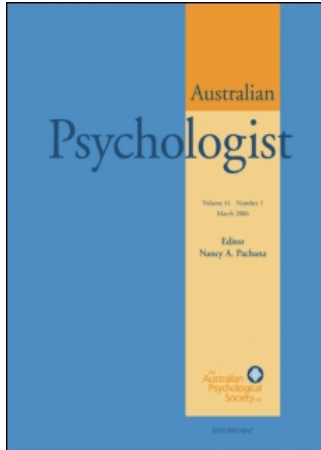


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### The art of thinking narratively: Implications for coaching psychology and practice

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## The art of thinking narratively: Implications for coaching psychology and practice

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### Abstract

This article looks at contributions from narrative psychology to coaching and, in doing so, demonstrates how to reflexively bring material from an existing literature into the coaching context and inform the emerging domain of coaching psychology. The first section looks at the self as performance, the nature of stories, and the process of development as key elements of narrative identity. The second section focuses on narrative practice and the role of the “field” in storytelling, and the Narrative Diamond as a model for working with stories in coaching. Case vignettes are used throughout to illustrate key points of this unique approach to coaching. The paper offers a number of important implications for coaching and the development of coaching psychology to demonstrate the key role of narrative in both domains and to illustrate the path between existing theory, current practice, and an emerging field.

One could argue that the field of psychology has had the largest influence on the growing practice of coaching even while recognising the important contributions of other disciplines (e.g., management theory, organisational development, communication studies, and adult learning/development). However, there is a need at this stage for the coaching community to articulate stronger connections among these disciplines in order to solidify its theoretical foundation and create a more robust platform for its future. For example, four key tenets touted in coaching are actually presaged by developments in family therapy in the late 1980s: (a) an emphasis on client strengths, (b) a view of clients and therapists as partners, (c) the adoption of a constructionist approach, and (d) an emphasis on the narrative form of meaning (Polkinghorne, 2004). It will be important for coaches to more overtly define an evolutionary path that aligns with its unique history and nature, perhaps along postprofessional lines (Drake & Stober, 2005) that emphasise its interdisciplinary approach to evidence, if it is to establish a suitable and sustainable platform.

Given the reverence for client stories within the field of coaching, it seems an opportune time to create stronger ties with narrative psychology – both for its own merit and as part of building that

platform. This article provides an introduction to some important ways in which narrative psychology contributes to our understanding of effective coaching and, in doing so, demonstrates how to bring material from an existing literature into the coaching context and, subsequently, inform the emerging domain of coaching psychology. We have seen the benefits of this migration in observing the impact that positive psychology has had on coaching, as an established body of work that resonates with many of the core values of coaching and provides an established theoretical and knowledge base to guide its practice.

The first section looks at the self as performance, the nature of stories, and the process of development as key elements of narrative identity. The second section builds on this theoretical foundation, focuses on narrative practice and the role of the “field” in storytelling, and introduces the Narrative Diamond as a model for working with stories in coaching. Implications for coaching and the development of coaching psychology are offered at the end of each subsection to demonstrate the key role of narrative in both domains and to illustrate the path between existing theory, current practice, and an emerging field. The goal is to articulate how coaches can think narratively in order to be present to clients and their stories in new and effective ways.

### Narrative identity

A narrative approach to coaching is predicated on the observation that the stories clients tell about themselves are important threads in the fabric of their self-identities (McAdams, 1993). While coaching is often focused on helping clients make new choices at the episodic and behavioural levels, deeper changes are more likely when broader narrative patterns and narration strategies are also addressed (Mattingly, 1998). A narrative approach to coaching works at the level of identity, seen here as clients' primary self-concepts and orientations in narrating their lives (Drake, 2005) and as both source and anchor for their behaviours. The stories clients tell in coaching are windows into their identities, their patterns of authorship, and openings for new narratives about who they are and how they want to be in the world.

In thinking about identity as a starting point – a “theory of self” as Baumeister (1986) called it, William James made the distinction between the I and the Me. James (1892) called the self-as-subject, the sense of I, and the self-as-object, the sense of Me. The dialectic between the I and the Me reflects the ongoing tensions inherent in the continual process by which we construct and negotiate our narrative identities throughout the day. We can see this in clients who are working with their sense of I in sorting out new career directions or with their sense of Me in response to a promotion. As such, identity can be seen as an continuous psychosocial process (McAdams, Diamond, de St Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997) in which people navigate between presenting identities that are acceptable and functional in their social contexts, and embodying identities that are authentic and meaningful in their personal context (Drake, 2005). Because we largely define ourselves by the narratives of which we are a part, and our place in them (Riessman, 2002), a story-based approach to coaching may provide some insights in this regard.

