THINKING ALOUD/ALLOWED: INCOHERENCE AS ADEQUACY IN PSYCHOTHERAPY AND ACADEMIC WRITING

Ying Liu
INDEPENDENT

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the place of narrative coherence in psychological wellbeing, psychotherapy, and academic writing. It includes a prelude that challenges coherence as a criterion of "academic rigour" in publishable papers and proposes academic writing as a process of "thinking aloud" about a research topic that is dialogical in nature and engages the self of the researcher. The main body of this paper illustrates the process of "thinking aloud" in the context of counselling and psychotherapy research. The first part of the main body questions the dominant emphasis on the benefit of narrative coherence, arguing that the demand for coherence can be a violent act on the core of a person's being that is permanently non-communicating and unknown as suggested by Winnicott. Drawing on Stern's concept of emergent self, the second part of the main body argues that the preference and obsession for the clever, articulate, and coherent academic voice manifests a borderline state of mind that has its root in the inability to contain the emergent sense of self. This paper also addresses both the impossibility and necessity for an individual to tell what is unspeakable and unknown.

KEYWORDS

narrative coherence/incoherence, psychotherapy, academic writing

CAPACIOUS

capaciousjournal.com ✦ DOI: https://doi.org/10.22387/CAP2024.80

Prelude: Research as Thinking Aloud About Interesting Topics

In the process of doing my doctoral thesis, I submitted a journal paper on the topic of narrative coherence in counselling and psychotherapy where I raised many questions about this topic and chose not to offer "solutions." I relinquished the attempt to put the paper into a rigorous structure and, instead, allowed my writing to proceed as my thoughts did, which gave the paper a feel of montage.

The paper was sent out to three reviewers. It, interestingly, received distinct feedback from each of them. The first reviewer highly disapproved of the fact that I offered nothing on what the therapist should do with the client's experience that defies articulation and narrative, which made the paper of no interest to them, since they received no concrete guidance on therapeutic practice. The second reviewer saw the paper as well-argued and publishable. The third reviewer found the article 'extremely' and 'deeply' interesting and it provoked a great deal of thinking in them. They thus offered long comments that included their thoughts in response to mine, offering alternative ways of looking at the topic and their challenges to some of my arguments. As the third reviewer found that their thinking mainly took the form of a dialogue with me, they also provided detailed in-text comments that were dialogic in nature.

The editor summarized that the main concerns about my paper were that it lacked a clearly articulated thesis and structure, and that it needed more rigor and thoroughness for a published journal paper. What initially hit me the most was the editor's comment that the paper read like 'a casual conversation' in which I was "thinking aloud about interesting topics."

As I laid on my bed that evening, thinking about these comments, I realized that although I did not agree with the word "casual," what I was doing in that paper and wanted to continue doing in my future research was "thinking aloud" and having a "conversation."

Implicit in the concerns the editor raised is an assumption about scholarship as "rigorous," structured, and articulate. In fact, these have become the requirements for scholarship. If I were to make major revisions and resubmit my paper as the editor suggested, I would need to make my paper neatly structured and clearly

articulated in order to be included and accepted, not only by the journal but also the "academic world." Ironically, structure and coherence are required from a paper that critiques exactly the demand for coherence. In other words, a paper that argues for the inclusion of incoherence needs to wipe out its own incoherence. In this process of inclusion and exclusion, acceptance and rejection, certain types of knowledge are privileged while others are silenced.

"Thinking aloud" indicates a thinking process that is laden with uncertainty and is shared with others. In this thinking aloud, I am sharing with readers, not the well-articulated, clever, and organized scholar that is required of me, but the "I" who raises questions from a personal place, and who seeks a dialogue with the literature in relation to me, and who struggles with (yet is somehow willing to embark on) the unknown, uncertainty, and incoherence.

While the presence and congruence of the therapist are stressed as crucial in psychotherapy (e.g. Greenberg and Geller 2001), I wonder why counselling and psychotherapy researchers, especially practitioner-researchers, must hide aspects of ourselves that are relevant to what we are researching. In my case, it is the inarticulate, the unstructured, and what might be called the incoherent.

It has been argued that counselling and psychotherapy research methods that are consistent with the type of therapy that is being researched need to be developed (McLeod 2001). I would like to argue that if the type of therapy that we do is process-oriented and relationship-oriented, there should be space for a type of research that is process-oriented and relational. So, yes, the following research paper is 'thinking aloud' (process-oriented) and takes you, my readers, through a journey that I do not claim to have mastery over and that is full of uncertainty, just like therapy. And yes, this paper is a 'conversation' (relational) where I want to meet you as, hopefully, a genuine person with my thoughts, feelings, strengths, and vulnerabilities, like we do in therapy.

Is this paper a "casual" conversation? If "casual" means no theoretical engagement, I would disagree. If it means that this paper lacks the type of "research rigor" that indicates absolute certainty, organization, and tidiness, then I argue for a different type of rigor. As the third reviewer recognized in my way of writing and my arguments, I argue for a different type of coherence that might not be valued by academic community, reviewers, and editors. I argue for a different type of research rigor that breaks the walls around academia. I see presenting this paper as a methodological experiment, looking for other ways of doing research that

is different from the traditionally rigorous scholarly voice and one that reaches towards a poetics of research (Hope 1971; Romanyshyn 2013). If "casual" means to have a conversation that is accessible to and engages with those who are not in academia, then it is exactly what I try to do.

