

Book review

Retelling the Stories of our Lives: Everyday Narrative Therapy to Draw Inspiration and Transform Experience. David Denborough. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014, xiv + 310 pages, CDN\$ 23.00 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-393-70815-8

Reviewed by Fernanda Carrá-Salsberg, PhD¹
York University

In *Retelling the Stories of our Lives: Everyday Narrative Therapy to Draw Inspiration and Transform Experience*, David Denborough presents a well written, detailed and easy to follow account of an alternative form of psychotherapy. Guided by his personal and professional experiences², this Australian therapist informs his general audience of the significance of understanding affective occurrences and of bearing witness to stress evoking events through the act of writing and sharing. He points to the isolating nature of mental illness, trauma, loss and melancholic sense of personal failure. Denborough highlights the ways in which narrating aspects of one's life, or of the lives and experiences of loved ones, relinquishes sufferers' sensed passivity, while creating a space for the externalization of socio-affective and psychological circumstances affecting subjects (pp. 74-77). This text draws attention to the value of human connectedness, of feeling understood, and being empathetic and/or sympathetic towards others. It asks readers to challenge cultural labels, acknowledge individual strengths and embrace difference.

This book is composed of ten chapters, five per section. The first section traces the noteworthy effects of reconceptualising inner and social experiences. It highlights the importance of drawing strength from those who validate ongoing efforts, acknowledge injustices and thus provide subjects with a sense of emotional safety. Denborough explains how for individuals, narrating about positive aspects of their lives and selves influence their actions and redefine their identities³. The second section of this text

¹ Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Fernanda Carrá-Salsberg, Department of Languages, Literatures and Linguistics, York University, Toronto/Canada. E-mail: fcarra@yorku.ca

² Part of this book is based on collaborations and conversations Denborough held with the late social worker and founder of narrative therapy, Michael White, and by experiences presented by White's former colleague, David Epston (p. viii). Much of the collected data is also taken from White's previously unpublished papers, gathered and presented by the Michael White Archive at the Dulwich Center (pp. ix, x).

³ In this his text David Denborough suggests that the way in which individuals tell selective aspects of their lives shapes the sense of who they are, and who they wish to become. These words parallel those of the linguist Aneta Pavlenko (2007) who, after analysing published self-narratives argues that writers use language to symbolize, interpret their worlds, position themselves as subjects and give their lives meaning across time (p. 164). Even though Pavlnko makes reference to published self-narratives, while Denborough discusses the effects of writing personal letters, charts, lists, etc., readers can nevertheless appreciate how writing

conceptualizes the implications of trauma and loss, and addresses the negative effects of cultural expectations. This section also draws attention to the importance of valuing diversity in character. It stresses the significance of constructive memories and points to the benefits of understanding subjects' own personal and shared existence as part of a continuum of legacies.

Both sections address the benefit of documenting and sharing personal hardships, goals and achievements. They emphasize the empowering effects of having a voice, and finding comfort with past and present, as well as real and imagined audiences. Denborough describes the non-linear process of –positive- change. He invites his readers to reflect on their lives and take a thoughtful, hands-on approach to recording stress-evoking experiences. This therapist explains how to understand and manage challenges with the use vignettes, visual illustrations and letters, and provides examples of ways in which to document and share experiences by offering templates of charts, graphs, diagrams, questionnaires, certificates, spiritual testaments and non-material wills.

In his first chapter, “A Life of Stories”, Denborough offers a model for reclaiming one's storylines through selective descriptions of lived occurrences. By highlighting specific events of his own childhood as examples, he explains how deciding on what and how events are shared alters the conceptualization of individuals' own realities and sense of self (p. 4). He defines the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of identities and highlights the implications of recognizing how sexist, racist, homophobic, and abusive lenses mark the manner in which subjects perceive their occurrences. Equally important, this therapist underlines the importance of externalizing such views, and –once again- embracing socio-emotional aspects worth remembering and sharing.

Chapter two, “We Are Not Our Problems” maintains the significance of identifying and externalizing psychological, emotional and social stressors. Denborough explains how personifying problems and understanding their triggers lessen their negative influence(s). With an emphasis on narrative theatre and interviews, this chapter continues to support the worth of re-writing life stories, and the significance of drawing strength from a supportive audience (pp. 41-43, 53, 69). Chapter three, “Finding the Right Audiences for Our Stories” points to the value of compassion, understanding and empathy. Denborough stresses the fruitfulness of taking proactive steps to understand and overcome difficult problems. He highlights the significance of contributing to friends' and loved ones' experiences as acknowledging witnesses. As seen earlier, this chapter supports the worth of sharing and receiving supportive feedback. After having worked with prisoners and individuals living in social isolation, Denborough also recommends writing letters to imagined audiences, explaining that such an act can also be conducive to writers' positive change.

