

Christian Narrative Therapy: Reconstructing Identity and Spiritual Healing Through Story

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Abstract: This study examined Christian Narrative Therapy as a psychological and theological framework for identity reconstruction and spiritual transformation. It analyzed how individuals shape their identities through personal stories and how narrative techniques—externalization, reauthoring, and meaning reconstruction—help reinterpret past experiences and reduce existential anxiety. The research explored the role of biblical narratives in Christian counseling, emphasizing how pastoral care facilitates narrative transformation. Additionally, it investigated the therapeutic role of storytelling in managing death anxiety, demonstrating how eschatological hope reframes suffering. By integrating psychological and theological perspectives, the study concluded that Christian Narrative Therapy strengthens spiritual resilience and supports faith-based counseling.

Keywords: Christian Narrative Therapy, Identity Reconstruction, Spiritual Transformation, Existential Anxiety, Pastoral Counseling, Eschatological Hope, Storytelling, Faith-Based Counseling

Introduction

Each individual carries within themselves a unique narrative that shapes their perception of life. Building on this reality, narrative therapy was developed as an innovative approach to psychological counseling in the late 1980s by Michael White and David Epston. Narrative therapy is an approach "based on postmodern, poststructuralist, and social constructivist philosophies" (Çakmak, 2022, p. 320) that explores an individual's identity, personality, and challenges through the stories they construct about themselves. This approach posits that life consists of meaningful narratives, and the therapeutic process helps clients reinterpret and restructure these stories to discover new perspectives and solutions that improve their well-being (Çakmak, 2022, p. 320). In summary, "narrative therapy (NT) is a therapeutic approach that assumes people construct their life stories to explain themselves" (Ghavibazou et al., 2022, p. 1–11).

The essential techniques in narrative therapy include externalizing the problem, identifying unique outcomes, and reauthoring the problem. "The client's internalization of the problem affects their self-confidence and leads to self-blame" (Çakmak, 2022, p. 326). This insight gave rise to the necessity of the "externalization" step in the therapeutic process. Externalization "is a therapeutic approach that encourages individuals to objectify and, at times, personify the problems they perceive as burdensome" (White & Epston, 1990, p. 38). As a result, the difficulties a person faces are no longer perceived as an inherent part of their identity but rather as external factors over which they can exert control. "The problem is not seen as part of the person but as an uninvited guest" (Galvin, n.d., p. 153). This is because "the problem does not compel, force, or determine a client to behave badly. Instead, it guides, persuades, or entices them. It enters their life, harasses them, and seeks to

invade their existence" (Galvin, n.d., p. 124). "Naming, objectifying, and personifying constitute the first step in externalizing the problem, helping clients identify and express it through their own metaphors and perceptions" (Ghavibazou et al., 2022, p. 1–11). Therefore, "the therapist's task at this stage is to help the person recall these [distress-inducing] events, describe them as completely as possible, and then find meaning in them, which can be integrated into the renewed narrative of their life" (Galvin, n.d., pp. 111–112).

Thus, narrating overwhelming situations allows essential aspects—often overshadowed by the dominant problem-saturated narrative—to come to light. "Through this process, individuals succeed in identifying aspects of their life experience that were previously overlooked but are essential—elements that could not have been anticipated merely by analyzing the dominant story" (White & Epston, 1990, p. 41).

A well-executed process of externalization is naturally followed by the identification of unique outcomes, which "encompass a set of actions, skills, thoughts, plans, statements, feelings, and desires, existing even when clients feel overwhelmed by problem-saturated narratives" (Ghavibazou et al., 2022, p. 1–11). Through this process, individuals reframe their problem and redefine their reality.

The narrative therapeutic process, therefore, involves restructuring personal experiences in accordance with preferred realities, providing individuals with a new perspective on their own lives. This approach aligns well with Christian faith, as Galvin (n.d.) observes: "Christianity has a natural point of contact with narrative therapy through its love for stories. The Christian and Jewish Scriptures are filled with stories. The Christian Gospel itself is a story—about the birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ, who was Himself a prolific storyteller" (p. 80). Niebuhr (1997) expands on this idea by asking, "Can we not say that when we speak of God and revelation, we are referring to events that take place in the intimacy of our personal, inner lives, or to what we consider fundamental in our moral consciousness?" (p. 26).