#### *Self as performance*

We use stories to build and negotiate the connections between our various “situated selves” (Ochs & Capps, 1996) as part of the ongoing dialectic between ourselves and our environments. As such, stories reflect both the teller and the context, and they are valuable both for what they include and what they exclude. Stories make visible, to ourselves and others, our invisible identity processes, our “theory of events” (Foucault, 1965). As such, close attention to how people construct and perform their stories can yield important insights about their identities. This supports the Eakin (1999) sense that we are the stories we tell, “Narrative and identity are performed simulta-

neously... in a single act of self-narration” (p. 101). This emphasis on the performance of identity fits well with coaching's behavioural orientation, and the narrative focus sheds light on the dynamics involved. This approach seems timely in an era in which it often seems that we are performers in search of an audience. Stories, then, can be powerful tools in helping clients understand their current patterns of self-narration as the basis for new options.

Therefore, narratives can be seen as “identity performances” (Mishler, 1999), and identity can be seen as the capacity to “keep a particular narrative going” (Giddens, 1991). As such, there is an ongoing dance between identity, narrative and performance that is both personal and collective in nature. The more salient a particular identity is to us, the more that situations will be perceived and structured according to this identity (Cross & Markus, 1991). In addition, the more important an element of our identity is to us, the more we will seek to have it validated by our significant audiences (Oyserman & Markus, 1993) and the more our behaviours will be in service of confirming these identities (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Therefore, there is an intimate connection between the ways in which we construe ourselves and the ways in which we are likely to behave (Novitz, 1997).

However, it is also true in the process of construing ourselves, we tend to distort our experience in order to render it more orderly, sensible, and meaningful (Mattingly, 1998). Experiences that are not consistent with our theories and dominant plots are seldom seen as meaningful or even noticed (Kenyon & Randall, 1997; White, 1988) – and are therefore left out of our narration. As a result, our distortions tend to further the plots we deem significant in a given context (Mattingly, 1998) and perpetuate our historically favoured and familiar stories about ourselves, others and life itself. Narrative psychology offers a frame for understanding the schematics behind these cognitive processes as well as the sociopolitical processes that shape our own unique distortions. Story-based approaches to coaching attend to these distortions and support clients to be more aware of (a) their lived experience; (b) their stories about their experiences; (c) their responses to their stories; (d) the consequences of their responses; and (e) their options for change on any of these four areas.

#### *Implications for coaching and coaching psychology.*

1. Any given story is embedded in a complex network of reciprocally influencing narratives (Sluzki, 1992). In many ways we become that which we are addressed (Berger, 1963) and define ourselves by the referent points we deem significant. Therefore, coaches would do well to

look at identity as a contextual performance and recognise the plot lines their clients tend to use to narrate their experiences. Coaches can reflect back to clients the lines they favour, their function as points of comparison, and the ways in which their narration and identity are shaped as a result. Sometimes clients turn away from these reference stories to envision other ways to be in their life or work; doing so sets up a distinction that is often a precursor to change. At other times it is a matter of staying within the story itself until something (e.g., an image, a metaphor, an insight) emerges as a new referent point for their narrative identity. This can be seen in the client for whom I used a gestalt technique to help him release from a long-standing referent point, experience that separation, and establish a new one more supportive of his current life and goals. As a result he was able to claim a new role for himself at work and in his family and learn the skills to be successful from this new place.

2. Coaches must recognise that if they want their clients to adopt new behaviours or attain new results, they must help them build an identity from which to do so and from which the desired behaviour is a natural response. If they want clients to sustain that new identity, they need to encourage them to enact new behaviours – and the stories that go with them. This reflects our deep human desire for “our stories and our behaviours to be consistent. If we cannot make story and action fit, we either have to make a new story or change the action” (Baldwin, 2005, p. 78). It is also important to remember here that any shifts that clients make in their identity will be thwarted or supported by the larger communal and social narratives in which they are embedded. As an example, I worked with a client to understand and shift his primary identity as someone addicted to work in order to make room for new, healthier behaviours; I worked with his leadership team to recognise and shift their collusive behaviours so he would have the support to do so. The goal with clients is to help them attain greater alignment between their identities, stories and actions in the direction of their goals.
3. Given the complexity of our global culture, coaches need to grapple with what development means in a time when many of the master narratives are breaking down (Lyotard, 1984). What are the ethics of performance? For example, is our aim to help clients successfully perform in accommodating the demands of the existing systems and culture, and/or to support them in their quest to grow as human beings,

which may put them at odds with a “successful” adaptation to these same systems?

4. For coaching psychology there is a need to draw on other disciplines (e.g., social psychology and sociology) to better understand the connections between identity, audiences, and behaviour so that coaches are more able to help clients sustain the changes they begin in coaching. It will be valuable for coaches to access these rich sources of insight on human dynamics in order to more effectively work with clients in preparing for and completing agreements, and with their stories in terms of the seeds and language of success they contain.

