



**UNIVERSITY of the  
WESTERN CAPE**

**Julian Müller's Narrative Approach to Pastoral Counselling in the South African  
Landscape**

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## ABSTRACT

The goal of this study is to examine and analyse Julian Müller's narrative approach to pastoral counselling within the South African context. The objectives include exploring both primary and secondary scholarly resources authored by Julian Müller, specifically addressing the use and importance of narrative counselling in guiding individuals toward the appropriate sources of human worth and dignity. The research project seeks to contextualise Müller's work within the global landscape of narrative counselling, with a particular focus on the contributions of Ruard Ganzevoort. The aim is to assess whether South African techniques present a viable alternative to prevailing mainstream counselling approaches and practices. According to Müller, the significance of individuals and their experiences lies in collaborative meaning-building with "co-researchers". Julian Müller's approach to narrative counselling considers the perspectives of "co-researchers", emphasising collaborative research *with* individuals rather than *on* them. His "seven movements" encourage the remembering and repeating of untold experiences, especially those of vulnerable and marginalised individuals. The strength of this approach lies in its palpable, contextualised, and localised focus, yet it extends beyond the local through cross-disciplinary discussions, resulting in findings that have broader implications. Beyond delving into pastoral counselling as an academic field, this study endeavours to investigate narrative counselling approaches within the South African landscape, specifically focusing on impoverished communities affected by marginalisation.

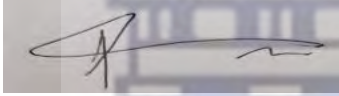
**Keywords:** Pastoral Counselling; Narrative Counselling; Story-telling; Poverty; Ruard Ganzevoort;  
Julian Müller

## DECLARATION

I, Patrick Joseph, declare that this study titled, '**Julian Müller's Narrative Approach to Pastoral Counselling in the South African Landscape**', is my original work and has not been submitted to any other institution. I further declare that all sources cited and or quoted are indicated and acknowledged by means of a comprehensive list of references. I have not allowed, and will not allow, anyone to copy my work.

**Patrick Joseph**

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_



Date: 25 October. 2023



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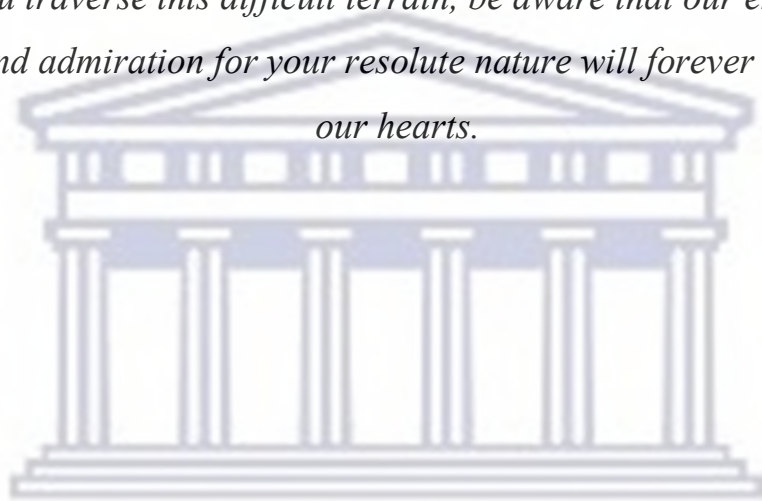
- Above all, I express my gratitude to God for sustaining me throughout these past two years and for endowing me with the strength and perseverance needed to bring this study to completion. To everyone who provided support through prayers and encouragement, a heartfelt thank you.
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## DEDICATION

*I dedicate this study to my sister, Charmaine Albertyn.*

*Your steadfastness and your silent story in your battle with cancer  
has deeply affected those who know you, leaving a lasting  
impression that transcends time constraints.*

*As you traverse this difficult terrain, be aware that our enduring  
love and admiration for your resolute nature will forever reside in  
our hearts.*



