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ARTICLE

Capturing the moment: developing a reflective narrative tool for training in the education professions

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ABSTRACT

The study presents a reflective tool that enables students to observe their personal and professional development process by formulating personal life stories; these narratives serve to identify each student’s characteristic lifestyle and modes of action. An atypical event is ‘captured’, one containing an ‘I-moment’ with a ‘different’ kernel of insight or action. The tool proposes reflective examination of the event, critical observation, re-conceptualization, and new action. This approach can expand current training methods, serving as a means for students in education professions both to analyze their own self-development and to assist others in resolving difficulties and overcoming barriers to change.

Introduction

In the course of academic training in the education professions (e.g., teaching and educational counseling), as well as in other human services professions such as psychology and social work, students are expected to simultaneously acquire professional knowledge and also broaden and develop their interpersonal skills. Training programs in these domains emphasize awareness and understanding of the personal and personality elements that influence work processes in the field.

Numerous studies have attempted to evaluate and measure the personal development of students in various training programs (e.g., Goldhaber, Liddle, & Theobald, 2013; Madaus, Scriven, & Stufflebeam, 2012; Posavac, 2015). The measurements or evaluations were based on students’ reports, and data analysis was conducted by an external researcher who oftentimes had difficulty in conveying the students’ complete, complex experience using conventional tools.

The innovation in the present study is the construction of a reflective tool, which was originally developed for use by psychotherapists in their clinic (Ribeiro, Bento, Gonçalves, & Salgado, 2010). We show how this tool is employed for the purpose of gaining a reflective understanding of students’ development during their training process. The tool is based on a self-narrative that the student relates orally or in writing, by means of which it is possible to identify the lifestyle and modes of action that the
student currently engages in, and which formed and became fixed in the past. These reflect how the student views the world, including barriers and ‘blind spots’. Observation then focuses on an atypical story that includes an action or self-perception that is different from those typifying the entire array of other small stories comprising the student’s narrative. Identified in this atypical story is the ‘I-moment’ in which a ‘different’ seed of insight or action can be discerned, and by means of which the range of alternatives at the individual’s disposal for acting in different situations can be expanded. Employing the proposed model can broaden currently accepted training methods, and provide students with a tool for their future work in which they will help others in their own processes of development, problem solving, and breaking down barriers to change and finding new paths.

The narrative story

A life story is a discrete unit of discourse organized along a timeline, and usually comprises the narrator, events in time and place, explanations, and insights (Smith & Sparkes, 2009; Spector-Mersel, 2011, 2017). Life stories include descriptions of successes alongside profoundly low points, and are constructed in order to convey an experience and create a moral and value-based foundation that can provide an answer to the question of how the world should work. The narrative story places at center stage the narrator’s ability to act in a given culture within professional and social expectations as he or she perceives them, and they reflect the individual’s life experience. Since life stories reflect the culture and norms in which they exist (McAdams, 2006), narrative thinking identifies an event as part of a temporal whole: we integrate each event into a story that comprises the events that preceded it and those that will come later. Paradigmatic thinking serves to provide an understanding of the real world, and narrative thinking provides an understanding of emotional and social reality. Narrative inquiry is a way of observing an individual through a three-dimensional prism by means of their experiences along a timeline, in the social domain and the place in which they act (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

An individual’s first narratives are called ‘antenarratives’ and they operate within interwoven stories from the past. They are clusters of partial stories composed of narratives that are usually fixed and stable. The stability of these narratives is what sometimes limits the individual’s capacity to gain new understanding in accordance with changing situations. Although the partial narrative has a protagonist, a small plot, a beginning, a middle, and an end, it is not a complete story. Like rainclouds that accumulate droplets of water, the groups of narratives organize the narrator’s understanding of the world from the micro level to the macro level. They form the connection between the small, anecdotal story and the larger story (Ribeiro et al., 2010). The self-story, with its wealth of events, includes a synthesis of elements that together create a fabric comprising the individual’s interpretations regarding themselves, the forces acting in their life, and the manner in which they contend with the opportunities and constraints they encounter. The individual seeking his or her way attempts to construct a picture wherein one way is preferable to or better than another. Freud claimed that revealing the past is actually discovering the future, and that the path of the past contains elements that will influence the future (Ricoeur, 1970). Many years later,
Freeman (2014) argued in a similar vein that while a narrative ostensibly describes a backward movement in time, it actually alludes to a movement forward, and constitutes an outline of action for the individual regarding life decisions they are about to make.

