A Trinitarian Perspective on the Counseling Alliance in Narrative Therapy

Neil Pembroke
The University of Queensland

An attempt is made to bring a trinitarian perspective to bear on the way in which the counseling alliance is constructed in narrative therapy. A tripersonal alliance is promoted in this approach to therapy. Participating in the re-storying process are the counselor, the counselee, and the support person(s). The author finds in this structure an image or mark of the triune God. This theological approach can be located in the vestiges trinitatis tradition sponsored by Augustine.

For a very long time it was the case that a book on the Trinity was the very last place I would have looked for inspiration in theological reflection on pastoral care and counseling. I had the misguided view that the mystery of the triune God was an exclusive doctrine unrelated to life in the real world. Recently, however, I have discovered that there has been a very significant turn to the practical in the theology of the Trinity. Though the approaches are all quite different, what unites them is a common interest in the relationality in the Godhead. Since the way people relate to each other is of prime importance, it is to be expected that trinitarian theology should teach us much about the normative shape of life in this world. This is indeed the case. Some theologians address areas such as therapy, psychological development, and politics (Kelly, 1989). Others have used the doctrine of the Trinity to develop an understanding of ministry and of certain pastoral issues related to it (Drilling, 1991; Fiddes, 2000). Still others have used the light of trinitarian thinking to illumine our general approach to the moral life (Cunningham, 1998; Gunton, 2000; LaCugna, 1991).

Inspired by such creative theological endeavors, the argument I wish to advance here is that a tripersonal working alliance involving the counselor, the counselee and his or her support person(s) mirrors the life of the Trinity. The idea that we find in human life a reflection, an imprint, or a trace of the triune God was first advanced by Augustine (1965). He found in human love, for instance, a reflection of divine love. Thus, the three entities of the lover, the beloved, and the love they share are said to mirror Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. More recently, theologians have suggested that when relationships in the family (Cunningham, 1998) and in the Christian community (Fox, 2001) are at their best, we find a mark of the triune life. It will be noted that the emphasis here is on the immanent rather than on the economic Trinity. That is, it is not what the divine persons do for us that is central in this theological approach, but rather the way in which the inner relational life of the Trinity exists as a model for human relations. Accordingly, the major concern in this essay is to show how the loving relationality that is the triune God offers the ideal pattern for a counseling alliance.

The work of the French philosopher Francis Jacques on interpersonal life will play an important role in our discussion. I will have much more to say about his thought below; let me briefly introduce it here. Jacques (1991) contends that a communication event involves three agencies, the I, the you, and he/she. That is to say, in personal discourse two subjects address each other (the I and the you), but always in the context of an absent third party (the he/she). Here Jacques differs from the dialogical approach developed by Martin Buber and others. Buber (1970) believed that personhood is constituted through the meeting between the I and the Thou. While Buber argued for a dialogical understanding of human communication, Jacques contends that we must take a tri-agental approach.

A number of counselors and therapists are inspired by Buber and construe their work in dialogical terms (Friedman, 1998; Hobson, 1985; Hycner, 1991). In this approach, the counseling process is interpreted as an I-Thou encounter. I want to follow those, however, who think of counseling in a tripersonal framework. Coun-
A Trinitarian Perspective

14

selors and therapists from a variety of schools are aware of the value of a support person(s) in effecting change. However, it is in the narrative approach that the tripersonal approach features most strongly. As a central part of their action plan, narrative counselors sponsor a search for what I will call a "nurturing third" (they refer to a member of an audience or of a team) who is able to support the re-authoring of the client’s personal story. In the narrative approach, three parties play a role in the re-storying process: the counselor, the counselor, and the nurturing third. I find in this structure an image or mark of the triune God.

Underlying the approach developed in this essay is the conviction that relationality is at the heart of therapeutic work. A central issue, of course, is the precise nature of the relationality in the counseling alliance. In addressing this issue, I will refer to tender love-in-relationship through the power of the Spirit. The first task, however, is to describe Jacques’ (1991) tri-agential approach to human communication.