The following paper's completion does not merely lie with my writing, but also lies with you, my audiences', reading (Ricoeur 1991). When reading the following paper, you might feel as frustrated as the first reviewer, or you might appreciate it as the second reviewer, or you might feel intrigued as the third reviewer and wish to participate in wondering about this topic yourself. Your response to this paper is an important part of this paper that is not yet written.

Rethinking Narrative Coherence in Psychotherapy

I struggled with telling stories of my own.

A part of the final assessment for my counselling and psychotherapy training required me to offer a coherent account of my personal and professional development. Although I knew that my training had changed me as a person, I found myself unable to articulate my change and development satisfactorily. Talking about my experience and putting it into the shape of words and stories tore the wholeness of my experience apart. While deeply touched by my peers' stories, I was envious of their ability to offer such clear and coherent narratives. I found it hard to tell a clear linear story of my development with a beginning, middle, and end. By then I had already experienced struggles in my personal therapy regarding telling my stories and articulating my experience. I always told fragments of memories instead of stories and was often frustrated by being unable to tell the therapist how I truly felt because the words felt inadequate or because I could not explain my feelings. At the end of the final assessment, I was left feeling inadequate, to doubt myself, and ashamed. I started to think of myself as someone having "no stories to tell."

In psychotherapy, it is often believed that the consistency of an individual's narrative is an important indication of their wellbeing (Angus and McLeod 2004). While the emphasis on narrative by different psychotherapeutic modalities and

the conceptual explanation of narrative may be different across various traditions of psychotherapy, the client's narrative expression has been regarded as essential indication of the client's reflexivity and agency (Angus and McLeod 2004). There is a fundamental assumption that the way we talk about our lives is closely related to, or predictive of, our psychological adjustment (Waters and Fivush 2015).

It is largely proposed that the sense of self is associated with the stories we tell about ourselves (McLeod 1997). Some writers (e.g. Bruner 2004) argue that our selfhood is created and recreated through narrative. Stories are a means through which we integrate aspects of self through time (McAdams and Janis 2004) and, thus, narrative functions to organize experience. Narrative coherence is thought of as linked to an individual's ability to sustain continuity, directionality, and meaning in life, and there is extensive agreement that individuals who speak coherently about themselves have higher levels of psychological wellbeing, and people who offer incoherent accounts of themselves have more psychological difficulties (Brockmeier and Medved 2010).

Incoherence in the client's narrative is regarded as a marker for psychological distress (Angus and McLeod 2004) and is written in relation to association with psychotic symptoms (e.g. Lysaker and Lysaker 2002, 2006), trauma (e.g. Guilfoyle 2018; Neimeyer, Herrero and Botella 2006; Tamas 2009), or illness (e.g. Frank 1998, 2013) in mental health literature.

These beliefs contributed further to my self-doubt and shame. Do I have a fragmented sense of self? Do I have a lower level of psychological wellbeing in comparison to my peers? I struggled with these questions. Meanwhile, parts of me rebelled against these beliefs. I had been content with the development that I deeply felt throughout my professional training. Yet, subjected to the demand for a coherent narrative, I felt inadequate. It was the demand for a coherent narrative that brought me agony. This drove me to write my thesis on the topic of narrative in/coherence. I used sandplay and writing as a means to explore the realm of experience that is unspeakable and formless.

During my sandplay sessions as a client, a shell repeatedly appeared in the sand-worlds I constructed. I called it "the scarred shell." It evoked strong emotions in me that I did not understand. While being disgusted by the scarred shell initially, I could not put it aside. As the sandplay sessions proceeded, the scarred shell took more and more central roles in my sand-worlds. A few weeks after I finished all the sandplay sessions, an event led me to connect with a traumatic experience in childhood that I had not been able to access experientially. I started to recognize

its impact on my life and to feel the pain my body had been carrying. For the first time, I cried for my hurt body. Thinking about the scarred shell again this time, I recognized those scars as scars of mine which I was disgusted by, wanted to avoid and get rid of, and yet somehow, I knew were important. Following this realization and recognition was a strong desire for telling. I wanted to tell the person who was involved in the event that led to my realization about the childhood trauma. In an ongoing internal monologue, I started to tell him about myself, my trauma, and my scarred shell. This monological telling continued for weeks. It helped to sooth the initial pain and allowed me not to feel alone. Reflecting on this process, I noticed that what happened in my imagination was always telling instead of dialoguing. I never imagined the other person's response or any dialogues between us. What happened in my imagination was always monologues. There was a strong longing to tell someone, to be heard, received, and recognized. However, I resisted any response from the other. I needed to tell but did not need any response.

