

Assessing Narrative Practice Conversations from a Scaffolding Lens

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Abstract: Narrative Therapy (NT) is a psychosocial intervention approach that assists people to identify subordinated storylines and re-imagine their lives, which has been increasingly recognized in social work. Nevertheless, it is challenging to assess whether an NT conversation is in line with NT principles because skills in NT are usually seen more as inspiration than operational steps, and this flexibility has created hurdles in empirical research which requires intervention adherence. Against this background, this study adapted the scaffolding framework suggested in White's (2007) *Maps of Narrative Practice* to analyze NT conversations recorded in that publication. The analysis revealed characteristic features in three observable domains, including i) progression of the distancing levels of conversation utterances, ii) proportions of the distancing levels of conversation utterances, and iii) synchrony between the distancing levels of conversation utterances from the therapist and client. These observations provide some hints to inspire the development of observable indicators, and they may have implications for intervention research and training in NT.

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I. Introduction

Narrative Therapy (NT) is a psychotherapy approach that has developed since the 1980s. NT assists people to develop subordinated storylines and re-imagine their lives, which involves a variety of techniques to deconstruct and subvert the dominant narratives that problematize people (White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990). Professional human services, such as counseling and social work, have increasingly recognized narrative approaches (Vodde & Gallant, 2002).

Empirical intervention research generally requires the intervention under research to have some strategies to ensure its intervention adherence – a quality reflecting in what ways an intervention is implemented as planned (Tucker & Blythe, 2008). In an intervention study involving multiple therapists, there should be some standardization across different therapists. For example, in Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT), observational coding is one of the methods to ensure the therapist's conversation is in line with therapy's principles, in which observers rate the occurrence of desired behaviors or techniques used during the therapy sessions (Rodriguez-Quintana & Lewis, 2018). Such a treatment adherence requirement is not uncommon in most intervention research (Borrelli et al., 2005; Moncher & Prinz, 1991; Rodriguez-Quintana & Lewis, 2018).

Nonetheless, assessing whether an NT conversation is in line with NT principles is not straightforward, partly because skills in NT are usually seen more as inspiration than operational steps (White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990). There are diverse forms of NT (Lopes et al., 2014; Moreira, Beutler, & Goncalves, 2008), and there are innovative practices inspired by NT (Chan, 2012; Chan, Ngai, & Wong, 2012; Wood, Fredericks, Neate, & Unghango, 2015).

NT proponents have respectively suggested some general process steps. For example, Payne (2000) has long suggested an outline of NT process which starts from naming the problem, follows by various options to deconstruct the problem and thicken the unique outcome, and finally ending the therapy. In a similar vein, Duvall and Béres (2011) see that NT is a three-act play: Act 1 is the beginning which includes points of story and backstory, Act 2 is the middle which includes pivotal events and evaluation, Act 3 is the conclusion which includes a reflective summary and a new context. However, these proponents also emphasize that there is not only one correct guide to practice NT, and they are cautious that any outline is for convenience of description, not a prescription (Duvall & Béres, 2011; Payne, 2000; White, 2007).

Partly because such an apparent heterogeneity has made comparisons between different NT studies very difficult, there is thus far no proper systematic review of NT. Moreover, some practitioners may see that NT does not reconcile with standardized measures and evidence-based evaluations, because these measures represent a positivist paradigm which potentially clashes with NT's postmodernist orientation (Epston, Stillman, & Erbes, 2012). Such a lack of empirical evidence also has drawn some criticism. For example, Steinglass

(1998) has long noted the difficulty in testing the validity of NT. Etchison and Kleist (2000) have stated that NT's focus on qualitative outcomes is not congruent with larger quantitative research which the majority of respected empirical studies employ today, and that this postmodern orientation has led to a lack of evidence supporting its claims of efficacy. Several critics have posed concerns that NT has made gurus of its leaders; because when there is no observable protocol informing operational standards, insider experts would have taken the lead (Doan, 1998; Minuchin, 1998).