In connection with the aforementioned chapter, chapter four, “Teamwork and Remembering Who is important to Us”, focuses on the significance of membership and thus, of the therapeutic aspects of being part of a supportive team of individuals (p. 87). In this chapter Denborough presents the idea of creating a ‘team sheet’ for one's ‘club of life’. He explains that such list may include imaginary and/or real friends, as well as

to actual or imagined audiences influences subjects' claim and (re)interpretation of their past and present realities.

religious figures, and even pets. This list, continues Denborough, may contain the names of individuals who are alive, and/or deceased (p. 93). As always, this therapist highlights the importance of documenting goals and keeping a list of scored accomplishments. He also invites his readers to create a diagram representing their individual and collective achievements (p. 103), and reinstates the significance of celebrating accomplishments. Denborough outlines the worth of being attached to subjects' 'better judgements', and points to the importance of staying connected with those who have introduced us to positive thoughts (p. 107).

"Life as a Journey: Migrations of Identity" analyses the benefits of understanding the way in which individuals respond to sudden transitions (p.121). Denborough looks into the manner in which personal changes lead to migrations of identity (p. 123), and speaks of the unsettling feelings that may follow such vicissitudes. The importance of writing and sharing letters is stressed once again, as is the documentation of goals and responses (pp. 130-132). He explains that during times of drastic change experiencing "backlashes" in the forms of fears and/or negative feeling is natural. He suggests that predicting and externalizing such setbacks makes the process of change and that of reclaiming one's life more manageable (pp. 141-142).

The sixth chapter, "Questioning Normality and Escaping Failure", invites individuals to challenge cultural expectations, re-consider the definition of normal and honour diverse forms of living (pp. 147,149). Denborough asks his readers to resist cultural pressures, suggesting that socio-cultural influences often lead to self-criticism and a sense of personal failure. He stresses the benefit of documenting and appreciating one's distinctiveness (pp. 152-153, 155, 160-162, 168). In this chapter, as read in all other chapters, Denborough continues to stress the importance of active listening (p. 150). In "Reclaiming our Lives from Trauma and Honouring What's Important to Us", this therapist offers coping strategies for individuals affected by trauma. He highlights the importance of cherishing individuality and honouring the qualities that make survival possible. He explains that even if a response becomes blocked and consciously forgotten, "no adult or child is a passive recipient of trauma" (p. 177). All subjects, argues Denborough, "take action to minimize their exposure to trauma and decrease their vulnerability to it" (p. 177). This therapist reiterates that connecting with compassionate individuals while reclaiming our lives influence the manner in which we understand our reality, perceive occurrences, and therefore act (p. 184). This chapter reinforces the significance of honouring acts of resistance, and of forging a stronger bond with others and oneself to overcome trauma (p. 198).

"Saying Hello Again when we have Lost Someone we Love" addresses the value of transforming the experience of grief and carrying legacies of loved ones who have passed away. Here Denborough rejects the cultural expectation of "saying good bye". He suggests that the Western notion of "finding closure" and hence anticipating an end to the relationship one holds with loved ones can be difficult to tolerate and/or conceptualize (pp. 211, 213). Denborough emphasizes the Western paradox of mourning and acknowledges Freud's theory through a reference to Barbara Myerhoff's (1982) work. In this section he highlights how in Western societies, regardless of the profound loneliness, need and isolation mourners experience following their loss, individuals are often expected to "move on" and adjust to the idea of leaving behind the relationship held with those who pass away (p.213). Following Freud, Denborough challenges such expectation by inviting mourners to reincorporate the memory of those who perished into their

present: to remember stories, honour their lives through prayers, and write letters highlighting memories and overall feelings (p. 213).

In this chapter, while addressing the guilt that often rises following the death of abusive individuals, Denborough stresses the importance of self-forgiveness and understanding (p. 239). He briefly returns to a theme presented in the introductory chapter by once again making reference to how socio-cultural signifiers and expectations influence subjects' self-other perceptions and identities. He thus mentions how issues of gender, ethnicity, etc., affect the way individuals cope with grief. Denborough also emphasizes that feelings of loss can be further complicated with experiences of physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse (pp. 238-239). Once again Denborough draws attention to the benefits of writing, suggesting that when subjects under the experiences of grief, guilt, and isolation, they should find comfort in writing and sharing their work with an imagined or real audience.

Chapter nine, "Legacy and memory: When we are facing our Final Chapter", discusses ways for readers to think of their mortality. Here Denborough stresses the benefits of focusing on the positive memories individuals leave behind (p. 246). While remaining with the theme of memory and loss, this chapter also draws attention to the fears that rise from being diagnosed with the early onset of dementia. This therapist discusses the challenges of preparing for one's physical passing, while he addresses the separate, yet perceptually interconnected experience of anticipating the eventual absence of one's short-term memory. The emphasis is once again placed on the significance of writing letters and asking family and friends to preserve and cherish the love and memories we leave behind. Denborough re-introduces the benefit of creating a spiritual will of legacies, proposing we should see our lives as a part of an important process that lives on despite our physical passing.

