Investigating Life-Stories. Personal Narrative in Pastoral Psychology

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ABSTRACT

The subject of this article is the meaning of the personal narrative in pastoral practice and research. A hermeneutical, narrative approach is used to explore the nature and function of the personal narrative, and gives insight in the dynamics of pastoral counseling. Narrative approaches are also both possible and valuable for research and counseling. This reflects the new interest for hermeneutics in Dutch pastoral psychological literature. Implications for research in pastoral psychology are discussed and possibilities for practice are described. The article concludes with a discussion of the hermeneutical approach.

People tell stories. They not only do so in daily life, but perhaps even more in pastoral counseling settings. In fact, they have to, because a story can express what cannot be said otherwise. These stories together form a pattern which we call the "personal narrative". To understand this personal narrative it is useful to take a hermeneutical approach. We define hermeneutics in a pastoral setting as the study of the ways individuals interpret their lives in order to reach an understanding of actions and events, that is held to be meaningful.

PERSONAL NARRATIVE AND NARRATIVE IDENTITY

Definition

A story is not just a way of conveying information, it is a way of interpreting facts. Every story attributes a certain meaning to the events it relates. That is why story-telling is an important aspect of life, because human life can be seen as a continuous process of interpreting and ordering the world in images or stories (Winquist 1978; Gerkin 1979). The events of our lives and world do not have a narrative structure. We do not claim either that all experience has a narrative structure, but as soon as experience is put into order, fragments of life are structured into a meaningful framework of interpretations. In that way it is possible that certain events are at first experienced at an unconscious level, and afterwards are being interpreted and given

a place in a narrative system. "By language we make sense out of what we experience" (Gerkin 1986, 5).

In this process of interpreting, every individual develops a narrative identity (Ricoeur 1988). That is, in telling the stories of his or her life, the individual creates a central character in the story. This is the image of the individual's identity one strives to construct and maintain (Schlenker 1987). Through all the different life stories there is a continuity, a certain pattern which we can call the personal narrative, the frame of interpretation. We therefore define life-stories as narrative patterns of interpretations whereby we seek to discover the sense, meaning and value of life and of the events occurring in it (Ganzevoort 1989; see also Shuman 1986). The personal narrative is the central story within the different life stories of a person. For this phenomenon others have used the terms "assumptive world", "structure of meaning" or "world model" (Janoff-Bulman & Timko 1987). Rogers (1951, 191) described this self-structure as "an organization of hypotheses for meeting life". The stories of life are used to order experiences and to answer the fundamental questions: Where am I, what am I, who am I? These questions are central in experiences of contingency (Peukert 1982). The narrative identity answers the Who-am-I-question, whereas the other answers contribute to the central story-line of the personal narrative.

Narrative Identity and Social Context

A few remarks should be made to the social context of the narrative identity. In this theory of personal narratives, there is a strong emphasis on the individual interpretation and attribution of meaning to situations and events. However, it is not an individualistic approach, because we do not write the personal narrative in a relational vacuum. For every individual there is a range of relationships with the social context. The personal narrative touches the narratives of others. We play a role in each others story, and we contribute to a "shared story" (especially in a community of faith), functioning as the horizon of our understanding, which in turn we communicate to our children.

The personal narrative is the central story in which events and situations are being told and interpreted. Relational theories like the Symbolic Interactionism of the sociologist G.H. Mead stress the fact that this interpretational process is a highly social phenomenon (Van Uden 1986). Self-evaluation and social identity are held to be based on social interaction (Thoits 1982). Erickson (1982) claims that belief systems grow in social networks through the process of social comparison. That is to say: the network-group functions as a frame of reference for individuals in order to arrive at a meaningful interpretation. The social context is a source for possible meanings (Ganzevoort 1991a).

As soon as the personal narrative is shared with others, several phenomena can be observed. The shared story is not the same as the inner story. In telling the personal narrative, the narrator modifies the story. The situation in which the story is told influences the selection of what is shared and what is kept secret. The curriculum vitae described in applying for a job is a story different from the anamnesis given in

the consulting-room of a surgeon. We expect the person we tell our story to be interested in certain aspects of our narrative. This process can be called narrative smoothing and is based on social desirability. (Spence 1986)

A second phenomenon occurring in sharing the story is the change of the story itself. By telling it, the narrative becomes a text, in a certain sense detached from the person. This externalised text can be read by the narrator, and therefore it can also be re-interpreted. The person the story is shared with functions as a second horizon of understanding. That is to say, the interpretation of the facts of life is no longer limited to the personal views but can be widened to new perspectives. As Pennebaker (1988) states, confiding in another person makes it possible to find a new cognitive reorganisation and integration that cannot be found as long as the story is not externalised. Here we find one reason why therapy can be helpful. When the personal narrative is seen as an important force in the perception and interpretation of the world, this means that explicit attention to the personal narrative can evoke therapeutical changes.