Overall, the dilemma is: if NT skills are so fluid and flexible, then it is not reasonable to expect that an NT therapist must demonstrate certain wordings/questions/statements. Likewise, the absence of specific wordings/questions/statements in an NT conversation does not mean that such conversation is not in line with NT, because in principle we can never have a complete list of NT skills. Therefore, most NT studies are anecdotal, and issues about intervention adherence are seldom addressed, except in a few studies (e.g., Cloitre et al., 2014; Lopes et al., 2014).

Re-visioning NT through a Scaffolding Lens

Michael White, a key founder of NT, has indirectly denoted the possibility that NT conversations may have some universal signatures. In a 2007 publication – *Maps of Narrative Practice* (after this referred to as *MNT*), White has illustrated some characteristic “staircase charts” which do not appear in any of his previous books published between 1990-2007. White (2007) used “map” as a metaphor and those “staircase charts” to depict conversations in diagrams. The maps, like roadmaps, are supposed to support therapists to navigate their conversations. By visually charting clients’ stories, White showed a range of options for facilitating these conversations, and there are different chapters introducing different maps.

The idea of scaffolding informed White to use those “staircase charts,” White explained that it was the cornerstone concepts defined by Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), a cultural-historical psychologist, that inspired him to rationalize the mechanism of NT conversations. First, Vygotsky’s theory assumes that meaning-making relies on symbolic mediators (e.g., sign, symbols, words), and therefore, language is deemed to be a powerful tool in promoting such processes. Second, the theory assumes that facilitators (e.g., teachers, therapists) can assist learners via a zone of proximal development (ZPD) – which means a difference between what a person can learn unaided, and what s/he can learn with supports from another person. Identifying and utilizing such zones can facilitate a person to go beyond his/her existing knowledge level (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994). As such, the concept of scaffolding helps rationalize in what ways external facilitation (e.g., instructions, questions) can influence storytellers’ narrative developments.

White (2007) stated that it is “possible to transpose the scaffolding conversations map onto the other maps of narrative practice” (p. 289). He also stated that the scaffolding conversations map “extends” his understanding of the processes associated with his therapeutic conversations and “serves as a guide in the further development of these conversations” (p. 282). It is worthwhile to note that although White stated that the “scaffolding conversations map” is a core backbone, the conversations covered by the chapter introducing such a map (Chapter 6) are the shortest, the most episodic, and they do not introduce new questioning skills at a verbatim level. In some way, it is reasonable to see that the maps introduced in Chapters 1 to 5 are the actual operational face of White’s NT, and that the scaffolding map introduced in Chapter 6 is, in fact, a meta-structure behind all the operational maps. That is, White (2007) implied that “scaffolding” is a key to identifying observable signatures of NT conversations across (his) NT conversations in different contexts. Unfortunately, White deceased a year after he published *MNT*, and he did not further elaborate in what ways this scaffolding framework guiding practitioners can also be a framework guiding external observers to assess NT conversations at an operational level.

In brief, the scaffolding conversations map is a 5-level framework, which denotes increasing levels of distancing tasks (White, 2007) (see Table 1): i) low-level distancing tasks, such as clients describing and naming the problem/situation, and then; ii) medium-level distancing tasks, such as clients connecting their problems with related thoughts and experiences. iii) medium-high level distancing tasks, such as clients evaluating the significance of those thoughts and experiences, particularly those potentially related to identity formation; iv) high-level distancing tasks, such as clients identifying with some preferred concepts, values or identities, and v) very high-level distancing tasks, such as clients planning for changes based on the newly developed identity or concepts about life.

