

Attribution Theory and Narrative Mediation

The following article follows the latest developments in Narrative Mediation. In our Mediation theory course we describe the Narrative Model of mediation as a process where the parties construct a story of their conflict and their version of events that is relayed as 'the truth' and the only possible version of events. The mediator's role is to question the initial version of events, to separate facts from perceptions, to gain more information and to help the person re-telling their version of events to recognize that it is their version – there may be other explanations and information which could lead to different conclusions.

The Narrative Model is compared to the Facilitative Model where the mediator's focus is resolving the issues presented. Underlying feelings and emotions about the issues are explored if they are a barrier to resolving the issues.

The Narrative model has its roots in Behavioural Studies and Cognitive Psychology. It is featured in an article by Nagao and Page written in 2005 that appeared on Mediate.com website in March 2010.

Nago and Page's description of Narrative Mediation expanded and updated my understanding of Narrative Mediation so I thought it was worth bringing it to your attention. You can read the whole article on Mediate.Com or my edited version here:

Attribution Theory

When we ask the parties involved in mediation "what's happening?" the reply 'matches' Nago and Page's description of Attribution Theory i.e. '.... the parties' version of events is self-serving, they are the victims, victimized by an/others who are seen as different from themselves. Furthermore they attribute the cause of any conflict between them to the other(s) failings as a human being and their lack of resources e.g. lack of intelligence, lack of (similar) values, morals, education and so on.... '

In a conflict both 'sides' describe themselves as the victim and the cause of conflict as something outside their control i.e. the others' innate inability to act/react as expected, desired or required.

Narrative Theory

Nago and Page say 'Each party creates and repeats a story (narrative) that perpetuates a self-serving bias one that puts them in the right and the other (s) in the wrong.

The narrative (story) of what happened is based on selected information presented as solid 'facts' and in the re-telling the story exaggeration and hyperbole is commonly used, unconsciously, for dramatic effect - to gain sympathy for the story teller and to demonise the other. Reality is distorted and reflected by statements like "he **always** does this..." or "she **never** does that,"

So the parties involved in mediation construct a narrative of events and attribute motives to actions.'

Nago and Page also say 'narrative mediation attempts to put aside the conflict-laden stories and assist the parties constructing a new story that will govern their behaviour and sustain relational dialogue. It attempts to improve communication and built ways that future differences can be dealt with'.

In everyday language this seems to be what mediators do most of the time i.e. we listen to different versions of events in a non-judgemental way. We say at the outset that we don't take sides yet we listen with interest to what is said and acknowledge what seems to be important to the story-teller. The attention given to the speaker and the story allows the speaker to feel heard and understood and calmer.

However the 'conflict-laden stories are not put aside' as Nago and Page describe, I would argue they are heard, acknowledged and re-defined.

How?

In the initial story-telling phase of mediation, the story-teller and the story are treated with respect and sensitivity. Questions inviting more information demonstrate a genuine interest in understanding and fleshing out certain aspects of the story however the person who asks the question (the mediator) is in control directing attention to areas of interest to listener.

The ability to accurately re-call, re-state and reflect statements also demonstrates a high level of attentiveness which is rare and makes the speaker feel valued.

Questions exploring 'what has worked, what the speaker like to happen etc. encourage the speaker to focus on a positive outcome.

Neutral re-statements of the issues offered by the mediator are usually accepted by the speaker as an acceptable version of events. Key phrases and statements are accepted and repeated and they become the script for further discussion and agreement. Helpful positive statements are reflected and re-used to build and re-enforce agreements and they are highlighted like 'dots to be connected' in a revised version of events.

The mediator is not acting as a therapist or re-interpreting events but *is acting as a sounding board*. The mediator's reaction or lack of reaction, interest and apparent lack of interest in certain details, statements or phrases provides feedback and allows a negotiated, modified version of events to emerge.

So the narrative mediator de-constructs parts of the story by challenging assumptions underlying the narrative e.g. challenging exaggerations, judgemental statements about the other participants, their motives, their lifestyles by drawing attention to specific statements and asking "what makes you say that" or something similar.

After the initial re-telling of events the focus changes to the 'as yet' unmet needs of the parties and ways in which these needs can be met. The role of victim is questioned to establish if mediation is a viable option. The parties are asked to consider what needs to change, what needs to happen and how that can happen.

Nagao and Page say ‘the construction (of a revised story) begins with the belief that co-operation exists and only needs to be uncovered.’

If that sounds a bit too optimistic – here is my alternative based on my experience – a re-constructed version of events begins with the silence, non-verbal and verbal response of the mediator(s) listening to an initial version of events, when key points are acknowledged and genuine interest in what is said is demonstrated by the mediator(s). Then and only then can the parties focus on an alternative version of events with a different outcome.

To achieve a different outcome the parties involved need to trust the mediator(s) and the other(s) involved despite their negative experience of them to date. Trust comes from a willingness to participate in mediation which requires a joint effort to improve the current situation.

The script changes when the people involved use different (more neutral) words to describe their situation. The words may come from the mediator, from the questions raised or from the answers the mediator reflects.

Asking questions – Nagao and Page state that narrative mediation is best implemented through skilful questioning as it reminds the participants that the mediator’s role is an enquirer. The mediator neither agrees nor disagrees with the original story. He/she highlights the parts that interest him/her e.g. what do the participants want and are they willing to work co-operatively to get it.

‘Open questions invite participants to tell *their* story.

Closed questions (that can be answered quickly in a word or phrase) can be used to elicit factual information and used to take/regain control.

‘Once answered, it is the questioner’s turn to talk’.

Leading questions are used to verify what is true e.g. “What do you hope to achieve through mediation?” Although it looks like an open question it is a leading question if the participant has not said they want to achieve anything through mediation. Leading questions can also be used to check what is obvious e.g. “What would you like me to tell your neighbour?” can be used to check what can be relayed to the neighbour even if the mediator could draw their own conclusions.

Perhaps the most valuable is the probing question about what has been said e.g.

~what makes you say that, what made you think that, what did you think was happening, what is fuelling this situation, what’s their reason for.....?

The Narrative mediator is trained to be genuinely interested in what people say and curious to understand what is meant. Questions guide the process. They allow new information, additional information into the picture and give people time to re-think their version of events before considering other ways to get their needs met.

The article closes with a case study that breaks the process down into smaller steps. The case study allows us to see how a narrative mediator works in a dispute between siblings. I would recommend reading the script.

The SCMC is running an Advanced Questioning course on 23 September 2010 in Edinburgh. I hope this article encourages you to join us to discuss theory, style and questioning further.