As far as the religious social context is concerned we can distinguish between the primary and the secondary environment. In practically all cases, the parents form the primary environment, being the persons that contribute to this environment from the very first day. To the second environment others contribute. These significant others can change in place, distance and value. In other words: the first influential factor should be seen in the parents, who provide the first orientation in the writing of the personal narrative (Hutsebaut 1982). When they (or at least one of them) offer an open relationship and a life in which the Christian faith is integrated, the developing child can be expected to integrate faith and life itself. If that is the case, positive coping with life events and the maintenance of a religious attitude is possible. If the parents seem unable to do so, this function can be taken over by others, so that a shift of orientation takes place. In crisis situations, where the personal narrative and the meaning of life are threatened, this shift often occurs. The new orientations most likely to be accepted are the ministers and the peers. The first because of their symbolic meaning as carriers of the Christian tradition and communicators of the transcendent; the latter because of their immediacy. In both cases there can be a combination of an open relationship and an integration of life and faith.

What is it that makes the social environment such an important factor? It is almost common knowledge that the way parents are, act and relate to the child contributes to the representation of God (e.g. Hutsebaut 1982, Rizzuto 1979 Spilka, Hood and Gorsuch 1985, Vergote and Tamayo 1981). We feel that this theory should be broadened in the sense that all significant others in one way or another contribute to this formation of religious beliefs and views. As stated here it is not just the cognitions of faith but the entirety of human life in which a religious attitude is embedded. This matches the findings of Kox (1989) who investigated the conversion of non-religious youth to Christian, charismatic churches. He discovered that social attraction preceded a commitment to the doctrines of the group. In a similar way we found that it is not the cognitive aspect of faith that is most

important in the development of a positive outcome of the faith-crisis-encounter, but the relational dimension (Ganzevoort 1991b). Through positive relationships with religiously oriented significant others an individual in crisis may discover the possibility of a meaningful interpretation of the life events encountered. Therefore in pastoral work and in the life of a community of faith it is not the right doctrines that count most, but the right relationships.

Narrative Identity and Religion

In a hermeneutical theory, religion and identity are closely connected. Religion can be described as a reduction of the complexity of human life into a meaningful system (Luhmann 1977). Fowler (1981, 4) states: "Faith is a person's way of seeing him- or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose". In the personal narrative as well as in religion meaningful interpretations are made to the situations and events in life (Pruyser 1968; Spilka, Hood and Gorsuch 1985). Both (narrative) identity and religion tell us who we are (Gillespie 1979). From a Christian point of view, these interpretations are only valid when they agree with the revealed meanings as found in the Bible. Therefore the Scriptures are the primary frame of reference in which we try to interpret our lives. However, we are still speaking of interpretations rather than facts. Saying this does not subjectivize the meaning of life or the biblical interpretation. Interpretation is not a point of a subjectivism-objectivism scale, but a process through which we try to grasp the objective meaning as we understand it. When our own religious interpretations and the interpretations of our religious social context are in harmony, they contribute to the perceived validity of our personal narrative (Pruyser 1968). In a recent dissertation, Streib (1991) has combined the views of Ricoeur and Fowler, and finds that both in religion and in identity the notion of 'responsiveness' can be used as a central concept. The interpretations we give are responses to the facts of life. Our responses reflect the meaning we see in and give to life. The symbolic expression of meaning is "essentially religious" (Winquist 1978:114).

