

Utilizing a Narrative Therapy Model When Approaching Intimate Partner Transition

Coltan Schoenike

University of Wisconsin – Stout

INTRODUCTION

In a field (and society) that continues to move from pathologizing transness to normalizing and affirming it as a simple diversity in the human experience, it is essential to recognize that therapists now more than ever are intentional in their approach and modality when it comes to working with transgender individuals and those who love them (Malpas, 2012). Throughout history, there has been precedent – likely due to the aforementioned pathology – that transgender people were unlovable and undesirable. It was believed that, even if they just so happen to be in a committed and loving relationship at the time of their starting to transition, that surely their transness would be the very doom of that relationship (Twist et al., 2017). However, this is not the case and it is shown that transgender people, just as anyone else, can have wonderful, fulfilling romantic relationships (Platt, 2018). Having said that, it does not mean that couple systems where a partner transitions are not without their own unique dynamics and experiences that they will face. As a therapist, it is essential that a correct approach is utilized in order to provide therapy that is both affirming of the transitioning partner, as well as validating of the non-transitioning partner. One such approach, is Narrative Therapy.

NARRATIVE THERAPY

Developed by Michael White and David Epston, narrative therapy focuses primarily on its very namesake – narratives. At a very basic glance, narrative therapy works to look at the narratives and stories that exist in couples' lives and help them to turn the stories on their heads, ideally leaving them with new and exciting outlooks on their lives and their futures. When beginning with couples, the therapist will listen to very superficial, introductory stories that begin to form a pattern that they can plot in a chart that shows the general trajectory of what the client has thus far given them. As time progresses, the therapist will continue to hear more stories

and narratives, enough to make their plotted chart slightly more complicated. From there, the therapist can highlight the complexity of human experience, and show the clients that a single story is not the end-all, be-all of their experience, and that there is so much more to their lives than this one narrative they have been experiencing (Freedman & Combs, 2008).

This approach to a client's experience is a significant factor in why narrative therapy is particularly efficient when working with clients where there is a dynamic or other experience of oppression and marginalization, such as couples where a partner transitions. A significant likelihood with clients of marginalized backgrounds is the experience of negative self-narratives and stories because of the hateful rhetoric that has historically been (and is still currently) broadcasted far and wide by dominant groups. This is a reason narrative therapy is a great model as well for therapists who work with a social justice lens, regardless of the background of their client (Combs & Freedman, 2012).

TRANSITIONING COUPLES

As mentioned previously, being transgender is becoming widely more accepted, and the possibility of being openly transgender in a romantic relationship is more realistic than society had ever thought before. But there are absolutely some unique experiences that occur in a couple with a transitioning partner that competent therapists will need to be aware of.

First and foremost, it will be absolutely essential that the therapist is affirming and respectful of the transitioning partner. This will include using affirming language in session, as such is a priority in being an affirming therapist. Affirming language may look like respecting the pronouns that a client has indicated to you would be appropriate for when addressing them (same goes for any new names that might be mentioned), matching language in how the client

has self-identified in regard to their gender, and at the very bare minimum honors and validates their self-designated existence (Malpas, 2012). This will be vital to a competent therapist for multiple reasons: it may cause undue harm or stress to the client and may also compromise rapport with the client at both an individual level as well as when the therapist is working with them in a couple setting if the client feels they are not respected at a very basic human level.

In addition to considerations for the transgender partner, there must also be attention made toward the cisgender partner, which can become slightly more complicated. Cisgender partners will have a wide variety of emotions and reactions to the transition of their partner – some positive, and some negative. It will be especially important as the therapist to navigate the couple in a way that can both validate everything the cisgender partner is going through with this transition – for better and for worse – without allowing any negative emotions or reactions to invalidate the transgender partner as a consequence (Platt & Bolland, 2018). Of course, this can become quite the balancing act for the therapist, but it is quite an important one. Losing a therapeutic alliance because of imbalance could be detrimental to any potential of performing meaningful and impactful work that can give this couple the help that they need. The help a competent therapist can provide could prove to be a vital support system that is often essential for these relationships to survive transition (Twist et al., 2017).

