

## Narrative Therapy in Brazil: Building Preferred Stories from North to South

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### Contextualizing: An Entry Door

What I present in this article is just one possible story. We know that no story is unique, much less complete. This one, like all narratives, was constructed by my selection of events over time, in the contexts in which I had the opportunity to live and learn. The thread that weaves this storyline is very personal and bears the marks of the meanings I attributed to lived experiences, since the 90's. Thus, if the authors were different, other stories would be possible. Just like life, Narrative Therapy in Brazil is also multistoried.

When Tom Carlson invited me to write about Narrative Therapy (NT) in Brazil, with a focus on therapy, honored by his trust, I felt a mix of joy and immense responsibility. How can we do justice to this practice and to the Brazilian therapists who has developed and enriched it with our Latin creativity? Born in the early 2000's, NT has grown, flourished and has been transformed since the first presence of Michael White and David Epston in Brazilian territory, firstly because of their writings, which we only had access to in English and, sometimes, in Spanish. Then, due to our traveling merchants spirit that led us to take all the opportunities that arose, even in other countries. This article bears the marks of my personal involvement with this practice, since, in 1991, when Carlos Sluzki, in a family therapy course in Massachusetts, presented Michael White as a creative young man who used therapy as a kind of "psychological exorcism". Sluzki was referring to the practice of externalizing conversations, which separates the person from the problem: the problem is the problem, the person is the person. For us Brazilians, at the time, this was great news.

Thus, it was not a surprising fact that, one year later, in 1992, for the first time, we met Michael White in Buenos Aires (Argentina), where the Interfas Foundation organized a four-day workshop with him. In a small room at the Foundation, enchantment took hold of us Brazilians, around 15 people. For me, particularly, what touched me the most was a presentation that Michael gave about a man who had lived in a psychiatric hospital for many years and had just attempted suicide. His story of hopelessness attested that his life didn't matter to

anyone and that, if he died, no one would need to be notified. In his conversations with this man, Michael managed to recover, among the stories he lived, the memories of his childhood. His first teacher was considered by this man as someone to whom his life mattered. We had the opportunity to watch the video in which this elderly teacher remembered moments in which that boy stood out and the appreciation she had for him. We returned to Brazil with the pulsating seeds of a great desire to learn more and transform our practice. Michael helped us understand that all people have valuable stories and that we should acknowledge the power of legitimizing lives and relationships through external witnesses' testimonies. At the time we had access to a fantastic article that exposed power practices aiming to subjugate selves and relationships. Even today, I share the article *Deconstruction and Therapy* (White, 1991) with my students. In this article, Michael presents four brief accounts involving some kind of oppression, helping us understand that there are always gateways to alternative stories that, once historicized, can help to deconstruct dominant stories saturated with problems, enabling the construction of preferred stories of legitimized lives.

We continued studying and, at the same time, sharing what we were learning with our students. A reference for us to build our path was the first book published by Michael White and David Epston - *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (1990). Objectify problems and not people; develop sensitivity to hear traces in narratives that invite us to stories of hope. Many new reflections have emerged with the narrative metaphor. Our therapy practice gradually changed its focus from problems to possibilities, externalizing the influence of cultural discourses on dominant narratives saturated with problems, which, subliminally, would lead to power relationships. Michael and David expanded our horizons and therapeutic practices, helping us look at problems as cries of nonconformity, in the face of disregarded, or even outraged, values. Later we were able to expand our understanding through the precious concept of "absent, but implicit" (White, 2007), a result of the influence of Derrida's ideas in narrative therapy.

Narrative therapy contributed to expanding our understanding of lives and relationships, by inviting other partners, outside the world of therapy: Foucault, Derrida, Vygotsky, Geertz, Bachelard, Barbara Myerhoff, Bruner, among others (Grandesso, 2011). Defined as a poststructuralist practice, in Brazil, narrative therapy contributed to the development of therapeutic relationships valuing local

knowledge, respecting cultural values and being attentive and sensitive to all forms of oppression. Seeing beyond the diagnoses and a psycho-pathologizing perspective of life, we were able to incorporate a political dimension into the process and expand it beyond the walls of the therapy room. Abandoning the ethics of control and embracing the ethics of collaboration, White (2007) always maintained a respectful, decentered, yet influential partnership stance. And so, we continued.