In the tenth and final chapter, "Where does our Story Fit in the Bigger Picture", Denborough points to the importance of linking our lives with those who came before, and those who came –or will come- after us. He suggests that challenging and/or embracing our ancestors' actions, as well as their priorities, hopes and dreams aid(s) in the beneficial reconstruction of our own identities (pp. 271-272). In this chapter Denborough asks his readers to consider to the changes that can be taken up for the sake of future generations (p. 287). As read in chapter nine, this therapist highlights the spiritual and emotional importance of conceptualizing our existence as part of a spiritual continuum. Once again, Denborough provides his own, as well as others' experiences. He describes the significance of forging a connection through letters written to past and/or present, lived and/or imagined individuals, and guides his readers with important points to consider when writing their own letters (pp. 286-287). As always, in this final chapter Denborough continues to stress the emotional importance of sharing one's writing with others.

As mentioned throughout this review, *Retelling the Stories of our Lives* highlights the significance of investing in actions that concretely grant us the power to change the views of our past, present and future. Denborough emphasizes that as social beings, we are enriched by the existing and/or imagined presence of those who offer us spiritual and emotional comfort. He points at the manner in which our worlds become deepened by those who -knowingly and unknowingly- perceive our existence as part of a continuum of memories and legacies. This writer does a wonderful job at inspiring and granting his readers a sense of purpose. His book is empowering; it offers tools to help conceptualize

and verbalize realities, ongoing actions and self-other perceptions. Equally important, Denborough addresses the importance of empathy and forgiveness, and the consequence of embracing one's existence with a renewed interpretation of the journey we know as life.

While this therapist makes no reference to the dynamics that take place within our third space, and thus to the defenses triggered within the constant interplay of our private and shared, conscious and unconscious realities⁴, Denborough's words indirectly reflect psychoanalytic practice through his rejection of passivity. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud explains that being unwillingly passive when exposed to sudden and/or ongoing danger, intensifies subjects' unpleasure. This is a condition that results in the unconscious deployment of defenses meant to counteract the ego's sensed hopelessness (pp. 138, 141-142). As explained thus far, actively overcoming one's crises, as well as one's sense of doom and/or despair in the face of physical and/or emotional trauma(s), loss and melancholia, is central to Denborough's approach.

That being said, academics and psychoanalysts may still feel that certain sections in *Retelling the Stories of our Lives* could have benefited from direct references to psychoanalytic theory. There could have been a more in-depth discussion of trauma, mourning, melancholia, and of dream interpretations as wish fulfilments, or as repetitions of the moment(s) of trauma. The same could be said of the absence in addressing subjects' histories of affect, and, as argued by Freud in "Observations on Love and Transference", of the advantages of transference within and outside of the analytic setting (p. 347). Yet, scholars and therapists must bear in mind that Denborough's aim was to offer to a general audience the unmistakable benefits of narrative therapy. His book presents simple descriptions of consciously perceived events, offering step-by-step illustrations of how, through the act of writing, subjects may consciously transform perceptions of experiences and cope with life's short and long-term problems. Once again, *Retelling the Stories of our Lives* draws attention to the importance of sharing and externalizing experiences. Denborough highlights the emotional significance of human connections, albeit at the conscious level. He stresses the value of experiencing a sense of socio-affective belonging and continuity through time. In his book this therapist informs his audience –patients, relatives, friends and professionals- that focusing on positive aspects of our actions, and documenting concerns, wishes, and achievements, alters the way in which we see ourselves, define our existence and therefore behave within the interconnected fluidity of our personal and shared realities.

⁴ Our social interactions, knowledge, perceptions and behaviours are not limited to isolated layers of conscious, preconscious and unconscious dynamics, but on the interaction of the subject's split worlds within the area known as the third space. As argued by Britzman (2006), this third space is an area in which self-other interactions become governed by an unconsciously shared "give and take"; it is a terrain through which we unknowingly respond to others' psychic histories and resulting affect as much as others respond to our own history of affect (pp. 42-44 and 49).

Biographical Note

Fernanda Carra-Salsberg has been a postsecondary foreign language educator for the past fifteen years. Born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, her interest in language, culture, migration and identity formations stems from her repeated migrations as a child and an adolescent, and from experiences as a language pedagogue. She has taught English as a Second language and Spanish. Carra-Salsberg is currently teaching advanced Spanish Grammar and Spanish for Native Speakers at York University, Canada.

Carra-Salsberg has obtained a BA (hns.) in Spanish Language, Literature and Linguistics at York University, a B.Ed. in Second Language Acquisition and History at OISE, University of Toronto, a MA in Spanish at the University of Toronto. She has recently completed her PhD in language acquisition, language philosophy and psychoanalysis at the Faculty of Education, York University.

Rereferences

- Britzman, D. (2006). *Novel education: Psychoanalytic studies of learning and not learning*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Denborough, D. (2014). *Retelling the stories of our lives: Everyday narrative therapy to draw inspiration and transform experience*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Freud, S. (2006). Beyond the pleasure principle. In A. Phillips (Ed.). *The Freud Reader*. (pp. 132-195). New York, NY: Penguin Group.
- Freud, (2006). Observations on love and transference. In A. Phillips (Ed.). *The Freud Reader*. (pp. 341-353). New York, NY: Penguin Group.
- Pavlenko, A. (2007). Autobiographic narratives as data in applied linguistics. *Applied Linguistics*, 28, 163-188.