My imaginary monological telling is similar to my experience of touching the sand in the sandplay sessions. When I wrote about my experience of the sandplay sessions in my thesis, I described the sand as an other who receives and accepts, who was simply being there, who does not wait: "It does not feel like it reaches out to me. It does not offer extended arms. It is being receptive but without being destroyed, intimidated, or scared by my feelings. It allows, receives, and accepts" (Liu 2019). Perhaps, the fact that the sand is always "being there, no expectations, nor desire to know" (Liu 2019) is one of the reasons why I have always been drawn to sandplay therapy.

I was looking for something similar in my monological telling and sandplay. Something that I lack in my relationship with others, even in therapy. I longed for an other who listens to me but does not respond, who does not even wait. It is an other and, at the same time, it is an other who does not have its own intention and expectation. It is an other who does not even possess otherness.

This other that does not possess otherness that I long for is perhaps what Winnicott (1963) called the "subjective object." Psychological maturation in the earliest formative stage of human growth cannot be taken for granted, according to Winnicott. It requires a facilitative environment in which a change of the nature of the object can gradually develop for the infant—"the object being at first

a subjective phenomenon becomes an object objectively perceived" (Winnicott 1963, 180). A relationship to a subjective object is related to the experience of omnipotence (Winnicott 1963). The subjective object is created and recreated by the infant (Winnicott 1963). The infant "creates what is in fact lying around waiting to be found" (Winnicott 1963, 181). While the creation of a subjective object is natural, it is made possible by a mother who permits her child to experience her care and physical presence as under the child's magical control (Fabozzi 2018). This presence of an object is non-intrusive and does not introduce a not-me to the infant. In both my monological telling and my sandplay, I was creating something that was waiting to be found. In other words, in my imagination and in the sand-world, I found the object that I created (Fabozzi 2018). Any response given to me from an other would feel like violation.

Winnicott (1963) writes that as the object changes over from subjective object to objectively perceived object, there is a natural change in the purpose and means of communication: "In so far as the object is subjective, so far is it unnecessary for communication with it to be explicit. In so far as the object is objectively perceived, communication is either explicit or else dumb" (182). Ogden (2018) interprets that explicit communication here might mean symbolic communication and "dumb" might mean not requiring words in conveying symbolic meaning, which can include communication in facial expression. In this sense, a narrative given to an other, which includes symbolic communication and conveys symbolic meaning, can be seen as communication with an objectively perceived object, an external object.

According to Butler (2005), an account of oneself is always given to an other. When entering into a communicative environment, a child is firstly addressed by others, which introduces the child into language, then the child in turn learns certain ways of addressing (Butler 2005). Narrative is generated through the individual's encounters in the social world (Skinner et al. 2001) and language "lies on the borderline between self and the other" (Bakhtin1981, 293). As Arsith (2011) writes, "learning and use of a language of a community can be undertaken as linguistic conformity, generated by the need for people to communicate and feel protected by the possibility of being understood by their peers" (15). Therefore, coherent, meaning understandable, narrative can be grasped as stemming from our desire to be known and related to, even at the price of distortion of individual experience. This resonates with Winnicott's (1963) two states of being that appear when communications with subjective objects and objectively perceived objects are achieved: "here then appear two new things, the individual's use and enjoyment of modes of communication, and the individual's non-communicating self, or the personal core of the self that is a true isolate" (182).

What strikes me is Winnicott's (1963) theory about the core of our being:

> I suggest that this core never communicates with the world of perceived objects, and that the individual person knows that it must never be communicated with or be influenced by external reality. […] Although healthy persons communicate and enjoy communicating, the other fact is equally true, that each individual is an isolate, permanently non-communicating, permanently unknown, in fact unfound (187).

These words brought me comfort. I had always thought about my unwillingness to narrate some realms of my experience as resistance and my inability to produce a satisfactorily coherent narrative about my development, my life history, or my emotional life, as inadequacy. I thought that I needed to arrive at the 'coherent' place which would indicate some sort of development or improvement in me. At the same time, I was drawn by a sentence written by Montaigne (1927): "[w]e must reserve a little back-shop, all our own, entirely free, wherein to establish our true liberty and principal retreat and solitude" (237-238). Deep down, I longed for this little back-shop in which I could be entirely free from the foreignness of an other and the obligation to an other introduced by a narrative given to an other. I also wonder about this from a therapist's perspective. There is perhaps little doubt that relationship is paramount in psychotherapy. We believe that it is the relationship that heals. We see the value of therapy as two persons meeting each other in emotional depth. It is about understanding and being understood. It is about being together. As therapists, perhaps we expect our clients to feel safe to open up this "little back-shop" to us in the therapy room. However, can we accept or stand that the client has this place all to themselves, entirely free, also from us? Can we allow our clients to retreat and find solitude in the little back-shop of their own without seeing it as the client's defence or resistance? Can we allow the client not to talk, not to tell us their stories?

Winnicott (1963) seems to be saying that it is essential to allow and accept this little back-shop of our clients. He thinks that this non-communicating self at the core of each person is "sacred and most worthy of preservation" (187). Although this non-communicating self can manifest in pathology, Winnicott sees it as an integral part of healthy being which carries all the sense of real. Here, being real is "a state of being in which external reality is absolutely irrelevant" (Ogden 2018, 1292) and there is no communication with the not-me world (Winnicott 1963).