This scaffolding sequence may have significant implications in exploring observable signatures of NT conversations; as it is supposed to be a progression pattern that guides NT conversations, therefore NT conversations should reflect this pattern, regardless of the specific questioning techniques used by the therapist. Even though it may not represent a common signature of all forms of NT, such pattern may represent a signature of the mode of NT proposed by Michael White. Therefore, this scaffolding framework can potentially be an analytical tool for external observers to analyze to what extent an NT conversation is in line with NT principles. Some recent research studies have tried to use this concept to analyze NT conversations (Chan, 2012; Chan et

al., 2012; Heather L Ramey, Tarulli, Frijters, & Fisher, 2009; Heather L. Ramey, Young, & Tarulli, 2010). However, the transcripts in those studies are not available for open scrutiny, and none of them used the same rigor to analyze Michael White's therapeutic conversations in the first place.

Based on these coding schemes used in previous studies, we simplified some difficult wordings and compiled our coding scheme (see Table 1). We analyzed Michael White's therapeutic conversations in *MNT* and explored the possibility of having observable indicators to assess NT conversations. This study can fill a gap in the current body of literature, as the detailed transcripts in *MNT* are available for open review, and they can become resources for informing the discussion and development of standardized protocols.

II. The Illustration

Data Collection

This study illustrated White's therapeutic conversations documented in *MNT*. The illustration adopted a thematic analysis approach to explore observable patterns. White (2007) includes 6 Chapters which cover 14 stories of individuals or families. There were 8 stories eventually selected for analysis. Selection criteria consist of both inclusion and exclusion, and selected stories are to meet all criteria. Inclusion criteria were: i) Number of utterances above 20, ii) At least one story is selected from each chapter. Exclusion criteria were: i) Dialogues that are selectively quoted for illustrating just a particular questioning skill, ii) Repeated dialogues from the same case.

Coding

Tagging utterances using a 5-level Coding Tool. This study used this 5-level system to identify White's utterances reflecting his intentions to induce particular levels of distancing tasks, and clients' utterances reflecting particular levels of distancing tasks (herein referred to as "utterance levels"). For example, an utterance from White should be coded with "2" if it reflected an intention to induce medium-level distancing tasks. Likewise, an utterance from the client should also be coded with "2", if it reflected medium-level distancing tasks. The same logic applied in coding utterances reflecting other distancing levels. Utterances that could not be classified were tagged "NA." Although we interpreted these utterances contexts, they were regarded as individual units and assessed independently as far as possible.

Using a heuristic timeline rather than a timeline in actual minutes. As we could not know the actual duration of the conversations, instead of a timeline in actual minutes, we adopted a heuristic timeline in terms of the quarters of the total number of utterances in a story. That is, if a story has 100 utterances, utterances 1-25 will belong to Quarter 1, utterances 76-100 will belong to Quarter 4.

Inter-rater reliability. We conducted an inter-rater reliability check. Three raters independently coded the articles using the same set of working criteria and definitions. These raters are authors of this article, who have received NT training and are experienced in using NT. Results were compared, utterances having differences in coding were reviewed and discussed until all discrepancies were agreed upon consensually.

Analysis and Visualization

This case study adopted a hybrid process of inductive and deductive thematic analysis to interpret the utterances (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). It was deductive as we used a preset coding scheme to identify utterances belonging to different levels of distancing. It was also inductive as we tried to generalize some common patterns and insights based on these descriptive statistics and conversation contents. Table 2 and Chart 1 show the results. Overall, the analysis and visualization were aimed to depict the overall distributions of utterances reflecting the five distancing levels, as reflected by the selected stories, and reveal how conversation progression is related to the distancing levels.

III. Discussion

1. Progression

There is a general progression from low to high distancing levels, although there are cycles of ups and downs throughout the process. There are altogether $N=916$ utterances from the 8 selected stories; average utterance level is 1.53 in the 1st Quarter, 2.11 in the 2nd Quarter, 2.35 in the 3rd Quarter, and 3.10 in the 4th Quarter (See Chart 1). The case of Liam ($n=126$ utterances) in Chapter 2 helps illustrate the basic progression pattern.