A Tri-agential View of Personhood

In searching for a foundational characteristic of human existence, dialogical philosophers turn to language. Language is the primary way in which we communicate. Communication involves the creation of shared meaning with the other. Macmurray (1961) observes that communication is therefore a personal act—one in which the I meets the You. It is here that personhood is established. He wants to argue that "the self is constituted by its relation to the Other; that it has its being in its relationship, and that this relationship is necessarily personal!" (Macmurray, 1961, p. 17). Here Macmurray echoes the personalist perspective of Martin Buber.

In the utilitarian ethos of the modern society, life with others is construed in terms of a subject-object split. The other is viewed as an object, a thing, to be used and manipulated. Buber (1970), however, imagines a new way of speaking in an attempt to reshape modern consciousness. In place of the language of atomisation—I, You, It, She, He—he offers the word-pairs I-You (or I-Tou) and I-It. A wordpair is immediately suggestive of communion. The one who speaks the word "You" appears as a person, a person-in-relation. She is aware of her subjectivity, but she does not think of herself as a subject over against an object. Only egos construct themselves in terms of the over-against.

Jacques (1991), like Macmurray and Buber, identifies linguistic communication as fundamental in interpreting personhood. Self-realization is a process in which a person is continually defining him- or herself as an agent of communication. Personhood is actualized in the event that I am able to recognize myself through being able to receive an address from someone who calls me you. It is only when I respond to the one who says you that I am able to call myself I. The "mystery of the self in two persons" (Jacques, 1991, p. 31) is an expression of the overlap of the two agencies, I and you. But this understanding of the linguistic event does not go far enough. We need also to refer to a third agency, the be/she. Interlocution, the reciprocity of address and response, cannot in and of itself establish the personhood of I and the you. Here Jacques (1991, p. 32) observes that he is extending beyond Buber’s interpretation of intersubjectivity through the key term of the I-You. For Buber, as we have seen, a person only becomes an I through contact with a you. The love shared with the other constitutes the first person. But for Jacques, a person only becomes someone, an I, in a linguistic event in which three agencies, the I, the you and the be/she participate. “The third person is in a way relative to the first two, figuring as a third entity in relation to the circuit of their exchange. The value be/she is indeed separated from the I and you values of the participants, but it nevertheless remains in a certain relation to them” (Jacques, 1991, p. 34).

This third party that forms the background to all communication is not, as Buber would have it, an it. Though he or she is spoken about, he or she is also a potential partner in an intersubjective exchange. If the be/she represented a person cut out of all communication, the third party would exist as a non-person. But the he/she about whom I am speaking to you has the potential to engage in communication. He or she “is virtually addressable by you and by me” (Jacques, 1991, p. 35). It is possible, for example, to contact him or her by telephone.

It is also important to realize that the be/she is not an optional extra. Jacques is not saying that an absent third party is only sometimes a factor in interpersonal discourse. Rather, his point is that even when there is no explicit reference to a third, the be/she must be there to make the communication meaningful.
When Jacques says that the third party is a necessary element in every communication event, he implies that he or she is there either explicitly or tacitly. Bill and Mary are engaged in conversation. In the course of their chat, Mary is talking about her good friend, Jenny. The communication event is constituted by an I (Mary), a you (Bill), and a she (Jenny). In this case, Jenny functions as an explicit third entity.

Now let us imagine that Bill and Mary are both very keen photographers and that in a later conversation they are talking about their current projects. Bill is discussing in great detail how he is using a lens he has just acquired to create a particular effect. It might seem on the surface that there is no absent third party to be found in this discussion. It is a conversation between two people about photographic techniques. And yet, the conversation is only possible because of an absent be/she. Someone taught Bill about photography (either in person or through something she or he had written). That person functions tacitly in the conversation as a third party. Bill is not thinking about her or him at this particular moment. Nevertheless, the photography teacher is a participant in the communication event.

Now of course there may have been a number of people who have helped Bill in his development as a photographer. They all participate tacitly in the conversation between Bill and Mary. Similarly, in the course of their previous conversation in which Jenny was featured, Bill and Mary might also have referred to a number of their other friends. Jacques’ be/she is to be understood as symbolically representing the absent others that play a constitutive role in a communication event. In a similar way, when I refer to the nurturing third in the counseling alliance, I am using a representative symbol. There may be a number of support persons that the counselor and the counselee enlist together. Indeed, the aim is to find as many as possible.

