Afterword: What Is the Spirit of Narrative Practice?

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The seven articles we have presented in this special issue of JCNT showcase various examples of written narrative practices. In this afterword, I will examine some of what these practices may have in common—a set of presuppositions that shape a particular perspective and a specific way of viewing people. It is a set of presuppositions that manifests itself in the written practices presented here but can also be brought into play in countless other ways. And perhaps it can say something about the spirit of our narrative practices?

To examine these presuppositions more closely, I will introduce Hilde Lindemann Nelson's concept of morally degrading identities. Using this concept as a starting point, I will examine some of the practices described in the other articles and highlight how they—perhaps precisely as a hallmark of narrative practices—seek to avoid the assignment of degrading identities that seem to happen routinely in a lot of everyday practices. Instead, they insist on viewing people as moral agents. But first, I want to tell you about a meeting with a massage therapist.

Many years ago, I had an uneventful experience that I nevertheless keep returning to. At a time when I was also dealing with several other problems in my life, I struggled for quite some time with back pain, so I sought out a massage therapist to do something about it. True to a frugal attitude of mine, I ended up booking an appointment with a therapist who was relatively newly trained but worked under the supervision of more experienced therapists. Even though I had high hopes that the treatment would do me good, it would also be nice if it didn't cost too much.

The day of the first treatment arrived. I lay down on the table, and the treatment began. The therapist quickly identified significant tension around my neck and

shoulders, and at one point, as he worked on a particularly tender spot and I winced loudly, he said in a quite neutral tone: “Does it hurt especially here? That’s where stubbornness is.”

Right then, I could feel my body cringe in silent irritation. I remember stubbornly thinking something along the lines of: “I really don’t think I’m stubborn.”

As far as I recall, I didn’t say anything about it, just grunted a little “oh” and then let my irritation simmer, while in my inner dialogue I apparently told him various truths about how difficult a situation I was in, and grumbled a bit about how he clearly didn’t really see what a good person I was.

He continued working while I lay there sulking. Eventually, he called in his supervisor: a tall, calm, bearded man who seemed trustworthy, though I can’t quite put my finger on why. They talked a bit about how far along we were in the treatment. My therapist mentioned, among other things, my tense shoulders and stubbornness, while the supervisor addressed the muscle tension.

“I don’t know if I’d call it stubbornness,” he said, “—maybe more like persistence.”

From one moment to the next, it was as if a weight had been lifted, and I relaxed and felt at ease in his presence.

How Do We Want to Be Known?

It’s been many years since I had that experience on the massage table—and yet I remember it clearly. Even back then, I was deeply struck by how much of a difference a single word made: I really didn’t like being called stubborn. I felt misunderstood and unrecognized, and I became irritated and immediately withdrew. On the other hand, I completely opened up when the experienced supervisor suggested that the word “persistence” was a better fit. I felt recognized in that description and wanted to continue working with him.

Even back then, I thought to myself that there must be plenty of people in the world around me who are used to being called far worse things. I couldn’t help

but wonder what it must be like for them. Does it also make them freeze up and withdraw? And soon I also started to wonder if I might be one of those people who, every now and then in connection with my work—and in life in general—calls others something that makes them cringe?

Perspectives on Narrative Practice

I have been enthusiastic about narrative practice throughout my professional life. Since 2004, I have been employed at DISPUK, where I both teach narrative practice and, as part of my work, conduct conversations and, among other things, work with conflict management.

When I was hired more than twenty years ago, Michael White and Maggie Carey were regular guests at DISPUK, teaching both our students and the staff. Since then, a string of narrative-inspired practitioners—such as John Winslade, Art Fischer, and most recently Travis Heath, Tom Carlson, and Sanni Paljakka—have regularly visited us and shared their practices with us.

Ever since I first saw Michael White and David Epston at work on a slightly blurry VHS tape, I have been inspired and moved by seeing the people they spoke with emerge in new ways in the conversations. People who, often both by their own perception and that of the world around them, had been regarded as having serious problems, as powerless, hopeless, or not good enough—who, in the conversations I witnessed, in an often loitering journey between questions and answers, gradually emerged in new ways. Both for us who witnessed it, and apparently often for themselves as well.