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Table 1. Example of doing practical theology



## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer



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# Chapter 1

## Introduction to the Study

### 1.1 Background

My interest in this topic arose during my undergraduate studies in Psychology, and while pursuing my Degree in Theology, I took Pastoral Counselling as one of my majors. The subject of Pastoral Counselling intrigued me, and my curiosity was further kindled by the theoretical and philosophical foundations of the Narrative approach. This approach offered a refreshing perspective on how individuals seek assistance to address the challenges they face through counselling. As a post-graduate student of Religion and Theology, I was introduced to Narrative exegesis, engaging in the work of leading scholars such as William Brown (2017), Walter Brueggemann (1990; 2012), and Gunn and Fewell (1993).

Brown (2017:19) states that we are definitively shaped by our upbringings, experiences, convictions, and our communities. This view is echoed by Gunn and Fewell (1993:1) who posit that stories are fundamental to human life, which can effectively shape people's lives and reorder their experience to reveal the way things are in the real world, or to create the real world. Rather than merely being explanatory, stories are performative (1993:1). They give life purpose by implicitly proposing thoughts and actions that are then embodied in a re-created universe. These narratives or stories, Gunn and Fewell (1993:2) state, create a verbal world that imitates and focuses on people, their speech and actions, desires, relationships, and their beliefs and institutions. Brown (2017:12) emphasises the significance of narrating one's personal story as a means to understand how our background and current context shape our perspectives on and interpretations of the world. Practical Theology encourages me to align with the lived experiences of the underprivileged and marginalised, compelling me to contemplate and share my own narrative of oppression and suffering.

As a young child, around the age of five or six, as I began to grasp and interpret the world around me, I was exposed to the most profoundly horrifying and traumatising events imaginable. It was a world where gangs committed acts of violence, including killing other gang members, in public spaces, and this was unfortunately considered the norm. My neighbours would often take their disputes and fights to the streets, accompanied by extreme profanity, resulting in physical altercations. Many adults in my community sought solace in alcohol to escape the harsh realities of abject poverty, hunger, and seemingly insurmountable suffering. This was the environment in which I grew up, residing in Manenberg and Bonteheuwel on the Cape Flats. My parents did not grow up in this area, however. My dad and his family owned a farm in George from where they were removed because of the Group Areas

Act, No. 41 of 1950 (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1950). My mother suffered the same fate where she and her family lived in Surrey Estate.

Davids (2018:17) asserts that Cosmopolitanism, which was once a robust tradition at the turn of the nineteenth century, disappeared from the apartheid historical canon primarily because of the oppressive system of forced removals (2018:17). He contends that the apartheid regime used a misleading justification for these forced removals, citing concerns about urban slums and public health, while their actual motives were political and financial in nature. According to Davids (2018:17), the political and social engineering facilitated by the Group Areas Act (RSA, 1950) dismantled cosmopolitan communities, and the apartheid government's segregation laws inflicted significant suffering and poverty, largely due to the unemployment and economic disruption caused by the forced removals from the economic hub. These racially integrated communities were physically destroyed as a danger to the theory of segregation and apartheid ideology. The idea of segregation was utilised to legitimise white supremacy and produce beneficial circumstances for racial capitalism to develop (Dubow, 1989, cited in Davids, 2018:17). Around 60,000 residents of District Six were relocated to the Cape Flats and resettled in various townships, including Lavender Hill, Bridgetown, Manenberg, Hanover Park, and Mitchells Plain. Many of the rebuilt cottages previously owned by black people were occupied by foreign immigrants and white civil servants (2018:25).

Schutte, Breetzke and Edlstein (2021:128) discovered that Manenberg on the Cape Flats, which emerged as a result of the apartheid regime's Group Areas Act, and a community marked by stark inequality, unemployment, and poverty, has one of the highest murder rates in the world. Additionally, the community faces a significant prevalence of other violent crimes, including rape, assault, and robbery (UNDOC, 2013; SAPS, 2019, cited in Schutte et al., 2021:128).