An individual’s narrative ‘text’ is interpretative. This text is constructed in a way that provides coherence and consistency, even at the cost of rewriting it (Freeman, 2014). Thus, people use stories in everyday situations as a means of creating and perpetuating knowledge of who they are vis-à-vis society and how they perceive themselves (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). Freeman (2010) contends that the insights that an individual ostensibly obtains in a reflective process, wherein they observe their life story, are actually intended to reinforce their feeling that they are walking a clear path delineated by the laws that govern the world. The wisdom of hindsight with which individuals tell their story constitutes an attempt to construct their personal and professional identity with a sense of meaning and efficacy. It therefore emerges that the identity manifested in the story is a kind of interplay between the past, the present, and the future, perceptions of self and the world, and desires of memory shaped by forgetting in order to create the outline of a coherently-structured story. That is not to say that the narrative story is not true, but its interpretative combination is unique and adapted to the interpersonal space and context in which it is constructed, since the story is always framed by social perceptions, values, and beliefs that create a guideline for choosing what is told and what is left out, what is highlighted and what is presented flatly, or even omitted (Spector-Mersel, 2011).

Every story has an end point, that is, a claim that it seeks to prove or a message that it aims to convey (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). This is an unconscious and unintentional process in which the narrator sets the objective of the story before he or she starts telling it. The objective of the chosen plot, the protagonists, and what happens in the plot are designed to lead the listener to acknowledge the truth and veracity of the end point and its existence in the ‘natural’ order of the world (Spector-Mersel, 2010). In the story we tell about ourselves, identity is constructed in a discursive process and through interaction. The listener participates in different ways in the creation of a unique story in the space occupied by the narrator and the listener. The discursive approach in narrative inquiry emphasizes the context in which narratives are related, and does not view them as reflections of reality, but as its creators (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Sometimes the narrator is also the listener, and even when the individual plays this dual role a metamorphosis of some kind occurs in the story in the space between the narrator as he or she tells their story, and the narrator as he or she listens to the same story ‘from the outside’. The observer who encounters the story as an independent entity can examine the narrator’s image, beliefs, motives, modes of action, and the feelings attending them.

**Life stories as a therapy tool**

Life stories are a central element in most psychological treatments. People tell their stories, adapting them to the places where they are being told and to the listeners, and, specifically, to what are assumed to be the listeners’ expectations (Angus & McLeod, 2004; Bruner, 1986, 2004; McAdams, 1993; White & Epston, 1990). Researchers suggest that figurative networks that express the personal experience should be examined by
means of self-narratives constructed as cognitive-affective superstructures whose function is to organize the ‘small stories’, the ‘micro-narratives’ that eventually give the individual a feeling of coherent self-understanding of the social world and how they should act in it (Neimeyer, Wittkowski, & Moser, 2004). Observation of the small anecdotal stories that compose the larger story led Ribeiro et al. (2010) to describe the therapy client’s personal development process by conceptualizing these stories as a series of milestones along a timeline. According to this approach, several recurring themes can be identified in the therapy story; these themes are usually associated with a problem that blocks the individual and prevents them from taking alternative actions even when their previous actions are no longer effective. More generally, the self-narratives of therapy clients can typically be characterized as ‘problematic’ in nature, preventing these individuals from engaging in alternative actions that differ from their current behaviors (White, 2007). During therapy the therapist and the client are partners in a process of identifying alternative narratives. These exist in the general story, but do not stand out in comparison to the narratives that impede their actions. The inner investigation of possible meanings broadens the range of internal situations, and the relationships and behaviors that are available to the individual. As the client becomes increasingly aware of the possible meanings of behaviors, emotions, and unconscious thoughts, clusters of new narratives are formed. These narratives enable the individual to build connections that create a broader self-perception and provide access to avenues of thought or action that were previously blocked. Ribeiro et al. (2010) contend that it is possible to focus on the small stories (microanalysis), which are small units of meaning, and thus identify and describe fixed patterns and the changes taking place in them.

