

Narrative Therapy, Applications, and Outcomes: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Introduction: Narrative therapy (NT) has a post-modern approach and assumes people as experts that construct their narratives. Aim: This study aims to provide a review of relevant literature from 1995 to 2021 on studies using narrative therapy, considering how to use it, the application of this approach, and its outcomes. Method: This study is a systematic review. According to this method, Web of Science and Scopus depositories were selected because they are acknowledged to contain high quality and high impact studies. Results: Results of this study shows that some studies have not clarified how narrative therapy techniques were used and even have conventional outcomes. The others use one or both essential techniques, including externalizing and unique outcomes. Besides, some studies focus on meaning-making and changing discourses. Conclusion: As a result of the review of this study, studies that have used the essential techniques have increased the efficacy of this approach, including externalizing, unique outcomes, meaning-making, and changing discourses (focusing on language and construction).

Keywords: Narrative therapy, Systematic review, Therapeutic Intervention.

Introduction

Narrative therapy (NT) is a therapeutic approach that assumes people construct their life stories to explain themselves (Lopes, Goncalves, Machado, et al., 2014). It has a post-modern approach and believes that there is no absolute fact and people use language to give meaning to their narratives (Combs & Freedman, 2012). In accordance with Scopus conducted studies, a good trend has been seen in studying narrative therapy from 1995 to 2021. In recent years, Iran is one of the three countries (Iran, Portugal, and South Africa) interested in narrative therapy. The United States has the most co-citation about narrative therapy (Figure 1) (van Eck & Waltman, 2010).

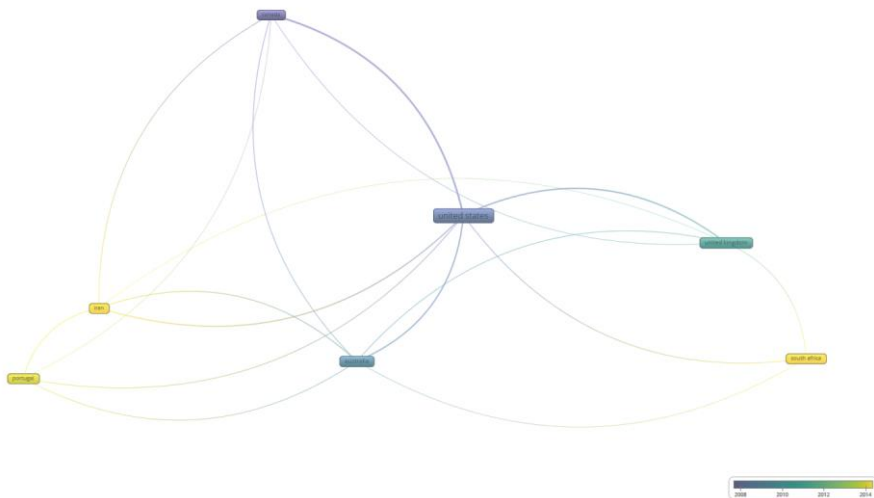


FIGURE 1. Co-citation map of countries (label view)

Narrative therapy includes some techniques that are the core of treatment. Techniques involve (1) externalizing the problem (separating the problem from the person, the problem is the problem), (2) unique outcomes (recognizing exceptional moments that there was no problem), and renaming the problem (Echison & Kleist, 2000). The following is an explanation of these techniques:

- (1) Externalizing the problem: It is the fundamental and core technique in narrative therapy. Naming, objectifying, and personifying are the first step of externalizing the problem and help the clients to identify the problem and explain it with their metaphors and perceptions and then how the problem affects the person and the effects of the problem considered. After that, the external discourses from childhood upwards evaluated (Ramey, Tarulli, Frijters, &

Fisher, 2009). Externalization implicitly highlights the preferred narratives and gathers evidence for them (examining social discourses) (Combs & Freedman, 2012)

- (2) Unique outcomes: Unique outcomes called innovative moments or reconceptualization. They include stories that are neglected, but potentially are meaningful and remarkable (Ramey et al., 2009). They are different from usual stories about clients and lead to emerging new stories; then, improvement occurs (Goncalves, Matos, & Santos, 2009). Unique outcomes include a set of actions, abilities, thoughts, plans, statements, feelings, and desires. They were even when clients were overwhelmed with problem-saturated stories. In this technique, the client affects the considered problem, and the new narrative renamed (Combs & Freedman, 2012).

However, few writers have been able to draw on any systematic research into narrative therapy. As mentioned, there is a good trend in studying narrative therapy according to Scopus conducted studies. On the other hand, narrative therapy is a therapeutic approach (Lopes, Goncalves, Machado, et al., 2014), because of that, the current study aims to review studies using narrative therapy, considering how to use it, the application of this approach, and its outcomes. Results of this review will be helpful to therapists to know where to use this approach and how they can increase its efficacy.