Communication, then, has a tripersonal structure. Personhood is constituted through a tripersonal system of interacting agencies. What is particularly interesting for our present discussion is that Jacques (1991) sees this “trinitariness” as a “beautiful mirror” of the divine Trinity. He refers to the Trinity in terms of what I would call Being-in-Relation:

The Trinity founds within the divine Being itself nothing less than the relation by which persons are constituted. Metaphorically, how can this be?

I shall go so far as to say that God Himself is relationally, God is He who is, the One who makes relations possible, because He Himself is a relation. (p. 69)

This God who is relationally is “the archetype ... of a tripersonal humanity” (Jacques, 1991, p. 69), and so we are led to the hypothesis that “the human person is basically relational on the level of absolute being and absolute value” (p. 69).

This idea of human experience mirroring that of the Trinity can be traced to the vestigia trinitatis approach developed by Augustine. In De Trinitate, Augustine (1965, Book 8 onwards) never tires of finding psychological images to assist in understanding the Trinity. He refers, to give just three of the twenty examples, to the lover, the beloved, and the love; to the mind, its knowledge and its love; and to memory, understanding, and will. The reason he thinks that these images are so helpful in gaining insight into trinitarian relations is that they represent imprints of the divine.

A vitally important image for Augustine is the last mentioned of the three above. The three psychological faculties of memory, understanding, and will are distinct and yet there is a mutual indwelling (perichoresis). The interrelationship exists because there is a “mutual comprehension,” and this mutual comprehension in turn indicates a fundamental equality between the faculties (see Augustine, 1965, pp. 200-201).

More recently, Cunningham (1998) has developed the idea of the vestigia. While Augustine developed the psychological analogy, Cunningham concentrated on human relations and there found a perichoretic trace. To give just one example, he observed that relations in the family (at least in the ideal case) should be marked by communion and participation. Referring to his own experience, he says: “I am ‘related’ to my wife and my daughters, yes, but more than this: I dwell in their lives and they in mine. They are fundamentally constitutive of who I am” (Cunningham, 1998, p. 169).

Jacques’ relational representation of the Trinity is very appropriate and has a long history in theological reflection. While the use of the three names, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, tends to produce in the mind an image of three separate entities, at the heart of trinitarian theology is the notion of God as three relations indwelling each other. God is not three persons in relation but “relation without remainder” (Cunningham, 1998,
p. 189). It will be useful at this stage to explore this conceptualization of the Trinity more fully.

The Trinity as Relationality

The idea that relation is the key term in understanding the triune God goes back to the Cappodocians, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus. Their thinking was hammered out in response to assaults on either the unity or the distinctiveness within the Trinity. Aris and Eunomius, for example, developed notions that undermined the coequality and coeternity of the Three. Since the Son was born, argued Aris, there was "a time when he was not." While Eunomius was of the view that "there is the Supreme and Absolute Being, and another Being existing by reason of the First, but after It though before all others; a third Being not ranking with either of these, but inferior to the one, as to its cause, to the other, as to the energy which produced it ..." (see Gregory of Nyssa, 1988, p. 50). On this view, there is a hierarchy in the Godhead with the Father at the top as the Supreme Being, the Son a rung down, and the Spirit a further rung down.

Sabellius, for his part, undermined the distinctions in the Godhead. According to him, the one divine substance manifests itself in three modes. This substance metamorphoses itself, as the need arises, to act in the mode of the Father, or of the Son, or of the Holy Spirit (see Basil the Great, 1978, pp. 251, 254).

In their responses to these challenges, the key category for the Cappodocians was relation. The three persons of the Trinity exist in a perfect communion. In this communion, there is no severance or division: "[F]or who receives the Father virtually receives at the same time both the Son and the Spirit..." (Basil the Great, 1978, p. 139). Basil is here upholding the unity in the Trinity. He is careful, though, to hold this in proper tension with the distinctiveness of the Three. There is a "proper peculiarity of the Persons delivered in the faith, each of these being distinctively apprehended by His own notes" (Basil the Great, 1978, p. 139). Three persons in communion is the summary line in the Cappodocians approach.