These were conversations in which we heard about small and large steps and about initiatives people had taken. They were conversations in which I was often moved when I heard these people talk about their thoughts and intentions, and how they had tried, in often creative and fearless ways, to take care of what was important to them. And these were conversations where I was touched when they spoke of the people around them—friends, neighbors, grandparents, stuffed animals, and all sorts of other wonderful beings—who had inspired or supported them and had mattered to them and their sense of purpose in life.

I was then—and I still am today—captivated by those moments in conversations and in life when a person, through often overlooked or entirely new stories, revealed themselves to us, and to themselves, in new ways.

The Special Perspective

In a beautiful passage in his book *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic* (Gilligan, 2000), the American psychiatrist James Gilligan writes about people's desire to feel known enough to be recognized and worthy of another look.

I have a feeling that this is something that often happened when I watched those old VHS tapes: that we saw conversations in which people were, from the start, regarded as worthy of another look. A look that saw not only all the problems they had so often been associated with, but something completely different that was worth knowing about them. And that through the stories told during the conversations, people became known enough to be recognized for something they wanted to be recognized for—both by others and often by themselves as well.

For many years, I have been preoccupied with learning to ask the questions that bring out those kinds of stories, and I know that many of our students at DISPUK have shared that desire: to learn the narrative questions.

But in recent years, my colleagues and I have been talking still more about something that seems to be there even before the questions. Something without which the exact same formulation of a question is still not the same question. A certain context—a look, a frame, a spirit—that adds to the words.

There is something special about the way Michael White and Maggie Carey, David Epston and John Winslade, and all the other narrative practitioners I have admired over the years, meet and look at the people they have conversations with. And I have a feeling that there is something about the way they see people that might be just as important as the wonderful narrative questions, maps, and ideas for documents.

That feeling only grew stronger when I read how Travis Heath invited course participants to describe what he calls *"the spirits of narrative practice*."

And it grew even further when I read David Epston's article *"How Michael White Came Up with the Idea of Externalizing: An Educated Guess"* (Epston, 2020).

Here, he describes how he and Michael White were intrigued by Thomas Scheff's analyses of psychiatric conversations in the 1970s and 80s. According to Epston, in these conversations, the patient had to admit and confess to being to blame to receive treatment. This became a significant inspiration for the development of externalizing practices—as an attempt to counter what he describes as an "internalizing" psychiatric approach.

And when I was finally introduced to Hilde Lindemann Nelson through David Epston's article *"Moral Character, Moral Agency, and the Genres of the Representation of Others"* (Epston, 2022), and I subsequently began reading her book, *Narrative Repair (Nelson, 2001)*, I felt as though she brought certain concepts into the conversation that emphasized that perspective.

Morally Degrading Identities

With Hilde Lindemann Nelson came some very simple concepts for the question I had been asking myself for so long: why was there such a big difference in the effect of the two words—stubbornness and persistence?

The first time I came across her was—as mentioned earlier—in David Epston's excellent article, where he introduces Hilde Lindemann Nelson and her concept *of "respectworthiness."*

She uses the concept to describe "the capacity for a person to convince themselves and others firstly that they were worthy of their own respect and secondly of others" (Nelson, 2001, p. 67). There was something about that concept that immediately caught my attention and made me want to read more.

In her book *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (Nelson, 2001), she introduces, right from the start, what she calls *morally degrading identities*.

First, she points out that identity matters for the opportunities we have in life. She writes that "personal identity, understood as a complicated interaction of one's own sense of self and others' understanding of who one is, functions as a lever that expands or restricts one's ability to exercise moral agency" (Nelson, 2001, p. 11).

She shows how this restriction can occur in two different ways. First, because the way others see us influences how they treat us:

> "The way in which others identify us establishes what they will permit us to do; if they identify us as morally defective, they will perhaps humor us, or hospitalize us, or else treat us with suspicion, contempt, or hostility. This restricts our freedom to act" (Nelson, 2001, p. 11).