#### *Nature of stories*

Stories have been integral to human communities since the dawn of time. We use them cognitively, discursively, and socially to remember and organise our past, communicate about and negotiate our present, and envision and act into our future. Stories, and the larger narratives they represent, incorporate five primary elements (Gergen, 1994), each of which serves a vital function (Drake, 2003), in sustaining an individual and collective sense of identity. It is helpful for coaches to understand these characteristics of narrative structure so they can recognise and use them in working with clients’ stories.

1. Ordered events provide a sense of temporality as they bring together the past, present and future in a meaningful way to address the question “Who am I?”
2. Stable identities provide a sense of spatiality so we know how to navigate relationships and communities and address the question “To whom do I belong?”
3. Demarcation signs provide a sense of accessibility so we can recognise opportunities in disruptions to the status quo and address the question “What is my role and purpose here?”
4. Causal linkages provide the sense we need so we can learn and communicate with others and address the question “Why are things the way they are and why do I do what I do?”
5. Valued endpoints provide a sense of meaning so we can make critical choices, find fulfilment in doing so, and address the question “How do I decide what is right, what is important?”

This framework provides a means by which to track the content of the stories we are told in coaching, and it also provides clues about the schemas and plots used to tell them. For example, we can see it at work in the following case. In coaching a client, Bill, through a major career transition, I heard the

following in his stories about events related to the loss of his last executive position: (a) where he placed himself in the sequence of events (historically seeing and defining himself as an outsider); (b) how he saw himself relative to his reference groups (as either a rescuer or an orphan); (c) where there were openings for changes and how ready he was to make them (not very open until he was willing to shift his role in his own stories); (d) how he explained the event in itself and as a pattern in his life (initially within an exile pattern but later as an opportunity to break free – on his terms); and (e) what seemed important to him in the end (primarily the desire for greater freedom and self-direction). The framework provides a way to listen with greater depth to the stories clients tell in coaching and then design questions to structure and work with this narrative material.

Over the years of my practice I have noticed that this material often reflects a central paradox about being human (Ricoeur, 1992) and speaks to the path of development. On one hand, we are concerned with sustaining a strong sense of order, coherence, and continuity across time and space. This drive is shaped by the conserving narratives developed, sustained, and validated over time by our communities to maintain order. On the other hand, we are drawn to disorder, surprise, and change as a means to adapt or exert ourselves in the world in new ways. This paradox is seen in the very nature of stories themselves, a fact that lends credence to their use as a vehicle for coaching.

We tell stories when we need to resolve discrepancies between what is expected and what has happened, that is, to integrate disorder. As such, we create stories at “breaches of the commonplace” (Bruner, 1986) in an attempt to get the situation back to “normal” and adjust the original expectation in light of what happened (Bruner, 2002). This tension is at the heart of both great drama and adult development and it is found where the forces of continuity and discontinuity collide (Mattingly, 1998). Identity, then, is a dynamic and relational process of continual negotiation within ourselves and with our environment. Narratives provide the material with which clients can better understand their narrative habits and renegotiate them as desired.

Narrative psychology is based on a systemic yet dynamic view of stories as processes by which we create and navigate our world according to our unique blend of cultural and individual expectations (Chafe, 1990). While it is helpful to understand the structure and purpose of stories in relating narrative psychology to the practice of coaching, it is even more important to know how to “think narratively”. In part, this means taking the postmodern turn with Boje (1998) and others from thinking of stories as objects to seeing stories in context. A story is inseparable from the context in which it is per-

formed, lived and held (Boje, 1998; Rossiter, 1999). The current interest in storytelling largely represents an object-oriented approach while the attention of narrative scholars and coaches on storymaking and storylistening represents a context-oriented approach. The distinction is reminiscent of the Stern (2004) call to be attentive simultaneously to both the explicit verbal content and the implicit experience in a [coaching] conversation.

#### *Implications for coaching and coaching psychology.*

1. Clients' employment strategies (Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Mattingly, 1994) operate largely at nonconscious and somatic levels, but they can be made conscious and malleable through coaching. Therefore, coaches will benefit from tracking the ways in which clients organise their stories. A good question to ask along these lines is, “What is this person trying to accomplish with this story?” As such, the stories that clients share shed light on their efforts to reclaim, retain, and reframe their stories about who they are and want to be in the world. Stories often reflect the tensions between the human drives for continuity and discontinuity even as they point to what will resolve this tension – and create a new story. As an example, I worked with a senior manager who made a profound shift from “just one of the gang” to “it’s my turn to be an elder” through working with narrative material in our session that gave rise to her awareness of the desire within herself to shift from a lifetime as a “youngest” in order to authentically respond to the call to become an “oldest”.
2. It is critical for coaches to be able to “think narratively”, to think of stories as a relational and contextual process and to attune themselves to the process as well as the content of narration. Working at the narrative level in this way enables coaches to glimpse the process by which clients construct and sustain their identity and their orientation to the world. In thinking narratively in a coaching conversation, a coach places an emphasis on the experience and less on the rush to interpretation, meaning or action, and engages the elements of the stories even as they address the context in which it is co-narrated.
3. For coaching psychology there is a need to more fully understand the structures and dynamics of stories as told in coaching, the differences between working with stories in narrative therapies versus narrative coaching, and the implications of postmodernist and social constructionist perspectives on narratives and development as found in coaching. In particular, there is a need to address these issues in a contextual manner because narrative work is most powerful when it

addresses the natural states, salient histories, and performance contexts in which the clients' stories occur (Boje, 1998), and in which changes will have to be sustained.

