

Truth, Reconciliation and Racial Unification in America: Using Michael White's Narrative Practices in Facilitation Conversations about Race

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ABSTRACT

On the 31st of December 2019, a report was made by the Wuhan Municipal Commission to the World Health Organization about a novel coronavirus through a cluster of cases of pneumonia. This first-of-its-kind report subsequently led to series of global health crises that ultimately led to declaring the coronavirus a public health emergency of international concern. This pandemic has in the past years revealed the socioeconomic inequalities that have plagued the country and are deeply rooted in racial disparities despite government efforts at ensuring equitable distribution of resources.

While race conversation remains very uncomfortable for a lot of people in America, the need for a more engaging and educative method for having these conversations is necessary. This article aims to explore the potentials of utilizing Michael White's Narrative Practice Methodologies (Externalizing the conversation on race; Re-authoring the race conversation; Re-remembering racial conversation; The racial definitional ceremony) in race-based conversations. These methodologies, through skilled practitioners of narrative medicine who will act as guides in the conversations through a workshop-styled format, helps facilitate these conversations. It is hoped that ultimately through community organization, community responsibility, these conversations would help create a more inclusive and realistic approach to racial unification, healing, and social equity in society.

INTRODUCTION

"Sometimes it takes a natural disaster to reveal a social disaster". - Jim Wallis.

Since the declaration of the coronavirus as a public health emergency in 2020, the virus has hurt and continued to harm the American people disproportionately. The effect of the virus notably affects communities of color more than others. These effects justify what activists have consistently referred to as the persistent social injustice and racial inequality in society despite claims of progress. This also showcases the need for a more proactive way of addressing race-based issues. For instance, studies conducted on the effects of the virus have shown racial and ethnic differences in people's experiences with the virus and people of color are more affected economically and in their health circumstances compared to others. The study by the Pew Research Center showed that Hispanics and Blacks were affected the most by the loss of jobs as a result of the virus (49% Hispanics, 36% Blacks, and 29% Whites) with most Blacks lacking the financial reserve to cover emergency expenses. Also, one in four Black adults (27%) mentioned knowing someone who was hospitalized or dead as a result of

the virus, doubling the percentage among Hispanics or White adults (13% each). (Lopez). The need to have race-based conversations that will help create social awareness and promote equitable distribution of opportunities is more important now than ever.

This is an avenue for Narrative Care Practitioners to explore the opportunities in honoring the central role of narrative medicine practices in health advocacy and social justice. Practitioners trained in narrative care practices or Narrative Medicine should take responsibility for facilitating these race-based conversations. By itself, "Narrative Medicine is a clinical and scholarly movement to honor the central role of story in healthcare" (DasGupta 2014, p.6); while in social engagement, the process of storytelling also creates an avenue for newer individualized stories that reveal personal and community histories which otherwise would have been suppressed by dominant narratives find expression. Therefore, having conversations around race-based experiences, disparities and the accompanying social injustices within societies can help create the needed awareness and social movements that would ensure social equity.

NARRATIVE MEDICINE AND COMMUNITY-BASED COMMISSION ON RACE

Narrative Medicine entails a clinical humanity approach that utilizes people's narratives as a way to promote healing. While the healing promoted through storytelling can be a complex and multifaceted phenomenon for those not trained in the science, the ideology embedded in the arts of witnessing told stories, personal essays or memoirs, and autobiographies has shown the impact storytelling has on its witnesses and its ability to create alternatives to dominant cultures and ideologies.

The utilization of narrative medicine in race-based conversations needs both the collective will of the people as well as adequate representation. In storytelling, witnessing efforts must include and prioritize a sustainable, operable methodology that ensures effective communication and clinical listening that is offered through the practice of narrative medicine. While this article is not aimed at forcing the difficult conversation of race, it is a call to action for the development of race-based conversations – where narrators from different races not only come to be heard but also to listen to others. It is hoped that in the process of becoming witnesses to one another's racial stories we can have effective race-based communication as well as become witnesses to one another's race stories. That way we also engage the dangers posed by single dominant stories. This article ultimately aims at discussing the opportunities within utilizing narrative medicine practice as a culturally appropriated tool for racial advocacy, social justice, and racial understanding.

Ideally, it is not enough to have a group of people gather, share their life stories and how their race affects them while having practitioners guide their engagements. Importantly, is the ability to scientifically utilize these reproducible methodologies at any time and place. Michael White's narrative methodologies have greatly influenced the practice of family therapy globally, with his works with individuals, couples, families, groups, and communities largely influenced by his narrative approaches at counseling and therapy. Because White's methodologies have consistently worked in family therapy practice, and the race-based conversation is not considered a form of therapeutic engagement, this article would propose the development of community-based commissions, as a possible platform to be developed for these race-based engagements through the narrative care practitioners.