The category of relation is also central in Thomas Aquinas' trinitarian theology. For Aquinas, God is Being-Itself. Thus, the nature of God is To-Be. The Being of God is also Being-In-Relation. LaCugna (1991) writes: "In De Deo Trino, [Aquinas] shows that the To-Be of God is To-Be-Related. Thus, while God may be the supremely actual and simple existent, this existence is personal, indeed, tripersonal, by virtue of the differentiation of divine persons in relation to each other" (p. 153). The starting point for Aquinas in developing his understanding of God as the To-Be-Related is the two processions in God (Aquinas, 1963, 1a. 27, 1-5). These are the procession of the Word, which Aquinas calls generation or begetting, and the procession of Love, which he refers to as "spiration" (or "breathing out"). These processions, in turn, imply four relations: fatherhood, sonship, spiration, and procession (Aquinas, 1963, 1a. 28, 4).

While there is no consensus on how exactly to interpret the idea of person, everyone is agreed that it does not refer to a center of consciousness. There are not three entities in the Trinity, each operating out of its own particular consciousness. Rather, there are three relations, and these relations indwell each other in love.

The Tripersonal Shape of the Counseling Alliance

Above I noted the way in which Francis Jacques finds a tri-agential structure underlying the constitution of the person. We saw that any communication event involves not only the I and the you but also an absent third party, a kabbal. What, we need to ask, does this have to say in the context of the counseling relationship? Counselors and therapists from a variety of schools of thought are aware of the importance of resource persons who can support the client. It is in the narrative school, however, that the role of the third party is most fully developed. Narrative counselors include as part of their methodology a search for what might be called a "nurturing third." This support person acts to strengthen the emerging counter story.

The two key underlying and related premises of narrative counseling are that human existence has a storied structure and that all social reality is a human construct. That there is a narrative structure in personal and communal life is a widely held view. There is ample evidence that humans generate stories to make sense of their lives. Narrative therapists use this idea as a foundational stone for their theory and practice. People, they observe, make meaning through the stories they tell about themselves (White & Epston, 1990, p. 10).

The way in which meaning is made, however, is shaped by the prevailing cultural myths.
Recognizing how difficult it is to develop an alternative story, narrative counselors intentionally seek out friends and family members who will be able to support this development. "An appreciative audience to new developments is deliberately sought out. For most of us, it is not possible to make radical changes in our lives without somebody cheering us on" (Winslade & Monk, 1997, p. 15). The question that is most commonly employed in helping the client identify a support person is along the lines of, "Who would be least surprised to hear that you did this or thought that?" (McKenzie & Monk, 1997, p. 111; Monk, 1997, p. 21; Morgan, 2000, p. 69). Freedman and Combs (1996) suggest other useful questions:

Who would be most interested to learn of this step you’ve taken? Why would that interest her so? How could you let her know?

Who in your current life would have predicted that you would make this kind of commitment? What do they know about you that would have led them to make this prediction? How would knowing about this step support this knowledge about you? Would that be helpful to you? How? How would you let them know?

Who would most appreciate this event we’ve been talking about? What might he learn about you if you let him in on it that would be of interest to him? What might he say to you about this? How could you initiate such a conversation? (p. 238)

There is, then, a conviction that there is a community of support available to the client, and that this community has a vital role to play in healing and growth. To use some of the terms we developed earlier in our discussion of Jacques' approach, behind or under the communication of the client to the counselor—that is, on a tacit level—there are third parties who have a crucial function. That function involves affirmation, support, and strengthening. The skill the counselor needs is the framing of the questions that will allow the client to move her relationship to the nurturing third from a tacit to an explicit level.