At the level of social Christianity, "the church tells even more stories—about its two millennia of existence, the heroes of faith, its mistakes, and its revivals. [Even] the discipline of preaching includes the art of storytelling" (Galvin, n.d., p. 80). Church services incorporate and reinterpret narratives from the Christian tradition, allowing congregants to engage with their own life stories. Thus, narrative therapy naturally aligns with the theological aspects of faith.

The approach of narrative therapy from a Christian perspective suggests that life's difficulties are part of a broader narrative—the divine narrative. Pennington (2023) states that "often, our faith in God gives us meaning" (p. 8), and the Christian worldview integrates human existence into a divine plan of salvation and restoration.

The theoretical foundation of narrative therapy

Narrative is fundamental to the construction of human identity, providing a means to understand the past, anchor oneself in the present, and project into the future. "In narrative therapy, the goal is shaped around the client's story. (...) Clients are the experts of their own lives" (Çakmak, 2022, pp. 321–322). However, how realistic is an individual's narrative? Rogers argues that personal reality is determined by "a person's perceptual field" (Galvin, n.d., p. 176).

Thus, reality is not a fixed, objective concept but rather a personal construction shaped by one's experiences and interpretations. For this reason, "the narrative therapist is deeply concerned with understanding the client's perceptual field" (Galvin, n.d., p. 176), exploring how they interpret their past and structure their identity in relation to lived experiences.

Anton Boisen, the founder of clinical pastoral education in America and one of the pioneers of modern pastoral counseling in the 20th century, states that "profound human experiences in their mental and spiritual struggles deserve the same respect as the historical texts upon which our Judeo-Christian faith tradition is built. Every living individual, like a human document, possesses an inherent integrity that requires understanding and interpretation, not categorization and stereotyping. Just as a preacher should not seek proof texts to distort them into a desired meaning, so must the individual human text be heard and valued according to its own worth" (Gerkin, 1984, p. 37).

This perspective, which acknowledges individual experiences as having intrinsic value, aligns with the principles of narrative therapy, which emphasize the importance of self-construction through storytelling. Narrative therapy highlights that identity is formed and reformed through the stories individuals tell about themselves. In fact, "we are a story waiting to be told. Our stories provide connections. Stories can connect us with parts of ourselves that we do not normally engage with, such as those from our youth, our traumatized selves, or our future selves" (Pennington, 2023, p. 6).

It is also essential to recognize that many modern psychological concepts are narratively constructed, and their interpretations can profoundly shape an individual's perceived reality. Shotter (1993) strongly argues that psychology has repeatedly created metaphors to describe particular psychological "conditions"—such as "depression" (a widely used metaphor!)—and then allowed these metaphors to take on a highly substantial meaning, as if they were as concretely locatable as the HIV virus. Similarly, Wittgenstein (1953) demonstrated how metaphorical language can spiral out of control and come to present itself as absolute reality (Galvin, n.d., p. 183).

However, constructing a narrative thread is essential for integrating life experiences into a coherent identity. "The self, in its process of growth and maintaining control over the course of existence, combines imagination and the perception of reality to develop a certain intermediate narrative space, within which an interpretive process can begin to take shape" (Gerkin, 1984, pp. 85–86).

The individual's profound need to structure life experiences by confronting and integrating them into a coherent form ultimately defines the first human task, as Kernberg has observed (Gerkin, 1984, p. 91).

This profound need reflects how people construct their identity through the story they tell about themselves. "The idea of a narrative structure in our understanding and experience implies that we organize our experiences in the form of stories. (...) We live our lives day by day, but we understand our life as if it were a story" (Ganzevoort, 2012, p. 216). Thus, the process of narrative integration plays a crucial role in the development of a healthy identity and a coherent relationship with the world.