Or as she later writes:

> "Identities mark certain people as candidates for certain treatments, and within abusive group relations these treatments are seldom benign" (Nelson, 2001, p. 11).

She is very explicit about the fact that this kind of treatment can be downright harmful:

> "A person's identity is damaged when a powerful social group views the members of her own, less powerful group as unworthy of full moral respect" (Nelson, 2001, p. 12).

But she also points out that a person's identity can be harmed when they adopt and internalize a dominant group's disparaging or exploitative views of the group to which they belong. In such cases, a sense of self-worth—the belief that one is worthy of full moral respect—is weakened or fails to develop at all. She describes this form of harm as a kind of infiltrated consciousness.

Not Just Words, but an Entire Identity

Hilde Lindemann Nelson's book is full of examples of people who are assigned morally degrading identities. She mentions people of color and LGBT+ people, but also mothers, nurses, and women, as examples of groups of people who have been assigned morally degrading identities. She views the assignment of morally degrading identities as a widespread phenomenon.

I can't help but think of my experience on the massage table as an example. I have a strong sense that being identified as stubborn in our culture can be morally degrading: stubborn people are easily seen as inflexible and opinionated, as someone who won't listen to reason. In Danish, there's even a term for "stupidly stubborn," but interestingly no term for "stupidly persistent."

That is perhaps why people identified as stubborn can also become candidates for special treatment: we can laugh at them a little, shake our heads at them, roll our eyes, and talk about them—openly or behind their backs. We can view them as "grumpy old men" or "a bit hysterical," and we may not need to take them entirely seriously but can brush them off and put them off.

The persistent ones, on the other hand, deserve our respect …

Questions for Further Work—and Reading

It's quite a leap I'm taking when I go from talking about Black people, women, and gay people, to talking about people who are called—and thereby assigned the identity of—stubborn. But as I read Hilde Lindemann Nelson, she invites us to ask a few simple questions:

- What words have I begun to use when describing the person I am talking (or thinking) about?
- When I start thinking and talking about a person in that way—perhaps even calling him that, in thought or speech—am I simultaneously assigning him a specific identity? And by extension: Doesn't this often happen in conjunction with the perceptions of a larger, more powerful group?

- Does that identity seem degrading in our culture? Would I myself appreciate being seen as "that kind of person"?
- Am I, by drawing that identity conclusion, simultaneously marking him as a "candidate for special treatment" that isn't benign and thereby limiting his opportunities?
- And does that align with what I intended?

Lately these questions have accompanied me in my daily life. They are with me when I read messages from parents describing their children, whom they'd like me to have conversations with. They are with me in conversations, helping me listen to how the person I'm speaking with has been viewed and labeled, and notice which identities I myself might be on the verge of assigning to them. And they are with me in everyday life, when I read the newspaper or talk with family and friends, and cannot help but notice the assignment of morally degrading identities.

I also had these questions in mind when I read my colleagues' articles in this issue of the journal, and it is my impression that I am not the only one concerned with morally degrading identities assigned in our culture:

It is easy to fall into identifying the shouting, angry, and somewhat threatening female citizen in Lisette Valter's article, and it seems obvious that being seen as shouting, angry, and threatening easily becomes morally degrading, perhaps especially if one is also a woman.

Lasse Hauge writes about how staff, feeling powerless, could speak of a family as "one of the most difficult families we've had," and again I think that being a difficult family could very well be a degrading identity in our culture.

Tine Mølgaard writes about children who react to the cultural structures in institutions—and from the way they react, they are easily identified in morally degrading ways as children with problems.

Camilla Schjørring tells us about Mia, who was received at the hospital by doctors who made her think: "They think that I don't like my child".

Lone Kaae Morell writes about a woman who “fought and lost” and “should have been able to do something”—and in a culture that values winning and action, that seems part of a degrading identification.

In Martin Nevers’ article, there are “victims of bullying” and children “who don’t want to go to a session with a new therapist,” and Olivia Nepper Winther writes about those who are regarded as “vulnerable sources.” When she wonders whether that is a good term to use, I have the impression that she is implicitly wondering if it identifies them in morally degrading ways.

