
Talk as Action: A Narrative Approach to Action Theory

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ABSTRACT

A discussion of “talk as action” is explicated at three levels: (a) talk as individual action, (b) talk as interaction, and (c) talk as social action. The main implication for action theory and counselling practice is that language performances are always socially, historically, and politically bound. If language is a form of action, then “words live us” and the kinds of words we live are contingent upon the discourses available to us.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article aborde la notion de « parole en tant qu'action » sur trois plans : (a) la parole en tant qu'action individuelle, (b) la parole en tant qu'interaction, (c) la parole en tant qu'action sociale. L'implication principale, pour la théorie de l'action et la pratique en counseling, est que les performances du langage sont toujours enracinées dans un contexte social, historique et politique. Si le langage est une forme d'action, les « mots vivent en nous et nous animent » et ces mots dépendent des discours qui nous sont disponibles.

The purpose of this article is to explicate the contribution narrative makes to our understanding of human action. Action theory commonly focuses on understanding human goal-directed behaviour. In this article, action is viewed from a postmodern, narrative perspective, extending the construct of action beyond the realm of goal-directed behaviour into the realm of language. Here action is seen as a language performance where speaking is a way of behaving. The interconnections between narrative and action are discussed in three sections: Talk as individual action, talk as interaction, and finally, talk as social action. Understanding that these three aspects of narrative and action function simultaneously, they are separated in this article for discussion purposes only. Narrative approaches to counselling will also be discussed in connection with each aspect of the nexus between narrative and action.

Talk As Individual Action

In order to comprehend the nexus between narrative and action, it is important to begin with an understanding of the function of language from a postmodern perspective and to be able to connect the role that language plays in epistemology, identity, and human agency. It requires that we move away from viewing the function of language as mere description — a process of labeling and naming objective reality, wherein the label itself becomes the actual object being named, and re-envision language as a living site where personal meaning is created, identities are formed and negotiated, and human agency is performed.

Knowledge and language

From a narrative perspective, language is a pre-condition for devising our conceptual frameworks. We are born into linguistic habitats (Efran & Heffner, 1998) and use pre-existing language structures already available to us, through the cultures in which we are born, to make meaning of our existence. Knowledge begins with personal experience, is only accessible from within the social realm, and is a “reflection of our individual and collective actions” (Varela, 1979, p. 275). Language is the medium through which our individual and collective actions are made known. Narrative is the linguistic form that we employ to make lived experience accessible and meaningful. It is through our narrative descriptions of personal experience that we make ourselves and others known to us. The narratives we create provide explanations for how the episodes and events in our lives are meaningfully connected. The narrative forms that we use are always historically and contextually contingent, a product of particular cultural discourses with explicit and implicit rules and legitimating practices. For example, if we examine the dominant discourse of “mothering” in North America, we can see how knowledge and language work. The dominant discourse of mothering is a linguistic habitat that we are born into. Motherhood and mothering practices have pre-existing language structures already operating and into which we are immersed when we are born. Our personal experience of mothering will depend upon the cultural practices available to us (e.g., breastfeeding, maternity leaves, birthing methods). Mothering practices are performed and communicated through language practices. Narrative forms explicate the cultural rules, norms, and laws impinging upon the kinds of mothering that can be practiced within a given culture. Examples of the narrative forms commonly practiced in this culture are nursery rhymes, lullabies, parenting magazines, medical literature on childhood illnesses, advertisements for diapers to name a few. These are cultural artifacts that support the discourse on mothering. They explicitly and implicitly inform mothers on what practices are sanctioned. This is an example of how knowledge of mothering and motherhood is accessible through language practices — mothering scripts and mothering discourse shape the kinds of mothers that we can be and also informs us about what mothering means.