The moment at which the change appears is called the ‘I-moment’. This is the moment when the individual shares with their listener a story whose essence is different from that of their ‘typical’ cluster of stories, i.e., their consistent positions and beliefs about the world. For a short time the narrator sets aside their characteristic, ineffective action and acts in a different way that, in their own eyes and perhaps in the eyes of those around them, is perceived as ‘not like them’. The story contains new moments and different modes of action, or different thoughts and emotions. These I-moments are the moments at which the narrator arrives at a new insight that did not previously exist in the problematic narrative. The I-moment is the moment of discovering the possibility of new options. It is a moment at which the individual re-observes what in the past may have seemed too insignificant to take the time to investigate, and reexamines an atypical event in their life and the additional possibilities for action it contains. This examination and reflective analysis of the atypical event indicate that the barriers blocking an individual’s path can be circumvented and alternative paths can be employed. Mendes et al. (2011) term these moments ‘Innovative Moments’ (IMs), and they suggest that ‘capturing’ these moments and understanding the potential of the new possibilities they contain can facilitate the advancement of change ahead of the formulation of a new self-narrative.

Ribeiro et al. (2010), followed by Mendes et al. (2011), propose a five-stage process for changing a problematic narrative:
New action: A type of new action that entails identifying new solutions and contending with the sense of absence. Finding an effective solution for an unresolved problem. Exploration, a new active understanding of possible solutions.

Reflection: Creating distance from the problem. Focusing on change through broad observation from a distance.

Critical observation, protest: The narrator’s critical observation of the problem troubling them. They can ask themselves: How is this happening? How is it possible? How did I get this far? They protest against their situation from within themselves. The protest is sometimes also manifested in the appearance of new opinions.

Re-conceptualization: Connecting past positions to the present. Describing the shift between the two positions. The process that marks the change is a different sense of self: ‘A year ago I wouldn’t have dared.’ The individual links what happened with what is happening: ‘I noticed I’m different...’, ‘It’s new’.

Presenting change: Inclusion of the new narrative in future actions and new life aspects. The problematic experience is a resource for understanding new insights and action abilities that are different from those employed in the past. Due to the change, energy resources are made available for new projects, and personal abilities for action emerge that were either abandoned or forgotten.

The process is described in Figure 1:

The new narrative that grows out of the new insights is different from the previous one since it contains a view that includes the potential for effective action, efficacy, and productivity. The model emphasizes examination of one’s personal stories and identification of a new alternative story as a basis for development. The present study examines how this reflective narrative model can also be applied to professional training processes.

The personal reflection and therapy model in learning processes

Estefan, Caine, and Clandinin (2016) describe how in the human services professions (e.g., social work and educational counseling) the connection between personal experience in private life and professional experience contributes to the development of the individual’s personal ability. They suggest that it is impossible to separate the personal
from the professional. The ability to reflectively understand the commonality of the thoughts and feelings experienced in the two spheres gives rise to a holistic and comprehensive perspective on life and the relationships between its various components. The stories we tell about ourselves influence us and the identities we construct for ourselves (Baldwin, 2013). One way of examining these stories is by means of reflection on life stories. Such reflection is an open, holistic process that encourages deep and comprehensive self-understanding of identity.

In the present study we propose a structured tool, originating in the therapy clinic, and apply it to the process of training students in the education professions. The analysis and development of insights were carried out by the students themselves and by a team experienced in working with this tool. The process began with the students writing their professional life stories. Each story was analyzed, and the end point characterizing the student’s line of thinking and action was identified. Next, we ‘captured’ an atypical event. Finally, we looked for the reflective insights emerging from this analysis in the context of the exploration process and practice-oriented development. The innovation is not only in taking the process out of the psychotherapist’s clinic and implementing it in a professional training setting, but also in providing a practical tool for students’ reflective-narrative observation of themselves, which they will later be able to use in their own work with students.

Methodology

The present study employs a qualitative approach that follows the interpretative phenomenological paradigm, and includes qualitative analysis of a narrative discourse (Gergen, Josselson, & Freeman, 2015; Josselson & Lieblich, 2001).

Participating in the overall study (only part of which is described in the present article) were 21 MA educational counseling students from a recognized academic institution. In the course of their studies the students were asked to write or orally describe their professional development, including the story of their childhood and adolescence, and up to their present choices regarding their academic training program. As they approached completion of the program, an external interviewer conducted an open interview with each of them, and an additional interview was conducted with each participant six to twelve months after they completed her studies.

In the present article, which proposes a tool for employing narrative stories in exploration processes, we have chosen to focus on the professional life stories of three of the students. All three are in their mid-thirties, married with two to four children, and describe personal experiences of adjustment difficulties as pupils in elementary and high school.