### *Stories of development*

*Our stories go deep, into the archetypal realm, into the genetic code, the tribal history, the family of origin both known and repressed, as well as the mythologies we live out on a daily basis...* (Hollis, 2004, p. 112).

As we have seen, people narrate their experiences so as to confirm their existing identity (and its supporting stories) or to account for anomalous events relative to their normative schemas (and related identity stories). It is this dynamic process that is of great interest in working with people's stories in coaching and, in doing so, creating both understanding of the current narratives at work and the openings for new ones. One of the challenges in working with people and their stories is that the dominant narratives in their life tend to blind them to the possibilities that other narratives exist. "Our prevailing narratives provide the vocabulary that sets our realities. Our destinies are opened or closed in terms of the stories that we construct to understand our experiences" (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 77). In many ways, we cannot see that which we cannot narrate.

Therefore, a key role of coaches is to introduce and work with the distinction between available narratives and potential stories (Drake, 2003, 2004). Available narratives represent the vocabulary and grammar, plot lines and historical conventions, beliefs and value systems (Polkinghorne, 1988, 1991) that we inherit and internalise from our cultural and situational environments. We narrate our identity in large part based on these unspoken, implicit cultural models of what selfhood should be, could be, and should not be (Bruner, 2002). As a result, certain stories are readily available to us in defining and maintaining our identity, while others are not (as much). We often do not recognise the contours and limitations of our available narratives until we try to cross their normative boundaries or seek to narrate our experiences or selves outside of them. However, these narrative breakdowns, when the old story does not work anymore, are often openings for breakthroughs in a client's life. It is here we see the value of stewardship (Drake, in press) in working with the narrative material of clients at these critical junctures where the building blocks of their identities are in play.

As people recognise limitations inherent in the available narratives in which they are embedded, they

can create a sense of distance from these narratives, see them more clearly, and surface the submerged voices of their selves (Polkinghorne, 2001). As we shall see, a major step in this process is to help clients identify narrative data from their lives that support an alternate view of who they are and how they want to be in the world. Following Goffman, narrative therapy pioneer Michael White (White, 1988; White & Epston, 1990) referred to these contradictions as "unique outcomes", and White (1992) later observed that they provide a gateway to alternative territories in a person's life. Other narrative-oriented therapists have described them as "unique experiences" (Bird, 2000) or "exceptions" (de Shazer, 1988; Hewson, 1991). Sometimes this comes from holding up for the client two of their stories and introducing the possibility that one could inform the other in a new way. At other times, a story can move from the periphery to the center in reshaping the nucleus for one's narrative identity.

These exceptions can be seen as potential stories that reflect the elements of our self that are not typically reflected in our primary identities or narrated in our language or behaviour. Potential stories represent our possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986): who we could become, would like to become, and are afraid of becoming; they are aspects of identity and development that are often undervalued. They can be seen in our hopes and fears, as with Jung's notion of the shadow, and they represent latent and undifferentiated energy that can be integrated as part of the client's development and movement. These selves are often found in clients' potential stories and can be used in helping them redefine what is possible for themselves. This works well in coaching because potential stories serve a comparative function. What we strive for, and are in the process of becoming, is at least as significant for explaining our functioning as what we once were or are now (Cross & Markus, 1991). The interpretation of current events is as much future-shaped as it is past-determined (White & Epston, 1990). Given its orientation around strengths and the future, working with potential stories is a natural fit for coaching.

### *Implications for coaching and coaching psychology.*

1. The application of narrative psychological principles to coaching necessitates an engagement in the real issues surrounding the politics of storytelling (Ezzy, 1998) with clients. A narrative approach to coaching focuses on helping clients become more aware of the contours of their available narratives and either reframe this available stock of knowledge or their relationship to it. The goal is to discover and develop new

options – often hidden as gems in the client’s own stories – and a more evolved repertoire. For example, a client identified a desire to shift the habitual stories she told herself about being a “wife” in order to renegotiate her place in her family and with her team at work and make room for a new developmental and professional agenda. This process required her to engage with others who were central to this pattern and enrol them in a new construction of this shared narrative about her place as the “wife”.