### **Learning From our Masters and From Each Other**

Below I present some of the notable presences in Brazilian territory from whom we were able to learn and create possibilities for our narrative practices. For clarifying purposes, I insist that this is a personal and, therefore, partial analysis. It is far from complete. My criteria were the resonances within my own experience and the openness to new possibilities in the context of narrative therapy, as requested by Tom Carlson.

At the beginning of years 2000, the Family Center of the Catholic University of São Paulo (NUFAC) brought Jill Freedman to the city for a workshop on Narrative Practices in Family Therapy. Among other things, Jill introduced us to the art of asking questions to develop richer stories from the “sparkling moments” observed in the answers. With her, we practiced a way of listening to stories from everyday life that could help us transform our responses into poetry. In 2005, Silvia Rechulski and Ada Pelegrini Lemos organized Michael White's first workshop in Brazil, also in São Paulo. On that occasion, we were able to witness a session conducted by Michael with a Brazilian family. What we saw was a therapeutic relationship that respected our cultural values and an artisanal way in which he, through his questions born from attentive listening to traces in the stories, opened up possibilities for the family to visit non-historicized territories of their life. Michael allowed us to follow a creative dance between his decentered, yet influential, positioning and a family being reborn into new ways of living together. For the first time, we were able to participate as external witnesses. As a genuinely interested and creative partner, Michael helped the family revisit their experiences and build new and richer stories, opening the doors to new existential possibilities. Without a doubt, this workshop was a watershed moment. Later, in 2006, Michael was in Salvador (Bahia) and Porto Alegre (Rio

Grande do Sul), a great contribution for us Brazilians, thanks to Maria Angela Teixeira in Salvador and Consuelo Brun in Porto Alegre.

Upon returning from Porto Alegre, I started an *Open and Continuous Study Group* on narrative therapy in 2006, in São Paulo, through INTERFACI, the institute I coordinate.

Another relevant event for the development of Narrative Therapy in Brazil was the presence of David Epston, in 2007, for two workshops, one organized in Salvador (Bahia) by Maria Ângela Teixeira and the other in Campinas, a city close to São Paulo (SP), under the responsibility of the *Institute of Family and Community Therapy*, ITFCCAMP. A remarkable singularity of these two workshops was the way David guided us “inside the interview” in a creative and inspiring narrative practice. David's creativity in his dialogical listening awakened our curiosity about possibilities of questions that could invite “magic”, the “elf questions” as he called them in one of the workshops we were able to attend. David shared a video of a session with 14-year-old Sebastian, whose family and school had resigned. I had already watched this video in Oslo, year 2000, and had been enchanted by it. A history of outbursts of anger, scenes of violence, countless episodes of behavior incompatible with a life in society, had led this boy to boarding in a mental health institution. Leaving aside the problem stories, David asked the boy one of his “elf questions”: “*What do you think your therapist answered when I asked him, 'What do you respect most about Sebastian?' What do you think he told me?*” After much thought, the boy managed to say something unprecedented, especially for someone with the stories that were built about him. Sebastian replied that his therapist saw him as a good boy. The conversation that followed brought dignity and freedom back to this institutionalized boy. This therapeutic work is a masterpiece for me, every time I see it, it invites me to a renewing sense of hope.

One of the great supporters of narrative practices in Brazil is Maria Ângela Teixeira. She's always been a passionate practitioner who organized countless courses and workshops, inviting several narrative therapists, from the pioneers to the most recent, so that we could develop our skills. From Michael White and David Epston's visit to Salvador (Bahia) to the presence of Shona Russel, Mark Hayward, John Winslade, David Newman, David Denborough, among others, in many of the events she promoted. Maria Ângela was the main organizer of the

*10th International Conference on Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, in Salvador (Bahia), in 2011, together with the *Dulwich Centre*. In addition to receiving participants from many parts of the world, this event was a living testimony of how extensively narrative therapy and community work were already rooted in Brazilian soil and how creative were the practices developed with the marks of our local culture.