Procedure

(1) The students wrote their professional life story and described their personal development at three time points: the start, middle, and end of the academic year.
An external researcher (not part of the teaching faculty) conducted an open narrative interview with each student about the story of their professional development. During the interview the students were also invited to perform further reflection. The interviews were held outside the students’ academic institution in an informal atmosphere that invites open conversation.

The content of the life stories and interviews was analyzed, and lifestyle characteristics typifying the student’s line of thinking were examined, ‘capturing’ the atypical event (the I-moment).

In the course of the study and during its writing the rules of ethics regarding interviewee confidentiality were scrupulously observed. Details that might identify the interviewees have been redacted.

Orit: ‘I created the solo’

Orit describes herself as child with low self-confidence, shy, quiet, and hesitant to speak. Her scholastic achievements were average and she felt that her teachers’ evaluation of her was low. In her age group she stood out with her social skills and was very popular, showed initiative, and was active. A crisis event occurred when she was fifteen, and her parents subsequently decided to leave the kibbutz where she was born and move to a small town far from the center of the country. In contrast to this passive experience in which someone in authority controlled her life, she relates a small story that took place early in her first year at school in the new remote town to which her family moved. One of the study tracks at the high school was dance. When Orit came to the school at the beginning of the year the track was already full. Orit approached the head of the track and demanded that she let her audition. The head of the track relented. Orit ran home, got her leotard, and arrived prepared for the audition. Being accepted into the track was a breakthrough for her self-realization and her ability to gain appreciation of her talent in this field. Orit completed her high school education with good scholastic achievements, she had many friends, gained great appreciation from the dance teacher who nurtured her, and she created the solo for the high school graduation party herself and performed it on stage in front of the whole school:

There was one teacher there who saw me, believed in me, and helped me to strengthen my self-confidence. For the end of high school performance this teacher decided to let me perform a solo I created myself. I can say [this was] a seminal event in my self-perception.

Observation of the array of small stories making up Orit’s personal and professional life story reveals a low self-image and a sense that in her relationships with others in authority she is diminished and dependent on their approval and appreciation. On the other hand, in her relationships with her peers she feels comfortable, liked, and enjoys optimal participation and integration. The problematic narrative that recurs in her stories describes her as a child whom no one saw: ‘I felt I was nothing, and that remained with me for quite a few years’. She attributes her success to someone else who discovered her (the dance teacher, a CO in the army, a lecturer at the college). The need for approval by a figure of authority recurs in the narrative towards completion of her studies: the kindergarten inspector decides to keep her in her job as a kindergarten
teacher and not allow her to work as an educational counselor. The inspector even threatens that should she wait for a counselor’s slot she will be dismissed from the Ministry of Education. Orit accepts the inspector’s decision and does not fight for her right to fulfill her new professional career as a counselor. Still evident in an interview conducted 6 months after she completed her studies is the experience of diminishment and the sense of low self-worth, coupled with a desire to break out and fulfill her new potential professional abilities: ‘The framework of the kindergarten I run is very, very limiting for me. I’m already in a different place […] I remain in the kindergarten and feel it doesn’t satisfy me’.

Table 1 summarizes the stages of development in Orit’s narrative. As described by Ribeiro et al. (2010), it is evident that the injured narrative is blocking Orit’s professional advancement. However, in the reflective process the first buds of the new narrative are evident in her critical observation and re-conceptualization. A few months after the interview Orit completed her academic obligations with a final paper that gained considerable recognition. At the degree ceremony she was one of the four outstanding graduates in her year. At the end of that year she reapplied to work as an educational counselor. On this occasion, as a result of her determination, she was accepted.

Changing problematic self-narratives requires time, since each problem is saturated with the injured self-narrative that subordinates creative thinking and narrows action possibilities (Salvatore, Dimaggio, & Semerari, 2004). Orit felt she was being led by the kindergarten inspector, but in her thoughts she was already challenging the injured self-narrative of accepting authority without being able to question it. Antenarratives constitute a process whereby the narrative is retrospective and strengthens the meaning of the narrator’s end point. Challenging the head of the dance track’s decision not to accept her leads to a story that is an atypical ‘incident’ or event (Boje, 2004), which breaks the consistency of the life narrative of the obedient, disciplined child who also acts against her own wishes due to the dictates of authority. Re-observation of the event can combine it with the existing narrative and thus expand it, make it more flexible, and create new options for action. Perhaps if at this stage Orit had been aware of the I-moment in her life story, in which she demonstrated her ability to stand up to authority in order to act in a way suited to her and her needs, a new proto-narrative would have been created from which a revised self-narrative could be constructed.