Thinking Is Also Practice

In *Narrative Repair*, Hilde Lindemann writes about descriptions used in such a way:

> “[…] members of a particular social group are compelled by the forces circulating in an abusive power system to bear the morally degrading identities required by the system. These mandatory identities set up expectations about how group members are to behave, what they can know, to whom they are answerable, and what others may demand of them” (Nelson, 2001, p. 12).

I cannot help but think that the identities my colleagues have noted and are countering in their articles are examples of this.

Hilde Lindemann Nelson is quite blunt in her description of the effects of such identifications: “Here we can speak of shattered identities” (Nelson, 2001, p. 12).

It is as if the concept of morally degrading identities has invited me to take notice of my own and our collective practices of identification—which otherwise easily take place in a completely everyday manner and often go almost unnoticed.

It is my impression that we live in a culture where we, often without batting an eye, describe others in ways that assign morally degrading identities to them, but for me, the encounter with narrative practice and now, even more clearly, the encounter with Hilde Lindemann Nelson's terms has made it harder to routinely

identify others without pausing to notice it: to consider how I am describing them and what identity I—and we—might thereby be assigning to them. To consider whether, in Hilde Lindemann's words, we are in the process of "damaging" a person's identity and *respectworthiness*, and to take note of the ways of treating them that become possible through that identification.

This made me think of an interview with the American scholar Donna Haraway. In a passage about what she calls "thinking technologies", she says:

> "I find it important to make it impossible to use philosophical categories transparently. […] Rather, I will foreground the work practice that thinking is." (Olesen et al., 2008, p. 35).

As I read Donna Haraway, her intention is to point out that thinking is a practice we often do not notice—and where we often fail to notice the very real effects that thinking has on how we identify others.

She wants to bring both thinking and the concepts we use to think to the forefront, making them so clear and explicit that it becomes difficult to use them without noticing both the concepts themselves and what our thinking does.

I believe that Hilde Lindemann's concepts have done just that for me: brought some of the ways we—and I—routinely identify others to the forefront as a practice we can notice, examine the effects of, and—if we so choose—change.

Counterstories In Narrative Practice

Since being introduced to the idea of morally degrading identities, it has been a pleasure to recognize a similar perspective in narrative texts when I reread them.

If one—just as an example—reads Michael White's introduction to the work on defining ceremonies in *Maps of Narrative Practice*, he is very explicit in his description of external witnesses as an alternative to what he calls "rituals of contemporary culture that judge and degrade people's lives" (White, 2007, p. 163).

He elaborates on this by writing that “in many of these degrading rituals, people’s lives are measured against socially constructed norms,” and that in the process they are “judged as inadequate, incompetent, disordered, and often a failure in terms of their identities” (White, 2007, p. 163).

In Hilde Lindemann Nelson’s words, one could say that in such contexts, people are assigned morally degrading identities.

I was struck by the word “ritual” when I reread White’s text. Translated into Danish, it might seem a bit mysterious. But I imagine he used it to point out that he was writing about practices that have become so widespread and commonplace in our culture that they have taken on an almost ritualistic character. These might include, for example, grading, parent-teacher conferences, performance reviews, diagnostic testing, and the whole array of practices where people’s lives are measured and evaluated against social norms. Psychotherapy can also take place in this way.

When the woman in Lisette Valter’s article protests, “Yet another meeting about us, which we probably aren’t allowed to attend,” isn’t it because she realizes that it is morally degrading to be seen as someone we talk about, without needing to speak with or listen to her?

Do some of the young people in Martin Nevers’ article, who are reluctant to meet with yet another therapist, perhaps sense that in previous encounters with such adults they have been assigned morally degrading identities and treated in ways they did not appreciate and do their best to avoid subjecting themselves to such identification?

And when Mia in Camilla Schjørring's article thinks that the doctors thought that she doesn’t like her child, isn’t she painfully aware that being seen as a mother who doesn’t like her child is a moral degradation of the worst kind?

Unsolicited, Know-It-All Helpfulness

Because the normalizing gaze is constantly focused on where people fall short, it often leaves us with an impulse—with the best of intentions—to help those we see, even without their asking for it. We try to guide them forward, make them realize where they are wrong, or shape them to fit the norms.