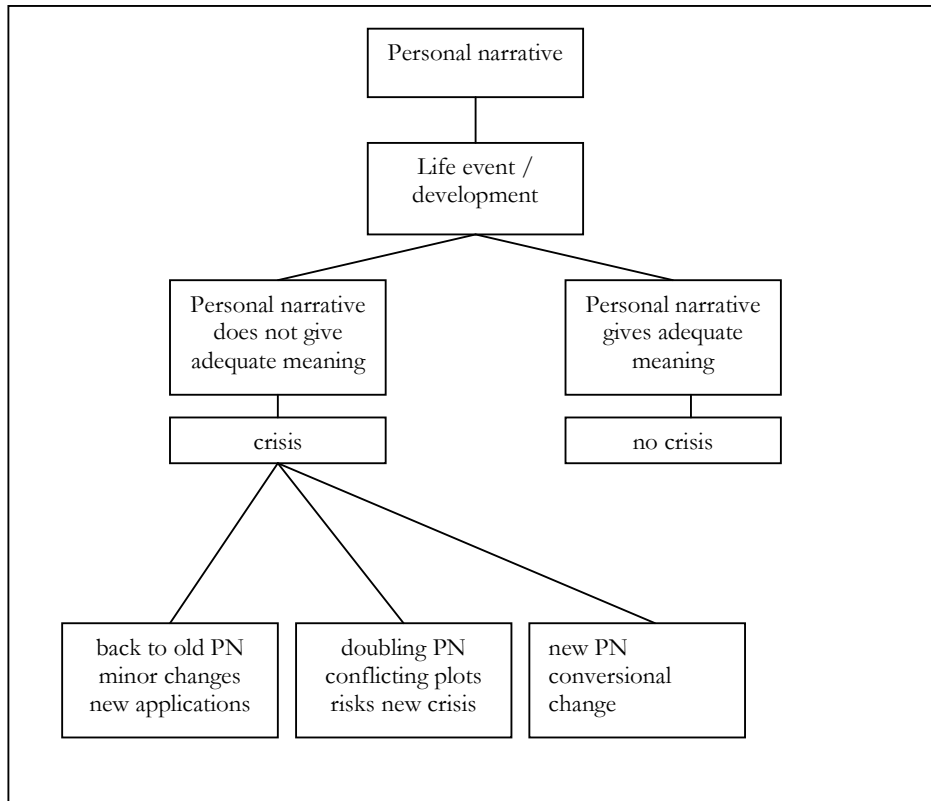*Development of the Narrative Identity*

How does this personal narrative come into existence, and how does it develop over the life span? From the very first days of our life we have interpreted our world. The hungry and crying baby interprets its parents' care as a sign of reliability. No matter how unconscious these interpretations may be, we should view them as very real. Erik Erikson has described this stage as the first crisis an individual meets, in which the basic trust or mistrust is established (Erikson 1963). In hermeneutical terms these are interpretations that form the very beginning of a plot or story-line of the personal narrative. This plot can be confirmed in later experiences, or it can be rejected when it seems impossible to interpret new experiences in the line of this plot. A child with a life story of trust and confidence may enter into a crisis when it is confronted with parental divorce or (sexual) abuse. The Eriksonian developmental crises can also be understood in this hermeneutical way. In the process of development there are always new experiences that may or may not fit in the framework of interpretations that forms the personal narrative. We try to keep

our stories intact as long as possible; at first an individual confronted with an event unsuitable for explanation in the old life story may try to use denial to prevent itself from crisis (Janoff-Bulman & Timko 1987; Sarbin 1986). When events and interpretations of them can no longer be disregarded, because they are too threatening and too influential, a crisis will occur. In other words: we try to assimilate new facts into our personal narrative. When this is appraised as impossible, the personal narrative has to be accomodated.

Two basic types of crisis-experiences have been identified: accidental (or traumatic) and developmental (Caplan 1964). Developmental crises have their origin within the individual and his / her personal development. It is assumed that every person meets several crises over the life span, and that these crises are a part of the natural flow of life. Accidental crises have their origin in facts and experiences outside of the individual. Although this division is a useful one, it is stated here that both types have the same structure. Jackson & Bosma (1990) explored the coping-process of adolescents, assuming a similarity between developmental and accidental crises. A crisis in either form is hermeneutically understood as the perception that the story of life does not adequately give meaning to a certain experience, which is appraised as too threatening (Lazarus 1966, Lazarus & Folkman 1984). Charles Gerkin (1979, 32) describes a crisis situation hermeneutically as "an extreme or boundary situation in which the fundamental contradiction between human aspirations and finite possibilities becomes visible in such a way as to demand attention". This approach to crisis experiences does not neglect or deny psychological insights. It rather identifies underlying structures of interpretation that form the heart of the crisis (Taylor 1983). Psychological disorders as in crisis-behavior are seen as descriptive symptoms of a hermeneutical problem. As Gerkin (1984, 122) puts it: "The hermeneutical question arises when the line of life is blocked", and "implicit in every story beginning a counseling relationship there is a hermeneutical question: 'What does it mean'".