**Neta: ‘I’m still quiet, but there’s no way I’m not heard’**

Neta chose to begin the story of her professional development with a description of her difficulties in elementary school as a shy, introverted pupil with learning disabilities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Development of Orit’s narrative.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>New action</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I created the solo for the graduation party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reflection</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have to recognize the places where I managed to bring about change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Protest</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The questions that guided me led me to painful places</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Re-conceptualization</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling is suitable for me because I know the places where it is difficult for children at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Presenting change</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I decided to work in educational counseling even though the kindergarten inspector opposed it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I had difficulties at school with language, with English, and attention and concentration “disconnects” during lessons. In third and fourth grades I had a homeroom teacher who would point out my difficulties in front of the whole class, and she’d even laugh at them.

Neta has a low self-perception. Significant adults are perceived as hurtful and insulting. The children’s social environment heightens her feeling of diminishment and harms her sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem. Appearing one after the other in the description of her personal development are offensive figures whose common characteristic is expression of their lack of confidence in the narrator’s ability: ‘I was sure ‘the problem’ was with me, and I didn’t share what was happening in class with anyone because I was ashamed’. At the end of fourth grade Neta solved a math exercise before the rest of the class. The teacher’s response was: ‘Sit down, I’m not prepared to check it for you, you probably cribbed the answer’. Following this incident, for the first time Neta told her mother who decided to have her transferred to another school. Thus, appearing alongside the offensive figures in her life (another teacher in high school, lecturers in her BA studies) there are several figures described in her life story as ‘guardian angels’. In high school, too, she describes herself as a student who was neither heard nor seen. The school counselor she went to see in tenth grade told her she was just lazy and nothing would come of her. ‘I felt I was nothing, and that remained with me for quite a few years’.

The change in self-perception from passive behavior and external attribution to taking an active stand only occurred during her BA studies. Neta contends that the college lecturers, too, lacked understanding of her learning difficulties, but she began fighting for her rights. On the face of it, a change came about as she entered adulthood in her assertiveness and her ability to demand the concessions granted to students with learning disabilities, but in fact Neta continues to hold the belief that her teachers do not appreciate her and do not treat her appropriately, and especially that they do not recognize and appreciate her academic abilities.

Her motives for choosing educational counseling were her desire for a corrective personal experience and to support introverted and shy children whom teachers also consider weak: ‘In my perception of the counselor’s role today my focus is on children experiencing difficulties. I believe in seeing the pupil as a person, not a report card’. Behind this declaration stands a latent accusation originating in her own life experience with teachers who did not appreciate her as a person but saw her solely through her achievements. Later, additional events are described in which a few beneficial figures appear intermittently alongside numerous others who ‘don’t see her’ and do not enable her to act. She still prefers to be angry and offended rather than give expression to an active, initiating position. It is evident that the declaration, understanding, and realization of a new narrative are still limited and delineated. In an interview with Neta 6 months after completing her studies, she describes a confrontation with one of her lecturers about the presentation of her final project:

When I had to prepare the poster for my final project, my supervisor and I didn’t really see eye to eye on how to present it and we were unable to agree. I think that moment made me grow. I told her that the pairing between us was unsuitable because each of us was pulling in a different direction. I stood my ground and didn’t give up. I wasn’t prepared to change what I wanted to do. She accepted it, and I changed supervisors.
Here it is evident that the new narrative is attended, assertively but not aggressively, by a negotiation process even though it concludes without agreement. Neta sums up: ‘I think the studies empowered me and allowed me to express myself the way I should. Today I’m more open, I’m still very quiet. But there’s no way I’m not heard’. The moment she confronted her supervisor on how she chose to present her poster, and was prepared to take responsibility for the outcome without external attributions, may allude to the development of a new proto-narrative. Neta attributes this change to her educational counseling studies: ‘Here I examined my life from every possible direction, I asked myself difficult questions, and I understood what hurts me the most... I understood what bothers me the most throughout my life... and it’s not the learning disability, but my feeling that no one saw me...’

All the elements of the new I-moment are evident here: a new action, focus on the change out of broad observation (reflection), observation of the problem with a critical eye out of the ability to ask ‘How did I get this far?’

Table 2 summarizes the stages of development in Neta’s narrative.

