avoidance of the power and knowledge relations implicit in the therapeutic alliance, these authors suggest that narrative counselors must assume that we are always participating in such relations. Rather than avoiding this reality or trying to cover it over with a completely “not-knowing” position, White and Epston (1990) suggest that we critique our own practices and identify the contexts of ideas from which our practices come. This, they argue, enables the narrative counselor to identify effects, dangers and limitations in their ideas and practices and turns their attention toward the keen awareness that social control—though avoided—is always a strong possibility within the therapeutic alliance.

White and Epston (1990) further argue that if we are to “accept Foucault’s proposal that the techniques of power that ‘incite’ persons to constitute their lives through ‘truth’..., then, in joining with persons to challenge these practices, we also accept that we are inevitably engaged in a political activity” (p. 29). Foucault (1994b) explains the nature of *truth* that must be challenged through the political activity of the counselor in this way:

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth—that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statements; the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (p. 131)

While White and Epston (1990) admit that the political activity of the narrative counselor does not involve proposing an alternative ideology to that implicit in the regime of truth, they do propose that the counselor challenges the techniques that subjugate clients to a dominant ideology. This involves what Brown (2007) argues is an acceptance of one’s position by which counselors acknowledge, rather than deny, their own knowledge and power and become more accountable for them.

What alternative exists, then, to the “not-knowing” position advocated for by many narrative and postmodern therapies? Brown (2007) notes that while a not-knowing position seeks to maximize clients’ power by positioning them as “expert,” “they often implicitly require practitioners to abdicate their own knowledge and power” in the process (p. 8). She further explains the problematic nature of the not-knowing position as one that (1) risks passivity and (2) involves little active problem solving or analysis on the counselor’s part. “In the first instance,” Brown (2007) argues, “expert knowledge and power, while practiced, are denied; and, in the second, the therapist is rendered virtually ineffective for fear of being too knowledgeable or too powerful” (p. 13). In a far more critical tone, Barbara Held (1995) posits that the antirealism within postmodern therapies “affords therapists...a legitimate way to diminish the discipline’s complexity, by diminishing if not eliminating what therapists need to know in advance of each case” (p. 14).

Brown (2007) argues that in order to practice effectively, the narrative counselor *must* have knowledge and power. The issue, then, is how knowledge and power are recognized and deployed in the therapeutic alliance. Winslade, Crocket, and Monk (1997) offer the image of coauthoring narratives within a collaborative relationship as a possibility for abandoning the all-knowing, but remaining free from the ineffective not-knowing position. Coauthoring, they postulate, “implies a shared responsibility for the shaping of the counseling conversation...[and] challenges the portrayal of counselors as followers, who must be very cautious about treading on the toes of clients” (Winslade, Crocket, & Monk, 1997, p. 55). At the same time, it challenges a modernist view of the counselor as a wise, all-knowing expert. In the collaborative relationship described by these authors, narrative counselors develop an awareness of aspects of professional discourse that set up harmful relations of power and authority and leave the client with little sense of agency. Instead, client and counselor take a position against the problems and deficit-inducing discourses and in this way create a relationship in which power is used in a positive manner in which the client has a voice that is offered legitimacy by the counselor’s hearing. Anderson (1997) further describes this collaborative therapeutic alliance as a partnership between people with different perspectives and expertise.

Even within a collaborative partnership, however, Mahoney (1995) argues that while clients show a degree of autonomy, this “does not negate the fact that clients’ values in some domains may be significantly influenced by the values expressed, affirmed and challenged by the professional practitioner” (p. 393). Taking note of this reality, Anderson (1997) posits that the focus in a collaborative approach to therapy is on the relationship system between client and counselor in which both the expertise of the client and that of the counselor combine and merge. While Anderson (1997) conceives of the respective domains of expertise as easily discernible—client as expert in his or her life experiences and counselor as expert in the area of the dialogical process—even this seems a false dichotomy. Whether or not the counselor is willing to recognize it, he or she cannot relinquish power over the domain of the client’s narrative. Even in the questions the counselor poses and those parts of the narrative that he or she chooses to attend to in detail, there exist relations of power that may serve to either reify or challenge the dominant discursive regimes of truth therein. Holding to a close Foucauldian understanding of power and knowledge, Brown (2007) notes that a narrative therapeutic stances must move away from the binary notion that one may either have power and knowledge or not. Instead, the counselor must be clear in recognizing that both the counselor and client are “active embodied subjects in the therapeutic process of coauthoring identities” (Brown, 2007, p. 3). Far from the objective neutrality of the modernist stance and the oversimplified not-knowing abdication of power in some postmodern approaches, Brown (2007) sees the necessity of being positioned and taking a stance as a vital in narrative therapy. “In my view,” she states, “it is far more dangerous to deny the presence of our own knowledge and power through efforts at sidestepping it” (Brown, 2007, p. 12). Above all, and despite the politics and goals of any particular therapeutic alliance, Brown (2007) states the unequivocal positioning of the counselor as one of ethical responsibility for the well-being of the client.

Conclusion

It is clear from this examination that questions of power and knowledge in clients’ narratives, as well as within the therapeutic alliance, are subjects of lively debate and clarity is not easily gained. Partially, this difficulty seems to stem from the reality that knowledge and power often operate in implicit ways within the regimes of truth that are so often taken for granted as normative ways of understanding. What seems clear, however, is that narrative counselors hoping to be true to postmodern conceptualizations of power and knowledge—at least Foucauldian understandings—must continue to recognize the relations of power and knowledge at play in the therapeutic alliance. Rather than attempting to divest oneself of power, one must instead recognize that relations of power are unavoidable and that the counselor is always positioned in relations of power with the client. What might be stated with some degree of certainty is that relations of power and knowledge are unavoidable and inescapable, even for those practicing narrative, collaborative-based, postmodern therapies. The determining factor for how power and knowledge will be experienced as constraining, constitutive, oppressive, liberative, limiting or emancipatory is the degree to which the counselor is willing to recognize her or his own involvement in relations of power and position herself or himself within those dynamics of power and knowledge, recognizing all the while that the act of therapy is, indeed, a political act.

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