Crisis situations are thus the turning points where the story-line of the personal narrative has to be changed in order to arrive at a meaningful interpretation. In our research, which interviewed people who suddenly got paralysed, one young man showed no symptoms of crisis (Ganzevoort 1987). In analysing this interview, we concluded that his former experiences of frequent hospitalization and other unexpected medical problems in his life had led him to the attitude of accepting life events as they come. When he broke his neck, he did not enter a crisis, but simply changed his daily activities. In other words: he did not have to find a new interpretation because his old interpretations were perceived as adequate (Ganzevoort 1989). That is why -from a developmental point of view- crisis experiences are worth studying (Ganzevoort 1991b). In crisis situations new meanings and interpretations are being sought and incorporated in the personal narrative (Thompson 1981, 1985). In some occasions this may have the consequence of a complete alteration of the story-line, as is the case in conversional changes (Doran 1981; Loder 1981). In other cases the new interpretations give shape to a second story-line, a double plot. When this is the case, there is a high risk

for new crises to occur when confronted with threatening events in the future, because an integrated frame of interpretation is absent, and conflicting alternatives of meaning emerge.

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In sum, each individual has a personal narrative of his or her own. More than that, we do not just have a personal narrative, we are a narrative identity. It is this fundamental frame of interpretation, from which all stories are told and all interpretations are made. The personal narrative is connected to the social and religious narratives that are significant to the individual. A hermeneutical theory integrates the social dimension, the symbolic dimension of interpretation and meaning, and the religious dimension. Both research and practice in pastoral psychology benefit from the insights of a theory of personal narrative, as will be shown in the next sections.

PERSONAL NARRATIVE IN PASTORAL PRACTICE

Qualitative or Quantitative?

After deciding for a hermeneutical approach in pastoral research and practice, the next question to be asked is what methods and strategies are most appropriate.

Fundamental in this matter is the assumption that the individual with his or her private interpretations should be the focus of the investigations. When this assumption is accepted as valid, qualitative methods should be preferred. The individual interpretations, biography and life story are so complex that it may be quite impossible to use standardized inquiries. A qualitative research design has more possibilities in this line of research. This is all the more true when the research design is directed towards the formulation of new theories or the investigation of a subject which has not yet been sufficiently explored (Glaser & Strauss 1967).

Relevant questions can be asked as to the reliability and general validity of the data found in qualitative research designs. It is at this point that quantitative methods can enrich a qualitative approach. Psychologists and pastoral-theologians, as researchers, are encouraged to use those methods most appropriate to their professional skills. For theologians qualitative methods are usually preferred, whereas psychologists may chose for quantitative methods. The combination of the two is a good approach for integrating their respective disciplines. It is claimed that both qualitative and quantitative methods can be used, depending on the question what is being investigated (Hoenkamp-Bisschops 1982). When little research has been done so far on a certain subject, qualitative methods might have the best chance for reaching valid data. In many cases qualitative methods are used to discover what is called a "grounded theory", that is a theory based on facts rather than on previous theories (Glaser & Strauss 1967).

When focusing on personal narrative in pastoral research, biographical methods seem to be the most appropriate ones. Biographical methods reflect the subject under investigation in their structure. The unit of analysis in these methods can be diaries, autobiographies, letters, (semi-structured) interviews, etcetera (Fuchs 1984). In order to uncover the personal narrative and interpretation, interviews should be prefered to questionnaires, because they are more open to unexpected results and have higher validity (Paykel 1985). The structure of the material may or may not be chronological. A complication is that re-telling the story may involve re-interpreting it. Therefore, in retrospective material we should not seek historical facts, but the interpretations an individual has given to these facts. That is why the focus of biographic methods in this approach is the personal narrative and frame of interpretation. Specific attention should be given to crisis experiences, being the situations where the search for meaning is highly apparent and where the story-line may change.

There are several possibilities of increasing the validity of qualitative research (including biographic methods). Fuchs (1984) focuses on the necessity of a sound theoretical selection. As opposed to statistical selection, theoretical selection strives for a maximal variance in the group of respondents, not by selecting a random group of adequate size, but by determining the relevant criteria and selecting respondents on these criteria. As a complementary method he mentions the possibility of a statistical method to check the qualitative research findings. Berg (1989) calls this "triangulation". He argues for multiplicity in research methods, researchers, and research subjects.