**Hagar: ‘it all depends on my will and on my strengths’**

Hagar immigrated to Israel with her family when she was 2 years old. She is a special education teacher who commenced her MA studies as the mother of two young children, and in the course of her studies she had two more. Hagar’s parents did not speak Hebrew. She began first grade with a big language gap compared to her peers:

To this day my heart lurches when I recall first grade. I was a weak pupil scholastically and socially, and I really didn’t like going to school. Every morning the teacher would test the pupils in reading, and I didn’t know how to read, and each time the teacher would humiliate and punish me. Additionally, I didn’t do my homework and the teacher would get angry with me every single time. I prayed that one day the teacher would understand me, that she’d see it was hard for me.

Hagar received support and encouragement during these years from her parents and close social environment. While they could not help her with her studies, they supported her and believed in her.

Hagar completed elementary school as a weak student, and then, according to her, in high school a turnaround occurred. She decided to become an outstanding student, and for the first time in her life she felt her strengths. Hagar asked her parents to register her at the municipal library and she would sit for days at a time reading books: ‘Through the books I felt I was drawing the strength to cope, and my reading improved, and I acquired knowledge that created confidence in me’. At the same time she joined a youth movement where she became socially active, thus increasing her self-confidence. She

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New action</th>
<th>I decided to make a career change and study special education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>I did the matriculation exams for my mother so as not to disappoint her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protest</td>
<td>I started to fight for my rights, something I hadn’t done in the past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-conceptualization</td>
<td>I understood what bothers me the most... it’s not the learning disability, but my feeling that no one saw me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenting the change</td>
<td>I’ll fight for my students... today there’s nothing to stop me</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Table 2. Development of Neta’s narrative.**
describes her I-moment, which was different from everything she was raised on, namely, the values of the Ethiopian community’s traditions, which are based on obedience, as occurring not long after she began her mandatory military service:

I was in the Navy. One day when I entered the base the officer in charge of discipline noticed me at the gate and shouted: ‘Soldier, multiple braids are against army regulations! You’re only allowed one braid. Go up to your room, undo all your braids and make just one.’ Everyone looked at me and I felt embarrassed. I went up to my room in tears and didn’t know what to do. How can I explain to him that I’ll only be able to do what he says when I go home at the end of week? I came out of my room, went to the office, wrote a letter to the CO explaining why I had multiple braids, and asked for permission to leave them on my head. In the end I received the positive answer that I can stay with the braids all the time. It was a huge thing for me.

Hagar describes the values she was raised on, e.g., modesty, timidity, and respect for her elders, as being an obstacle at times to receiving respect and appreciation: ‘I understand that these traits characterize me and they’re part of me, but at the same time, I know that as soon as I feel that my silence is harming me, I won’t be silent anymore’. Will the atypical action, daring to stand up to military regulations and defend her right as a member of the Ethiopian community to have multiple braids, typify her in the future? Will the breakthrough of resisting authority and being able to act out of belief in her inner justice recur in her developing narrative story? Examination of the different narrative that appears in the I-moment can provide an answer to this question.

Hagar describes the choice of special education as stemming from situations in her life in which she felt different due to the color of her skin. In her work she once again found that she had exceptional patience for resolving complex situations, and had the ability to form a connection with parents where others in the system had failed. In general she was averse to and had reservations concerning counselors’ generalizing, stereotypical attitude to children with difficulties. ‘These parents [of children with difficulties] – they don’t understand anything’; however, she preferred not to confront this issue directly, but rather to act with the quiet and modesty typifying her traditional upbringing. Hagar describes her loyalty to the children, her respect for and connection with their families, and the love and appreciation she received from them as the motivation for her continuing studies in the educational counseling program. Towards the end of her studies Hagar once again wrote her life story. The story is almost identical to the one related at the beginning of her studies, but added to it is a reflection that sees the main narrative of her professional perception as linked to her past:

As a child and pupil from the Ethiopian community I developed abilities and sensitivity towards the other who is different to me. I want to give support to children and parents in collaboration with the parents and the school staff. I want to give expression to my values as a human being, and believe that my life story will meet me in my role as a counselor.