Liam, aged 15, dropped out of school 4 months before meeting White, he was quite unresponsive and morose. Michael White met Liam and his mother Penny throughout the process. Dialogues in the 1st Quarter and the 2nd Quarter were coded Level 1 to Level 2 utterances. In the first meeting, White intended to draw Liam's interest in describing his problems. However, Liam was not drawn in; White thus turned to invite Penny to describe the situations around them. After a series of Level 1 utterances, Liam was able to agree to name his story of sharing his treats with the other kids at lunchtime "rescuing." Penny then mentioned "the dreams of a

little boy.” White continued to encourage Liam to relate it to anything that had happened in Liam's life in more recent years that would fit with what they were learning about him.

It was in the 3rd Quarter and the 4th Quarter that higher level utterances started appearing. Liam connected a story about his cousin – Vanessa, that she was having a hard time like him. Then Liam was able to summarize his actions of rescuing, protest, and reaching out. He named this state of identity as "salvaging life" (Level 4). Based on the previous conversations, Liam was able to pick up the hopes again. He became more engaged in the upcoming conversations. He also “reached out” to one of his old friends – Daniel, who also had some pretty hard times (Level 5).

In a subsequent meeting, Liam announced that he had realized that the depression he had been struggling with for so long was "fake depression." He realized that he was not messed up. In the final meeting, White reviewed with Liam many of the initiatives Liam had been taking in recent months. Liam found that he was a veteran of rejection, and he was “probably much better equipped to cope with rejection.” White asked him about the implications of that for his future. Liam concluded that future rejections were less likely to be a hurdle to him. That constituted a new realization for Liam (Level 5).

This basic pattern appears in an NT conversation regardless of the map(s) used. The results indicated that scaffolding occurred in all stories which were used to illustrate the various maps (see Table 2). The therapist’s intention of using which map or mixing different maps did not affect this pattern. A detailed discussion of each of these maps is beyond the scope of this study, but they are useful in illustrating in what way a core pattern appears in stories associating with each of these maps. An obvious example is White’s conversation with Peter in Chapter 5. In Peter’s case, there are $n=253$ utterances. Peter, 14 years old, spent much of his time in detention centers because of destroying property, assault, and theft. He came to the first interview with a unique outcome, “walking away to go to the gymnasium instead of wrecking things when being frustrated.” White noted that he applied multiple maps in the same case, and these various maps were used to facilitate the scaffolding progression in that case.

Most of the utterances in the first two quarters were Level 1 or Level 2 utterances, and the therapist applied some typical landscape of action questions (signature skills of the re-authoring conversations map) to depict details of the story. Trudy, the mother of Peter, accompanied Peter to attend the interviews. After hearing Peter’s regret for losing the right to own his life in childhood due to a hard time with his step-father. White inquired information of Peter’s recent development from Melanie (the referring therapist) and Trudy for establishing a series of Level 1 utterances. When finding Peter’s initiative in “walking away” from trouble, White made a way to have conversations that highlight unique outcomes. It started with helping Peter to have a better understanding of the characteristics of his “walking away,” including “stepping back, figuring things out, figuring I didn’t need it, and keeping my mind.” Then, the conversations moved to map the effects of “walking away” in other domains (Level 2). They found that “walking away” could keep Peter away from going wild, avoid counseling, and keep his privileges. After making an evaluation “good to see” (Level 3), Peter abstracted the concepts of identity about himself such as “do something with life” and “able to make things happen” (Level 4).

It was in the 3rd Quarter that Trudy realized her life attitude “nothing can get in my way now,” White then applied the re-authoring conversations to thicken the stories behind this finding. Trudy was thus able to review what she had gone through in the nearer and far back life stories, and better understood her hopes for a peaceful and respectful life. White turned to focus on Trudy’s unique outcome of “not allow herself to be paralyzed by guilt.” After realizing her attitude of “nothing can get in my way” at a crossroads 18 months ago, Trudy was able to acknowledge her intentions to have a peaceful and respectful life, and she identified herself with “resilience” (Level 4).