CAPACIOUS

Winnicott (1963) proposes that communicating with an objectively perceived object can easily be linked to a sense of false self that is developed to comply with the demand of an external object. Meanwhile, an active non-communication (in the form of clinical withdrawal in a therapeutic setting), i.e. secret or silent communication with subjective objects, is needed in order to restore the sense of real that is carried by the permanently non-communicating self. As argued above, narrative is generated socially and given to an other. To demand for a coherent narrative at all times, and pathologize what does not meet the criteria for coherence, is to annihilate this permanent isolation that lays at the core of individuals as stressed by Winnicott.

A sense of shame related to my incoherence always followed me, even when I was writing my thesis and preparing for conference presentations. I never showed my thesis to anyone except my supervisors and proof-readers. I avoided talking about my research with others, being afraid of not being able to articulate my arguments in a way that would make sense to others. Even before my VIVA, there were doubts I secretly held. I doubted whether this work of mine speaking from the place of incoherence were valid.

During an unstructured medium group in which I participated as a part of a group analysis training, I spoke from what was present in my body—my shaking hands, my accelerated heartbeat, the sense of grief coming from nowhere—without any understanding, explanation, and even attempts to explain. When I relinquished any attempts to explain or to organize fragments into coherence, I felt a sense of being real. Later in a smaller group, I offered a reflection on my experience in the medium group and tried to explain it based on my family history. Though my self-interpretation seemed to make perfect sense, it soon became inadequate for me. I thought I had betrayed my experience by containing it in an explanation. I realized that I needed to just let my experience be, without storying it—tracing its origin, thinking about cause and effect, and so forth. When writing about chronic anxiety, Gabor Maté (2018) writes: "We may believe we're anxious about this or that— body image, the state of the world, relationship issues, the weather—but no matter what story we weave around it, the anxiety *just is*" (335). This is my experience of storying what was happening in me. My experience came into being first and whatever story I created later could not contain the fullness of this experience.

Noticing that I was not ashamed by what was inarticulate and what did not make sense in me, and that I was assertive about these realms of my experience made me realize that I have now allowed a part of me to fully live. I realized that my thesis was a yearning for life from this part of me. It wanted to live, without

shame or prohibition. A few years of writing and being received by my supervisors and examiners helped to bring this part of me to life. My thesis is not against the utility of narrative so much as I realized, through the process of conducting my research project, how much I needed to tell and be received, even if the response I needed was often silence.

It became obvious in my thesis writing that I desired to tell and I wanted to be known. It was the impossibility of expression and the necessity to tell and be known that brought me difficulties. I often felt stuck in this liminal space. The theme of loss and grief became prominent in my thesis as my writing proceeded. Following the completion of my thesis, I started to mourn for family losses that had never been recognized and mourned by any of my family members. I mourned for the unborn life of my younger brother who was aborted due to China's One-child Policy at the time, for a 10-year separation, and deaths in my father's family due to the Cultural Revolution. I mourned for the life my parents did not get a chance to live and the bonds that I never had. I tried to locate the sense of grief and melancholia that resides in me via the glimpses of my parents' memories (as they casually shared them with me), I tried to speak about the life of my grief. I wanted to tell its story. However, I have never been able to tell the story of my grief and melancholia. No matter how much sense these "stories" I told make, they never feel adequate to me. In the effort of trying to narrate the loss, something is always lost.

I carry so many things inside that I cannot make sense of, that I cannot tell a story about. Perhaps I will never be able to. What has been passed on to me is not the stories, but feelings, the inarticulable, unspeakable, fragmented yet overwhelming, and often covered feelings. Kottler (2015) touchingly acknowledges that with regard to unimaginable evil and extraordinary inhumanity, for example what happened in Nazi concentration camps and China's Cultural Revolution, "there is no possible way to describe to anyone else what it was like, especially in such a way that the listeners can truly understand and accept that there is no possible way to ever fully recover or heal from such an experience" (132). In times like these, as Levi (1988) says in his memoir of his imprisonment in Auschwitz, "ordinary language cannot convey what happened there" (129). Having suffered from social violence, my family's history is not told via stories but embodied transmission of covered feelings across generations. When pain is not recognized as pain, when stories are not remembered as stories, when avoidance and repression become a family's

default way to deal with emotional disturbance, when something is too painful to remember, or when people live in a time when things are so distorted that pain has become the ordinary, how can we tell?