These commissions through a multi-staged community setting will systematically encourage storytelling centered on the lived experiences of different racial representations and their effects on everyday living. Participating members to be involved in these race-based conversations should cut across the various race and ethnicities officially recognized in the United States within their respective communities. These representations should include but not be limited to Whites or European Americans; Blacks or African Americans; Hispanic or Latino Americans; Asian American, American Indians, and Alaskan Natives, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islanders, and those identified as multiracial.

An example of a not-perfect, yet profound conversation occurred in South Africa after the end of apartheid. Known as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, it was vested with the responsibility of identifying victims of gross human rights violations as witnesses, these victims were then invited to give statements about their experiences, out of which a few became selected for a public hearing. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, although marred by what critics claim to be an uneven representation, was still able to act as an integral part of the transition of the apartheid country of South Africa into a democracy.

To have community-based commissions and learn from the pitfalls of similar commissions in other parts of the world. We must incorporate a culturally competent witnessing strategy for a safe and brave conversation space; encourage the healing of participants irrespective of race or ethnicity through mutual understanding of our interconnectivity as members of the same community. With this, we can address the social injustices and racial divides experienced in our communities. These community-based commissions must be facilitated by narrative care practitioners and community members alike with a focus on using storytelling as a means of race conversations and healing. It is hoped that this article will generate in its readers either privately or collectively a consciousness for genuine conversation around race and ultimately create an interracial and cross-cultural engagement.

THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

Storytelling tends to create interactive processes through which individuals can come to terms with others' lived experiences. This reflection of recreative prowess builds relationships, creates understanding, and brings about witnessing that can unify us. Recruited volunteers participating in these conversations should reflect the realities of their socioeconomic groups through their shared experiences prompted by the facilitators. These engagements, mirrored in a narrative medicine workshop format generally can occur weekly or as deemed fit by participants. With facilitators as guides, utilizing prompts to generate conversations, transitioning from one methodology to the other once the conversational goals are achieved or extended as deemed necessary by participants and facilitators. To ensure participants can express themselves, the facilitators should create an enabling environment for honest and safe conversations with participants having mutual respect for one another.

This article will now examine the methodologies expressed within Michael White's *Maps of Narrative Practice* as a roadmap for a successful race-based conversation with the hope of culminating such into healing, justice, and more cultural democratization as opined by Makungu Akinyela- a renowned expert in cultural issues, social justice and narrative approach to therapy. These methodologies are utilized by the narrative care facilitators in guiding these

race-based conversations. It is hoped that this article will not just appeal to academia but almost anyone interested in joining in a genuine conversation around racial unification.

MAP TOWARDS RACIAL CONVERSATIONS

“My lifelong fascination for maps has led me to look at them as a metaphor for my work with people who consult me about a range of concerns, dilemmas, and problems” (White 2007, p.4).

As maps help with navigation and guide us in unfamiliar terrains, likewise stories and lived experiences can provide clarity and connections into our journeys in life. One of the strategies to be employed during the conversation includes encouraging volunteers to share individual stories. This aims at putting perspectives into the individual’s lived experiences. “Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower and humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity” (Adichie 17.37). By encouraging individuals to share their stories, participants begin to redefine their identities, challenge the problems of single-story and dominant narratives that often exist through distorted histories leading to societal stereotypes.

It is noteworthy that narrative practitioners as facilitators should proactively support participants in navigating tensions and uncomfortable conversations. During conversations, the process of unlearning can sometimes occur especially when witnesses identify and appreciate the dangers of the effect of behaviors and subconscious attitudes towards others based on societal stereotypes. This unlearning when coupled with education and enlightenment experienced during these sessions more than often would lead to empathy towards each other’s racial experiences. The methodologies expressed in White’s conversation maps give participants the insights for effective race-based conversations.

METHODOLOGIES FOR RACE CONVERSATION USING WHITE’S CONVERSATION MAPS

White’s conversation maps encourage the equitable distribution of participants' discussion, the balance of power, and the opportunity for subtle realities to become magnified and witnessed by others. Witnessing each other’s lived experiences also helps decolonize predominant cultures and allows for newer opportunities for better cultural understanding. While this novel concept has not been used in race-based conversation, its reproducibility affords a necessary advantage for utilizing individual stories as a component of bigger community stories. While ensuring facilitation is done in a culturally democratized environment, narrative practitioners through prompts will begin to guide participants in initiating and maintaining conversations, utilizing the narrative conversational steps outlined by White:

- Externalizing the conversation on race.
- Re-authoring the race conversation.
- Re-membering racial conversation.
- The racial definitional ceremony.

The ability of these steps to be reproduced and easily adaptable even in non-clinical settings can set a progressive path for these racial conversations.