When Trudy came up with the finding “resilience,” White mentioned that he switched to another map – re-remembering conversations. White invited Trudy to think of anyone who could validate or acknowledge the importance of her intentions and hopes. He also asked if there was anyone who might have shared her hopes for life. It helped Trudy find an important character in her life – her Grandma Lillian that assisted Trudy to make her new developments even more solid.

In the 4th Quarter, White turned to involve Peter to join the conversation which involved a technique White called “definitional ceremony.” White invited Trudy and Peter to imagine Lillian (Trudy’s Grandma) being there as an audience to their conversation about developments in their lives. By sharing the imaginary views and thoughts, the lives of Lillian, Trudy, and Peter were linked together with a shared theme of “keeping these hopes going.” Trudy and Peter were able to have a better understanding of their life experiences and reconfirmed their new developments. Re-remembering conversations were used to facilitate the development of the identity “resilience.” The conversations thickened the preferred identity with Grandma Lillian’s contributions of understanding, support, and love, the conversations scaffolded Trudy’s narrative to a higher level, helped her identify herself as a sensitive, thoughtful and gentle person.

In sum, there is a common progression pattern— conversation utterances proceed from low to high distancing levels, while there are cycles of ups and downs throughout the process. Although White sometimes mentioned that he consciously used different maps in a case, external observers could identify such a progression pattern from the dialogues at a verbatim level even without knowing the specific maps he noted in his explanations afterward. This progression pattern echoes with what Duvall and Béres (2011) have suggested that NT is a three-act play, and what Payne (2000) has suggested that NT process starts from naming the problem, follows by various options to deconstruct the problem and thicken the unique outcome. The most significant difference between White's scaffolding framework and Payne's or Duvall's framework is that White's framework is not just a structure of linear process steps, but it refers to a system of abstraction levels reflected by individual utterances. As such, the scaffolding lens can support external observers to identify the distancing levels of utterances in a conversation, and hence, the progression pattern of that conversation.

2. Proportions

There are substantial lower level utterances supporting much fewer high-level utterances. There are altogether $N=916$ utterances from the 8 selected stories, 70% of the dialogues are Level 1 and Level 2 utterances (see Table 2). That means, this pyramid pattern applies to almost all cases, except Vivienne's story, in which only 45% are Level 1 and Level 2 utterances. However, we should note that Vivienne's story is a small extraction of a much larger narrative, in which White had already detailed much background before he reported the conversations with Vivienne.

Jeffrey's case in Chapter 1 provides a more comprehensive picture and helps illustrate such typical proportion pattern. In Jeffrey's case, there are 88% of the utterances belong to Level 1 or Level 2. In the first meeting, Jeffrey's parents wanted to know how to deal with Jeffrey's ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). White did not directly provide an answer. Instead, he spent a session in asking Jeffrey and his parents some questions about influences of ADHD (Level 1) and employed a "twin" metaphor to differentiate Jeffrey's ADHD from others' (Level 2). After seeing the painting of Jerry's ADHD, Jeffrey proposed to take a picture of his ADHD. In the next meeting, Jeffrey brought a picture of his ADHD to the session. By visualizing the difference between Jeffrey's situation with others, they could comment on Jeffrey's ADHD. ADHD had substantial influences on Jeffrey's school life. It made trouble for Jeffrey and gave his teachers headaches. Due to the existence of ADHD, Jeffrey did not get along well with other kids. Moreover, it also tired Jeffrey's parents out. Following the session, the tactics and strategies of ADHD, and the plans that ADHD had for Jeffrey's life were studied (Level 2).

There are only 12% of the utterances belong to Level 3 to Level 4, and they emerged in the latter part of the conversation when Jeffrey and his parents eventually concluded that his ADHD was a mutated version of Jerry's. They were unhappy with all the influences over them. They wanted their family back. It was clear that the depicted picture of the ADHD gave the family a ground for concluding. In the last part of the meeting, Jeffrey also expressed his intention of keeping ADHD as a special friend but not allowing ADHD to rule his life.