Implicit in the encouragement for clients to tell their stories in the therapy room is our belief as therapists that "the telling of the story heals the disruption and creates a future" (Watson 2007, 1284). A future with hope seems to be what drives us forward. Frank (2013) points out that the audiences of illness stories always seek to find solution to the chaos and find something good in the terrible. This helps the audiences to create a hope that if they were to fall into the same illness situation, there would be a way out. In this way, the audiences shy away from the horror and hopelessness: that something horrible like severe illness can happen to people and there might never be recovery. I wonder whether the encouragement of telling stories and reconstructing incoherent stories into coherent stories that make sense is also a way of creating that hope, a future in which what we cannot make sense will eventually make sense. When we reject a fragmented story, when we refuse to accept that an experience does not make sense, perhaps we are trying to shy away from the horror about the possible fact that we forever live with the unknown. When chaos stories are told, people do not want to listen (Frank 2013). When we see the therapeutic journey as a journey from incoherence to coherence, we are not tolerating the presence of the incoherence, not acknowledging that there are aspects of human existence that we might never make sense of. We shy away from it, just like the audiences of severe illness stories refuse to confront the hopeless horror these illnesses can bring.

What is often not addressed when we appraise narrative coherence is the acknowledgment of the inevitable failure of words and narrative form. It is perhaps seldom acknowledged by therapists to their clients, that I strive to be with you, but I cannot exactly be there with you; and sometimes, my presence itself can act as an intrusion.

Every storyteller is confronted with the question of whether they are being understood; if they are not, there is no point to tell the stories in the first place (McAdams 2006). When the stories do not make sense to the intended audiences, misjudgement and misunderstanding might happen, followed by conflicts and/or a sense of isolation and alienation (Singer and Rexhaj 2006). When stories defy the audiences' view about how the world operates, how human beings are supposed to think, feel, and behave, the audiences want to ask for more details for the stories to make sense or make up their own explanations, hypotheses, or theories to help them make sense (McAdams 2006). When this happens in psychotherapy, we, as the therapists and the audiences to our clients' stories, become an intrusion. Winnicott (1963) writes, "[a] good object is no good to the infant unless created by the infant" (181). He

emphasises the importance of waiting as subjective objects, until we the therapists become objectively perceived by the client in their own time, and if interpretations are made out of our own cleverness and experience then they must be refused or destroyed by the client. Winnicott (1963) warns us of the danger of violating the client's sacred, non-communicating core by suddenly becoming "not-me" for the client: "[…] we suddenly become not-me for the patient, and then we know too much, and we are dangerous because we are too nearly in communication with the central still and silent spot of the patient's ego-organization" (189). Winnicott (1963) thinks that we must allow the client's non-communication and our techniques must allow the client to communicate that they are not communicating.

Rethinking Narrative Coherence in Academic Writing

Summer 2022, almost six years after I completed my counselling and psychotherapy training, I met with a colleague from the same training cohort. Naturally, we started to talk about our training. When I was asked how I have changed over the years, one of the things I said was that I now have a stronger sense of self. I have developed a voice of my own, I said. I can now look back and see my own story of personal and professional development. Six years later, I finally feel that I can engage with the final assessment set in my counselling and psychotherapy training without a strong feeling that I am betraying some realms of my experience or tearing apart the wholeness of my experience.

In Daniel Stern's (1985) terms, in those years of counselling and psychotherapy training, an emergent sense of self was coming into being for me. Stern describes that from birth to 2 months, a sense of the world and of self is emergent for the infant. The infant experiences the "coming-into-being of organization" in this period (45) which is an experience of a process and a product. It is an experience of becoming, and a sense of self is forming. Stern stresses that this is not a state of non-organization. When talking about a state of undifferentiation in the infant, we talk about it from the adult observer perspective, when differentiation has been developed. Yet, "infants cannot know *what* they do not know, nor *that* they do not know" (46). The lack of relatedness between separate experience is not noticed and many separate experiences can exist with "exquisite clarity and vividness" for

the infant (46). This sense of something emerging remains a fundamental domain throughout human life (Stern 1985) and it is often present in the face of new experiences, transitions, and changes (Johnsen, Sundet and Torsteinsson 2018).

I often tell people that training to be a counsellor and psychotherapist has changed me as a person. Yet, when I was asked to give a coherent narrative about my development at the end of my training, I could not manage. The sense of change at the time was a global sense of becoming someone different from who I was before. This was a dawning experience that involved what was yet to be known. It would not be exaggerating to describe finishing my counselling and psychotherapy training as a new birth. Parallel to Stern's model of self-development, a new sense of personal and professional self was emerging in me at this stage. This emergent self preceded the sense of verbal self (Stern 1985). When I was asked to represent this experience of becoming in a coherent narrative, the global experience was inevitably fractured and poorly represented (Stern 1985), which led me to the feeling that something whole was torn apart and some of my experiences were betrayed by my words.

Standing from an adult observer's position, both the course assessment and I myself were requiring a verbal representation that did not fit my process of becoming. Being an adult who evidently had the verbal capacity to communicate with others in most circumstances, it was difficult to acknowledge and validate this pre-verbal emergent sense of self that, as Stern (1985) points out, is present in all learning activities. I went quickly into self-doubt, thinking that something was wrong with me. The requirement for a coherent account as a part of assessment is not unique to the training programme I undertook. Working as a lecturer in counselling psychology now, I find myself assessing students' assignments, research reports, and presentations against the criteria of "coherence." In order to abide by the university's assessment framework, I, as the assessor, now also demand coherent accounts from the students as evidence of certain achievements. While it is already acknowledged, by Stern and Winnicott in this paper, that what cannot be narrated or narrated coherently holds an important place in our lives, coherent accounts are widely regarded as evidence for academic and developmental achievement with little consideration of the equally important state of *becoming*.