Methods

The objective of this study is to investigate the areas in which narrative therapy has been employed. The search and review process used in this study is as follow.

Databases:

For searching of narrative therapy articles in different areas, The Web of Science and Scopus databases are used. According to Scopus conducted studies, it is a good trend for studying narrative therapy from 1995 and upwards. These online depositories selected because they are acknowledged to contain high quality and high impact studies (Hussein, Ow, Cheong, Thong, & Ebrahim, 2019).

Search terms:

The following keyword was used in this study: (narrative* therapy*). Although keywords like storytelling, narrative, and narration were common in studies, they were related to field of literature more than psychology; also, articles that do a narrative review in any fields including the word “narrative”. Due to that and according to experts, they did not use in the searching process.

Inclusion criteria:

The purpose was to pinpoint high-quality research articles that described the effectiveness of narrative therapy in different areas. The following conditions were considered to ensure

that the papers selected appropriately. The entrance criteria including (a) date from 1995 to 2021 and published in English, (b) using narrative therapy to cure a problem or disorder or show the effectiveness of the treatment in one area.

Results

This part summarizes the screening and choosing process of research articles. Figure 1, illustrates selecting and screening the papers and the studies that finally match with the entrance criteria.

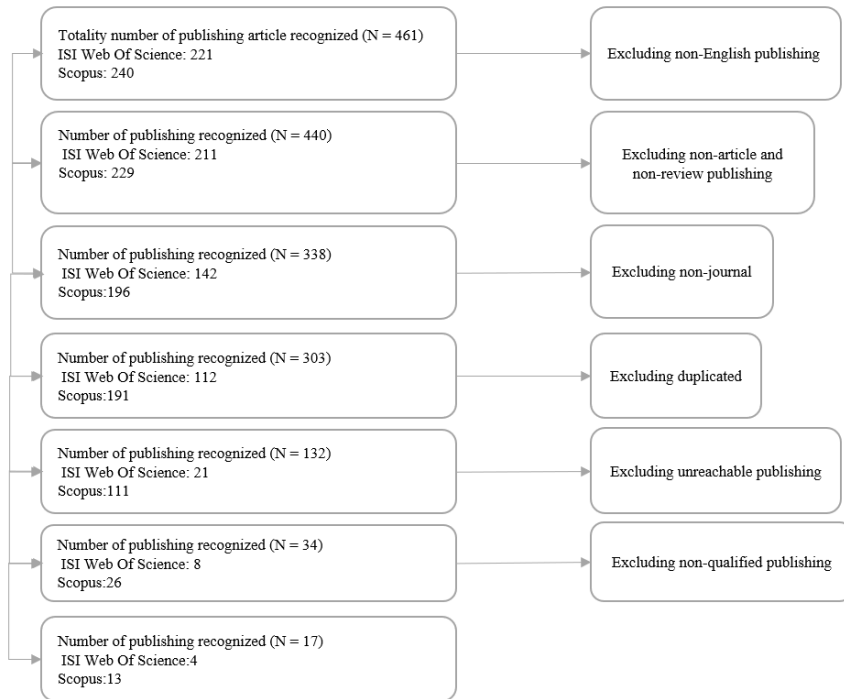


FIGURE 2. Study recognizing and inclusion diagram

Table 1, indicates the summary of researches that using narrative therapy to cure a problem or disorder or show the effectiveness of the treatment in one area.

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Author(s)	Objective of study	methods	conclusion
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Cashin (Cashin, 2008)	Investigating the characteristics of Asperger's disorder and its concord with the techniques of narrative therapy.	A case study: a 13-year-old boy diagnosed with Asperger's disorder studied at the age of eight.	Narrative therapy helps these people by giving them a social story to involve them in creating the story. However, the study needed to confirm the relative merit as a therapeutic approach for this group.
Chen (Chen, 2012)	Using narrative therapy besides using a train metaphor for stroke rehabilitation.	Narrative therapy intervention used in a group practice for people who recovered from a stroke.	Separating the problem from them and give a new perspective; also, focusing on inner resources and abilities instead of focusing on disabilities. It helps them to re-author their identity and spiritual healing.
Cloitre (Cloitre, Garvert, & Weiss, 2017)	Considering the effectiveness of the combination of narrative therapy and STAIR (trauma-focused work) in comparison with two control conditions on people experiencing PTSD (childhood abuse).	Participants include 104 women with PTSD (childhood abuse). They were randomly assigned in three conditions: (1) STAIR plus narrative therapy (SNT), (2) STAIR plus supportive counseling (SSC), and (3) supportive counseling plus narrative therapy (SCNT). Assessment performed in three stages: pre-test, post-test, and 3, 6 months follow-up.	Participants who have severe depression alongside PTSD obtained better treatment consequences that combined trauma-focused work and narrative therapy.
Ghavibazou (Ghavibazou, Hosseinian, & Abdollahi, 2020)	The aim of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of narrative therapy on communication patterns for women experiencing low marital satisfaction.	It was a quasi-experimental study. Thirty women were experiencing low marital satisfaction randomly designated in the intervention and waiting list group. Narrative therapy was performed individually for the	Narrative therapy could be effective for marital satisfaction and increased it. Furthermore, it reduced male-demand/ female-withdraw and total demand/ withdraw in the intervention group.