Moreover, the sense of self-continuity is based on a combination of memory, imagination, and meaning. Kohut (1977) argues that "a healthy individual constructs their sense of continuity and identity over time from two sources: one superficial and one deep. The superficial source is linked to an essential and distinctive capacity of the human intellect—the ability to adopt a historical perspective, to recognize oneself in the remembered past, and to project oneself into an imagined future. However, this aspect alone is not sufficient" (p. 180).

Without the deeper source, however, whose roots transcend the mere chronology of events, the process of self-integration will fail. "If the other, deeper source from which our sense of constant identity arises is depleted, then any effort to reassemble the fragments of the self through a mere recollection of the past will be doomed to failure" (Kohut, 1977, p. 180).

This identity construction through memory and imagination aligns with a fundamental characteristic of narrative—its distinct structure, which includes a beginning, a

development, and an ending. "Like any narrative," states Gerkin (1984), "the story of the self or the deep myth of the soul has a narrative thread that includes a beginning, a continuous unfolding, and a more or less problematic ending" (p. 114).

Bradatan (2015) connects the discovery of life's meaning to one's ability to narrate it. He asserts, "Since to understand something means to be able to tell a story about it, a person's life has meaning insofar as it can be narrated" (p. 7). Storytelling, therefore, is not merely an exercise of memory but an active process of identity construction and the integration of life experiences. In fact, "telling a story often involves our attempt to make sense of the chaos of the deeds we have done, in order to construct a self" (Hauerwas, 1976, p. 344).

If, at the individual level, storytelling helps us make sense of our own lives, at the collective level, religions have always used narratives to structure human experiences within broader frameworks of meaning.

Narrative therapy and religion

Religion has always used stories to communicate spiritual truths and to help individuals understand their life experiences in the light of faith. Scripture is filled with narratives that serve as models for interpreting human existence. "Many (perhaps even most) contemporary biblical scholars work with narrative approaches, without necessarily adopting a fully narrative perspective. (...) The goal of [narrative] therapy is (...) to deconstruct limiting stories and to construct new and viable ones" (Ganzevoort, 2012, p. 217). Thus, narrative therapy not only analyzes the structure of personal stories but also actively reinterprets them to support identity and spiritual development. Pennington (2023) states, "Often, we do not see God in the traumatic event unless we intentionally seek His presence" (p. 6).

The narrative approach, therefore, brings a shift in perspective on truth and on how life experiences are structured. Furthermore, "modern practical theology (...) usually starts from the premise that (...) a narrative approach changes the perspective on knowledge and truth" (Ganzevoort, 2012, p. 218).

Ultimately, "in the process of creating new meaning and purpose in life, spirituality plays an important role in shaping an individual's actions and experiences" (Çakmak, 2022, p. 323). "In one way or another, people's stories are connected to stories about and of God. Liturgy and rituals incorporate and reinterpret narratives from the spiritual tradition, allowing contemporary congregations to participate with their own life stories" (Ganzevoort, 2012, p. 214).

The interconnection between personal and collective narratives highlights the fundamental role of religious tradition, which provides a rich repertoire of images, symbols, and themes through which believers can structure and understand their existence. As a result, individuals come to relate to biblical events in a personal way—renewing the meaning of their own lives—and congregationally, integrating themselves into the community's narrative.

Moreover, Gerkin (1984, p. 62) emphasizes that personal integrity can be shaped by the integrity of the religious community: "From the biblical and theological tradition, we draw a wide range of images, symbols, and narrative themes that provide us with a language through which to reflect and, at times, communicate at this level of profound understanding. We are not left entirely on our own; rather, we rely on the richness of our religious community and its tradition. The integrity of this tradition grants integrity to our perspective, giving it shape and an orienting horizon."

Thus, Christianity not only offers theological answers but also a practical method through which individuals can reinterpret their lives in the light of the divine narrative.

Narrative therapy provides an essential framework for understanding human identity through the stories individuals construct about themselves. This perspective highlights that personal identity is not fixed but undergoes a continuous process of interpreting and reinterpreting life experiences. Integrating a coherent narrative helps individuals make sense of their past, anchor themselves in the present, and project their future in a meaningful way.