NARRATIVE AS INTERVENTION

Because of its very nature, narrative therapy is a prime tool in a therapist's repertoire to handle situations of couple transition. In addition to already being a solid choice due to social justice considerations that allow it to be successful across categories of difference like race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and so many more, narrative therapy is especially ideal because of many of the experiences a couple going through this process will have (Combs & Freedman,

2012). For couples in this context, several different types of thoughts and experiences, both good and bad, are reported to be common. For many, some of the negative experiences that are reported consist of entirely re-navigating their senses of physical, sexual, and emotional intimacy with their partner as well as redefining their entire view of sexual orientation for themselves. On the other hand, they often report a newfound appreciation for the spectrum of gender and gain a better understanding of themselves and their partner (Platt & Bolland, 2018). With this information, it is no wonder that something like narrative therapy can be especially helpful for transitioning couples. In regard to the many things that will need to be redefined such as their intimacy and even sexual orientation, narrative therapy is a perfect way to facilitate that dialogue. Mapping out the narratives and other stories will show the couple all that is possible for them regarding this situation, and remind them that the one option they think they have for any of those questions is not the only way it could possibly go. The most important thing will be to figure out what is comfortable for the both of them, and create a narrative around that.

Externalizing questions, for one, would be really helpful throughout this process for the couple. Asking questions about things like what “society” says regarding their identities and the relationship will remind the couple that, at the deepest level, they are dealing with social constructions, not their own constructions. Separating like that will be able to give the couple the room to be able to create their own narratives surrounding what they think is normal and acceptable. In many instances of transgender relationships, cisgender partners feel a sense of shock when a partner can finally come out and be their authentic self (Platt, 2018). When that happens, the therapist should explore what about their partner coming out was particularly shocking, and what narratives specifically led to that reaction of shock within their body? What options exist as alternate narratives that they could adopt instead?

With the mentioned example of implications for sexual orientation identity as a consequence of a partner transitioning, this will be a prime location to work with the couple in regard to changing narrative. If, for instance, the couple intend to stay together and still love each other, but the cisgender partner finds significant struggle with adapting their sexual orientation identity to “match” (which itself is its own complicated social construct and dominant narrative) what would be expected for someone of their gender being with someone of their partner’s newly lived gender, there could be a lot of discomfort and stress around that topic. To make matters worse, perhaps the cisgender partner is currently uncomfortable with the proposed label change, but the transgender partner feels that their partner maintaining their original sexual orientation identity despite the transition is something that feels incredibly invalidating of their gender identity. This sounds like a difficult situation, and one that many couples in this circumstance experience (Platt & Bolland, 2018).

Perhaps with the cisgender partner, a narrative they may hold may regard the privilege and power that is at play with them being a cisgender person who is romantically involved with a transgender person. To ignore the dynamic and pretend it doesn’t exist would be irresponsible, and perhaps they have begun to instead internalize the story of power and oppression and think that, whenever they act in or defend their own best interests, it somehow further oppresses their transgender partner. In working with the couple, it would be beneficial to explore times that they have stood up for their transgender partner and it felt good. In addition, it will be helpful to have the transgender partner vocalize the times they have specifically felt defended and advocated for, as well. With this in the open, both partners will be able to better see that the cisgender partner really and honestly cares about the transgender partner, and vice versa. From there, a new narrative can be formed that each of the partners cares about the other, despite what social

hierarchy may suggest. They will then be able to have better and more intentional conversation about what each other's needs are, assess how it impacts the other partner's needs, and find a compromise that will leave them with a better sense of understanding for each other, more mutual respect, and also a generally better sense of satisfaction. With the sexual orientation debacle, perhaps this new understanding will allow the both partners to recognize social narrative that suggests identity and behavior correlate but establish their own narrative that makes generous room for exception. From there, the cisgender partner can comfortably still identify with whatever label feels right for them even if it is "incorrect" by society's standards, and the transgender partner may engage with their partner and validate their sexual orientation, while also understanding that their gender is valid despite what that identity label would normally suggest, and at a bare minimum, they were so attractive to their partner that they proved to be an exception to the rule.

CONCLUSION

Transitioning in relationships is a circumstance that will not be going away anytime soon, and it is imperative that therapists are competent in meeting the unique needs of these relationships, for sake of not harming the therapeutic alliance and causing further harm to an already marginalized person (Malpas, 2012). With such rigorous dominant narrative influencing every aspect of minoritized lives such as those of transgender people, it is obvious that narrative therapy is an appropriate model for addressing the needs of the couple through separating those dominant narratives and allowing the couple to blaze new trails and have maximum input in what they want their own story to look like (Combs & Freedman, 2012).

RESOURCES

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