<p>Ghavibazou (Ghavibazou, Hosseinian, Abdollahi, & Ghamari Kivi, 2021)</p>	<p>The aim of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of narrative therapy on adult attachment styles and expressivity in women experiencing low marital satisfaction.</p>	<p>intervention group in eight 45-minute sessions. It was a quasi-experimental study. Thirty women were experiencing low marital satisfaction randomly designated in the intervention and waiting list group. Narrative therapy was performed individually for the intervention group in six 45-minute sessions.</p>	<p>Results showed that narrative therapy could not influence adult attachment and expressivity, but a 2-month follow-up illustrated improvement in expressivity with a large effect size.</p>
<p>Gomez (Gómez, Cerezo, & Ajayi Beliard, 2020)</p>	<p>Investigating the effectiveness of narrative therapy on fostering resilience following sexual violence in women survivors of color (WOC).</p>	<p>A case study: a 22-year-old cisgender woman of Latinx descent studied.</p>	<p>Narrative therapy helped women to re-author their trauma narratives. By involving in narrative practice, WOC can increase richer and more helpful stories and foster their resilience.</p>
<p>Kropf (Kropf & Tandy, 1998)</p>	<p>This study aims to deconstruct the meaning system of older people and helps them to create an alternative meaning system by using narrative therapy.</p>	<p>A case study: an 80-year-old woman who had reactive depression symptoms due to losing her husband 30 years ago studied. Also, she suffered from a dramatic decrease in physical performance.</p>	<p>Narrative therapy can help older people to solve many problems. Older people have dysfunctional stories due to a sense of worthlessness, devaluation, and loss. Therapeutic sessions with narrative therapy foster their stories and change their meaning systems to powerful and more functional ones.</p>
<p>Hawkins (Hawkins, Eggleston, & Brown, 2019)</p>	<p>This study aims to help couples to understand how their experiences are affected by traumatic brain injuries (TBI) and</p>	<p>Working with couples that one of them has disturbed a TBI.</p>	<p>Narrative therapy could externalize their problematic narratives and strengthened and thickened their new narratives. It facilitated sympathetic</p>

	helps them to refine their intimacy by the narrative lens.		communication and a mutual perception about the preferred narratives.
Lock (Lock, Epston, Maisel, & de Faria, 2005)	The aim of this study is to consider the efficacy of narrative therapy on anorexia/bulimia.	Foucauldian perspective in narrative therapy used (using discursive resources).	The study illustrated that resistance could break by recognizing anorexia as a problem, not the person as a problem. In this perspective, the problematic relationship is considered.
Lopez (Lopes, Goncalves, Machado, et al., 2014)	Considering the effectiveness of individual narrative therapy for moderate depression in comparison with cognitive-behavioral therapy.	Sixty-three people (27 female and seven male) having a diagnosis of major depressive disorder by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), designed in two treatment groups (narrative therapy and cognitive-behavioral therapy).	Consequences showed that participants in both groups had a significant decrease on all measures. Also, there was no difference between narrative therapy and cognitive-behavioral therapy.
Lopez (Lopes, Goncalves, Fassnacht, Machado, & Sousa, 2014)	This study aims to investigate the long-term effect of narrative therapy and cognitive-behavioral therapy on depression.	Using the original study's sample (Lopes, Goncalves, Machado, et al., 2014) and taking the same measures after 21 and 31 months from the latest treatment sessions to follow-up evaluation.	Results showed that one-third of participants sustained treatment effects at follow-up and recovered.
Mckenzie (McKenzie-Smith, 2020)	This study aims to provide a critical review on the efficacy of all narrative therapies performed on people with intellectual disability (ID).	It investigates seven papers using narrative therapy on people with intellectual disability (ID).	Results indicated that there are conflicting consequences. Because of using small samples and lack of control groups, outcomes were not precisely due to performing narrative therapy, and it maybe was because of the passage of time.