From a religious perspective, Christians have always used narrative to provide an interpretive framework for human existence. In this regard, narrative therapy and spirituality converge, offering individuals a language through which they can restructure their experiences in light of a deeper meaning. Scripture is not only a source of theological authority but also a narrative model through which believers can shape and reinterpret their own life stories.

Narrative therapy in pastoral counseling

Every individual, including Christians, shapes their identity around a dominant narrative that reflects how they interpret their life experiences. However, this narrative can become limiting or even destructive when it is marked by suffering, failure, or trauma. In this context, pastoral counseling can provide a safe space for the reinterpretation of one's personal story. But when and under what conditions do Christians seek pastoral counseling? Gerkin (1984) observed that this happens when "they need someone to listen to their story [because] it is tangled; it involves themes, a narrative thread, and conflicts. (...) Their [personal] interpretation has become painful, and the emotions generated by this interpretation are intense and conflicting" (p. 26).

In such painful moments that are difficult to bear alone, the believer seeks "a listener who is an expert in interpretation, someone who can make sense of things that threaten to become meaningless, someone whose interpretation of the story can reduce pain and make intense emotions more manageable" (Gerkin, 1984, p. 26). Thus, the role of the pastoral counselor is to help the individual identify the key points of their story and reorganize them in a way that reflects hope and the possibility of transformation.

A foundational training in the person-centered approach is essential for the therapist, as it enables them to affirm, empathize with, and offer unconditional positive regard to the client. In narrative therapy, problems are viewed as external to the individual—social constructs that affect them but do not define them. The therapist must not only understand the client's perspective but also actively co-create new ways of interpreting reality. "The skills and self-reflection from person-centered therapy remain essential in pastoral-narrative counseling" (Galvin, n.d., p. 176–177).

The role of the empathetic witness—whether a therapist, counselor, or pastor—in the therapeutic process is essential for validating and restructuring the personal narrative. Cooper-White (2012) even considers that "the practice of witnessing is sacred" (p. 29). She explains the importance of the witness as follows: "By serving as witnesses to another's suffering—perhaps for the first time in a truly empathetic way—we can facilitate this process of deep recognition of the other's pain" (p. 29). Thus, the witness allows the suffering individual to feel seen, understood, and valued, which is crucial in the healing process.

In pastoral counseling, the narrative witness does not merely listen but creates a bridge between the individual's story and a broader vision of the meaning of their suffering. The client finds meaning once they succeed in integrating their problem into their personal life story, the social narrative, and the divine narrative. "This in itself can be transformative, even if not every situation can be changed. There are losses that can only be mourned: a failed marriage, the loss of a child through abortion, the harm caused to others by one's own negligence" (Anderson, 2001, p. 241). Cooper-White (2012) argues that the narrative

therapeutic process can lead to "a new life," as it allows for "a renewed and continuous productive evolution" (p. 29).

Another crucial aspect of Christian narrative therapy is its anchoring in an eschatological perspective, in which the Kingdom of God provides a framework for restoration and hope. Anderson (2001) contends that therapy must be understood beyond its psychological dimension and that the Kingdom of God can serve as a context for healing. "We must recognize," Anderson states, "that therapy offers more than psychological restoration. The goals of therapy go beyond the elimination of physical or emotional dysfunctions" (p. 241).

Jesus Christ demonstrated through His life and teachings that personal health and well-being are not isolated aspects but are deeply interconnected with social and spiritual relationships. Anderson (2001, p. 235) highlights Jesus' concern for the "integration of the whole self" as follows: "Jesus did not specialize in individual therapy as a clinical procedure—although He did not refuse to offer such help. His concern was for personal health and well-being that belong to persons created in the image of God. He called for the integration of the whole self and pointed to the healing and purifying power of an inner life directed outward—toward others and toward God. He demanded the integration of religious truth with social concern."

Through this theological lens, suffering is reinterpreted not as an insurmountable reality but as a process that can lead to transformation and spiritual maturity. Thus, retelling events through the lens of God's presence not only helps Christians find meaning but also enables them to recognize the moments when He was actively present in their lives, even in the midst of difficulties.