2. Coaches can reflect and explore their observations with clients about how the typical ways in which the latter is narrating their experience and/or telling their stories are affecting how they live their life and interact with others (Bruner, 2002). This is important because, as social psychologists have discovered, our explanations, expectations, and behaviours all strongly affect one another (Sherman, Skov, Hervitz, & Stock, 1981). As such, it would be useful to understand more fully the connections between the cognitive, discursive, and dispositional aspects of narrative (Gergen & Gergen, 2006) as an important source of guidance for coaches and clients around shaping new behaviours.
3. For coaching psychology there is a need to incorporate theory and research from scholars who have taken a critical stance on hegemonic narratives in order to have a more complete picture of the broader narratives in which people live and by which they measure their own stories. For starters, we can follow the lead of Gergen and Davis (2005) who asked, “How can narrative research take on a critical function, one that closely evaluates the current cultural repertoire of stories and themes? How can research serve a generative or creative function, one that introduces new narratives into the cultural and individual lives?” (p. 242). In doing so, we would gain a greater understanding of how people navigate among their various available narratives and incorporate desired potential stories into their primary identities.

### Narrative practice

*Several of my colleagues have asked why the therapist does not at some point verbally mark such a nodal happening. . . . The reason is this: the therapist and patient already know that something important has happened. They are still reeling under the force of the event. Such a response may cause many interesting things to emerge, but it has a major disadvantage. It makes the implicit explicit, which necessarily pulls the process away from the ongoing here and now in which the stance is more abstracted and removed. The flow gets cut. Instead, one should let the flow*

*accomplish its work and find its own immediate destiny* (Stern, 2004, p. 170).

### *The power in the field*

An often-overlooked factor in successful client outcomes from coaching is the work done within the conversational space itself. As Mitchell (2000) noted, “analytic change is now understood as beginning in changes in the interpersonal field between patient and analyst, as new relational patterns become interactively co-created and subsequently internalised, generating new experiences, both with others and in solitude” (p. 70). In this section I address this role of the field as it is created in coaching conversations and introduce a model for a core narrative practice that I have developed to teach and engage in storylistening as a core coaching competency. The model is consistent with the approach of many in psychology who give precedence to the context and process of co-narration over the historical emphasis on the therapist’s power and techniques. Even those who focus on the cognitive and discursive processes draw attention to the importance of the narrative container.

Clearing this space for a transformative dialogue, what Mattingly (1998) called “therapeutic employment”, is essential, and echoes Freud’s notion of “evenly suspended attention” as the heart and soul of the therapeutic enterprise (cited in Yalom, 2000). The Stern (2004) research on the present moment and his conjectures about the intersubjective matrix as the place of a continuous co-creative dialogue point in this direction as well. He observed that “the sharing creates a new intersubjective field between the participants that alters their relationships and permits them to take different directions together. . . . Changes in psychotherapy (or any relationship) occur by way of these nonlinear leaps in the ways-of-being-with-another” (Stern, 2004, p. 22). Given the contextual nature of narrative and identity, it makes sense within coaching to diligently attend to the space in which stories are told.

Let us turn now to look more closely at the nature and use of this space. There is a clear sense that the life of a story, its true essence, often develops on the boundary between two consciousnesses, two subjects (Bakhtin, 1986), and that stories are jointly produced in the interactions between two people (Wyatt, 1986). However, as we saw in the work of Stern (2004) and others, these dyadic interactions can best be seen as an element of a triadic experience and the field that constellates as a result. In depicting this triadic structure, we can build on the Adler (1977) use of Tillich’s notion of a “third area”: a concept that was later explored in depth by Schwartz-Salant

(1998) as an imaginal vessel within psychoanalysis. Ogden (1999) called it the analytic third, the interpersonal field between analyst and patient with a life of its own. In the social realm, the work of authors such as Bhabha (1990) and Pile (1994) speak of third spaces; a concept I later incorporated in my transition framework with clients (Drake, 2003, 2004, 2005). One of the functions of this third area in conceptualising the field within coaching conversations is as a projective space in which clients (and coaches) can work with elements from clients' stories. It is through the projective space that the client brings to the surface psychic material that can be addressed later in support of their development and outcomes (Drake, 2003). As such, a key role for coaches is to "invite people to see their stories from different perspectives, to notice how they are constructed (or that they are constructed), to note their limits, and to discover that there are other possible narratives" (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 57). Overall, this approach is about a shift from thinking about a story as a fixed commodity transmitted from one person to another to thinking about a story as co-created within a narrative space that lies between, yet beyond, the participants.