Noble & Jones, 2005	The purpose of this study is to prepare a good condition for the people who are at the end of their life, to explore their stories and explain their feelings mainly focusing on the present problems.	It is a holistic view to the people at the end of their life. The most common stories in these people are stories about their worries, resentments, success, and love.	The results showed that narrative therapy is a useful approach for the people at the end of their life. Also, it was useful for the nurses. Because nurses are more likely to engage with the stories of patient.
Olsen, 2015	Reflecting narrative therapy in a learning disability background.	A case study: A 53-year-old man who was known as a person with learning disabilities studied.	Consequences indicated that Bob's stories were around being stupid. Narrative therapy can deconstruct his stories and highlighted unique outcomes such as managing his father's shop. Then he could be an independent person. It shows having cognitive disabilities does not mean that they could not use psychological interventions.
Ramey et al., 2009	The objective of this study is to prepare evidence for the process was recommended by White in the therapy sessions.	Participants were eight children and youth (6-15 years old). Data gathered by video recording of single therapy sessions and then transcript precisely. Five categories were extracted from the data encoding according to White's tasks, including name, consequences, evaluation, intention, and plan.	Consequences demonstrated that children follow the therapist's scaffoldings during the therapeutic sessions. This process moves problematic stories to the new plot that before was not clear, as White had mentioned.
Saltzburg, 2007	Using a narrative therapy lens for parents with lesbian, gay, and	In this study, these adolescents' family compares with the Jewish community who had limited	Narrative therapy focuses on the strengths, talents and prepares a normative environment for these

	bisexual adolescents.	themselves and had any images of themselves in the outside world.	adolescents. Consequently, new stories exalt their strengths and efforts despite opposing social forces.
Shakeri (Shakeri et al., 2020)	Investigating the efficacy of group narrative therapy on depression, quality of life, and anxiety with addicted people.	Participants were 26 people who had an addiction to amphetamine in Kermanshah, Iran. They were randomly designated intervention and control groups. The study had follow-up after ten sessions.	Consequences showed a significant decline in depression and anxiety, but treatment was not useful for quality of life.

Discussion and Conclusion

The search term used in this review illustrated 461 studies that show a growing interest in using narrative therapy in therapeutic intervention. Thirty-three studies fully screened to determine their acceptability for inclusion. After considering the inclusion criteria, only 17 remained relevant for this study.

The most essential techniques in narrative therapy are externalizing and unique outcomes (Etchison & Kleist, 2000; Ghavibazou et al., 2020; Ghavibazou et al., 2021). The results of this study demonstrated that some studies did not clarify the process of narrative therapy (Cloitre et al., 2017) or did not determine how they externalized the problem or whether they use unique outcomes or not. They just stated that they had helped participants to engage in their narratives (Cashin, 2008). Another study focuses on the deconstruction of problem-saturated narratives more than creating meaning between them (McKenzie-Smith, 2020).

These three studies did not precisely determine using of core techniques in this approach. However, one of them acknowledged that narrative therapy could decline the severe depression alongside PTSD (Cloitre et al., 2017). The other stated that narrative therapy has relative merit as a therapeutic approach for Asperger's disorder (Cashin, 2008), and the other one confessed that there are controversial results and these results did not necessarily due to narrative therapy and maybe due to the passage of time (McKenzie-Smith, 2020).

13 remained studies have used both or one of the essential techniques (externalizing and unique outcomes) in therapy as follows:

Chen (2012), Ghavibazou et al. (2020), Hawkins et al. (2019), Ramey et al. (2009), and Saltzburg (2007) used both externalizing and unique outcomes. Also, Ghavibazou et al. (2020) recommended that naming and renaming the problem in considering communication patterns should focus on the relationships. Gómez et al. (2020) and Olsen

(2015) focused on unique outcomes. Lopes, Goncalves, Machado, et al. (2014) and Shakeri et al. (2020) used externalizing. Two of these studies focused on changing the meaning of the narratives and discourses (Kropf & Tandy, 1998; Lock et al., 2005; Noble & Jones, 2005).

Implications for Therapists:

In considering the current study, therapists can use narrative therapy in the therapeutic interventions including depression, PTSD, anxiety, learning disability, disruptive communication patterns, anorexia/ bulimia, and intellectual disabilities. It can help the parents with lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents, those recovering from a stroke, and those experiencing low marital satisfaction. Therapists should keep in mind that effectiveness of this approach having accordance with studies in this manuscript is when essential techniques, including externalizing, unique outcomes, meaning-making, and changing discourses (focusing on language and construction) are used.

Overall, outcomes showed that the correct implementation of the narrative therapy process (using essential and influential techniques) makes it more effective. Furthermore, these outcomes illustrated those externalizing, unique outcomes, meaning-making, and changing discourses (focusing on language and construction) are influential narrative therapy techniques.

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