While writing my thesis, the world of emergent self, in Stern's words (1985, 67), served as the reservoir that I dipped into for creativity. Looking back, I can see that my whole thesis was an expression of this sense of emergent self. Writing as a method of inquiry which I adopted for my thesis allowed the process of becoming. I wrote my thesis in "fragments" and each piece exists with, again in Stern's (1985) words, "exquisite clarity and vividness" (46). This absence of organization

and narrative coherence is not a lack of something essential but the emergence of something new. Similarly, sandplay also provided me with a space where something yet unknown could emerge without being urged toward words or any cognitive understanding.

When I as invited by the journal editor to rewrite and resubmit my paper in a more "rigorous" and structured way, it was this process of emerging organization that was unwelcome. Traditional academic writing requires the sense of verbal self which makes some of our known experience sharable with others (Stern 1985). In traditional academic writing, I, as the researcher, articulate what I know and communicate it to the audiences. In my writing and the audiences' reading, understanding can be reached. However, this understanding is limited to only one realm of human experience. Experience in other domains of self, including the emergent self, are irrespective of language and can only be seized partially in language (Stern 1985). When the domain of verbal self is considered more prominent, the other domains of experiences are alienated and become a "nether domain" of experience (Stern 1985, 163). In general, it seems that only what is logically written and articulated holds significance in academia. We engage with the verbal sense of self and relatedness in academic writing, forgetting other domains of selves that are also present throughout our lives and in which creativity can emerge. Stern (1985) urges us to acknowledge language as a double-edge sword and pay attention to both verbal and non-verbal development:

> It will be necessary to follow both these lines of development—language as a new form of relatedness and language as a problem for the integration of self-experience and self-with-other experiences. We must somehow take into account these divergent directions that the emergence of a linguistic sense of self has created (163).

I see this as an advice for academics as much as for practitioners. Especially in the field of research areas that concern human experience; if we only see what is organized, structured, and articulate as valid, the very real existence of other realms of human experiences will be pushed underground. Stern (1985) also points out that affect as a form of personal knowledge is difficult to represent in words. Language is often good at labelling or categorizing affective states but has a great disadvantage when expressing gradient information about the affective state which are pivotal in interpersonal communications (Stern 1985).

CAPACIOUS

Meanwhile, Stern (1985) acknowledges that, paradoxically, words in poetic use can evoke experiences that transcend words. Therefore, while being aware of the disadvantages of language, I never give up on words. On the contrary, I count on it for expression of what feels or is uncommunicable. This use of words, however, cannot be neat, 'rigorous', structured, and organized as traditional academic writing requires. Due to this, I often find myself struggling to find a place for these words to be seen or needing to change them in order for them to be seen. It becomes even more difficult when what I had to say was about the awakening of a hidden chapter of a family, or even national, history.

I wonder whether the preference, or perhaps even obsession, for the clever, articulate, and coherent academic voice manifests a borderline state of mind in academia, and even in the wider society, that has its root in the inability to contain the emergent sense of self and relatedness. What is often presented in academic journals is a state of 'is'—something is certain and conclusive. The state of 'becoming'—the uncertainty of what will come into being—is often not allowed. As many great psychotherapy theorists, such as Winnicott, point out, the development of self is only possible in the company of someone else. The capacity to integrate opposing internal images of self and other and to tolerate ambivalence requires an attuned relationship with the maternal object (Volkan, Ast and Greer 2002). I wonder whether the traditional academic environment fails to provide an attuned environment in which ambivalence can be tolerated. If the world of academic publication can give more space to what is emerging and uncertain, increasingly different types of knowledge can be developed, more stories can be told, and what was considered as a lack can be viewed as abundant.

(Not) A Conclusion

When I wrote my thesis, I questioned myself, why was I writing? Constantly experiencing the limit and inadequacy of language, and the resistance in giving an account of myself, why did I still write? As what is argued about traumatic testimony, when communicating my experience, the narrative form it takes lends to it a framework—coherence, structure, meaning, comprehensibility—which it lacks (Andrews 2010). Near the end of my thesis, it became clear to me that, despite the inadequacy, it was important that I did say it—the significance is simply that something is said (Andrews 2010).

While Kottler (2015) proposes that appreciation needs to be given to the need to not describe the indescribable and to be silent in the face of unimaginable evil and extraordinary inhumanity, some recognize both the impossibility and necessity to tell. In his diary about the life in the Warsaw Ghetto, *Cups of Tears*, Abraham Lewin (cited in Andrews 2010) talks about both the impossibility and the necessity of expressing his thoughts and feelings. In the case of melancholia, Leader (2009) recognizes the necessity of speaking about loss creatively in the form of language that suits each individual and to have a listener to address—a listener who can receive the communication of the impossibility. The emphasis on coherent narrative, from others and myself, had trapped me in a limbo. In my wordless touch with sand, my silent encounter with the sand-worlds, my 'messy' writing process, my repetitive imaginary telling, I freed myself from the external and internalized, explicit and implicit requirement and obligation to make sense, and to be consequential. It was important for me that the silent presence of the sand, the figures in the sand-worlds, the pen and paper, and the imaginary other did not expect or even wait. This has allowed me to express, connect to, and immerse in myself, in my own way and pace, in the presence of an other who is free of their own even slightest agenda, demand, and expectation.