Hagar sees her life narrative in the shift between weakness and strength, between feelings of failure, helplessness, inferiority, and lack of confidence, and her gentle ability to contend with demands and do things in her own quiet way. She reminds herself once again of the incident in the army: ‘Like it was then, when I was a soldier, but took action and wrote a letter that led to success and a sense of satisfaction’. It seems that the
previous I-moment continues to accompany her, but is not yet part of her ability to give it expression. In her reflective process, she also describes her social behavior during her MA studies as a traditional pattern of introversion and timidity. She regrets this, but can also see buds of change:

At the beginning of my studies I was quiet and closed. Towards the end I realized I had to open up more for people to know me, and that’s my missed opportunity, that I didn’t do it in time, but also the insight I take with me. I think I learned that exposure doesn’t always indicate weakness . . .

Table 3 summarizes the stages of development in Hagar’s narrative.

Hagar’s new, alternative self-narrative includes insights that link strength with weakness, and modesty with assertiveness. In a reflective process the small anecdotal stories of the I-moment transform into alternative trailblazers that were previously blocked.

**Summary, discussion, and recommendations**

It seems that no one can examine a person’s story other than the narrator-protagonist. Any external interpretation that does not place the narrator’s interpretation at the center neglects the complete experience in which the story exists. Reflection is thinking about an action with the aim of explaining and conceptualizing accumulated practical knowledge in order to improve possibilities for action in the future. Dewey (1933) referred to the concept of reflective thinking as a kind of high thinking integrated in self-action research aimed at improving the performance of the action. Schön (1983) and Argyris and Schön (1997) drew a distinction between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action and emphasized the importance of the reflective process for numerous professions that include interpersonal relationships associated with providing assistance. Virtually all training programs in the human services professions acknowledge the importance of reflection during training and seek to develop students’ self-awareness and reflection skills, assuming that these skills will serve them in the future (e.g., Binks, Jones, & Knight, 2013; Bruster & Peterson, 2013; Burgess, Rhodes, & Wilson, 2013; Eaton, 2016).

When people tell themselves the story of their life and then examine and analyze their own story, a process of exploration and self-discovery takes place, even if the process is externally directed. Exploration is a deliberate action, overt or covert, of searching for and processing information concerning the self (Flum & Kaplan, 2006). It is a process in which individuals collect information in order to know their own self or their environment for the purpose of solving problems or making a decision concerning their life choices (Flum & Kaplan, 2006; Grotevant, 1987). Exploration is considered crucial in identity development processes in general and in the development of

**Table 3.** Development of Hagar’s narrative.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New action</th>
<th>I went to the office and wrote a letter explaining why I have multiple braids</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>I realized I had to open up more for people to know me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protest</td>
<td>I couldn’t accept the counselor treating parents of weak children with disrespect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-conceptualization</td>
<td>I learned that exposure doesn’t always indicate weakness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenting change</td>
<td>As soon as I feel that my silence is harming me, I won’t be silent anymore</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
professional identity in particular, since it enables individuals to examine their self, their fields of interest, abilities, and values, and to examine the ‘environment’. It is a deliberate internal or external action of searching for and processing information concerning the self with openness to new experiences and development of a sense of efficacy and control. Exploration enables high-order thinking regarding control over the environment and a more comprehensive development of sense of self and identity (Blumenfeld, 1992). Today, many leading researchers (e.g., Freeman, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2007) agree that life stories contain material in which a negotiation takes place on a semi-latent internal layer, especially on issues that the individual feels are made up of inconsistent components. The premise is that stories are structures that are built from coordinates of time, place, and personality, and give expression to sense of self by means of the interactive relationship formed between the narrator and the person listening to or reading the narrator’s life story.

Research on the use of reflective narrative analysis in professional training contexts has expanded in recent years (e.g., Estefan et al., 2016; Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013; Wang & Geale, 2015). The present study joins the growing body of research on developing the reflective skills of individuals training in the education professions. This kind of professional training – which does not focus solely on the acquisition of professional knowledge, but also on the personal and professional development of the students themselves – mandates in-depth understanding of personal difficulties and ways of contending with them. In the present article deliberate use was made of a tool that facilitates familiarity with self-narrative by means of the professional life story, exposure of ‘new’ moments, and connecting these moments to the original narrative in order to create a life narrative that contains a wider range of options for action.