EXTERNALIZING THE CONVERSATIONS ON RACE

In serious race-based conversations, White's methodology suggests that problems must be separated from individuals. This does not necessarily mean being absorbed from taking responsibility for race-based actions or inactions, but rather, builds a basis for understanding that a problem is a problem and not the person. Narrative practitioners as guides do not interfere in the conversations, but rather, allow narrators to share their individual race-based experiences in their everyday living. These shared experiences, as it relates to family, access to health, education, experiences with the police, or interrelationship with members of other races are guided to ensure they do not deviate totally from the theme.

As these storytelling sessions begin to reflect individual identity, it is not unusual for racial conversations or problems to seem as if they were internal to self or the selves of others. This internal psychology of individuals or others being the problem might then try to take hold of the conversations and cause a further sinking into racial issues rather than solutions. When these occur, it is suggested that facilitators through their narrative expertise guide and redirect these conversations into the specified themes.

When externalizing the conversation of race, White encourages the focus of such conversations to be on issues experienced by narrators through the objectification of the issues by themselves rather than objectifying the victims or perpetrators. Through such objectification and externalization, there is a "separation of individual identity from the identity of the problem" (White 2007, p. 26). This, he said, helps participants separate the problems – a proposition where the problem becomes the problem, not the person; from the person. As the externalization process takes over the conversations, people become aware and begin to naturally strip the truth status off historical stereotypes. These truth-stripping acts subsequently shift the power dynamics between raised racial issues and individuals.

RE-AUTHORING THE RACE CONVERSATION

Sometimes, during conversations, there are times when a narrator's storytelling session shifts into expressing painful realities experienced. Allowing these detailed painful conversations through narrative guidance is highly encouraged, because, in so doing, the thoughts, feelings, and actions of such individuals otherwise only shaped by language can be allowed the free expression necessary both for the narrator and the witnesses alike. The witnesses, who also doubles as partakers of these stories through this experience begin to fill even the story gaps in their own lives by internally guiding the narrator's conversation through their imaginations and utilizing their mind's ability to be stretched in understanding the experiences shared by narrators.

As narrators continue to share their tough life experiences, witnesses also recruit their own lived experiences, finding an interjection of both through a robust, thickening, and non-linear characterization of what is heard and what their own experiences are in history. This is then expected to assign values, commitment, and beliefs that allow a connection between the hearer and the sayer in a way that what is said, even though painful, is understood through narrative witnessing. This process of re-authoring conversation also distinguishes narrators and makes them active mediators in giving meaning to their own lives while sharing their experiences and predicaments. This, in turn, helps build collaborations with listeners who identify with those realities shared.

Re-authoring conversations aim to invite people to develop and tell their stories, it helps narrators include some neglected but significant events and experiences that are otherwise unaligned with dominant stories popularized in their communities. This creates an entry point for witnesses into these alternative stories that have been suppressed, ignored, and sometimes forgotten. By so doing, ownership of such stories is claimed by the speaker. As this fuller participation and authorship of narrators' lived experiences emerge, narrators' creativities through storytelling, poetry, music, visual arts, and other creative methodologies should be encouraged and employed to enable easy reconciliation of the thoughts of the narrators with the spoken words.

RE-MEMBERING RACIAL CONVERSATIONS

Another conversational step in White's narrative methodology is the process of re-membering in racial conversations. This crucial step creates background relationships between the voices of significant ideologies that influence personal stories and the individual identities associated with them. These associations between the identity of the speakers and the perceived identity of the speaker by participants, when revised through the narrative process, create what White calls re-membering. The re-membering subsequently leads to a re-evaluation of the existing concepts attributed to the identities involved. Simply put, the review of the narrators' as well as witnesses' identities through the process of re-membering would determine what identity belief is worth retaining and which is worth relegating – another crucial part of deconstructing dominant identity narratives. A deconstructed identity, decentralized from existing stereotypes would ultimately create the opportunity to challenge preconceived narratives and ideologies of identities which would otherwise not have been possible without listening to and witnessing multiple stories.

As participants begin to pick turns in narrating their lived experiences, re-membering conversations enable narrators and witnesses to begin to recognize themselves as membered identities in the association of life. This encourages the perspective of more than one person about the narrator to be heard in a multivoiced manner. To harness the power within storytelling in contributing to the development of a multivoiced sense of identity, these shared themes ranging from isolated to collective cases of racial experiences must be encouraged by facilitators to be given expression. When expressed, these heard stories would eventually help witnesses with the retelling of the narrator's stories.

Once the narrator is done with their story, witnesses are called to share what they hear or experience from the narrator's stories. They are called into the world of retelling the narrator's stories in ways that create connections with events that have shaped their own lives just as it had shaped the life of the narrator. This simple act will constantly evaluate and establish that individual lives are joined to the lives of others around shared and precious themes. And with many re-telling comes welcomed voices into the dialogues that create connections through historical dots and re-membering.