Increasing validity and reliability can thus be obtained by combining the biographic with other methods. Research presently being done in the University of Utrecht project on "Context and Attribution of Meaning" uses this design. Each interview is analysed by at least two independent researchers, the analyses are examined by the interviewee and a research supervisor. Additional questionnaires filled in by the significant others of the individual complete the material for each case. Our theoretical selection provides a maximum in diversity of subjects. We hope to report on this research when results are available.

In sum, qualitative research methods should be chosen when the personal narrative is the focus of the investigation. Biographical methods seem to be the most promising. Much attention should be given to matters of validity and reliability.

PERSONAL NARRATIVE IN PASTORAL PRACTICE

Hearing the Story

In order to discern this fundamental personal narrative or life story among the many stories an individual may recount in counseling, we should pay attention to the basic characteristics of narrative. Four fundamental principles of narrative are plot, setting, character and tone. Plot means that a certain beginning is connected through several links to a certain end. It is a recognizable pattern of events (Sarbin 1986). In the case of the personal narrative this means that the various stories being told somewhere have a connection that points to the plot of the underlying personal narrative. Emotionally charged memories and expectations may reveal this plot as well. In pastoral research and practice it is crucial to come to understand this life story, because it is the principal frame of reference within which an individual makes his or her interpretations.

Setting means the constellation of social, cultural and other context-factors. When certain elements of this setting continue to be told in the various stories, it is suggested that these elements constitute the context of the personal narrative. Special attention of pastor and researcher is therefore needed because the repeated setting-elements may point to the personal narrative.

By character is meant the personal context; those persons and relationships that are perceived as primary in importance. Characters in a personal narrative may not be realistic compared to the real persons, but still these characters are of great relevance. It may even be more appropriate to understand these characters than it is to understand their degree of reality. After all it is the perception of the person and relationship that is of influence to the individual, and not the person or relationship as it is in the real world. To this perception, Vergote and Tamayo use the term of "symbolic figures" (Vergote & Tamayo 1981).

The fourth fundamental principle of narrative is tone. This concept is used to describe the overall emotional atmosphere in which a story is told. There is a clear difference between the tone of a neutral documentary, a court plea, a comedy or an

intimate confession. The tone of a story expresses in part the meaning of the particular story in the personal narrative.

These four principles (plot, setting, character, tone) point to the personal narrative. In a hermeneutically oriented pastoral research and practice the focus of the work is this personal narrative. Therefore major attention should be given to the development of a model of understanding and discerning the life stories. Bohler (1987) describes how the counselors should respond to different stories. Some stories only have to be heard well. When the counselor helps to discover the "root metaphor" of the stories (i.e. the personal narrative), the counselee feels understood. Other stories have to be interrupted in counseling. This is the case when stories foster the avoidance of reality as in addiction or withdrawal in the past. Interruption is also recommended when simple (behavioral) solutions are possible.

Changing the Story

Probably the majority of stories told in pastoral (and in psychological) counseling however, should not only be heard and understood, but given a twist of meaning. Story-telling in a counseling setting may well involve the search for new interpretations. Often the aim of story-telling is the re-construction of the personal narrative. The counselor can stimulate this re-construction by asking to tell the story from a different perspective (Bohler 1987). In a recent Dutch dissertation (Veltkamp 1988), the concept of parable is used as a model for pastoral care. The parable is a story inviting the listener to become part of the story and re-interpret his or her personal story.

How does one change the story? As stated, the use of a new perspective can turn a rigid old story into one more open for change. This new perspective can be the perspective of somebody else. One exercise might be to let the counselee tell a fairy tale or a biblical story from the perspective of another character. The stepmother might tell the story of Cinderella; the older brother might tell the parable of the prodigal son. New perspectives help to see other possibilities of meaning and interpretation. Likewise, individuals in counseling may be invited to tell the story of their life from the point of view of a significant other person. This can be very useful when one certain person is often mentioned in the story in an emotionally charged way. Having the counselee tell the story as if he or her were this particular person will often evoke important new possibilities of interpretation. Counselees who find it hard to see that God is near them in their experiences may be asked to write the story of their life as God perceives and experiences it.

Another pastoral technique using story-telling is the writing of double-stories and scenario's. By the term "double-stories" I refer to a life story in two different versions. When one tells a painful story of loneliness and pain, he or she may be invited to tell the story again with a different motive or through the eyes of a different person. From a popular Christian point of view Seamands (1981) gives the example of a counseling session (involving a woman born from an unwanted pregnancy) in which the counselee is asked to describe the moment of conception and to answer the question where God was at that particular moment. This is a clear

case of re-construction. The focus is not on the facts of the past, but of the unconscious assumptions of present life. These assumptions may become visible in re-writing the story in a different way.