Narrative therapy and the fear of death

A study conducted with 56 elderly participants found that narrative therapy significantly reduced death-related anxiety and improved ego integrity, helping them find meaning and dignity in the aging process (Ahn, 2017, p. 2945–2954). The results of another study showed that person-centered narrative therapy has a positive effect on increasing happiness levels and reducing death anxiety (Heidari, Amiri, & Amiri, 2021).

Narrative therapy also helps bereaved individuals express their grief and find new meaning through the reconstruction of their life story. By externalizing suffering, they can rewrite narratives that reconnect them to their inner strengths and the memory of the deceased. In doing so, they develop a renewed perspective on life, integrating loss in a way that honors the values of their loved one (Positive Reset Mental Health Clinic, 2023).

Psychiatrist Avinash De Sousa argues that "narrative therapy can help individuals reconfigure their perspective on death, constructing a stronger and more meaningful narrative" (De Sousa, n.d., p. 1). Similarly, Martin (2009) contends that the fear of death, which "paralyzes" humanity, has only one antidote: a correct understanding of "Christian teachings on the afterlife" (p. 31–40).

The fear of death plays a fundamental role in shaping personal narratives, influencing how people interpret their past, present, and future. In this sense, narrative therapy can provide a framework for individuals to rewrite their story in light of the Christian promise of eternal life. Integrating the Christian vision of death transforms this fear from an absolute threat into a transition toward a new stage of existence.

Although *Psalms 90:12* urges believers to "number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom," Keller (n.d.) observes that "there has always been the danger that people live in denial of their own death. Of course, we intellectually and rationally know that we will die, but deep in our souls, we repress this thought and act as if we will live forever" (p. 8).

Often, the suffering caused by the fear of death remains unprocessed and misunderstood, leading to dissociation and isolation. However, "dissociation creates new suffering because it becomes disconnected from its traumatic origins, remaining incomprehensible and untreated" (Cooper-White, 2012, p. 26). He suggests that by staying in contact with suffering, it becomes integrable, despite its tragic nature—to fully experience suffering means to carry a seemingly unbearable burden. However, through its capacity to generate meaning, suffering offers the possibility of enduring it without denial or suppression. The construction of new meanings in relationship with others allows for the sharing of burdens and connects individual suffering to a broader social and spiritual context, where God's presence becomes more tangible (Cooper-White, 2012, p. 26).

One of the essential aspects of narrative therapy in confronting the fear of death is the process of reminiscence, which becomes particularly valuable in the final stages of life. Through reminiscence, "a person reconnects with the events and moments in their life that hold the greatest significance, bringing them into their present perspective and exploring the meaning of their life as a unified journey approaching its conclusion" (Galvin, n.d., p. 132). Moreover, recalling meaningful moments is beneficial at any stage of life and does not necessarily have to be prompted by a problem. It can serve as a means of constructing the landscape of consciousness. "At any moment, it can be valuable for a person to recall times in their life when they acted with nobility, to reflect on the significance of these moments (that is, to build a landscape of consciousness), and to integrate this into a new narrative that enriches their perception of their life story" (Galvin, n.d., p. 132).

In a Christian context, narrative remembrance has "an additional dimension through the recollection of special moments that a person would identify as 'the hand of God' in their life" (Galvin, n.d., p. 137). This process allows experiences to be integrated into a coherent—even divine—story, providing a sense of fulfillment and reconciliation. Thus, the Christian can focus on aspects of the past that, despite pain, have led to remarkable personal growth, expanding their perspective on both their own existence and the world at large.

Another important aspect of narrative therapy concerns the "socially distributed survival of the deceased's personality in the stories of the bereaved." Galvin (n.d.) argues that an individual's personality does not belong solely to themselves but continues to live on in all who have ever known them. Thus, the deceased's personality persists, contributing to the process of grief management and helping the bereaved find meaning in their loss: "My personality does not live only within me. It lives in all those who have ever known me. I was born into a community, I learned to speak my mother tongue in and through a community, and I became a person through interaction with others in a community. Who I am is unique, but much of me is borrowed from others. My father, my mother, my sisters, my brother, my elementary school teachers, my close family, my mentors, and my closest friends are all 'within' me and contribute to shaping who I am, just as I am 'within' them and contribute to shaping who they are. When I am absent from them—whether by travel or by their death—I do not cease to be the person I am; that which constitutes me continues to exist" Galvin (n.d., p. 129).