Identity and language

In narrative theory, the self is constituted through language practices. Narrative functions as a means to self-construction in that storytelling or story construction is a way of coming to know oneself and one's world. In our participation in language practices, we not only create a narrative, we construct ourselves and our life worlds. Narratives are both process and product (Polkinghorne, 1988) — simultaneously an activity of narrating a life and a representation of the flow of life in a meaningful sequence. At the individual level, language is the medium through which stories of the self are produced to explain one's life in the past, present and future; at the cultural level, stories serve to unify common cultural beliefs and values.

Language, identity, and agency

Given that our identities are constituted through language practices and our understanding of ourselves and our worlds are subject to the discourses available to us, there are major implications concerning power and agency that need to be considered. The identities that we claim for ourselves, which are always contingent and open to multiple interpretations, must be negotiated within our social relationships. The social world then becomes the site where power relations are played out through language practices — who gets to name the “truth” and who can claim power depend upon who is speaking to whom and their relative positions or perceived status within their social interactions (e.g., parent-child; teacher-student; counsellor-client). The therapeutic relationship is a poignant example of a social site where power relations and agency get played out through language practices. Within the therapeutic space, some of the questions that need to be addressed by the client and the counsellor are: Who has the power to name lived experience? Who has the power to interpret reality? What labels are used to explain experience and how are they employed? What discourses are called upon to describe experience? Are the discourses used in therapy infringing on agency or enhancing agency? Paying attention to our language practices is imperative if our therapeutic practices are to be participatory and emancipatory.

Language as performance

With an understanding of the functional role of language in the construction of knowledge, identity, and agency, I now turn to a discussion of the connection between narrative and action through the idea of language as performance — talk as action. To understand the connection, we must view language as an evolving medium we collectively inhabit. Within this medium, we “body forth” our intentions into the world. We not only use words to express our meaning and intentions, we use embodied speech to make ourselves known through the use of facial gestures, body movements, intonations, and other devices to communicate with others. When we converse with others, our bodies enter a living space where we sensuously speak ourselves forth; it is the body that performs our speech acts. Efran and Heffner (1998) write about language as performance. They state that language is:

... a specialized form of communal activity — the use of words and symbols as a second-order form of social orchestration. From this perspective, people do not speak now and behave later — speaking is behaving (Efran, Aldarondo, & Heffner, 1997). Moreover, language is never purposeless chatter or just preparation for future action. Describing an event, telling a story, arranging a meeting, affixing a label — these are all tangible social performances ... language *is* what language *does*. (p. 96)

From this perspective, language cannot be separated from action, nor can action be separated from language. Action is a form of language and vice versa, language is a form of action. Every time we speak, we perform some aspect of ourselves out into the world to be interpreted by others and ourselves. The way that we language ourselves into being then, determines the way that experience

and consciousness are understood. This universal claim applies to every form of therapy since all therapies employ language practices. However, it is particularly relevant in narrative therapy. If the way language is constructed determines the way experience and personhood are structured, then according to narrative theorists, counsellors who assist clients in the reconstruction of old self-narratives are opening up not only the possibility of new narratives, but new lives. An example is the aggressive client who states that he/she has a “short fuse” or has “a bad temper.” Exploration into the construction of the labels and the purposes that they serve may elicit insight into the idea that even if a person believes that he/she is born with a temper, that it is an intricate part of personality, there is still choice in how an individual expresses emotion. Using new words and descriptions to explain client actions help reframe client self-descriptions. New language practices directly affect personal experience, self-knowledge, one’s sense of self and agency. Narrative counselling provides a means for teasing out the ways in which our self-descriptions are limiting and how our personal narratives are tied to our active engagement in the world. Our actions then are tied to our self-narratives making certain actions possible and others outside the realm of plausibility. Language, and narrative as the structure or form we give experience, are fundamental to our ability to act.

