

# **Narrative Theory: A Culturally Sensitive Counseling and Research Framework**

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I have been a School Counselor for the past 16 years in Fairfax and Loudoun County Public Schools in Virginia. I have also taught *Multicultural Counseling* and *Education and Culture* as an adjunct professor at George Mason University, Fairfax, VA and *Practices of School Counseling* at Marymount University, Arlington, VA. I hope to continue to research, write, and work within the counseling field on issues of developing cross-cultural competencies.

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The purpose of my presentation at the American Counselors Association convention in April, 2006 will be to share the story of how narrative theory has provided me with a culturally sensitive theoretical framework in my role as both a school counselor and as an educational researcher. I will share my research study that proposed to further the understanding of how the label of learning disability (LD) may affect identity development and particularly how culture may influence that effect.

Narrative theory has provided me with a model that has served to deepen my understanding of the numerous and complex issues that face the diverse student population with whom all school counselors have the privilege to counsel in today's schools. Schools, however, continue to be challenged in addressing the academic needs of the Latino students in our schools as evidenced in a recent local newspaper article that stated, "The graduation gap between Latino students and their classmates is an issue school districts are struggling with across the country." (McNeill, 2005). The article particularly addresses the issue as it confronts the Washington DC metropolitan school districts and specifically

Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS), where “in the past five school years, the number of Latinos who dropped out from Fairfax County schools has more than doubled – far more than their white, black or Asian classmates.” (McNeill, 2005). Juan Pacheco, a Latino community activist and former FCPS student, shares that, “existing programs in school and community centers need to find better ways to engage children and provide them with ‘culturally appropriate’ role models.” (Schumitz, 2004). School counselors have the ethical mandate to find culturally appropriate ways to intervene in Latino students lives in order to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to achieve academically. Due to the underlying assumptions and the theoretical concepts based on those assumptions, narrative theory has the propensity to provide counselors with a culturally sensitive framework from which to build a counseling practice that takes culture into consideration.

The counseling discipline has recently begun to take culture into consideration when assessing and treating the individual and the field continues to search for a theoretical model that will provide a culturally sensitive methodology. Narrative theory, I believe, is an emerging theoretical model which does provide counselors with that necessary framework. Narrative therapy’s theoretical assumptions are based on a comprehensive understanding of the importance of culture in the identity development of the individual. George S. Howard (1991) makes this same discovery in his article, *Culture tales: A narrative approach to thinking, cross-cultural psychology, and psychotherapy*, as do Alan Parry and Robert Doan, 1994, in their book, *Story revisions: Narrative therapy in the postmodern world*. Parry & Doan (1994) view the underlying assumptions of narrative therapy as bringing therapy into the postmodern world and completely revolutionizing the role of the counselor and the process of assessment and treatment. The major narrative assumptions they outline are:

- There is no *truth*, only different interpretations of reality. Meaning, therefore, becomes what is most important and meaning is constructed in social, cultural, and political contexts.
- All people create meaning through narratives (stories). We live our lives according to the stories we tell ourselves and the stories that others tell about us.
- Culture is a peoples’ collected stories. Culture, therefore, is the most influential determinant in peoples’ lives.
- There is no one *knowable* self, but there are many selves.
- The person is never the problem. The problem is the problem – a problem story.

These assumptions of narrative thought vastly change the traditional role of the counselor and counseling practice (assessment and treatment) and allow for culture to be taken into account.

Based on these assumptions the counselor's role becomes more of a cultural anthropologist who takes a stance of curiosity and of not knowing with the student as they ask students to reflect on the stories that shape their lives. Assessment, in the narrative counseling process, is also vastly different from traditional therapies. The assessment process is more like a process of discovery where the counselor's role is to assess the problem rather than to assess the student. The problem is taken out of the person through a process called *externalization* (Parry & Doan, 1994). This process is often accomplished through objectifying the problem by encouraging the student to name the problem. By questioning the student about how the problem is influencing relationships with peers, family, teachers, etc., the counselor and the student are able to map the influence of the problem. This narrative way of assessment allows a student to express their problem story through their own cultural lens and therefore decreases the risk of cultural misunderstandings.

Narrative therapy also opens the door to allow the counselor to become a researcher and to utilize narrative research methods to deepen one's understanding of the issues and problems that may face a student. This narrative approach to research seemed the most likely one to choose; therefore, when I researched the educational issue of how the label of LD affected the identity development of the Salvadoran male students I was referring to special education services in my practice as an elementary school counselor. By utilizing the narrative research methodology of Brown & Gilligan's (1992) longitudinal study of adolescent girls, I was able to discover that the Salvadoran boys were tending to view the LD label as an intrinsic condition, such as mental retardation, and that they felt somehow responsible for being LD. This belief seemed to be influenced by cultural meanings of disability that were more severe in definition than the other cultural groups of the study. As a result of these findings, I have worked more carefully with the parents of any student whom I may refer to the special education process as to their understanding of their child's academic difficulties. Salvadoran parents in particular may need clarification of the dominant culture's LD meanings. I seek advice from leaders and community activists as to what that particular cultural group's meaning of disability might be so that I may be more sensitive to the impact of that meaning if the student receives the LD label. I collaborate with the parent liaisons who are culturally and linguistically sensitive to the different cultural groups represented in the school to

help inform parents of the special education process. I work more closely with the classroom teacher in the pre-referral phase to make certain teachers have a variety of culturally sensitive teaching methodologies and resources to utilize when working with diverse students' educational issues. I have also shared my research with educators through my adjunct teaching at George Mason University's educational cohort program's course, *Education and Culture*, which teaches teachers the action research methodology of the Cultural Inquiry Process (Jacob, 1995). By utilizing the Cultural Inquiry Process teachers can take culture into consideration when they are faced with educational issues in their diverse classrooms.

Narrative counseling and research provide a culturally sensitive context for creating change in a student's life by helping the student to deconstruct the old problem story and to re-vision a preferred story. The counselor listens for the student's self-descriptions of stories of strength and strengthens the new story by helping the student to notice areas in his/her life where the new story is growing. By co-creating the revised story, there is less chance of dominating the student with one's own cultural biases.

Narrative theory, therefore, is a springboard for consistently doing culturally sensitive work as a counselor. This theoretical framework, due to its underlying assumptions, includes the larger system into the therapeutic and research process by taking into account cultural themes, social injustices, history, gender issues, politics, acculturation issues, immigration and the politics of therapy. Narrative counseling helps people identify what they want in their own lives and to re-connect with their own knowledge and strength. Based on the theoretical assumptions of the importance of culture, narrative counseling will often include the healing processes of the clients' culture (spirituality, dreams, prayers) (Waldegrave, 1990). Narrative thinking provides the counselor a way to consistently provide services that take into account cultural differences (language and the way it promotes certain concepts and reduces others, definitions of behavior, patterns of thinking, family structures, expressions of distress, etc.) (Waldegrave, 1990). As a counselor working in a very diverse society, this theoretical framework is one that I believe gives me a story of becoming an effective cross-cultural counselor.

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