Furthermore, the Christian's life narrative, being integrated into the narrative of Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection, can transform death-related anxiety into an experience of liberation and hope. This is possible due to the countless promises of resurrection and eternal life, addressed to all whose life "is hidden with Christ in God" (*Colossians* 3:3, ESV). Thus, Christian narrative therapy becomes a bridge between the reality of death and the hope of resurrection, facilitating its acceptance as part of a divine plan of restoration.

Conclusion

The ultimate goal of narrative therapy is to construct a "new set of images (...) that structure a new story—one that is less painful and more hopeful. The raw past experience, now gathered into new containers of meaning and integrated with a new experience provided by the counseling relationship, gains new significance, and a path forward emerges" (Gerkin, 1984, p. 28).

Monk (1997) emphasizes how reframing life experiences can shift one's status from that of a victim to that of a strong and victorious individual in life's struggles: "Narrative therapy embraces an optimistic orientation. The main character in the story is often positioned in conversation as a courageous victor rather than a pathologized victim—as a vibrant individual with rich stories to share, rather than a hopeless person living a miserable life" Monk (1997, p. 4). This perspective allows believers to see their sufferings not as isolated events, but as parts of a larger divine plan, where every trial has a purpose and can be transformed into an opportunity for spiritual growth.

It is essential for pastors and counselors to recognize the profound impact of personal stories and to create a space for listening and reinterpreting experiences. Pastoral counseling thus becomes a process of narrative reconstruction, where individuals are guided to rewrite their story in a way that brings hope and clarity. The pastoral counselor's role is not merely to listen but to help reframe suffering within a redemptive framework. Through this process, believers can shift their perspective from one of despair to one of spiritual renewal and transformation.

At the heart of Christian narrative therapy lies the fundamental truth that those who are in Christ experience a new identity and a new way of living. As Nelson (2012) explains, "Those who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit no longer live according to the patterns of the world. They love as Jesus loved and live as Jesus lived. They are a new people living a new story" (p. 49). This transformation is not merely psychological but deeply spiritual, as believers move from a fragmented and pain-filled narrative toward one that is redeemed, whole, and infused with divine purpose. Yet, the Christian journey does not end with personal healing—it extends outward. Just as Christ redeems and restores, believers are called to be a source of healing for others. This is why Guder (1998) affirms, "We are blessed to be a blessing" (p. 236). Bonhoeffer (1978) expands on this truth, stating, "When God was merciful to us, we learned to be merciful to one another. When we received forgiveness instead of judgment, we were also prepared to forgive one another. What God has done for us, we are obliged to do for others" (p. 24).

The renewal that takes place through Christian narrative therapy is not just for personal healing but also equips believers to extend encouragement, wisdom, and spiritual guidance to those in need. "The beauty of a narrative approach," writes Galvin (n.d.), "lies in the fact that it allows the pastor to help the individual create new realities" (p. 136).

In Christian narrative therapy, the intertwining of one's personal story with the divine narrative serves as the foundation for healing and spiritual renewal. This approach not only reshapes individual identity but also situates it within the broader redemptive framework of God's restoration plan. By integrating faith and storytelling, Christian narrative therapy becomes a transformative tool for reconciliation and renewal, guiding believers toward a deeper understanding of their journey. It fosters spiritual growth, restores hope, and reframes suffering as a meaningful chapter in God's greater story of redemption.

More than a means of healing past wounds, Christian narrative therapy empowers individuals to embrace a renewed identity—one that testifies to God's grace and redemptive power. Reflecting on its profound impact raises the question: How can faith communities more intentionally cultivate this perspective and create spaces where stories of struggle and redemption are embraced as part of God's unfolding plan?

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