Another contribution from narrative psychology is the recognition that the past, present, and future are closely linked in stories and that each one receives its meaning from the other two. At the same time, there is a recognition that *now* is the only time frame for action (Boscolo & Bertrando, 1992). A here-and-now focus has many advantages. It provides a safe laboratory in which to experiment with new behaviours and to experience new voices before trying them in the world (Anderson, 2004; Yalom, 2000). Working with stories in the here and now allows us to "stop the flood and swirl of thought so someone can get a glimpse of us, and maybe catch us if they can" (Grumet, 1991, p. 69). An important discipline along these lines for coaches is to stay within story-time/-space as much as possible when engaging with narrative material with clients. Doing so allows clients to anchor any shifts in awareness or capacity in their lived experience as a platform for change (Drake, in press). The focus shifts from a traditional emphasis on generalisation and interpretation to what Stern (2004) described as expansion [of the moment], "the process of staying with or within each specific moment as it comes along, treating it more fully and endowing it with more import and deeper appreciation" (p. 208).

#### *Implications for coaching and coaching psychology.*

1. The integration of principles from narrative psychology can help coaches move beyond a transactional approach, and its emphasis on the

bounded dyad and the coach's techniques, to also incorporate a more contextual approach, and its emphasis on the dynamic field and the coach's presence. "By telling their stories to the [coach] and to themselves, a dialogical space is created that instigates the retelling of the story in such a way that new relationships are established between existing story parts or new elements are introduced" (Hermans, 2004, p. 175). As such, there is a need for more study on the field and other intersubjective factors and how they contribute to coaching relationships and affect its outcomes.

2. Whenever clients launch into a story, they open themselves to new possibilities in how they tell it and, in doing so, new possibilities for how they position themselves and others in it, what plot lines they follow, and what meaning they make from it in the end. While recognising that all narration is co-constructed by virtue of the presence (real or imagined) of others, it is important for coaching professionals to be conscious of the vulnerabilities for clients in the storytelling process. As such, I view their opening lines as "story vectors" in the sense that they begin in a basic direction, but may unfold along a variety of paths in content and meaning. Cognitively, we are wired as listeners to recognise patterns as guides for our listening, for example, this is a grief story, a bad boss story, a victim story, but these schemas may or may not match the intent, conscious or otherwise, of the narrator. As such, coaches need to routinely ask themselves, "What assumptions am I making in listening to this client right now that may lead me to constrain or redirect the vectors I hear? What may I miss or disallow as a result?" Again, it is about the discipline to focus on the field and less on directing the storytelling process. It would be helpful here to have more research on how stories begin and end in coaching sessions, what coaching strategies are appropriate and advantageous in supporting a successful trajectory, and how story threads progress through the co-narration process in coaching sessions.
3. A key role for a coach is to provide both an interpersonal structure and a narrative structure in which clients can engage and explore their stories (Levitt, 2002). A structure is essential for a productive coaching conversation and for the client to create a story from the narrative fragments, the "antenarratives" (Boje, 1998) they present. Otherwise, client stories often end up devolving into mere chronicles. At the same time, it is important that these structures remain in the background as a source for potential

questions rather than in the foreground as expectations to which the client and his/her stories must conform. Coaches can help themselves in this regard by continually asking themselves in sessions, “what story am I in?” (Mattingly, 1998, p. 72) “what role am I playing?” and “how are these affecting the client’s narration?” We can draw again on the work of Gergen and Davis (2005) in asking, “What factors in the session inhibit certain selves and certain versions of a life story and activate others?” (p. 243). Phillips (1994) raised similar issues when he asked about the influences of theoretical allegiances, professional norms, and aesthetic preferences on the narrative processes in therapeutic conversations. We need to understand more fully the degree to which coaches steer clients’ storytelling into their own preferred frames and language and the ways they do so in attempting to reduce their own anxiety and increase their perceived ability for success. The following tool was designed to map client stories in a way that supports coaches to stay in the proper relationship to the storytelling process with their clients.

#### *Use of the Narrative Diamond*

I have developed a variety of tools for use in mapping client stories within coaching sessions and during post-session analysis. This section provides an overview of one of these tools as a way to illustrate some of the key points that link narrative psychology and coaching practice as a contribution to our understanding of coaching psychology. In particular, the tool extends narrative psychology’s contextual frame beyond the field of narration to look at the stories themselves. As alternative stories become available to be performed, other “sympathetic and previously neglected aspects of the person’s experience can be expressed and circulated” (White & Epston, 1990, p. 17). It is far easier to accomplish and sustain this in a collective context (Rappaport, 1995) such as coaching because the client’s identity, from a Bakhtinian perspective, is a product of “dialogical relations in a field or landscape of *I*-positions” (Raggatt, 2006, p. 18). It is my contention that the nature of a client’s “landscape” can be observed and explored in the raw material of the clients’ stories themselves (Drake, 2003, 2005; Gergen & Gergen, 2006), both for what is present in them and what is absent from them.

While the identity implications of our stories are not fully accessible to us directly, they can be approached indirectly through the reflection and witnessing of other people (Ricoeur, 1992) in telling or reflecting on them. This approach can be quite informative because the story we consciously know,

or believe we know, is seldom the whole story that is actually unfolding within us (Rennie, 1994). Working with people’s stories in coaching affords them the opportunity to candidly surface and acknowledge the narration processes at play in their lives and the developmental movements they may reflect. This is important because we largely define ourselves by the narratives of which we are a part and our place in them (Riessman, 2002).