Scenario-writing is a method in which the counselee is asked to write at least two stories about his or her life in the future. One scenario should describe a negative outcome, whereas the other describes a positive outcome. By comparing the two, it will become clear where the decisions for one of the story-lines of the scenario's is made, and what can done to arrive at the desired outcome. It should be kept in mind that stories of the future have a different value than stories of the past (Crites 1986). Stories of the past are re-constructions, while stories of the future can only be imaginative, global, and open for improvisation. Still, scenario-writing makes clear the expectations, dreams and fears of the counselee in a narrative way.

When doing pastoral counseling in groups, the technique known as biblio-drama can be used to change the stories of the participants. By playing the characters of a biblical story, asking the characters about their feelings and discussing actual questions and problems with the characters, a deeper insight is gained not only to the biblical story, but also to the personal life and experiences.

A Clinical Example

A clinical example involves a young mother who had recently learned that her two sons suffered a genetic disease with multiple consequences. We agreed to meet a few times to explore her feelings towards this experience and towards God. I asked her to write the story of Little Red Riding-Hood in two versions, one as told by the little girl and one as told by the wolf. After some hesitation she agreed, and we discussed her stories in the first meeting. The story of the girl showed a character of great naïveté, exploring the dangerous yet beautiful world. It was the story of someone who is the victim of her own curiosity, and who felt guilty for making decisions. The story of the wolf revealed an interesting point when it explained the lust to kill from the wolf's memory of seeing its father being killed by a man. In answer to my question, this woman said she recognized part of herself in both stories. Our discussion focused on the parallel between the fatherless wolf, and her own situation, her own father often being absent and behaving as a victim, and God seeming far away and incapable of protecting her. She felt guilty for the trouble she experienced every time she tried to discover new things. Through this discussion she came to understand that her images of God were quite naive: she expected clear guidance, presence and power, which as a child she had not got from her father. However, this child-like story of God made it impossible to experience God's presence in her present situation. We then sought for new stories in which her responsibility to act and live were encouraged. She discovered, that she had mostly experienced God's presence at those moments she was forced to make her own decisions.

Changing the Referential Figures

Changing the story is the aim of many pastoral encounters, whether or not the counselor is aware of this. Many pastoral counselors and others contribute to the

change of story, but do not use these terms. Several methods have been described, all focusing on changing the story itself. Another focus of this pastoral approach of changing the story however will be the referential figures, that is the persons, groups or belief systems that provide the primary orientation for interpretations. These orientations can be either supportive or detracting. Supportive orientations should be explored in their possibilities of finding new interpretations, while detracting or negative orientations should be changed or avoided. It may be possible to change the way a counselee sees a referential figure by discovering this person or system is different than he or she had assumed. In other cases it may be possible to leave this orientation and find new referential figures. In many cases the counselor will serve as a temporary new orientation. Christian counseling may explore ways in which the community of faith can be a supportive reference.

It is here that the connection should be made to the story of God. A pastoral worker is a representative of the Christian tradition. He or she is the symbolic carrier of the story of God. We do not understand this term in a critical way as if the Word of God is merely a human interpretation of faith-experiences. In our view the Bible is the means through which our Lord has revealed Himself. However, this revelation has taken place in a narrative way! Divine revelation was not given in the shape of dogmatics or ethics, but in stories of God's liberating action in the history of mankind (Wiggins 1975). In the same way human revelation (or disclosure) is shaped in narratives. The pastoral aim is to establish a relationship which offers openness and acceptance, so that the two stories of Divine and human revelation may come to merge, and a new understanding and interpretation may originate. Pastoral counselors and others may function as a referential figure, through which an orientation on the transcendent God may lead to meaningful interpretations.

It is the task of the pastoral counselor to provide the information necessary to arrive at valid interpretations. Not every interpretation is acceptable within a Cristian view. We do not advacate a subjectivity. There has to be a standard of truth, by which we can know whether interpretations are right or wrong (Malony 1987). Although the counselee has to interpret in his or her own way, the counselor will try to keep in line with the central elements of the Christian tradition and with Biblical revelation.