Both Jeffrey and his parents expressed the unhappiness that ADHD brought into their lives. After mapping the influences of ADHD through various domains of Jeffrey's life, he proceeded to higher-level distancing tasks. In subsequent meetings, Jeffrey gradually revealed his preferred relationships in his life domains, including the relationship with his parents, teachers, and other children, which used to be inhibited by ADHD. With the preferred identities that Jeffrey longed for, Jeffrey, his parents, and his teacher had developed some initiatives to curtail ADHD's activities in the later meetings. The family finally became more capable of shaping their ability according to what was important to them.

In sum, White's conversations showed that low-level distancing tasks are essential for the development of a rich story description of the lived experiences of the problem. Through exploring the consequences of a problem in different domains, the problem became connected with related thoughts and experiences. NT conversations distance a person from the immediacy of a problem and identify a non-problem position. Utterances in higher levels (particularly Level 4 utterances) are pivotal and indispensable in all the selected conversations analyzed in this study. Higher-level distancing tasks are important, not in terms of their quantity, but because they appear at the right time and place. This observation partly echoes with insights from experiential learning programs, in which the part about concrete experience usually occupies a much longer time than the debriefing session serving to support participants to further conceptualize their learnings (Cheung, 2006; Kolb, 1984; Ord, 2009, 2012).

3. Synchrony

The average distancing level of White's utterances is consistently a bit higher than the average distancing level of the clients', and yet they are in synchrony in their overall progressions(see Chart 1). Among the 1st Quarter utterances from all stories, the therapist's average distancing level is 1.58, and the clients' is 1.49. The same pattern applies to other Quarters. In the 2nd Quarter, the therapist's average distancing level is

2.18, and the clients' is 2.03. In the 3rd Quarter, the therapist's distancing level is 2.42, and the clients' is 2.29. In the 4th Quarter, the therapist's distancing level is 3.20, and the clients' is 3.02.

This difference is partly because the therapist consistently took a proactive role to enable clients to work on higher-level distancing tasks, but clients did not always respond at the level in their initial responses. For example, at the beginning of Liam's story in Chapter 2, Liam did not become aware that he was the target of the meeting. White wanted to invite Liam to describe more about his problem, but Liam was not engaged. White then turned to invite Penny (Liam's mother) to describe the situation and allowed Liam to verify it. When Liam participated more actively in the development of the subordinate storyline later, White invited him to higher distancing utterances.

There were occasions that White intended to ask a series of Level 3 questions in order to move to Level 4 utterances, such as: what's important to you, about what you've held onto despite what you've been through, about dreams about what life should all be about, what this would make possible for you? What would this make possible for you to do? However, these questions were too advanced for Liam, and he had difficulty in answering them. White thus turned back to a Level 2 utterance by continuing to converse with Penny and prompted Liam to answer. As shown in Liam's case, White tried to uplift the conversation to a higher distancing level when they were ready. If clients were not ready, White remained at the same level or even returned to a lower level. This principle also appears in other conversations in *MNT*.

That said, in an NT conversation, distancing levels of the therapist's utterances and the client's utterances were not always the same because the therapist proactively enabled the client to work on higher-level distancing tasks before or after a client's utterance. The therapist could use a higher-level question to prompt further responses or use a higher-level summarizing statement to respond to the client's response. Therefore, although the progression of the distancing levels of the therapist and the client were in synchrony in the overall conversation, the average distancing level of the therapist's utterances could be a bit higher than that of the client's.