Therefore, we need a way to work with stories at many levels in coaching. One framework that is used often in narrative work is Bruner’s (1986) dual landscapes. In simple terms, the landscape of action focuses on what the protagonist does in a given situation and the landscape of consciousness focuses on what the protagonist believes and feels about the situation. In telling our stories in the presence of others, we construct a “storyworld” that represents the landscapes that are most salient for us and convey elements of our relational dramas (McLeod, 2004). If the aim is to understand others’ storyworlds, it makes sense to explore the possibility that the characters in their stories are parts of themselves, projected onto familiar forms as a means of working through developmental issues or needs in their identity (Drake, 2003, 2005).

To assist in teaching this work and using it in my coaching practice, I developed the Narrative Diamond model (see Figure 1). The model links narrative structure, narrative psychology and coaching in offering a dynamic means to work with client stories for transformative ends. The model draws on the conjecture that the characters, objects, and events that appear in our stories are systematically related to the other story figures (Drake, 2003; Osatuke et al., 2004). In practice it means an attention to the fluid, dynamic nature of the stories as they are being formed in a coaching conversation and working with them accordingly as the coach. As Anderson (2004) observed “Each story serve as a new stage in which the narrator repositions the characters in his or her life within a constantly moving interpersonal field. The narrator imposes meaning and identity on these events by fixing a cast of characters who are continuously moving toward and away from each other” (p. 317). This provocative stance mirrors the Riessman (2002) question as a narrative researcher, “How does she locate characters in relation to one another and in relation to herself?” The Narrative Diamond model outlines the core elements of these relationships: the narrative field, the narrator, the listener, the story, and the characters embedded in a larger matrix of communal and contextual narratives.

The model, and the methods involved in using it, incorporate three spaces in a storytelling context: (a) the declarative space of the narrator, (b) the narrative space of the story itself, and (c) the projective space

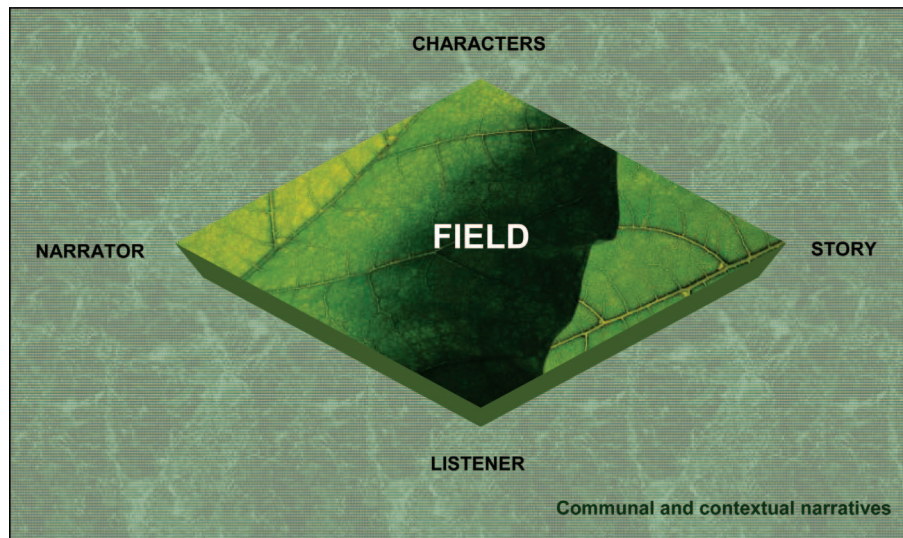


Figure 1. The Narrative Diamond.

as seen in the characters (or other elements of the story, e.g., metaphors, images, objects, beliefs) (Drake, 2005). All of the stories are embedded in larger narratives related to communities germane to one's identity and/or to the contexts about which they are being told. For example, stories shared by a young Asian woman who is being coached to support her success as a new executive will need to be understood in terms of the larger narratives with which she identifies: for example, her national and cultural background, her gender, and her generation as well as what promotion and leadership means in her organisation. The listener is depicted off to the side, away from the usual dyadic position across from the narrator, to demonstrate a more fruitful position from which coaches can engage the narrator in working with the story and its characters.

Each time a person tells a story it serves as an opportunity to explore the position of the characters as a means to consider new options for narration, identity and behaviour. As such, the coach's focus in listening is to track the presence and absence of characters, their relative position and actions, and the implications and meaning of such a construction for the narrator. In working with the elements and characters in the story, the listener can work with the person to open more space in their stories, and subsequently in their identities, by stepping back to get a bigger picture, experimenting with alternatives to their customary vantage points, and observing their situation from these new points of view (Dunne, 1995). I describe it as loosening their narrative grip to create an opening for other ways of narrating their experience and lives. The ultimate goal is to help the person develop a greater sense of agency relative to their narrative patterns and create a broader repertoire so they are

able to move more flexibly and adeptly from one position to another as the situation and their goals warrant (Hermans, 2004). These processes have been explored in more detail by Drake (2003, 2004, 2005, in press), and they align with Freud's strategy to consider what the storyteller was doing with, and through, the story (Sarup, 1996).