Another encouraging source of our development in narrative therapy and, especially, in collective narrative practices, was the collaborative work between Marlene Simonetti and Adriana Müller, in Espírito Santo, in 2009. By inviting David Denborough and Cheryl White to a workshop in the same year, they contributed to the development of collective narrative practices in Brazil. Invited again in 2010, by INTERFACI, for a workshop in São Paulo, the *Tree of Life*, the *Team of Life*, among other practices, resulted in a great movement of practices and production of knowledge and contributions to effective social transformations. Many creative and innovative methodologies and several community projects have been inspired by collective narrative practices. I am not including them here, as they go beyond the purposes of this article. Those interested in the topic, can find great sources in Müller (2013) and Abdalla (Denborough & Abdalla, 2019). I consider Cheryl White and David Denborough as the influential partners and gateways for *Recycling Minds Institute*, in Rio de Janeiro (RJ), to begin a project of intense repercussion in Brazilian territory, always in partnership with *Dulwich Centre*. In addition to holding events that encourage collective practices, since 2021, *Recycling Minds Institute* has been promoting training courses in narrative practices and community work, starting its fourth class in 2024. The online modality has enabled access to people from the most varied regions of our immense country.

As for the INTERFACI Institute, we were able to contribute to the dissemination of narrative practices in Brazil, in addition to the *Open and Continuous Study Group* started in 2006, through the workshops we organize. John Winslade, with his theoretical-philosophical contributions, in which he highlighted the importance of Deleuze and Foucault's ideas to the practice of narrative therapy, opened possibilities for us to integrate externalizing conversation, re-authoring, scaffolding, absent, but implicit and double listening practices to the use of narrative therapy in conflict situations. Then Stephen Madigan brought the relational interview as a great contribution. And, as our last workshop before the

pandemic, we welcomed David Epston, Tom Carlson and Sanni Paljakka, with whom we were able to reflect on how to reimagine narrative practices. The opening to compassionate witnesses and the inclusion of documents and poetry in the therapeutic process were innovative proposals that had great repercussions on our narrative work. Hence new practices and new productions of knowledge emerged, such as, for example, (Paschoal & Pereira, 2022), using letters and poems in reflective processes.

During the pandemic, we had the opportunity to increase the number of participants in our workshops due to the cost reduction that online modality provided. Therefore, through INTERFACI, we held two more workshops, one with Marta Campillo and other with Tom Carlson, in 2020. Tom presented contemporary practices and narratives with couples, mixing stories of justice and love. And finally, still in the pandemic in 2022, David Marsten innovated our knowledge with interviewing practices initiated by wonderfulness. And so, we have continued learning and creating.

In addition to what has already been mentioned, a creative way of promoting therapy and other narrative practices nowadays is in the form of a blog.

Accessible and popular, Maria Ângela Teixeira ([www.narrativasterapeuticas.com.br](http://www.narrativasterapeuticas.com.br)) publishes books in Portuguese and navigates from poems to art, always with a narrative approach. More recently, Maria Ângela has been writing about narrative therapy and dreams, the ones we have “with our eyes closed”, as she says: another innovation on her part.

### **Incentive and Production of Knowledge**

One of the biggest obstacles to the dissemination of knowledge comes from language barriers. Intellectual and theoretical productions originating from narrative therapy were published in English and later in Spanish, disfavoring the inclusion of our Portuguese-speaking community. Thus, the publication of two books translated into Portuguese (Morgan, 2007, Russell & Carey, 2007) were of great contribution to spreading narrative therapy in Brazil. Simple and very didactic, as well as accessible, we were able to introduce them in our family therapy courses in which narrative therapy had already been disseminated since the beginning of the 2000's. When, in 2012, we had the opportunity to have access to the last book written by Michael White, *Maps of Narrative Practice* (White, 2007, 2012 in Portuguese), narrative therapy expanded throughout Brazil,



from north to south. It is to highlight the importance of linguistic inclusion, to which the translations by *Narrativa Brasil* group, responsible for the publications in Portuguese of the books by Morgan (2007) and Russel and Carey (2007), had already contributed at great extent. Articles by other therapists such as Winslade (2017) and Madigan (2018), published in Portuguese in editions I had the privilege to organize also boosted the spread of practices. We had to overcome language barriers, not only to have access to what has been done and disseminated in English, but to be able to disseminate what we have done here in another language.

