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## Book Review / Compte rendu

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White, M. & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. New York: W. W. Norton and Co.

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*Reviewed by:* David Paré and Don Sawatzky, University of Alberta.

This book presents a cornucopia of theory and case studies demonstrating what has come to be known as Narrative therapeutic practice. And while White and Epston primarily practice family therapy, their clinical technique is equally applicable to individual therapy and work in the schools.

Australian Michael White has published widely since his work with psychosomatic children in the late Seventies. This collaboration with New Zealander David Epston represents his turn away from the structural and strategic family therapy approaches he once favoured. *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* established this pair of private practitioners Down Under as leaders in an emerging postmodern approach to counselling and psychotherapy.

The authors themselves shun labels, but their various influences are clearly delineated—especially in the writing of Michael White, whose fascinating intellectual forays are a constant source of challenge and stimulation. Among the various disciplines and schools of thought evident between the lines of this book are literary and social criticism, cultural anthropology, cybernetics, and feminism. However, we find the most distinguishing element of White and Epston's approach is their deliberate and self-conscious reliance on a constructivist perspective throughout their work. Families and individuals construct their realities, they argue, and they do so through the medium of stories.

The problem for most of us, say White and Epston, is that the stories we construct of our lives usually derive from the normalizing influence of modern society, and do not necessarily contribute to our own psychological and emotional health. More often than not, a client comes to therapy with a "problem-saturated story" which the authors say is just one of a whole range of possible readings of the "text" of their life. The aim of therapy is to replace these disempowering readings with new interpretations of the text, and to strengthen those interpretations by enacting them almost as a play script takes on a life of its own through its performance.

Externalization of the problem is the most distinguishing feature of the author's clinical technique. Through a series of case studies, the book demonstrates how clients are encouraged to objectify and occasionally personify the problems they experience as oppressive—in effect, to situate them outside of themselves. Thus, one child's encopresis becomes "Sneaky Poo"—an adversary who (which) is influencing his family, but is not inherent to the family's identity. Through a series of carefully constructed questions, the therapist helps the family to map the influence of this externalized problem on their lives, but more importantly, to discover the ways in which the family has already acted in defiance of the problem. An instance where

family members refused to allow the child's behaviour to depress their mood becomes the germ of a solution. As the family comes to discover its own resources, a new, empowering story emerges.

Therapeutic conversations are a primary vehicle for this process, but so is the written word. One of White and Epston's most innovative contributions is the use of personal letters to clients in place of session notes. Many are masterful, solution-focused reframes of the therapeutic context. By putting these on paper where they can be observed and reviewed, the authors argue the new interpretations are strengthened in both form and substance. They also draw up contracts with clients, and certificates of merit for various accomplishments—often presented as grand diplomas with ornate lettering (courtesy of modern word processing) to heighten the client's sense of personal authorship.

In their bold effort to contextualize their work, White and Epston draw on the work of French intellectual Michel Foucault, who writes extensively about knowledge, power, and the oppression wreaked by modern social structures. At times, the authors fail to translate Foucault's ponderous social critique into the language of the narrative framework, which shuns mechanistic models of behaviour in favour of more literary metaphors.

We found this to be a flaw in what is frequently a brilliant re-thinking of the context of therapy and the change process. But there is much here in the way of theoretical insight and useful interventions for counsellors. The book is a *tour de force* of post-modern psychotherapeutic ideas, and a must-read for practitioners intent on keeping abreast of an emerging movement in contemporary counselling and psychotherapy.