Talk As Interaction

In this section, I wish to highlight the importance of understanding the interactive, dialogical nature of language and its significance in the human sciences, particularly with regard to our counselling practices. If we focus more closely on the dialogical co-constructed space between ourselves and others in counselling, a complexity unfolds that often goes unnoticed. This therapeutic, co-constructed space created through language practices (such as speaking, nodding, smiling, laughing, pausing, crying) changes from moment to moment allowing each to be different from the other yet simultaneously creating a communal space, a “third space.” This space manifests as a “plurality of unmerged consciousnesses” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 9). Shotter (1993) has written extensively on the nature of this dialogically, co-created space as a “third space” created through joint action. Shotter and Katz (1999) describe it as follows:

The dialogical reality or space people spontaneously construct in their joint action is experienced (sensed) as a ‘third agency’ with its own specific demands and requirements. . . . This is what is so special about dialogically structured activities: the very responsive nature of the activity between us makes it impossible to say which aspect of it is due to you and which to me. An ‘it’ emerges between us with its own requirements, a responsive order, which we are both a part of and participate in, and which as such can make calls upon us both. . . . Although no written formulation is ever adequate to its capture, the lived experience of moments when juxtaposed thoughts meet in a dialogue . . . have a kind of ‘fractal fullness’ in that as one looks into their ordering one can see endless future orderings. (pp. 7-8)

Shotter brings together convincing arguments based on the philosophical writings of Wittgenstein (1953), Bakhtin, (1986, 1993) and Volosinov (1986).

At the heart of his treatise are the ideas that we “body forth” words, that our mental activity is “out there” in the world between us, not inside our heads, that understanding or meaning making takes place in living moments, dialogically, and that the “third space” provides infinite opportunities to create connections and understandings. Shotter and Katz (1999) explain that forms of understanding are found “in the moving, momentary, dialogic living relationships that occur in the streams of life between us” (p. 86).

All forms of counselling that engage in therapeutic conversations participate in Shotter’s conceptualization of ‘joint action’ — working therapeutically in the “streams of life between us.” Therapeutic conversations are voiced into the space, a “third space,” between counsellors and clients and both have a role to play in this joint construction of a shared reality. The therapeutic relationship from this perspective is seen as a performance — the client and the counsellor performing knowledges. Neimeyer (1996) extends this idea of the performative role of language in his metaphorical description of narrative psychotherapy as a creative art form: the act of sculpting through the use of language.

What we as therapists have to offer our clients is not an expert set of prescriptions for “correct” ways of thinking, acting, or feeling but a hard-won and carefully honed expertise in the therapeutic use of language. Metaphorically, I think of the work of therapy as sculpting conversational realities, giving form to a joint conversation that embodies something of the intentionalities of both client and therapist. (p. 381)

The therapeutic relationship from a narrative perspective is a living, linguistic space where knowledges are dialogically performed and enacted.

The ethical imperative that lies within these therapeutic performances is the danger of taking language to be transparent. Words and body language exist in webs of meaning and therapeutic understanding requires “accurate” empathy and “accurate” reflecting back. This means that the narrative counsellor is always checking the client’s assumptive world, asking about the personal meaning of particular words or actions. The narrative counsellor is conscious of personal agency in therapeutic conversations and keeps a check on how actions are construed. For example, asking the question — “What made you angry?” denotes that an external event has the power to influence the client’s internal state. This type of question does not empower the client; instead, it limits other possibilities. The narrative counsellor in this scenario would ask the client to describe what it means to “be angry” in connection with the given experience rather than because of it (Efran & Greene, 1996). In narrative therapy, the counsellor’s aim is to deconstruct client beliefs that prevent agency or action. Being cautious about languaging practices within therapeutic conversations, the narrative counsellor is wary of whose language (client’s or counsellor’s) gets to be used to define experience. Therefore, “talk as action” — the idea that the individual uses language as a performance in order to create knowledge, identity and agency, and “talk as interaction” — the concept of languaging ourselves into the world between us, are two ways that narrative theory and action are interconnected.