During psychotherapy, the client and therapist tend to spontaneously synchronize their vocal pitch, bodily movements, and even their physiological processes (Koole & Tschacher, 2016). The client-therapist synchrony in NT may be a feature that marks its difference with conversations from other therapies. This observation has profound theoretical implication if we think back White's scaffolding idea has its root in Vygotsky's theory, which sees that the therapist can assist a client via a ZPD and utilizes such a zone to facilitate a person to go beyond his/her existing knowledge level (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994). As such, it shows that scaffolding is a mechanism explaining how clients go beyond their existing knowledge level in an NT process. These observations provide a useful entry point for us to reinterpret what White claimed that his questions are responses to clients' responses (White, 2007, p. 98) and that NT therapists do not imagine the destination of conversation at the outset (White, 2007, p.250). It is likely that although there is no prescribed wordings or questions that direct the client's narration at a verbatim level, White's NT conversations present a consistent guiding pattern at a meta-level across his various cases illustrated in *MNT*.

IV. Concluding Remarks

If NT skills are flexible, it is not reasonable to expect that an NT therapist must demonstrate certain wordings or questions. Likewise, the absence of specific wordings or questions in an NT conversation does not mean that such a conversation is not in line with NT. As such, the problem of intervention adherence has long been an issue in intervention research studying NT. This study explored the possibility of identifying meta-structures of NT conversations which go beyond a verbatim level. The analysis revealed characteristic features in three observable domains, including i) progression of the distancing levels of conversation utterances, ii) proportions of the distancing levels of conversation utterances, and iii) synchrony between the distancing levels of conversation utterances from the therapist and client.

Our observations suggested that although there is no prescribed wordings or questions that "must" appear in an NT conversation at a verbatim level, White's NT conversations present a definite pattern at a meta-level across various cases illustrated in *MNT*. Our observations are far from comprehensive, but they may inspire further development of NT research at least in two aspects:

First, this study denotes the possibility of having some instruments to assess whether an NT conversation is in line with NT principles. It may help NT research to further align with the general requirement of intervention adherence, as adopted in many other well-established intervention studies (Borrelli et al., 2005; Moncher & Prinz, 1991; Rodriguez-Quintana & Lewis, 2018; Tucker & Blythe, 2008). For example, it may be possible for external observers to indicate their level of agreement with some criteria using a Likert scale or a yes/no feedback. These tools can help researchers assess in what ways different practitioners have provided consistent consultation patterns in different contexts.

Second, this study may have implications for innovations in NT. If researchers can identify signature patterns in NT conversations, it also means that they can have protocols to assess in what way any new

developments, such as new skills, new programs, or new self-help software can generate narrative experiences which are in line with NT principles. It is worthwhile to note that the concept of scaffolding is also a core concept that has significantly inspired educational technology studies (Luckin, 2008; Vérillon, 2000). Vygotskian theories have assumed that meaning-making relies on external symbolic mediations, and such mediations do not necessarily need to be human facilitators, they can be self-paced learning packages.

Overall, the question remains: Is it possible to have observable indicators assessing whether NT conversations are in line with NT principles? We see that it might be possible, but it is not yet generalizable. We are fully aware that our understanding of White's work is an interpretation through a specific lens in a specific sociocultural context, and there are various versions of NT emphasized by different NT practitioners. Besides, we are also aware that the stories in *MNT* are episodes rather than full transcripts; therefore, we can only select some of those cover more complete details. These limitations notwithstanding, the focus of this article is not to propose a normative standard, but to explore in what ways the scaffolding framework proposed by a key NT founder can shed light on the possibility of identifying observable signatures of NT conversations. Our study is merely a heuristic attempt. Further discussions, debates, and research are necessary.