I'll close with a story that illustrates the model in action. Sarah's presenting stories were about recent turns of events that left her simultaneously the new matriarch of her family and financially independent. With a history steeped in her role as daughter and marked by success in her work, she was uncertain how to proceed on either front. I first attended empathetically to the story as it was presented and then explored what she was doing for herself in this new state. As part of this narration, she talked about her return to her passion for singing with others. As we explored what this was like for her, we stayed completely in the time/space of the stories as they were shared. When the time seemed right, I brought these musical stories back into the field and held them up in juxtaposition with her presenting question about how to be a suitable and authentic matriarch for her family. In that moment, she began to see how she could use the same strengths and joy she found in group singing in framing how she could be the matriarch for her family. The result in that moment was quite moving for both of us as she recognised a potential story for the next chapter of her life.

#### *Implications for coaching and coaching psychology.*

1. In sessions, coaches can listen and work the elements in the Narrative Diamond model as it serves the coaching process: the field, the client,

the coach, the story, the characters, the larger narratives, and the coda (what happens as a result of the story work to move the person forward). A lot of my research and teaching is in pursuit of a better understanding of the nature, role and contribution of each of the elements in the model. In doing so, I can make use of the research and expertise of other scholars and practitioners from psychology and narrative practice. One key result would be the development of a topographic mapping of the narrative dynamics within coaching conversations when stories are used to create transformative results.

2. Coaches would do well to ask questions that generate experiences and invite clients to stay in their stories as they unfold across a series of present moments. As they do so, the characters, the context, and the conclusions become more apparent and available for renegotiation by the client (Freedman & Combs, 1993). Working with these internal images generates material that is both indicative of and a resource for changing external behaviour (Scott, 1997). Further study of the dynamics and links between the internal and external elements of stories as they relate to behaviour and change would be useful for coaches.
3. Working narratively, coaches can listen for experiences that are not currently being storied and the exceptions that do not fit into the dominant narrative (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Coaches can then ask questions that invite clients to develop a narrative that incorporates these unique experiences. It would be helpful to do more comparative studies of the differences and implications of White's therapeutic focus on meaning, narrative, and power versus de Shazer's focus on behaviour, goals, and pragmatics (Hart, 1995).
4. In seems fitting to close with an example of how psychological research related to narratives can be translated and incorporated into clinical practice with great effect. There are lessons to be learned here for the evolution of coaching and the formation of the discipline of coaching conversation. Hewson (1991) provided an exemplary example of how to apply research and principles from classical and narrative psychology to a practice context. She made important connections between laboratory findings in cognitive psychology experiments (i.e., Ross & Conway, 1986; Sherman et al., 1981) and both theoretical and practical applications of these findings. For example, the research found that people selectively recall their past behaviours to make them consistent with their current attitudes. On the basis of these data she offered the following advice: "Induce your audience to

recall attitudinally relevant past behaviours. This should increase commitment to new acquired attitudes" (p. 6). In applying Hewson's (1991) advice to coaching, we quickly see that if we spend too much time asking questions that elicit the recall of the performance of the old story, we are likely to increase the person's commitment to that story (Hewson, 1991). Instead, her research and work on "story launching" suggests that coaches should focus on getting clients to recall instances of the desired new story in the past as the way to solidify and anchor the incarnation of that story in the present and future.

## Conclusion

*We have no idea, now, of who or what the inhabitants of our future might be. In that sense, we have no future. Not in the sense that our grandparents had a future, or thought they did. Fully imagined cultural futures were the luxury of another day, one in which 'now' was of some greater duration. For us, of course, things can change so abruptly, so violently, so profoundly, that futures like our grandparents' have insufficient 'now' to stand on. We have no future because our present is too volatile* (Gibson, 2003, p. 57).

This paper makes some important connections between narrative psychology, coaching, and coaching psychology. The nature of stories as related to performance, identity, and development was explored as well as two critical elements in narrative practice: the field in which stories are co-narrated and a model, the Narrative Diamond, for working with the stories themselves. These insights and their implications on working with client stories in coaching draw on narrative psychology research and principles to inform the development of coaching psychology as a discipline to guide that practice. It also provides an initial response to the Gergen and Gergen (2006) request for "an account of human change in which all that we have understood as distinctly psychological can be understood in terms of relational action" (p. 119). May it contribute to the unfolding narrative that coaching is bringing to the world and enrich us in our efforts to help our clients transform the stories they live by.

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