This perhaps relates to what Winnicott (1963) calls "the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found" (185). In Winnicott's (1963) language, there is a need for me to hold on to a not communicating self while, at the same time, waiting to communicate and be found. He addresses both the enjoyment of communication and the need to not communicate. The need for narrative and language to communicate itself is a proof that we can never fully be with each other and that we are always to a certain extent left alone in some experiences of ours. Nonetheless, there is always the longing to tell and to be known by an other, despite the doomed effort of being fully known. As Edkins (2003, cited in Andrews 2010) articulates: "[I]t is both impossible to speak, and impossible not to speak" (155).

What is most significant, in my opinion, is that despite the inevitable failure of narrative, of language, and of being completely understanding, as therapists, we still try. We make an effort regardless. The message this conveys is a simple but a crucial one: I care.

CAPACIOUS

I remember when the sandplay therapist could not rescue me in a session where I was in panic about the scarred shell, what mattered to me was simply that she made an effort and she remembered the scarred shell's appearance in my previous sand-worlds. To hold onto the striving to narrate not the narrative itself, to hear narratives, coherent or not, is to show one cares.

There is something to learn from the sand: to receive without demand and to be silent. Wittgenstein (1922) says that if language is a tool that we use to communicate, when it fails, one can only be silent: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (90). Yet, we do not need to abandon narrative all together. There is another thing to learn from the sand: we can be together in the silence, together in our aloneness; and to listen to the unsayable, unnarratable and let them be.

I wish I could end this paper with a conclusion or solution of some sort, which perhaps stems from the demand for closure and structure and the discomfort of not having them. Therefore, I would like to exercise what I have been arguing in this paper: relinquishing the imposition of structure to something that is formless. As Wittgenstein says:

> the difficulty […] is not that of finding the solution but rather that of recognizing as the solution something that looks as if it were only a preliminary to it […]. This is connected […] with our wrongly expecting an explanation, whereas the solution of the difficulty is a description, if we give it the right place in our consideration. If we dwell upon it, and do not try to get beyond it. The difficulty here is: to stop (Wittgenstein, as cited in Genova 1995, 39).

References

Andrews, M. (2010). Beyond Narrative: The Shape of Traumatic Testimony. In: M. Hyvärinen, L. Hydén, M. Saarenheimo and M. Tamboukou, ed., *Beyond Narrative Coherence*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins B.V., pp. 147-166.

Arsith, M. (2011). Ludwig Wittgenstein and Language Games (A Literary Application). *Acta Universitatis Danubius: Communicatio,* 5(2), pp. 14-21. Available at: https://doaj.org/article/03c80ae3d19d490eb088697bb1d15f4e

Angus, L.E. and McLeod, J. (2004). Toward An Integrative Framework for Understanding the Role of Narrative in the Psychotherapy Process. In: L.E. Angus and J. McLeod, eds., *The Handbook of Narrative and Psychotherapy: Practice, Theory, and Research*. London: SAGE, pp. 366-374.

Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays.* Austin: University of Texas Press.

Brockmeier, J. and Medved, M.I. (2010). Weird Stories: Brains, Mind, and Self. In: M. Hyvärinen, L, Hydén, M. Saarenheimo & M, Tamboukou, ed., *Beyond Narrative Coherence*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins B.V., pp. 17-32.

Bruner, J. (2004). The Narrative Creation of Self. In: L.E. Angus and J. McLeod, ed., *The Handbook of Narrative and Psychotherapy: Practice, Theory, and Research*. London: SAGE, pp. 2-14.

Butler, J. (2005). *Giving An Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Byrne, B. (2003). Reciting the Self: Narrative Representations of the Self in Qualitative Interviews. *Feminist Theory,* 4 (1), pp. 29-49. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700103004001002

Fabozzi, P. (2018). Winnicott's *Subjective Object:* Merging Experiences as Preconditions of Being. *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly,* 87(1), pp. 73-99.

Frank, A.W. (1998). Just Listening: Narrative and Deep Illness. *Families, Systems, & Health, 16,* pp. 197-212. Available at: https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A54260277/AONE?u=ed_itw&sid=AONE&xid=38f136b3

Frank, A.W. (2013). *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Genova, J. (1995). *Wittgenstein: A Way of Seeing*. New York: Routledge.

Greenberg, L. & Geller, S. (2001). Congruence and Therapeutic Presence. In: G. Wyatt and P. Saunders, ed., *Rogers' Therapeutic Conditions (Vol. 1): Congruence*. Herefordshire: PCCS Books, pp. 148-166.