This often manifests as an impulse to do something *to* the person rather than *with* the person; we may feel the urge to help before we've even asked if help is wanted at all—to teach them to control their temper, believe in themselves more, not take things so seriously, or gain more self-awareness.

Our culture is full of this kind of often unsolicited, know-it-all helpfulness—both in professional contexts and in everyday life. And with Hilde Lindemann Nelson in mind, one might ask whether—precisely in our attempt to help—we sometimes systematically end up assigning people morally degrading identities that make them candidates for special treatment, of which the help itself is one example?

Counterstories Can Repair Damaged Identities

It is one thing to be mindful of the morally degrading identities I may help assign to others. But in a culture rife with degrading rituals, we must also ask ourselves what we can do when identities have already been damaged by such labels.

Here, Hilde Lindemann Nelson's approach is very familiar to narrative practice. She refers to counterstories as "tools designed to repair the damage inflicted on identities by oppressive power systems" (Nelson, 2001, p. 13).

Stories whose "aim is to re-identify such people as *competent members of the moral community* and, in doing so, to enable their moral agency" (Nelson, 2001, p. 13).

Stories that make it possible to see the person as a competent moral agent, as she phrases it.

I found myself smiling when I read that, because those are exactly the kinds of stories that captivated me during my first encounters with narrative practice. Stories that re-identified people as competent members of moral communities. Stories about people with feelings and intentions, hopes and dreams.

People who faced difficult situations and did their best to handle them. People who, despite overwhelming circumstances, had done their best to offer quiet or vocal resistance and try to create lives and relationships that were in line with what they preferred.

Or, in other words, competent moral agents.

Is There a Particular Perspective at Play in These Counter-Narratives?

I recently reread Allan Wade's article *"Small Acts of Living"* and noticed that he writes about a series of practices—including narrative therapy—which, according to him, share "the assumption of preexisting ability":

> "This is the view that people attending therapy already possess the inherent ability to respond effectively to the difficulties they face," he writes (Wade, 1997, p. 24).

Michael White touches on something similar when he—in a quote from the article *"Narrative Practice and Community Assignments*," which I usually have with me when I teach—describes how it is one of his assumptions in *community work* that all communities possess knowledge about life that is relevant for addressing the concerns and difficult situations faced by the members of these communities:

> "We also assume that many of these knowledges and skills […] will be either thinly known or relatively invisible to members of these communities" (White, 2003, p. 25).

A third assumption I find time and again in narrative literature is the assumption that people are never simply passively subjected to what hardship life has given

them—that they always respond and that stories can be developed based on the actions they took in response to the problems they faced.

A fourth point could be the idea of what we can "refer to as people's moral character"—an idea that Travis Heath introduced to us at DISPUK, and which David Epston describes in the aforementioned article *"Moral Character, Moral Agency and the Genres of the Representation of Others*."

Epston points to a moral character that people have often been deprived of "as a result of dominant modes of representation that dominated our professions" (Epston, 2022, p. 8).

What emerges for me is a set of *presuppositions* that help us—even before a conversation begins—to assume that the people we meet are competent moral agents, with the ability to respond, with knowledge and skills they draw upon, and with intentions and values they strive to live by.

They also lead us to assume that their moral character is often thinly or "flatly" described in the problem stories or—as Sanni Paljakka points out more precisely—through some of the *labels* and *unstories* that have been used to describe them (Paljakka et al., 2024).

Seeing as a Practice

I find it important to talk about the perspectives created by the *presuppositions* we hold. This is partly because of the risk of narrative practices being taken up and used as tools of normalizing discipline.

In a world full of "rituals that judge and degrade people's lives," we see how people who have "learned" narrative practices risk using those practices in ways that suspiciously resemble normalizing discipline.

A so-called narrative therapist can skillfully declare that "the person is not the problem" and begin what by name is supposed to be an externalizing conversation, but on closer inspection—in very normalizing ways—seems to attempt to make women less angry or boys less restless, driven by a silent

underlying assumption that there must be something wrong with the people themselves, since anger and agitation are constantly "paying a visit."