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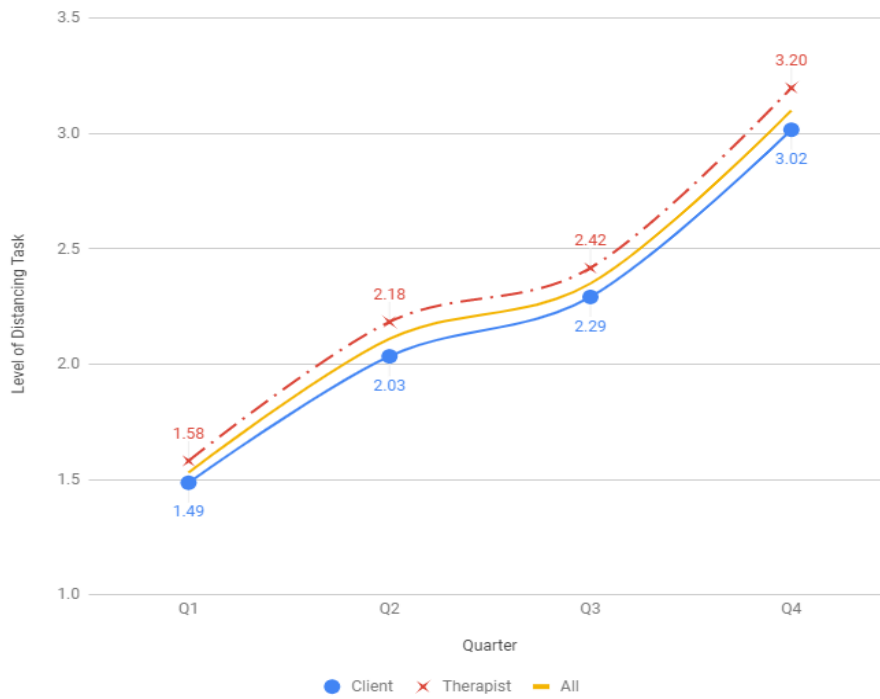
Table 1. Tagging Utterances in NP Conversations

Tag	Distancing level	Examples
5	Plan: Very high-level distancing tasks: Clients plan for changes based on the newly developed identity or concepts about life.	T: What sort of step would this be if you took it? Would you say it was a step in rescuing, protesting, or reaching out? Or something else? C: I don't know. Probably reaching out.
4	Identity: High-level distancing tasks: Clients identify with some preferred concepts, values or identities based on selected thoughts and experiences.	T: What is it about the owning up that is important? C: It's being an honest person.
3	Evaluation: Medium-high level distancing tasks: Clients evaluate the significance of those thoughts and experiences, particularly those potentially related to identity formation.	T: What would that be like for you, Peter? If managing your own life made this possible? C: That would be really positive for me.
2	Connection: Medium-level distancing tasks: Clients connect that problem with related thoughts and experiences, particularly compare and categorize specific experiences and observations.	T: May I know how could this "walking away from trouble" make possible for you? Do you have any other experiences like this? C: I didn't wreck anything this time. I didn't get wild and bust everything up. In many other occasions, I messed things up.
1	Naming: From loitering to Low-level distancing tasks: Clients describe and name the problem/situation.	T: I understand that you were feeling pretty upset, and you could have done anything. How come you didn't get into so much trouble this time? C: Just walked away from it. That's all.
NA	Could not be classified	T: Okay, I understand. Another question? C: Okay.

Table 2: Distributions of utterances reflecting respective levels of distancing tasks in each story

Percentage	Chapter	One	Two	Two	Two	Three	Four	Five	Six	ALL
Level	Story	Jeffrey n=126	Liam n=118	Vivienne n=68	David n=99	Thomas n=144	Alison n=62	Peter n=253	Jack n=46	N=916
5		0%	9%	0%	0%	0%	13%	0%	0%	2%
4		2%	11%	46%	6%	26%	0%	14%	28%	15%
3		10%	0%	9%	0%	4%	6%	16%	22%	9%
2		52%	75%	35%	75%	58%	35%	45%	50%	54%
1		37%	4%	7%	13%	6%	42%	21%	0%	17%
NA		0%	0%	3%	6%	6%	3%	4%	0%	3%

Chart 1: Utterance Level Progressions Across Quarters in All Stories (N=916 Utterances)



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