I was the third eldest of seven children, and my mother played a vital role as the anchor holding the family together, doing everything in her power to secure food for us on a daily basis to ensure our survival. My father suffered a debilitating brain injury during his early adulthood, rendering him ineligible for permanent or full-time employment. Due to the effects of his mental injury, he would most times disappear for weeks on end and my mother would either go off in search of him or sat distraught at the window, waiting for him to return. When he did return, he would often be abusive and go into fits of rage, chasing all of us around the house and beating us up. This vicious cycle continued until my mother died of cancer at the age of 56.

Drawing on Müller (2017:88-89), there is a heightened awareness of how people interpret their circumstances in light of their understanding of life's ultimate questions. During the times that he was well, my father was devoutly religious. He earnestly instructed us in the Scriptures and Christian living,

and it stuck with me. It was a complex relationship; I harboured a deep resentment for my father, yet I also held a profound and conflicting love for him in my heart. I carry and bear my mother's anguish and suffering in a very deep and sacred place inside of me. I developed a deep-seated love for God and the things concerning Him. My father's wavering commitment to his faith, primarily stemming from his mental illness, compelled me to search for a deeper understanding and meaning in God's Word.

It is quite ironic and somewhat cynical that, like my father, I too experienced a profoundly unfortunate and horrific train accident that left me with permanent disability and paraplegia. What astounded many, including doctors and psychologists, was my unwavering refusal to question God or assert my "right" to do so regarding the cause of this accident. My response, which remains unchanged, is that God is not the cause of what happened to me and is not unconcerned with the affairs and suffering of His creation and His creatures. God is omnipotent, all-knowing, and infinitely compassionate, providing deep solace. The acknowledgment that life involves suffering is a fundamental tenet of religious faith. Despite the challenges I've faced, I haven't become bitter, cynical, or nihilistic. I attribute this resilience in part to my undergraduate studies in Psychology, which have helped shape my character and prevent me from succumbing to despair. Instead, I have grown steadfast in my faith in God.

Müller (2017) states that our own stories become part of our research, which means that "knowing the self and knowing about the subject are intertwined, partial, historical local knowledges" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005:962, cited in Müller, 2017:88). This view eradicates our supercilious illusion of expert knowledge, rendering us exposed and tenuous. Adopting this weak position, however, becomes our strength (Müller 2009a). Richardson and St. Pierre (2005:962, cited in Müller, 2017) state that "nurturing our own voices releases the censorious hold of 'science writing' on our consciousness as well as the arrogance it fosters in our psyche...". According to Müller (2015), narrative research does not leave one unimpeded or unchanged; rather, it draws the researcher into the nuances of a transforming and flexible identity.

## **1.2 Rationale**

There is a scarcity of mental health specialists in low-income areas of South Africa. To close the treatment gap, new psychological and counselling approaches offered by non-specialists are required. Grief and anxiety are treatable, yet countless South Africans go undiagnosed and untreated, resulting in a "treatment gap" of more than 75% (Nyatsanza, Schneider & Davies, 2016:25-26). This study set out to investigate whether Julian Müller's narrative approach to counselling provides a different positionality to people in marginalised communities and to explore the role played by pastoral carers in this process.

### **1.3 Methodology**

This study employed a theoretically grounded desktop research approach to conduct an extensive literature review, serving as the foundation for the conceptual framework outlined in the thesis. A brief review of narrative counselling in South Africa and in the global landscape was carried out. Given their extensive work in the field of narrative counselling, the narrative approaches of Müller and Ganzevoort were examined and evaluated. Following a summary and critique of Müller and Ganzevoort's work, I utilised Müller's transversal rationality, his postfoundationalist, social constructionist perspective, and his "seven movements" in the narrative approach to practical theology to establish a comprehensive framework for the research methodology and theological reflection. The integration of pastoral counselling and narrative counselling may potentially provide a robust framework for practical responses in this context. A comprehensive review of Julian Müller's narrative approach to counselling in the South African landscape was done by conducting a literature review to critically analyse the limitations in previous studies, identify gaps in the existing literature, and identify and record the research findings and opportunities in the field.

