

Psychotherapeutic Narratives and the Importance of Truth

Authors : Spencer Jay Knafelc

Abstract : Some mental health practitioners and theorists have suggested that we approach remedying psychological problems by centering and intervening upon patients' narrations. Such theorists and their corresponding therapeutic approaches see persons as narrators of their lives, where the stories they tell constitute and reflect their sense-making of the world. Psychological problems, according to these approaches to therapy, are often the result of problematic narratives. The solution is the construction of more salubrious narratives through therapy. There is trouble lurking within the history of these narrative approaches. These thinkers tend to denigrate the importance of truth, insisting that narratives are not to be thought of as aiming at truth, and thus the truth of our self-narratives is not important. There are multiple motivations for the tendency to eschew truth's importance within the tradition of narrative approaches to therapy. The most plausible and interesting motivation comes from the observation that, in general, all dominant approaches to therapy are equally effective. The theoretical commitments of each approach are quite different and are often ostensibly incompatible (psychodynamic therapists see psychological problems as resulting from unconscious conflict and repressed desires, Cognitive-Behavioral approaches see them as resulting from distorted cognitions). This strongly suggests that there must be some cases in which therapeutic efficacy does not depend on truth and that insisting that patient's therapeutic narratives be true in all instances is a mistake. Lewis' solution is to suggest that narratives are metaphors. Lewis' account appreciates that there are many ways to tell a story and that many different approaches to mental health treatment can be appropriate without committing us to any contradictions, providing us with an ostensibly coherent way to treat narratives as non-literal, instead of seeing them as tools that can be more or less apt. Here, it is argued that Lewis' metaphor approach fails. Narratives do not have the right kind of structure to be metaphors. Still, another way to understand Lewis' view might be that self-narratives, especially when articulated in the language of any specific approach, should not be taken literally. This is an idea at the core of the narrative theorists' tendency to eschew the importance of the ordinary understanding of truth. This very tendency will be critiqued. The view defended in this paper more accurately captures the nature of self-narratives. The truth of one's self-narrative is important. Not only do people care about having the right conception of their abilities, who they are, and the way the world is, but self-narratives are composed of beliefs, and the nature of belief is to aim at truth. This view also allows the recognition of the importance of developing accurate representations of oneself and reality for one's psychological well-being. It is also argued that in many cases, truth factors in as a mechanism of change over the course of therapy. Therapeutic benefit can be achieved by coming to have a better understanding of the nature of oneself and the world. Finally, the view defended here allows for the recognition of the nature of the tension between values: truth and efficacy. It is better to recognize this tension and develop strategies to navigate it as opposed to insisting that it doesn't exist.

Keywords : philosophy, narrative, psychotherapy, truth

Conference Title : ICPPP 2023 : International Conference on Philosophy, Psychiatry and Psychology

Conference Location : Vancouver, Canada

Conference Dates : May 22-23, 2023