

## Mini Review

# Theoretical Viewpoints and Mental Health Implications of Constructing and Deconstructing Narrative Identity

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Considering the prevailing mental health issues among adolescents and the overall clinical population due to their incoherent personal narratives, there is a growing need for mental health professionals to integrate narrative therapy in their theoretical orientation and practical application. Therefore, the author of this paper focuses on various theoretical viewpoints toward constructing and deconstructing narrative identities along with the emphasis on mental health implications. This paper also presents a variety of counseling strategies that can be useful in different clinical settings to help clients in changing their personal narrative for the purpose of promoting mental health well-being.

**Keywords:** Narrative therapy; Narrative identity; Clinical mental health counselors; Mental health professionals

**Introduction**

Literature reveals that it is common for people to develop mental health issues and psychiatric problems when they have incoherent narrative identity [1-3]. Narrative Identity (NI) is the evolving story of an individual that is internalized and crafted by each person differently and provides one's life with a sense of purpose and unity [4]. The construction of ego development or the intricacy with which meaning of life is constructed are considered as significant characteristics of NI [5]. According to the theory of NI [6], personal narratives are naturally formed by individuals' meaning making of their life experiences that integrate their perceived self across time and situations. NI has been found to emerge in adolescence, assist generativity in adulthood, and cultivate meaning making at the end of life [6,7]. NI has been associated with diverse outcomes including love, political ideology, morality, self-esteem, meaning making, volunteerism [8,9].

Moreover, based on Erikson's identity development theory (1968), intergenerational narratives play an important role in NI development and psychosocial development among adolescents [10]. Intergenerational narrative is defined as the process of communicating life experiences by parents or other family members to their children [10]. For instance, past events passed through generations may become an individual's master narrative that contributes to one's identity development [11]. The dominant thematic content is one of the chief characteristics of NI, which represents narrative installation of the major psychological forces shaping human life [12,13]. For instance, the theme of agency is strongly linked with one's sense of meaning and psychological well-being due to its association with the individual's mastery, achievement, and autonomy [14]. Therefore, dominating themes installed in an individual's NI have great implications for mental health.

There are various mental health implications that can be helpful in changing themes in personal narratives, which are positively correlated with improved mental health [1]. One of the major implications is based on the fundamental nature of narrative therapy

that allows the client tell his or her preferred dominating story in the counseling session which is a problem-filled story, and helping the client find alternative story which is an anti-problem story and generally hidden, untold, or unheard by themselves [15,16].

According to Bellin [17], meaning is readily available to anyone as it is an experience which is ever present, and from which identity is shaped. This leads to another implication for Clinical Mental Health Counselors (CMHCs), which includes supporting their clients by honoring the fullness of their meaning of life that they express through their personal narratives. For instance, using counseling techniques of assisting clients in looking at their meaning of life by integrating doing-based and being based meaning, because of its potential in exploring the connection with both 'what one does' and 'who one is.' This view is also aligned with the Buddhist view according to which memory is not an accurate representation of the past, and the present memory doesn't re-manifest the past cognition due to the momentary nature of all cognitions. Moreover, the narrative construction of our present-self is based on the episodic memory of our past-self. Thus, the appearance of our identical present-self with our past-self has no phenomenological basis and no metaphysical conclusion can be drawn. Utilizing mindfulness related approaches such as Buddhist derived mindfulness interventions including Compassionate View Intervention or Vipassana meditation are well-aligned with this viewpoint [18].

Another mental health implication is based on the constructivist view of narrative, according to which stories are constructed in people's heads as human imagination rather than in the real world [19]. Thus, clients can be helped in re-writing the stories of their life as a cognitive achievement [19] rather than an unambiguous narration of something univocally given. CMHCs can help their clients in reconstructing their stories in-session as well as give them homework in the form of writing personal journals.

Furthermore, historical and intergenerational narratives play a big role in understanding and developing racial identity among people belonging to any particular racial group [20]. According to

Watts et al. [20], racial identity can be developed by acknowledging the importance of historical narrative and understanding individuals' engagement with the broader community. Public and private regards can be used to construct racial identity for the advancements at individual level and community level, for instance, public regard indicates positive or negative attitude of individuals regarding their own perceptions of others feelings about Blacks, whereas private regard reflects positive or negative attitude of individuals regarding their own feelings as a member of the Black racial group [21]. CMHCs can help clients by acknowledging the importance of historical narrative helping them create a link between history narratives, civic involvement, and racial identity.

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