The function of pastoral counselling and care as a pillar for emotional well-being is starkly visible when the bereaved, the psychologically sick, the abused, the marginalised, and the impoverished are ignored, particularly in under-resourced countries such as South Africa, where competent psychiatric therapies cannot meet demands (Moodley & Rabson, 2023:1). The aim of this study was to examine and contextualise the application of the narrative approach to investigate the possible role pastoral counselling can play in addressing the rising prevalence of emotional wellness issues in the South African landscape. Furthermore, the study also sought to provide recommendations on how pastoral counselling can be harnessed to alleviate the challenges faced by marginalised individuals and communities, both at the individual and community levels.

The desired outcome is to foster a robust and critical discourse among participants from theological and psychological backgrounds in universities, seminaries, teachers, students, churches, and marginalised communities. This discourse aims to address the intricate emotional health issues persisting in South Africa and make a valuable contribution to the growing body of literature on narrative techniques in pastoral counselling.

### **1.4 Research Problem**

Many South Africans suffer from treatable conditions such as grief and anxiety, yet they remain undiagnosed and untreated, resulting in a treatment gap of over 75% (Nyatsanza, Schneider & Davies, 2016:25-26). In marginalised communities of South Africa, there is a shortage of mental health specialists. To address this treatment gap, it is necessary to introduce new counselling approaches

provided by non-specialists. The aim of this study was to examine whether Julian Müller's narrative approach to counselling offers a different perspective to people in marginalized communities and to investigate the role of pastoral carers in this process. This study further endeavoured to investigate the integration and impact of Julian Müller's narrative approach to pastoral counselling in the South African context, with a specific focus on addressing spiritual and emotional well-being in marginalised communities. To do so, this study explored both primary and secondary scholarly resources authored by Julian Müller, particularly focusing on the use and significance of narrative counselling in guiding individuals towards recognising the appropriate source of human worth and dignity. Further, situating Müller's work within the broader discourse on narrative counselling such as that offered by Ruard Ganzevoort, the study examined whether South African techniques present a viable alternative to prevalent mainstream counselling approaches and practices. The study particularly sought to answer three research questions as indicated below.

### **1.5 Research Questions**

- 1) What are the strengths and weaknesses of Julian Müller's narrative approach to counselling in the context of impoverished communities?
- 2) To what degree does pastoral counselling enhance emotional well-being for marginalised communities?
- 3) How effectively does pastoral counselling foster human dignity and worth among individuals in these communities?

### **1.6 Aims**

The aim of this study was threefold:

- 1) To investigate and critically analyse Julian Müller's narrative approach to pastoral counselling within the South African context, particularly in impoverished communities affected by marginalisation.
- 2) To examine and contextualise the application of the narrative approach to explore the potential role that pastoral counselling could have in addressing the growing incidence of emotional well-being issues in the South African landscape.
- 3) To make recommendations regarding how pastoral counselling could be utilised to alleviate the challenges faced by marginalised individuals and communities, both at the individual and community levels.

## **1.7 Preliminary Literature Review**

### ***1.7.1 Defining narrative counselling***

Morgan (2000:1) considers the *narrative counselling* process as a journey in which destinations and findings are unknown to us, and many possibilities and directions can be discovered. When conducting narrative therapy, Morgan (2000:1) believes that one should keep an open mind and be curious, by consistently asking questions to which you actually do not know the answers. Morgan further asserts that conversations about stories involve participation, in which the counsellor is aware of what interests the counslee and the degree to which the journey fits their preferences (2000:2).