**Figure 2** describes the process of working with the tool for reflective examination of a life story.

The present study proposed an observation of the narrative of change through the life stories of educational counseling students. During their training, the students were expected to undergo exploration processes by means of multiple reflections on their

![Figure 2](image-url)

**Figure 2.** The exploration process of working with the reflective narrative tool.
experiences. The students’ preconceptions, including their perceptions concerning the nature of the world and how they act in it to advance their personal goals, were epistemologically examined by means of a reflective process on their self-written life stories and interviews. The premise was that where there are seeds of change it is possible to ‘recapture’ the moment, to study and learn it, and thus expand the individual’s possibilities to move in a broader personal and professional world than that characterizing the initial perceptions they adopted in the first part of their life. In the three case studies presented here, the unique personal nature of each of these moments was evident, as well as what they all have in common. Each of the three stories in which the I-moment appears presents an alternative for the narrator, different from her familiar behavior, a single event in which she is the protagonist and acts in a non-self-evident manner, i.e., a manner that runs counter to what characterizes her larger life story. The three I-moments appeared in the narrators’ life stories and described their professional development at the beginning of their studies, but were swallowed up in the dominance of the overall narrative that presented external attributions, submission to authority, and a lack of belief in their inner strength and capacity to act and change. The atypical story presented an alternative of initiative, recognition of self-worth, and being prepared to stand up to authority over justice and the right to equal opportunity. These are basic skills that educational counselors need to possess in their work. In the process described, it is evident that each of the students examined the discovery inherent in her atypical action and embraced that discovery as a means of changing the problematic narrative and constructing a strong narrative that creates a larger personal and professional space. The innovation of the approach described herein is that the process was carried out under deliberate guidance and instruction, while also integrating independent reflective skills, which in themselves constitute a tool for continued growth and development.

The aim of the present study was to demonstrate use of a reflective model from the therapy world that has been adapted to training processes for the human services professions. The present article recommends including use of the tool in the training process, thus not only providing learners with a tool, but first and foremost helping them by means of an effective tool to learn about themselves, about the significant and less significant turning points in their life as they are reflected in their writing assignments and the interview, which encapsulates the learning process and enables retrospection.

The tool proposed by Ribeiro et al. (2010) was originally designed for a psychologist’s work with clients. The innovation of the present study is the application of this tool, with adaptations and modifications, in the education system, in educational counseling training. Its use could be further expanded to training programs in additional human services professions (e.g., social work, nursing and medical professions). The role of the lecturers accompanying the students is to encourage exploration, and provide empathic feedback on the process and the personal discoveries that it leads to.

In the professional life stories of the students at the focus of the present study, the choice of a profession is presented as a personal corrective experience for a childhood experience. Re-observation of the I-moment marks the beginning of the development of a new alternative narrative, and ‘capturing’ it at the beginning of the professional training process enables the students and the faculty accompanying them to work
together to establish this new narrative, develop it, and integrate it into the expanded personal and professional narrative. From all the material we collected in the present study, especially the later interviews with the students (some of which are not detailed here), it appears that changes in reality sometimes only take place after completion of the training program, until which time they may be impossible to observe. Consequently, practitioners implementing the tool described herein must have faith in its ultimate success, and should instill similar faith and hope in their students that professional development that gains expression in a narrative story does not end with the completion of training. It is an ongoing process, and awareness of this fact enables the process to move forward. Finding the atypical story, creating a proto-narrative, and joint observation by the narrator and listener of its components offer potential for growth and personal development and for many more possibilities than might seem available to students the start of their journey.

Since the proposed reflective tool was found to be extremely helpful in understanding the educational counseling students’ development and change processes, we recommend working with it during the training stage rather than for the purpose of a retrospective analysis. We suggest that identification of the I-moment and the reflection be carried out during the students’ training, which will make the tool even more effective. We believe that developing and further evaluating the model will improve it and enable better evaluation of its efficacy. We recommend development of a pedagogical methodology that includes a process of narrative writing and reflection as proposed by the tool described in the present study as part of the training programs in the human services professions.

In the present study the analysis was carried out by the researchers. However, we believe it would be more appropriate to train the students themselves to practice identifying the components of their narrative perceptions by means of the model. Putting students in a position to lead their own self-inquiry process enables them to also maintain boundaries of privacy in their life, and only share the content worlds they wish to. It is the student who chooses what to tell, and it is the student who accords meaning to the events he or she chooses to describe and share. The tool presented in this article facilitates systematic work with students and development of a dual skill: self-reflective narrative, and the ability to listen to future students or clients by identifying new methods for coping and for enacting optimal change.

Notes

1. Three-dimensional narrative inquiry space of temporality, sociality, and place.
2. It is customary for women from the Ethiopian community, as part of their tradition and culture, to braid their hair into multiple braids.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
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