Among our productions, we have written book chapters and articles for our magazines that are more in tune with the proposals of narrative practices, such as the *New Systemic Perspective (Nova Perspectiva Sistêmica)*. Since the year 2000, when an article about narrative therapy with children was published (Grandesso, 2000), we have published narrative works developed with children (Grandesso, 2000, 2012; 2018, Cesar, 2008); with teenagers (Lion, 2022, Lion et al, 2023); with people affected by chronic illnesses (Novis & Abdalla, 2012); with patients affected by mental disorders (Laurentino, 2017); with family groups (Almeida & Müller, 2014); on the use of short stories in narrative therapy (Novis, 2016) and co-research projects (Abdalla, 2020). We also have some theoretical articles (Grandesso, 2011, Paschoal & Grandesso, 2014, Cruz, 2008, Guimarães, 2007). It should be noted that a vast written production on collective narrative practices is not being included here because it is beyond the purposes of this specific publication.

### **Concluding: Narrative Therapy in Brazil Rhizomatic Effects of a Transformative Practice**

From this general overview I have just presented, I realize how far we have gone since narrative therapy was introduced to us, Brazilian therapists, in the 1990's. Since Jill Freedman, in 2005, how many great practitioners have been with us, contributing to our identity as narrative therapists! For us Brazilians, more than learning a new therapy practice, it was being in constant dialogue with a universe of possibilities for theoretical dialogue and narrative therapy practice. I dare to say that, now, we are in a great number in Brazil. This article shares a small sample of what we have developed. Many narrative therapy practices ended up not being documented in texts or books and, therefore, could not be included in

this article. The articles included in this publication are a small example of the creativity of Brazilian narrative therapists, working with the most different contexts and populations. Sensitive to the values of Brazilian multiculturalism, attentive to the practices of power that oppress people and communities, our practices are guided by an ethics of collaboration. Breaking the conventionality of traditional therapies, narrative therapy revealed itself as a set of transformative practices promoting liberation from forms of oppression that restrict possibilities of existing with dignity. If we extended this article to include collective narrative practices, we would have, in this sense, a variety of projects, innovative methodologies and transformative practices.

I conclude by expressing gratitude not only to our masters who came to share their experiences with us, but also, and especially, to the Brazilian professionals who promoted our access to courses and workshops on therapy and other narrative practices. I can't help but mention Maria Ângela Teixeira again, who organized the first courses and workshops in 2005, introducing us to many creative and inspiring narrative therapists that we would not have met, if it weren't for her desire to expand these practices in Brazil. Such desire was shared by some institutions such as INTERFACI (São Paulo-SP), *Recycling Minds* (Rio de Janeiro-RJ), and *Crescent* (Vitória-ES). Through this article, I tried to honor them by highlighting some of their contributions. As White and Epston (1992) wished, our Brazilian narrative therapy culture has managed to keep the spirit of adventure and, I believe, we have managed to enrich our lives and the lives of others who have sought our help.

From the first islands of narrative therapy in our country, we built archipelagos and today we can speak of a continent that offers us a support platform to create and move forward, in our more than 20 years dedicated to learning and practicing narrative therapy. I want to finish by highlighting that narrative therapy defined a new identity for practitioners who embraced its purposes and ventured to delve into a new conception of therapy. A practice that, far beyond the psi world, allows us to stand against social injustices and abuses of power, as well as to resist practices that subjugate identities, relationships and lives. But, above all, narrative therapy helps to keep burning [...] “the flame of hope that lights up our actions and fuels our belief that new and preferred worlds will always be possible, in light of preferred and extraordinary stories that every person has. We just have to build the scaffolding”. (Grandesso, 2008, p. 117)



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