According to Morgan (2000:2), humans possess an inherently interpretative nature, actively seeking meaning in their daily experiences of events. This involves connecting specific occurrences in a chronological sequence over a period of time. The purpose of this process is to make sense of these events, ultimately giving rise to a dominant narrative. In this way, the story becomes more intricate and layered as additional events are selected and woven into the narrative over time (2000:4). This dominant story affects the person in the present as well as their future actions due to the meanings attached to them (by the person experiencing these events). Morgan (2000:5) further postulates that our outlook on life and our stories are influenced by the culture we live in.

### ***1.7.2 Thin description vs alternative stories***

Morgan (2000:9) defines "thin descriptions" as the behaviours or identities that individuals have acquired from others, particularly those in positions of power. At times, people interpret their own behaviour through these thin descriptions, and this can have profound implications. Thin descriptions lead to shallow or limited conclusions, as they tend to overshadow an individual's knowledge, abilities, skills, and competencies (Morgan, 2000:9). On the other hand, "alternative stories" are narratives through which they want to experience their lives. The counsellor's role would be to help the person identify the stories to assist them in escaping the grip of the issues they are experiencing (Morgan, 2000:10). The therapists are interested in finding ways in which these rich descriptions of stories can be discovered (Morgan, 2000:11).

### ***1.7.3 A very brief overview of narrative counselling in the (South) African context***

John Klaasen (2023:1) posits that the rebirth of Christianity in varied and fresh approaches on the African continent, distinct from colonial and imperial designs, has major implications for traditional pastoral theology, pastoral care, and narrative counselling. The African worldview approach to wholistic healing, Klaasen (2023:1) states, lessens the divide between spiritual and scientific, or spirit

and body. This therapeutic technique varies from the Western approach, which views healing from a biological standpoint. The gap in worldviews and, as a result, divergent methods to healing are evaluated in light of the consequences for pastoral theology and pastoral care.

A Western and African worldview approach to healing, notes Klaasen (2023:1), are controversial concepts that cannot be reduced to a single viewpoint. The *Western worldview* emphasises freedom, autonomy, rationality, and independence (Klaasen, 2023:1), whereas the *African worldview* underscores the significance of humanity within a society as expressed via customs, imagery, and relationality. In pastoral care, this is a crucial distinction.

Despite Klaasen's (2020) differentiation between narratives and stories, he clarifies that the terms "narrative" and "story" are commonly used interchangeably. He draws on Riley and Hawe (2005, cited in Klaasen, 2020), who explain the main difference as follows:

[W]here the primary data ends and where the analysis of the data begins. Frank (2000) points out that people tell stories, but narratives come from the analysis of stories. Therefore, the researcher's role is to interpret the stories in order to analyse the underlying narrative that the storytellers may not be able to give voice to themselves (p.227).

Narrative counselling is not solely focused on describing and interpreting experiences; it also encompasses the processes of deconstruction and deliverance. Francois Wessels (2015) states that pastoral therapists within the narrative paradigm consider reality to be socially constructed, thus emphasising the relational nature of identity, agency, and knowledge. Stanley Grentz (2006, cited in Wessels, 2015) suggests that personhood is "bound up with relationality" and suggests that the fullness of relationality lies "ultimately in relationship with the triune God" (Grentz, 2006, cited in Wessels, 2015). Our selves, he contends, emerge within the "dialogue between the 'I' and the social context"; the self thus becomes an ongoing process "rather than ... a given which exists prior to social relationships, forming a narrative with both past and future perspectives" (Wessels, 2015:2).

According to Müller (2017:87), narrative counselling approaches do not rely on structured and inflexible methods to analyse and interpret stories. Müller (2011:5) argues that it instead employs a holistic understanding and a social-constructionist process to which the storyteller is invited, whilst engaging in the creation of new meaning and outcomes to mitigate spiritual, emotional, and psychological suffering. Wealth, social status, and privilege frequently influence the perception of human dignity and identity, with individuals lacking these attributes often being seen as invisible and devalued.