Such conversations too easily end with conclusions about the benefits of a little more impulse control or other ways to keep anger and agitation in check, which would make it easier to fit in.

My impression is that the "thinking practices" and presuppositions that have shaped narrative practices are as important to learn as the questions themselves.

And the more we articulate some of the presuppositions and 'thinking practices' we might think of as characteristic of narrative practice, the more difficult it becomes to fall into normalizing routines that assign degrading identities to the people we work with.

And in the process of doing so, we might be able to say a great deal about some of *the spirits of narrative practice.*

Looking for That Look in the Other Articles

I think I see those thinking practices, those presuppositions and the kind of gaze they shape again and again in the articles that preceded this afterword.

I think I see it in Martin Nevers' invitations to those he works with: when he writes invitations instead of summons—because an invitation allows a moral agent to decide whether they want to take part in such a conversation, while a summons implies that the person must.

I see the perspective when Martin considers that the young people may have had experiences with therapists and other helpers that make them, as moral agents, hesitant about meeting with a new therapist—and when he tells them about this in the invitation and invites them to a different kind of collaboration.

And I see it, for example, when he writes: "I don't actually know very much about eating disorders, but you already have three years of experience with it, so I imagine what you know about the subject is more than enough"—and in doing so

identifies the young woman as a competent moral agent with relevant knowledge and experience, and invites the establishment of a collaborative relationship that respects those experiences.

I think I see this when Lisette Valter takes the shouting voice seriously instead of simply viewing the woman with the voice as yet another overly angry resident and brushing her off. When she doesn't just hear the protest against staff holding meetings without the residents as mere grumbling but hears it as a relevant objection from a moral agent and responds not just by letting the voice speak, but by listening to it, taking it seriously, giving it influence, and inviting it to supervision.

And when, in her poetic practice, she not only insists on using the voice's own words as they were spoken but also insists that the words contain poetic wisdom that deserves to be written down and read aloud, with all the solemnity a poem deserves.

I see it in the way Lasse notices how people—even in moments of vulnerability—exercise agency through small but meaningful acts.

And when Tine has an eye for professionals who fight an unequal battle daily to bring their professional expertise into play under conditions that stand in stark contrast to what we know is necessary for children's development and well-being.

I see this when Olivia Nepper Winther insists on approaching her sources' intentions to agree to be interviewed with curiosity, and in doing so views them as moral agents who have likely already considered what they hope to achieve by sharing parts of their story with a journalist—even in situations where they know full well that, in the eyes of many readers, these stories may leave them vulnerable to criticism and condemnation.

I see it when she listens to them as a witness and writes witnessing letters in which she tells the people she has spoken with what their words have given her—and in this way makes them moral agents in their relationship with her and in her life as well.

And I see it when Camilla points out that her letter-writing is about writing with the family's knowledge at the center and directs her attention to what Mia's reactions might say about her skills as a mother, her ability to be there for her child or—as a direct counterperspective to that held by the doctors—about how much she cares for Hugo.

We could look at all the articles in this way—searching for signs that the writer has viewed those they write about as moral agents. My claim is that we would find this perspective in all the articles.

I See You—but How Do I See You?

I would like to conclude this afterword by mentioning an experiment conducted years ago by Jacob Birkler, the former chair of the Danish Council on Ethics. In the experiment, he asked a group of nurses to look their patients in the eyes and say, "I see you."

It is touching, but perhaps not surprising, that the eyes of half of the patients filled with tears when they heard this.

The experiment speaks to how important it is to be seen.

Echoing Hilde Lindemann Nelson, I would add that it is not only important to be seen, but just as important, *how* one is identified when seen.

To me, some of the spirit of narrative practice lies in the avoidance of practices that make morally degrading identifications. In an insistence on presupposing that any person who sits in front of me is a competent moral agent. And that no matter how easily they could be—and have been—identified in morally degrading terms, they are worthy of another look.

That look might be just as important to the development of counterstories as the wonderful questions and letter-writing skills we have come to cherish.

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