There is in narrative counseling, however, a step beyond this shifting of the encouraging third party from tacit to explicit awareness.
Counselors work with the assumption that the client might actually engage the third party in a conversation. In reflecting together on the sparkling moments, the significance of these moments is understood more fully and they become even more real and powerful. Freedman and Combs (1996) suggest that even when no such conversation takes place, there is still a very real benefit. The supportive third person develops in the imagination of the client, and an "imaginary conversation" (p. 239) may make a significant contribution.

Even when it is no longer possible to make contact with the nurturing third—because she or he is dead—her or his influence can be strong. Winslade and Monk (1999, p. 330f) illustrate this through recounting the case of Elaine, a 13-year-old diagnosed with clinical depression who had been receiving medication for several weeks before coming for counseling. The counselor asked Elaine how she kept going without being totally swamped by the depression. Elaine responded by saying that she would think of her grandfather's indomitable spirit. It was this inner strength and sense of hope that sustained him when Elaine's grandmother died. Sensing the potential empowerment the grandfather could provide, the counselor asked: "Would your grandad be surprised to hear the conversation we are having now about how you are beginning to drive depression out of your life?" This line of inquiry "led Elaine to redescribe herself as symbolically carrying forward her grandfather's spirit. She felt less alone in her struggle against depression" (p. 47).

This need for a nurturing third is so urgent that sometimes it is not even necessary to ask the question that would elicit him or her. In my experience, some counselees will spontaneously call on the support of their "cheer squad." David came to see me because of what he experienced as persecution from his boss, the principal of the school in which he was working. Over a period of time, David received numerous e-mails criticizing some element of his work. When a parent raised a concern about David's discipline of her daughter, the principal immediately took her side and proceeded to berate him. After 30 years in the teaching vocation, David was experiencing for the first time a significant failure in professional self-confidence. The end result of these experiences was clinical depression.

When David first came to see me, he believed that he would have to stick out the job. He was convinced that getting another one at his age would be almost impossible. During the course of the counseling, however, this view proved to be overly pessimistic; he received a job offer and decided to accept it. David continued our sessions in order to process what he had been suffering through and to attempt to regain his confidence.

As I listened, I heard two sets of stories. The first set of stories was, of course, about the unjust and soul-destroying way his principal was treating him. David knew on one level that he was a very able teacher, but this crushing experience resulted in self-doubt. I didn't have to ask him the question, "Who knows you as an excellent teacher and as a fine person?" David spontaneously told a series of stories from his teaching past. These were stories about young teachers he had mentored. I heard about their deep appreciation for his belief in them and his help with their careers. I listened to stories about innovative teaching programs and the way students warmly received them. In our conversations, the nurturing third was often present. He or she did not need my bidding in order to come to David's aid. David instinctively knew that he needed a cheer squad to help him re-build his confidence. My role was one of enhancing the power of the stories through positive mirroring. As I reflected back the highlights in these stories and pondered on their significance, they became an even stronger resource for David in countering the story of incompetence and failure sponsored by his principal.

These three—the counselor, the counselee and the nurturing third—share together in the development of a counter story. In this relational alliance there is an echo of the Trinity. Of course, it is a faint echo. There are clearly significant differences between the relational life of the trine God and that of humans. The most obvious is that nowhere in human existence do we find three personal relations within the one entity. I contend, though, that wherever we find persons connected to each other in a communion of love it is appropriate to speak of a mark of the Trinity.

Tender Love, Trinity, and the Counseling Alliance

I have been arguing that the optimal counselling alliance is one in which counselor, counselee and the nurturing third party all participate fully. I want now to ask the question, what are
the personal qualities that these three manifest when they maximally participate in the work of healing and growth? I want to focus primarily on the counselor and on the support person. The touchstones in counseling work are empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence. In a strong counseling alliance, both the counselor and the nurturing third will be persons who are empathic; accepting, and genuine. However, I want to suggest that they will also manifest another quality, namely, what British psychotherapist Brian Thorne calls “tenderness.”