Talk as Social Action

The final arena where language and action make significant connections is at the level of community. In the social realm, "talk as social action" is defined by social constructionists and poststructuralists as "discourse." Here again, language is seen as a performance where "talk" performs an action. Narrative counsellors seek to understand the actions that various kinds of talk perform, acknowledging that these performances are socially, historically, and politically constructed. Efran and Green (1996) explain that "language does not consist of disembodied words floating through the ether but of contextualized acts that advance particular courses and claims" (p.92). All social contexts and the discourses that live within them, impose limits on their members restricting the possibilities or options available to them at any given time. The mechanisms of social consensus within our social worlds and the discourses that create them are political acts with rules and norms. These social rules and norms shape experience into various dichotomies such as truth or fiction; possible or impossible; proper or improper, and so on. The dominant discourses created through language practices have the power to form human identity and name what is the "truth." The more powerful the discourse, the more prevailing it is socially. They represent a crucial component for maintaining social order.

One of the explicit aims of narrative counselling is to analyze the power relations in which our clients live and to deconstruct the ways in which their personal experiences are framed, and to offer an analysis that will help facilitate change. A starting place in narrative counselling is to reframe "traditional" psychology's discourse with regard to the categorization and classification of human experience as a pathologizing practice. Burr's (1995) comment is at the heart of this practice: "What traditional psychology tends to do, then, is to de-politicize social problems by locating them at the level of the individual psyche . . ." (p. 103). Narrative counsellors draw attention to the discursive practices at work in our psychological problems. If a client is suffering from depression, panic attacks or posttraumatic stress disorder, for example, then the individual must participate in the community's dominant discourse to share in the construction of what counts as a depression, panic attack or posttraumatic stress disorder. There are social practices and forms of social talk that provide the basis for these "disorders" and clients are most likely to consider themselves as having one of them as they engage in conversations with others who assist in the construction of this identity for them. As counsellors we need to examine the ways in which we limit our clients' possibilities. We need to decentre our counselling practices by remaining conscious of the some of the constraints imposed upon us by the dominant discourses within the disciplines of psychiatry and medicine.

Using narrative discourse as a frame for understanding, the clinical applications of White and Epston's (1990) narrative therapy have made significant contributions to the ways in which narrative counsellors can analyze and deconstruct dominant discourses within therapeutic conversations. White's methods of externalizing the problem and internalizing human agency are examples of ways

that counsellors can collaboratively work with clients by aligning with the client in taking a stance against the problem's influence in the client's life. Thus, he politicizes the human condition and invites clients to re-author or re-story their lives by taking a conscious, purposeful position against oppressive practices. His work is not a therapy of adjustment, but a therapy of critical reflection and liberation. At the heart of his work are the ideas of how language and action are intricately intertwined. He asks: "Where in your life now do you get to perform this new meaning?" He pushes the envelope of agency through action.

At the community level, he is expanding his work to include several Aboriginal communities in Australia. Within these communities, he facilitates the telling, performing and retelling and re-performing of the collective story, identifying the cultural history and location of Aboriginal skills and knowledges that have often been subjugated by the dominant culture. His work privileges alternative knowledges and is an excellent example of moving narrative practice into the social realm of community intervention.

CONCLUSION

Narrative theory and narrative therapy are intricately tied to action at three levels: the individual having agency through narrative self-construction; relationally through conversational and other forms of *interaction*, and finally, at the community level through social practices and performances maintained through discourse. At each level, a narrative framework opens up new possibilities for personal action, social action, and transformation. In addition, language from a narrative perspective is more than mere description. It structures our experience and consciousness. We live in linguistic habitats and are influenced by the discourses available to us. These discourses may enhance our experiences or hinder our self-expression and personal agency. Language is the living medium where human action is performed and narrative is the form we use to make our actions understood. Human agency and action are languaged forth. Given these premises, it is imperative that counsellors pay attention to the ways in which we "language forth" our therapeutic practices. We need to ask ourselves how our words are framing reality, how our words are limiting or enhancing agency, and how our language practices are intricately tied to our clients' change processes.

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