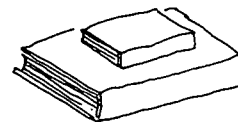


BOOK REVIEW



**Micheal White and
David Epston**

*Narrative Means to
Therapeutic Ends,*
New York, W. W. Norton
& Co. 1990, pp.229

The work of Michael White and David Epston offer the practitioner an innovative and promising approach to helping people reshape their lives. White, from Australia, and Epston from New Zealand are social workers whose writings, until recently, were generally unavailable to readers of U.S. journals. Published widely in their own countries, during the past two years they have been highlighted at conferences and workshops in the United States. Their approach, enthusiastically greeted, receives more than mild acclaim. The Family Networker, in an issue last year devoted to "Narratives The Third Wave," feature the work of Epston and White.

The book is a work in progress, it moves us along the paths they took as they evolved a new partnership and a new approach to helping. While it does not cover their most recent turns, their emerging theoretical formulations supported by numerous examples furnish the reader with a sufficiently clear picture of what they are attempting. Practitioners interested in reviewing their tapes and their expanding literature and/or taking one of their workshops certainly would be able to explore these methods for their own practice. What they will discover are thoughtful and respectful helping approaches. The authors wondrous concern for people comes through in

every client contact explored, and in the explanations which support their examples.

Their major premise is that the client must maintain control of his/her life, and that the therapist must be most careful of her/his own controlling interventions. Their theoretical base, derived from the work of Foucault emphasizes freedom, autonomy and the dangers inherent in hierarchial psychological control by expert actors and systems. This base which frames the form and content of helping most symbolizes their techniques.

Their first efforts as they work with the client, individual and family is to externalize the problem; and a mutually acceptable definition of that problem. This is an effort to identify a major thread in the client's(s) life which hinders growth and shapes his/her life's direction.

They explore this external factor, which is outside the person, but connected, in that it tries to run that person's life for its own reasons. A hallmark of this effort is the reminder, "The person is not the problem, the problem is the problem." How simple an idea, yet how transforming. As the initial interview proceeds, this culprit problem emerges from the conversation with the client, is named, and is recurrently brought into consciousness by the therapists who begin to refer to that factor as

By Paul Abels, Ph.D.

Paul Abels, Ph.D. is professor, Department of Social Work, California State University, Long Beach.

the problem that tries to control the client and the family. The effort is to help everyone see how the problem effects their lives, and create approaches that end the problem's control.

As the interview proceeds and the designated problem examined, the client is asked to tell about the times s/he was able to overcome the problem, trick it, and control it. These "exceptions" become an important factor in helping the client realize that s/he has the power and the strength to undertake a plan, a storied therapy, that evolves as the meeting draws to a close. The fact that the person was able to come for help is given as an example that s/he was able to defeat the efforts of the problem to keep them from opposing the problem. The parents too, are asked how they have been influenced by the problem, in turn influence the problem, and identify the exceptions when they had been able to overcome it. Thus, we see the strength perspective in the approach used to help people empower themselves.

Often families and the individual members are given assignments and tasks which act as rites of passage. Success often leads to a celebration, a major breakthrough, a diploma or a letter of acclaim from other clients as well as the therapists. Experiences with other clients (with their permission) are brought into the session; the client might get a letter from another client telling how s/he overcame a similar problem, ways of tricking and controlling that powerful force, or warnings

not to let down their guard.

It is within the framework of "rites of passage" that an attempt is made to connect client and community. White and Epston propose a different conception of "termination-as-loss" metaphor, identifying this phase as built in to therapies oriented toward western culture and practice as the "therapies of isolation". In contrast they use the reincorporation metaphor — rejoining the person with others in a familiar social world. They argue that the therapist is at a relative disadvantage in creating second-order change; they do not have the ties to the family's community and community norms that reinforce the changes. They are at the beginning of forming practice techniques that reframe the helpers' method and obligation to end the division of individual therapy(family) and community.

Listing these techniques out of context without full explanation and case material might lead the reader to think of these various helping efforts as a bag of gimmicks. They are well thought out approaches related to theoretical concepts taken from various scholarly fields, particularly anthropology, Epston's formative discipline. That orientation led Epston to realize the concept of "rites of passage" which he utilizes at points in the helping process.

An additional approach that supports their efforts are letters the therapists write to clients and related others, following each session. These are not merely a summary of the session, or a reminder of what

needs to be done, but a sensitive appraisal and reflection which the therapist believes will aid those involved in better understanding and dealing with the issues.

It adds to the content of the session, and serves to reframe the reasons the person found him/herself in the particular situation. Thus, a woman who had been abused might be helped to understand how such abuse over the years chipped away her self esteem and added to her feeling of powerlessness. The letter might include the steps she could continue to take for self-growth. She was not to blame. These letters are expressive concerns for the client, which the clients recognize as such, some holding onto the letters and re-reading them over the years.

White and Epston have also begun to use reflective teams and the subsequent give in take among client, therapist and team that method promotes. This fits the authors' belief in helping the client gain power by helping them obtain information, and seeing that they and the team can often differ, thus minimizing the control that might naturally be attributed to an all-powerful therapist.

While their approaches have not been subject to vigorous evaluative research, analysis of their case material and viewing them at work, leads this reviewer to believe that their approach has strong helping potential. A worker seeking to use their approach would be well served to experiment tentatively with the ideas, trying them out and

reflecting carefully at each step.

For the benefit of those who would like to further examine the works by Epston and White, Dulwich Center Publications has published their collected papers and additional material.

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