To discover the personal narrative pay attention to:	Plot	Connection of all the stories
	Setting	Socio-cultural context
	Character	Significant other persons
	Tone	Emotional atmosphere
To change the personal narrative use:	Perspective	Have the counselee tell a story from a different point of view or from another person's view
	Double-story	Ask the counselee to write story of life in two versions.
	Scenario	Ask for a future-story in a positive and a negative version
	Reference	Change the perception
		Choose other referential figures

In sum, in pastoral counseling, stories should be listened to carefully and understood. Some stories have to be interrupted or changed. Several pastoral strategies can help to change the story itself, or to change the referential figures.

More strategies should be developed to help individuals in counseling re-write their personal narrative in a new meaningful way.

THE HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH

The Concept of "Hermeneutics"

The term hermeneutics was originally connected to Hermes, the messenger of the gods, whose task it was to make intelligible the messages of the gods to human beings. Analogous to this, in the earlier Christian church hermeneutics was seen as the theory of interpretation, aiming at the discovery of rules which would yield a correct sense and interpretation of biblical texts (Mudge 1983). Since the Enlightenment the meaning of this concept changed, reflected in the work of such philosophers as Schleiermacher, Dilthey and Gadamer. Rather than trying to discover interpretive rules, these men initiated an approach which analysed the process of interpretation and understanding itself. Hermeneutics thus shifted its focus to the interpretation of facts and texts within the personal context and frame of reference. In Gadamers view, an encounter between the individual and the fact or text, that is, a relationship is needed. This encounter has been described as the "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer 1983). That is to say, the limits of our understanding can move further in the encounter with another person or a text. In that case, a "hermeneutical circle" comes into existence when our prior understanding of a text is reshaped into a new understanding. Understanding is not seen as a linear movement from no understanding to more, but as a circular movement in which the same elements are met over and over again on different levels of understanding (Gadamer 1959). Thus, hermeneutics can be defined as the methodology for arriving at an understanding of written texts held to be meaningful at a personal level (Capps 1984).

Hermeneutics in Pastoral Psychology

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, practical theology has developed new approaches to theological hermeneutics. Anton Boisen has brought forward the notion of the person's life as a "living human document", which should be studied in ways similar to the written documents of the Bible and ancient texts (Gerkin 1984). The resemblance of meaningful action and written texts is therefore an important assumption of the application of hermeneutical sciences in pastoral theology. According to Capps (1984, 40), at least four similarities can be seen: (1) both meaningful action and written text has an influence that lasts beyond the moment; (2) both have consequences of which some are intended and others are not; (3) both create a world people live in; and (4) both are open for a new interpretation afterwards. Texts and human actions disclose the world for understanding.

In human life there are more dimensions than the interpretational. Important other dimensions are those of power and value. All these dimensions are interrelated (Gerkin 1988). Every action, value and relationship is connected to the ultimate

meaning of life, because they have underlying interpretations that define the concrete actions and powers.

Psychological Parallels

There are certain similarities between the approach taken here and some psychological theories. For reasons of space we cannot but shortly mention them. In random order we start with the theory of personal construct (Mancuso & Adams-Webber 1982). Stemming from the work of Kelly (1955), this theory deals with past events and the anticipation for future events. The construing person creates the meaning of events. According to Kelly's theory, we do this by using "dichotomous constructs" of interpretation. Frankls "Logotherapy" (1963) is built on three assumptions: the freedom of will, the will to meaning, and the meaning of life. Frankl doesn't support extreme subjectivity, as he also discusses the objective meaning of events. Still, the empasis is on subjective interpretation. In his developmental model, Kegan (1982) also takes his starting point in the individual's interpretation, and thus incorporates the work of Piaget, Kohlberg and Erikson.

Another parallel to be noted is in the field of coping-research, where Lazarus' influential model of cognitive appraisal is also based on the interpretation or appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman 1984). The primary appraisal (in order, not in time) is the appraisal of the event; the secondary appraisal is the appraisal of the resources. Lazarus & DeLongis (1983) explicitly refer to a "continuous story-line of life", connected with the central story-line of a group or person. In cognitive psychological theory, it is a basic assumption that the perception and interpretation of events is shaped by the underlying assumptions, beliefs and schemata (Freeman e.a. 1990).