Guilfoyle, M. (2018). Storying Unstoried Experience in Therapeutic Practice. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology,* 31 (1), pp, 95-110. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/10720537.2016.1266450

Hope, A.D. (1971). *A Midsummer Eve's Dream: Variations on A Theme by William Dunbar*. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd.

Johnse, A., Sundet, R. and Torsteinsson, V.W. (2004). Daniel Stern's Model of Self-development. In: A. Johnse, R. Sundet and V.Q. Torsteinsson, ed., *Self in Relationship: Perspectives on Family Therapy from Developmental Psychology*. London: Routledge.

Kottler, J.A. (2015). *Stories We've Heard, Stories We've Told: Life-changing Narratives in Therapy and Everyday Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Leader, D. (2009) *The New Black: Mourning, Melancholia and Depression*. London: Penguin Books.

Levi, P. (1988). *If This is A Man; The Truce*. London: Abacus.

Lysaker, P.H., and Lysaker, J.T. (2002). Narrative Structure in Psychosis: Schizophrenia and Disruptions in the Dialogical Self. *Theory and Psychology,* 12 (2) pp. 207-220. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354302012002630

Lysaker, P.H., and Lysaker, J.T. (2006). A Typology of Narrative Impoverishment in Schizophrenia: Implications for Understanding the Processes of Establishing and Sustaining Dialogue in Individual Psychotherapy. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly, 19* (1)*,* pp. 57-68. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070600673703

Liu, Y. (2019). *Sky Seen through Trees: Rethinking Narrative Coherence in Counselling and Psychotherapy.* Doctoral dissertation. Available at: http://hdl.handle.net/1842/36146

McAdams, D.P. and Janis, L. (2004). Narrative Identity and Narrative Therapy. In: L.E. Angus and J. McLeod, ed., *The Handbook of Narrative and Psychotherapy: Practice, Theory, and Research*. London: SAGE, pp. 159-174

McLeod, J. (1997). *Narrative and Psychotherapy*. London: SAGE.

McLeod, J. (2001). Developing A Research Tradition Consistent with the Practice and Values of Counselling and Psychotherapy: Why Counselling and Psychotherapy Research is Necessary. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research,* 1(1), pp. 3-11.

McQuillan, M. (2000). Introduction: Aporias of Writing: Narrative and Subjectivity. In: M. McQuillan, ed., *The Narrative Reader*. London: Routledge, pp.1-34.

McAdams, D.P. (2006). The Problem of Narrative Coherence. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology,* 19 (2), pp. 109-125. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/10720530500508720

Maté, G. (2018). *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction.* London: Vermilion.

Montaigne, M. de. (1927). *The Essays of Montaigne. Vol. 1*. London: Oxford University Press.

Neile, C.S. (2013). Our Stories, Our Companions: A Conversation with Arthur W. Frank. *Storytelling, Self, Society,* 9 (2), pp. 261–276. Available at: https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/storytelling/vol9/iss2/6

Neimeyer, R.A., Herrero, O. and Botella, L. (2006). Chaos to Coherence: Psychotherapeutic Integration of Traumatic Loss. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology,* 19 (2), pp. 127–145. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/10720530500508738

Ogden, T.H. (2018). The Feeling of Real: on Winnicott's 'Communicating and Not Communicating Leading to a Study of Certain Opposites'. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis,* 99 (6), pp. 1288–1304. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/00207578.2018.1556071

Ricoeur, P. (1991). Life in Quest of Narrative. In: D. Wood, ed., *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*. London: Routledge, pp. 20–33.

Riessman, C.K. and Speedy, J. (2012). Narrative Inquiry in the Psychotherapy Professions: A Critical Review. In: D.J. Clandinin, ed., *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping A Methodology*. London: SAGE, pp. 426–456.

Romanyshyn, R.D. (2013). *The Wounded Researcher: Research with Soul in Mind*. New Orleans, Louisiana: Spring Journal Books.

Singer, J.A. and Rexhaj, B. (2006). Narrative Coherence and Psychotherapy: A Commentary. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology,* 19 (2), pp. 209–217. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/10720530500508944

Skinner, D., Valsiner, J. and Holland, D. (2001) Discerning the Dialogical Self: A Theoretical and Methodological Examination of a Nepali Adolescent's Narrative. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 2 (3). Available at: https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-2.3.913

Stern, D. (1985) *The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology.* New York: Basic Books.

Tamas, S. (2009). Writing and Righting Trauma: Troubling the Autoethnographic Voice. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research,* 10(1). Available at:http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1211/2641

Waters, T. E. A. and Fivush, R. (2015). Relations between Narrative Coherence, Identity, and Psychological Well-being in Emerging Adulthood, *Journal of Personality*, 83(4), pp. 441–451.

Watson, S. (2007). An Extraordinary Moment: The Healing Power of Stories. *Canadian Family Physician,* 53(8), pp. 1283–1287. Available at: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1949243

Winnicott, D.W. (1963). *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment.* New York, NY: International Universities Press, pp. 179–192.

Wittgenstein, L. (1922). *Tractatus: Logico-philosophicus*. London: Routledge.