While this article does not intend to trivialize the collective memories of individuals and any associated inequalities and injustices; it, however, does recognize the enormous power of storytelling and re-membering conversations in such settings. The understanding of witnesses' relationship with significant events in their own lives as well as the life of the narrator displaces the concept of passivity otherwise experienced in casual conversations. These mutual contributions create a resurrection through their vocalized wounds that set the

stage for conversational healing that could also be worth addressing by the facilitators.

THE RACIAL DEFINITIONAL CEREMONY

“Sometimes conditions conspire to make a generational cohort acutely self-conscious and then they become active participants in their own history and provide their own sharp, insistent definitions of themselves and explanations for their destiny, past, and future. They are then knowing actors in a historical drama they script, rather than subjects of someone else’s study. They “make” themselves, sometimes even “make themselves up”, an activity which is not inevitable or automatic but reserved for special people in special circumstances” (Myerhoff 1982, p.100)

In her book, Myerhoff illustrated the concept of empowerment that comes from storytelling through an example of an identity project done in a community of elderly, poor, and neglected Jews in Venice, Los Angeles. These elderly Jews, having been deprived of important reflections in their own lives due to their loss of loved ones during the holocaust. They were noted to be at risk of isolation and being invincible even to themselves. However, with the help of a devoted and talented community organizer – Maurie Rosen, a sense of community was built in Venice for them with an opportunity to tell and retell their stories, perform and re-perform the stories of their lives. Through this act, they were able to reappear on their terms in the eyes of community members and in the eyes of outsiders who were invited to participate. This ritualistic engagement is an example of what Myerhoff calls a definitional ceremony. In storytelling, the definitional ceremony helps create an acknowledgment in the life of the narrator as well as empowerment that helps narrators own and assume the role of authors of their own story.

A similar definitional ceremony structure moderated by facilitators in a stepwise approach can simulate such definitional ceremonies during these racial conversations - The first stage includes significant race-based storytelling, guided through prompts, by the narrators; the second stage includes the retelling of the narrated story by participants who have been invited as outside witnesses and the third stage involves the retelling of the witnesses’ retelling and this is usually done by the narrator for whom the definitional ceremony was conducted. (White)

One of the contributions of the definitional ceremony in race conversations is its ability to overcome the existential threat posed by racial disparities and injustices especially to narrators during the process of telling or performing those experiences of trauma stories in their lives before an audience of witnesses. The process of re-telling such stories creates within narrators recognized themes and social values which they share with the witnesses who re-tell their stories. This moment brings an acknowledgment that in itself is considered therapeutic for both groups. For witnesses, the acknowledgment and authenticating of stories said or performed by narrators will, in turn, create an accompanying humanization of such experiences.

While difficult stories by themselves could be traumatic in their experience and recall process, an effective engagement is of immense importance for those willing to share. Sometimes as the narrators find expressions for these trauma stories, they might experience difficulties in the use of language as an expressive medium for it. Facilitators can encourage other creative expressions like non-language-based means to communicate their stories in situations like this.

White's experiences show that during the re-telling of these difficult stories, witnesses could inadvertently try to use affirmative words or contemporary practice of praise which could present itself in form of opinions, advice, declarations, or moral stories, and this can make narrators feel patronized or their stories normalized. The proactiveness of facilitators in guiding conversations back towards the expressions in the telling that the witnesses are drawn to, the images that these expressions might have provoked, the personal experiences that resonate with these expressions, and how the lives of witnesses have been touched by these stories helps make the whole process a success. And this success is depicted by narrators being drawn into the values of their acts and the powerfully resonant representations acknowledged by the listeners ultimately provide a significant thickening of the precious themes within their stories.

CONCLUSION

Michael White's map of narrative practice is a book that reflects a practical means of professional engagement and therapeutic expertise in bringing critical hopefulness and storytelling ceremonies into narrative family therapy. The methodologies shared therein have shown a tremendous opportunity for exploring the power of storytelling as a viable tool for race conversations. Pilot studies with a cross-section of participants from mini-communities like colleges, workplaces, etc representing the different racial groups with the facilitation of narrative care practitioners are encouraged. Feedback received from participants as well as the recommendations and challenges faced in facilitating such conversations can help develop a road map towards developing culturally competent community race-based commissions .

These Pilot Studies should aim to identify and evaluate the impact of these narrative methodologies on race-based conversations as the first step towards a scaled-up means of promoting such conversations within the different communities in the United States. This article believes that through these conversations, social justice and equity that would promote racial healing, mutual respect, and peaceful co-existence within the communities would be encouraged. This article, therefore, ultimately aims at encouraging the establishment of culturally competent community-based commissions on race facilitated by narrative practitioners as a means of ensuring and integrating these methodologies in race conversations for a more engaging and reconciliatory communication within our communities.

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