

RELATIONSHIP, LOVE, SEX AND IDENTITY: IN THE EYES OF NARRATIVE APPROACH TO COUNSELING

Ben Law, Assistant Professor,
Department of Social Work and Social Administration, HKU

Content

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- What is narrative approach
- Dominant stories about young people on love, sex and relationships
- New stories
- Meaning remaking

Ben Law

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- Social worker for more than 15 years in Hong Kong
 - ▣ Provide counseling in school social work setting, family service setting and for families with specific learning difficulties youth
- Training
 - ▣ Structural family therapy from Dr. Lee Wai-yung
 - ▣ Narrative therapy in South Australia
- Relevant research on narrative therapy
 - ▣ M. Phil. at CUHK under Prof. Joyce Ma (2000)
 - ▣ How to use narrative approach for youth cases in school social work setting

Student team

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- Five groups of students will present alternative stories on young people about love, sex and relationship diversity.

What is a narrative?

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- It is the story we have live with ourselves.
- Sometimes we can get through the pain but sometimes we are stuck with the stories
- Changes:
 - ▣ Understanding the themes -> allow rooms for new changes
e.g. a story of family struggle to a story of caring

Narrative is a vehicle leading to change in counseling

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- **Studying** narrative
 - ▣ Beginning, middle, end (Aristotle, Poetics VII)
- **Doing** narrative
 - ▣ We organize our lives within a particular narrative
 - ▣ We **organize our experience and our memory** of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative – stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on. (Jerome Bruner, 1991, p.4-5)

Narrative by sociology (Richardson, 1990,p.117)

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- displays the **goals and intentions** of human actors;
- makes individuals, cultures and societies comprehensible **as wholes**, it **humanizes time**;
- **contemplates the effect** of our action,
- **alters the direction** of our lives

Narrative by anthropology (Oochs & Capps, 1996)

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- Narrative is the fundamental means of **making sense of experience**.
- Narrative and self are inseparable in that **narrative is simultaneously born out of experiences and gives shape to experience**.
- Narrative activity provides tellers with an opportunity to **impose order on otherwise disconnected events**, and to create continuity between past, present, and imagined worlds.
- Narrative also **interfaces self and society**.

For any narrative

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- Basic content
- Higher level content, **meaning or theme**
- Emotion, belief, motivation and behavior attached to the narrative

What is the uniqueness of approach in counseling?

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- It starts from clients' stories, and we believe that story is the most fundamental
- It is the change of clients' stories that will affect lives
- It focuses on the **second order change** rather than first order change
 - ▣ We work with clients together for hope
 - ▣ A new **meaning** to the original problem
- We have to be aware of the obstacles that hinder our understanding of clients' stories
 - ▣ DOMINANT STORIES

Dominant stories

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- Sources
 - ▣ Societal assumptions
 - ▣ Cultural stories
 - ▣ Established theories and knowledge
 - ▣ Normative daily practice for an individual
- Importance of dominant stories
 - ▣ Provide a yardstick to assess a situation, a person, and a system
 - ▣ Provide the legitimacy of social control
 - ▣ Provide an easy referencing for every day lives

Some typical dominant stories

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- A boy with a tattoo
- Stepfather and stepdaughter in Latino families
- The easiest way to get success for young people
- Parents in Hong Kong
- Afternoon session presentation
- <http://www.youtube.com/user/SunLifeFinancial?v=etirtR7-l9c>

Dominant stories about young people's love, sex and relationships

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- Society and cultures
 - ▣ Young people will have sex if they are in a relationships
 - ▣ Young people's relationship is unstable.
 - ▣ Studying is most important, puppy love wastes time
 - ▣ Only boys will approach girls; decent girls should not approach boys in relationships
 - ▣ Boys should pay the bill

Dominant stories about love, sex,
relationship and identity:
Adolescent psychology knowledge



Theoretical Perspectives on Adolescent Intimacy

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- Sullivan's developmental progression
 - ▣ Infancy: need for contact and for tenderness
 - ▣ Early childhood: need for adult participation
 - ▣ Middle childhood: need for peers and peer acceptance
 - ▣ Preadolescence: need for intimacy
 - ▣ Early adolescence: need for sexual contact and intimacy with opposite-sex peer
 - ▣ Late adolescence: need for integration into adult society



Dating and the Development of Intimacy (Montgomery, 2005)

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- Girls
 - ▣ Cross-sex relationships may provide a context for further *expression* of intimacy
- Boys
 - ▣ Cross-sex relationships may provide a context for further *development* of intimacy

The Impact of Dating on Adolescent Development

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- Impact of more serious dating is complicated
 - ▣ Early starters (before age 15)
 - True for both sexes, but research has focused on girls
 - Less socially mature, less imaginative, less oriented toward achievement, less happy with who they are and how they look
 - ▣ Late bloomers
 - Adolescents who do not date at all show signs of retarded social development and feelings of insecurity



The Impact of Dating on Adolescent Development

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- Romance has a powerful impact on adolescents' emotional states
- Adolescents' real and fantasized relationships trigger strong emotions