While fully appreciating the value of, and power in, the three therapeutic touchstones, Thorne (1991) contends that there is yet another level of personal participation. He cannot find the word that fully describes this experience; the closest he can get is “tenderness.” “Here is a word which means both vulnerable and warmly affectionate, easily crushed and merciful, not tough (but rather) sympathetic. It seems to incorporate both weakness and gentle strength, great fragility and great constancy” (Thorne 1991, p. 75). Struggling to capture this very real, but at the same time quite elusive, quality, Thorne (1991) strings together a number of descriptors. This is a quality that “radiates the whole person” and “communicates through its responsive vulnerability that suffering and healing are interwoven” (p. 76). Finally, the one who has this quality is able to “move between the worlds of the physical, the emotional, the cognitive and the mystical without strain” (p. 76). Thorne (1991) has no hesitation in saying that when he participates in the counseling relationship in this intense and profound way, “my client and I are caught up in a stream of love” (p. 77).

Olthuis (1994, 1999) also refers to therapy as entering a stream of love. The power in therapy is not so much in techniques and psychological knowledge, but rather in the love that fills the “wild space” (Olthuis, 1999) between therapist and client. The sphere of the between is wild because it is uncharted, unpredictable and risky. Those who enter it must be prepared to be vulnerable, to suffer with, and to offer profound respect and affirmation. In Thorne’s language, they must be ready to give tender love. It is the Spirit of Christ that makes such love possible. “In this process, love—the love of God—not reason, nor method creates a healing connection. Sharing this cosmic process in which the Spirit is afoot in the world heals our isolation, suffering with leads to a celebrating-with, grace and blessing” (Olthuis 1999, p. 150).

The extent to which the quality of tender love exists in the counseling alliance is, of course, only partially within the control of the counselor. While through prayer, reflection on experience, and openness to the Spirit, a Christian counselor can aim to grow in her capacity for tender love, she has no input into the personal qualities of the nurturing third party. This is someone nominated by the counselee, and she or he may not even be still with us. I am simply making the point that a maximally effective counseling alliance will involve full participation from all three parties, and that from the side of the counselor and the supportive third this maximal participation involves tender love. The counselor can only hope that there is a support person available to the counselee who has the valuable personal qualities we have been discussing. When this is the case, the counseling alliance will be much the richer for it.

When it comes to the counselee, his full participation requires honesty, courage, vulnerability, and perseverance. To engage fully he also needs the grace to receive the personal gifts offered by both the counselor and the nurturing third party.

I want to suggest, further, that the full participation in the counseling alliance that I have been describing echoes the inner life of the Trinity. “Participation” is also a key word in trinitarian theology. It is a mutual coinherence in love (perichoresis) that defines the life of the triune God. This life is not that of three centers of initiative that somehow come together in a loving relationship. The trinity is a relationship of love without remainder. The God of love “is wholly constituted by relationality” (Cunningham, 1998, p. 165). This mutual coinherence is what Cunningham calls “the trinitarian virtue of participation” (p. 165). He suggests that when we dwell in others and they dwell in us, our life together is marked by this virtue. The empathy, love, and tenderness that are shared in the counseling alliance at its best echo the life of the Trinity.

Conclusion

Underlying all of our discussion of the counseling alliance is the conviction that relationship is its core. It is the relationship that heals. Some counselors influenced by the dialogical philosophy of Martin Buber construe their engagement with the client in terms of an I-You relation. Following the lead of the narrative therapists, however, it was suggested that there is real value in broadening the framework of counseling work
to include a hešhe, the nurturing third. Francis Jacques sees in the triad of I, you and hešhe that constitutes a communication event a "beautiful mirror" of the Trinity. Following Jacques' lead, it has been argued that the tripersonal alliance in counseling is also an image of the triune life.

The question of the nature of the relationships in the counseling alliance was also addressed. Tender love is at the heart of healing relationships. This is a love that is characterized by empathy, vulnerability, suffering with, deep respect, and strong affirmation. We are able to love in this way when we are lit up by the love of the Spirit of Christ.

References


Author

Neil Pembroke obtained his doctoral degree from the University of Edinburgh. He is currently the lecturer in religion and psychology in the School of History, Philosophy, Religion, and Classics at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia. His areas of specialization are (a) the integration of psychotherapeutic psychology and theology, and (b) dialogical philosophy and the counseling process.