‘Is it because I’m gormless?’ A commentary on "Narrative therapy in a learning disability context : a review"

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Commentary

‘Is it because I’m gormless?’ A commentary on “Narrative therapy in a learning disability context: a review”

McParland’s paper illustrates the value of narrative work in helping people with learning disabilities to explore long-held, damaging stories about themselves. He also makes some interesting observations in respect of lack of information available in the literature on which he based his study.

When reading the article I was reminded of my first contact with a man with learning disabilities.

Bob’s narratives

I was a social worker with a community learning disability team in the early 1990s and had received a referral from a mother in her 80s who wanted help with future planning for her 53 year old son, ‘Bob’. Bob’s father had died 15 years earlier and his mother was now concerned about what would happen when she died. When I first made contact with Bob I asked the usual question, ‘Do you know why your mum has asked me to meet with you?’ His immediate reply was, ‘Is it because I’m gormless?’

For readers unfamiliar with the North of England colloquialism, the term ‘gormless’ is used to mean stupid or lacking in understanding. I was touched by Bob’s low self-esteem and his personal construct of himself as something faulty.

The initial assessment revealed that Bob, a white British man with a mild learning disability, had attended school for a week when he was 5 years old in the 1940s. At the end of his first week the head teacher had called Bob’s father into school and told him that he did not believe that Bob would be able to learn anything at the school. He also feared that Bob would not be able to help himself, or put on his gas mask if there was an air raid. From then on Bob spent his days either in the back of the family shop with dad or with his mum. The family never received a diagnosis for Bob. They did not like the term ‘backward’ which was frequently applied to him by family and neighbours. Instead they chose, what they believed to be the more socially acceptable ‘gormless’.
As we worked together it became apparent that Bob had picked up some valuable skills in his father’s shop. Within weeks of us working together he had secured paid employment in the local bakery. The manager of the baker’s shop, which by then occupied his father’s premises had ‘allowed’ Bob to undertake low skilled tasks for him for more than a decade. This job was formalised and Bob was employed as ‘an apprentice’ whereby he was given a small wage which increased incrementally as he learned new skills. It became apparent that several of Bob’s mother’s friends relied on him to shop for them.

Bob’s mother was surprised how quickly Bob became more independent. She had believed the narrative written for her 5 year old son by a man who had known him for one week in the 1940s. This narrative stayed with the family for almost half a century with neither parent recognising how much Bob ‘helped’ out in the family shop and elsewhere. They, and Bob, simply saw the difficulty he had in learning to read and write.

During our last contact I asked him if he still thought that he was gormless. He smiled and replied, “not always”.

This experience will be common to many readers who have spent time with people with learning disabilities who have extremely low self-esteem. Belief in a narrative learned from influential others can affect individuals and families for life, if not replaced by more positive narratives. Bob’s life improved, not through therapy but because he began to learn a different narrative about himself, eventually becoming able to tell a new story about himself as a wage earner and a valued member of the community.

It is important for people with learning disabilities to inhabit positive stories and for these to be promoted in general society. Bob’s stories illustrate this well. His initial story confirms the view, held by some people, that people with learning disabilities are unemployable. His second story challenges this notion not only for Bob but also for his community. His change in economic status, moving from being unemployed to employed, was unusual for people in his locale during a time of economic recession.

Similarly, McParland’s work, drawing together seven case studies, challenges a practice narrative, held by some mental health professionals, that the cognitive
Limitations of people with learning disabilities means that they cannot benefit from psychological interventions (Hurley 1989). The case studies that he has presented reveal imaginative ways of helping people with learning disabilities to tell different stories about themselves.

This leads to the other aspect of the article that interested me, the difficulty in finding sufficient accurate data when undertaking a literature review. Empirical research must be reported fully and accurately from design through to findings. It is often complex and multi-faceted; making the art of reporting within the word limit of academic journals quite a challenge. Authors may feel required to choose between reporting the ‘story’ and reporting the ‘science’ of their research. Secondary reporting, such as in a literature review, can be as challenging as primary research because the decision to précis the work of other authors can be fraught with danger.

The importance of storytelling in research

There has been an interesting debate rumbling around psychology circles recently. The debate centres on a large scale registered replication project, which was undertaken and reported before all the results were fully known ((Etchells 2014, Klein et al 2014, Schnall 2014). The subsequent backlash against the replication project included accusations of lack of rigour, including trying to replicate parts of projects rather than an entire project (Schnall 2014). Important details appear to have been omitted either during some of the attempts at replication or in the reporting of them.

This highlights an important point; that research design and reporting must tell the whole story. McParland has provided a good example of this, exposing the paucity of available literature, and the lack of detail available within some of it. For example, it may be possible to draw some comparisons between ‘Paul’s’ story, as described by McParland, and that of Bob because we know that they are both white British and in their early 50s and their stories have some similarities including holding a negative understanding of themselves.

Influenced by this information, we might attempt to compare the efficacy of narrative therapy used with ‘Paul’ with that of Bob’s support, influenced by the principles of Social Role Valorisation (Wolfensberger 1983). Both men eventually benefitted from specific interventions and were able to tell new stories of more successful selves.
However, while we know that both men share some characteristics, there are gaps in our knowledge that might influence whether or not ‘Paul’ and ‘Bob’ should find themselves in the same study. Take family background and socio-economic status as examples. Bob was the son of a business owner; a butcher in war time Britain was held in high esteem, the family lived in relative affluence. As readers, we do not have the same level of detail about ‘Paul’. And without sufficient details we run the risk of focusing on the symptom rather than the cause of a person’s distress.

Lack of detail of the characteristics of research respondents is a common problem in the reporting of a lot of learning disability research as I recently found when tutoring students on the BSc. Integrated Practice in Learning Disability Nursing and Social Work programme. The students were required to undertake literature reviews for a module assessment. One of the first questions asked by the students was “how many pieces of literature should we review?” I suggested a figure of five to eight peer reviewed articles, which should then be discussed in light of policy guidance and other grey literature. This reflected the short time that they had to produce the work.

Several students struggled to identify five peer reviewed articles, none of them reviewed eight. Issues of access to some databases and cost of gaining copies of articles aside, it became apparent that major problems occurred during the hand sorting of potentially promising literature. Students repeatedly stumbled over poor reporting of participant detail. Common difficulties included lack of clarity in respect of the following:

- Overshadowing of diagnoses, i.e. did the literature focus on people with a learning disability or mental health problems?
- Terminology, especially conflation of learning disability and learning difficulty.
- Gender and age of respondents/ participants/ research partners.
- Overshadowing of other circumstances such as ethnicity, spirituality or socio-economic background.
- Lack of detail in research design.

Reporting and analysis of research findings also proved to be problematic. In several instances authors were unclear about who their respondents were. For example, when researching how people with learning disabilities are supported to express
their spirituality one student found a promising study. The study used questionnaires
to ask people with learning disabilities about religious and cultural beliefs and about
their opinions of support. On closer reading it was apparent that some of the
questionnaires had been completed by people with learning disabilities but many had
been completed by parents and carers. The study lacked detail regarding this
anomaly; were people with learning disabilities ‘dictating’ answers or were others
making assumptions about their opinions? Lack of detail about the levels of support
needed by the respondents with learning disabilities impacted on the generalisability
and usefulness of the paper.

As McParland reminds us, Narrative therapy may help to thicken the stories of
‘problem-saturated’ people with learning disabilities, and in doing so help them and
others to recognise more positive aspects of their own stories. Narrative approaches
to research reporting may help practitioners and academics to thicken their stories
so that readers can begin to apply research findings to practice with greater
confidence.

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