Sexual Activity During Adolescence

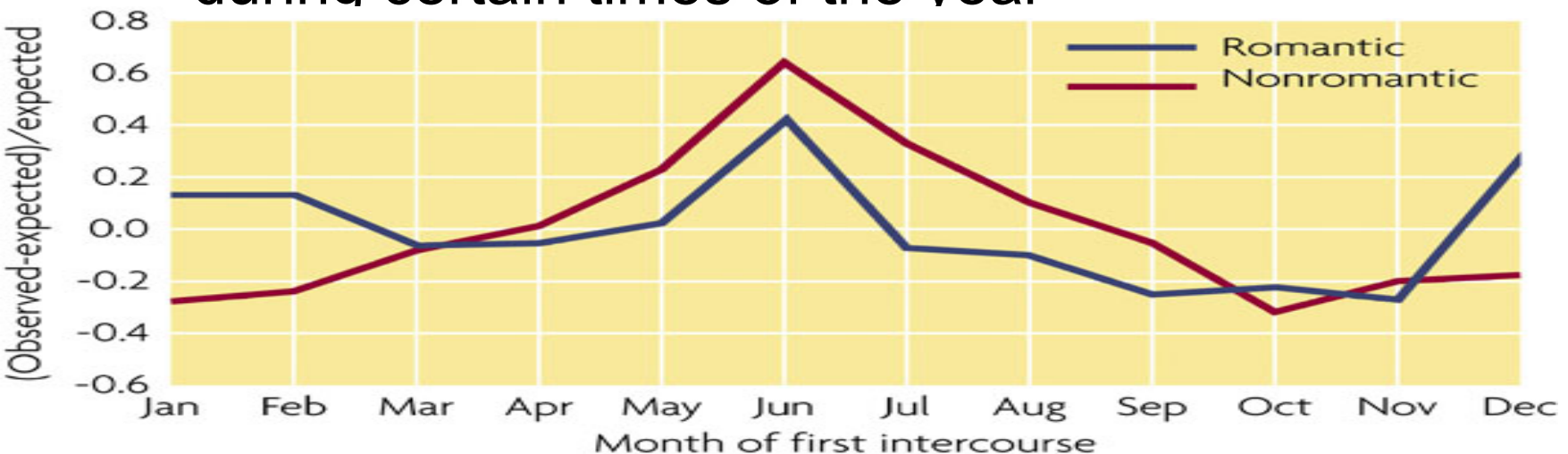
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- Promiscuity in adolescence is rare
- Stages of sexual activity
 - ▣ Autoerotic behavior – sexual behavior that is experienced alone (e.g., having erotic fantasies, masturbation, nocturnal orgasms)
 - ▣ By high school, transition to sexual activity involving another person
- For many girls, first sexual experience is forced
 - ▣ Especially among girls 13 or younger

Prevalence and timing of sexual intercourse

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- Prevalence of sexual intercourse
 - ▣ Slightly fewer adolescents are having sex compared to previous eras
 - ▣ However, those who are do so at a somewhat earlier age
- Adolescents are more likely to lose their virginity during certain times of the year



Pros and cons of dominant stories for counselor

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Good sides

- To check whether adolescents are at risk
- To normalize a situation
- To provide a professional judgment

Bad sides

- To assume adolescents involve in intimacy acts
- Knowledge knows more than the adolescents
- Avoid the active understanding from youth's perspectives

In narrative approach, we intend to be the active listener to the clients, so that the clients can find a NEW meaning to their lives, relationships and identities

Five alternative stories from young people

Relationship, sex and sexual diversity

Let's work together

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- From the start of the presentation to now, what aspect impresses you most?
- Among all the alternative stories, which new story impress you most?

Meaning-remaking

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- Understanding
 - ▣ Passive understanding
 - ▣ Active personal understanding
 - ▣ Dialogical understanding

- All narrative works aim at meaning re-making
- Meaning remaking aims to transform the life themes from “injury” to “hope”, from “dying” to “living”
- Meaning changes from active personal understanding and dialogical understanding

When we adopt narrative approach to counseling young people about love, sex, relationship and identity

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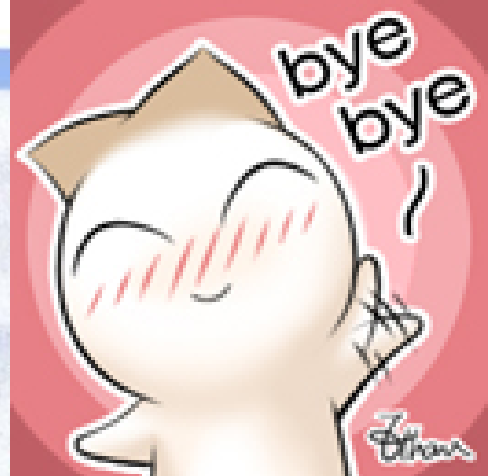
- We have to be aware of our own dominant stories about youth
- To listen carefully about young people about their own perspectives and the meaning
- We are aware of the problems, beliefs, behaviors of clients. We focus more on the personal meaning of the combo of attributes.
- Only through understanding that we can help young people explore new meaning to their lives

Summary

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- Narrative approach aims at listening to the meaning of stories told by clients
- Counselors should be aware of their own dominant stories, especially love, sex, relationship and identity are full of assumptions and ideas from adults' world
- Meaning-remaking is the key to narrative approach





Life is without meaning.
You bring the meaning to
it. The meaning of life is
whatever you ascribe it to
be. Being alive is the
meaning.



(Joseph Campbell)

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