Currently, narrative approaches are increasingly being used in psychology and psychotherapy (Sarbin 1986, Tappan & Packer 1992). Schafer (1983) attempts to reshape psycho-analysis in a more narrative way. He argues against a positivistic view on reality versus narrative by pointing to the analytic process as a "second reality" as real as the other. Questions remain concerning the right of the analysand to interpret his or her life in an individual way and the external interpretations of the analyst. In a recent Dutch publication on "narrativity in human and cultural sciences" the psycho-analyst Van der Zwaal (1990) focuses on the narrative paradigm in psycho-analysis, as the new paradigm following the medical / mechanical paradigm of the human being as machine, and the Freudian paradigm of the human being as excavation.

A variety of psychological theories thus regards interpretation as a central phenomenon in how individuals perceive reality. Rather than referring to an inner homeostasis which should be preserved or restored (Menninger 1954), the individual interpretation, appraisal or attribution of meaning is a key concept. I do not intend to take exclusively one of these psychological approaches. In all cases questions can be asked and objections can be made. It seems to be more useful to integrate several aspects in a hermeneutical theory of development and interpretation.

Advantages of a Hermeneutical Approach

There are at least five advantages for using a consistent hermeneutical approach in pastoral practice and research. The first one is the expertise of theologians as interpreters of stories in which the most fundamental questions of faith and meaning come to the fore. Over many decades, pastoral counseling has gained many new insights from psychology and psychotherapy. Notwithstanding this profitable input, we still are amateurs in the field of psychology. Therefore pleas are held to focus on our own professional interests and skills, not to deny the insights of psychology, but to be a valuable partner in the cooperation and integration of psychology and theology (e.g. Hiltner 1972, Pruyser 1976). Theologians are trained in literal and structural exegesis and therefore, by the very nature of their profession, they are hermeneuts. When pastoral theologians develop hermeneutical methods, this can offer a fresh input to both theology and psychology. Pastoral hermeneutics might be an important perspective integrationalists are looking for (Clinton 1990).

The second advantage is the possibility of resolving the tension between proclaiming (kerygmatic) and client-centered approaches, a tension very apparent in Dutch literature because of the influences from both American and German writers (Bons-Storm 1985, Heitink 1977). Most efforts in solving this tension are compromises between an emphasis on God and His Word and an emphasis on the counselee. In contrast, a hermeneutical point of view makes it possible to see both the individual and the Word of God as stories that come to each other. In this communication, the stories merge and influence one another. Re-writing the person's story then becomes possible. Therefore a hermeneutical theory can clarify the relationship without overempahsizing one side of it.

The third advantage is the fact that a hermeneutical approach gives the partners in dialogue a fundamental uniqueness as interpreters of their own lives. He or she is not an object of care or research, and therefore a real encounter is possible. This also means that pastoral workers or researchers are involved in their work in a comprehensive way. They are not just professionally active in their work, but as whole persons with life stories of their own. This insight helps to prevent biases, but it also leads us to the conclusion that the experiences and interpretations of the counselor can be of value in a counseling setting. The partner in the pastoral encounter is in similar ways unique and involved. This means that the activity of the Holy Spirit is not limited to the contribution of the pastor. Both counselor and counselee can be the channel through which God can influence the pastoral encounter. Therefore the story of both partners can be changed and enriched by the encounter with the Third. As Oates (1974, 11) said, "Instead of being simply a dialogue, a trialogue comes into being". This fundamental reciprocity and spiritual openness is an important advantage of a hermeneutical approach.

The fourth point is the possibility of evangelizing in a pastoral context. This point has been criticized in many ways, mainly because it seems to be an attempt to influence an individual when (s)he is temporarily vulnerable. The thin line between witnessing and manipulation is then hard to discern. However, in a hermeneutical

approach, we can allow an evangelizing component. The meeting of the stories allows for mutual influence. This approach takes into account the individual's right and task to interpret his or her own life as well as the right and task of the pastoral worker to represent the Christian tradition and to connect the stories of life with the Story of God.

The fifth and perhaps most important advantage is that a hermeneutical approach allows us to better understand why persons (including ourselves and our partners in dialogue) act the way they act and think the way they think. Understanding a person's life story is understanding the meaning of action and thinking. Capps (1984, 29) says: "Understanding a given human action involves identifying the meaning system's inner structure". As has been stated above, hermeneutical approaches imply reciprocity and equality. Therefore, understanding in counseling includes understanding ourselves as pastoral counselors. A hermeneutical approach may not provide new methods and techniques, but at least it offers a fresh understanding of pastoral work. Hermeneutical theories provide insight in the process of counseling. It helps counselors to understand what they do and have done in counseling without knowing precisely what they did and why they did it that way.

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