Müller (2017:87) contends that people's stories should be allowed to develop into a new story of meaning and understanding that transcends the local community. He further opines that narrative research draws the researcher into the nuances of a transforming and flexible identity and does not leave one unimpeded or unchanged (Human & Müller, 2015). Müller (2017:87) hypothesises that our own stories become part of our research, which means that "knowing the self and knowing about the subject are intertwined, partial, historical local knowledges" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005:962, cited in Müller, 2017).

#### ***1.7.4 Challenges to narrative counselling in the South African landscape***

Narrative counselling is becoming increasingly prevalent both globally and in Africa. Although the African continent has multiple psychological and community wellness issues that clinicians and therapists are ideally suited to treat, Asimwe, Lesch, Karume and Blow (2021:815) assert that there are still obstacles hindering the widespread adoption of community counselling in Africa. These barriers are further compounded by adverse socioeconomic circumstances and political marginalisation due to limited financial resources, ongoing struggles, gang violence, poverty, and racial discrimination (2021:825).

People face genuine hardship and disadvantage as a result of poverty and low socioeconomic status, with long-term consequences for future generations. According to Wagle (2023:1), poverty and low socioeconomic status compel people to come to terms with their subordinate standing in society. This can be especially challenging when economic inequality is entrenched, allowing the wealthy sectors of society to live a lifestyle that the marginalised masses cannot conceive of (2023:1). These challenges are increasingly intertwined with the normative concepts of fairness, equity, and social justice (2023:1).

Decerf (2020:326) identifies two primary approaches to measuring poverty: the absolute and relative approaches to poverty. Absolute poverty is when personal income is insufficient to provide for the true cost of sufficient nutrition and clothing. Decerf (2020:326) indicates that the absolute poverty line is determined by the true cost of living rather than the societal income level. People are relatively poor when their income is significantly lower than the income standard in their society. The true cost of social involvement varies with living standards. As a result, the relative poverty line is determined by the income level of the society under consideration (2020:327).

Poverty is an economic, political, and social problem, and reducing the suffering caused by people's disadvantageous conditions is a moral concern that must be addressed by the state (Wagle, 2023:1) and the church. Wilson and Ramphele (1989) state that it is a matter of pastoral care, and the church must not give up on making a genuine impact in the lives of individuals, families, and communities. The

quintessential nature of poverty, however, makes deciding on a single strategy that would produce the best results an arduous exercise.

Dreyer (2016:643) states that in the post-apartheid South African context, emerging adults face a difficult transition from childhood to adulthood. Pastoral counselling focuses on helping individuals navigate the transition to a postmodern South Africa, encompassing aspects such as identity development, societal pressures, career decisions, complex emotions, as well as psychological, social, and physical changes. Additionally, it addresses the repercussions of enduring challenging formative years and historical contexts (2016:643). Poverty, poor education, dysfunctional families, political upheaval, and exposure to violent crime are all examples. Schlebusch (2005, cited in Dreyer, 2016:643) posits that special skills and approaches are required to overcome the dangers of suicide, sexual abuse, and other forms of trauma. This involves necessary conciliation “between the world of the story and the world of the interpreter” (Ricoeur, 1982:78, cited in Dreyer, 2016:645) because of the diversities and disparities between the two worlds.

Pastoral counselling seeks to help people broaden and envisage a world beyond their current circumstances. From a social constructionist perspective, it entails listening to and co-constructing an alternative story with the counselee. Dreyer (2016:644) defines narrative counselling as a therapy practice that uses storytelling to acquire a better understanding of societal and personal problems.

In Africa, there has been a growing trend towards the adoption of comprehensive ideas and approaches in the field of mental health treatment since the postcolonial era (Nwoye, 2018, cited in Asiimwe et al., 2021:816). In numerous African countries, professionals are attempting to understand individual and community emotional issues via a broader relational and contextual lens, while stigmatising and opposing social-cultural and political frameworks toward counselling (Puffer et al., 2019, cited in Asiimwe et al., 2021:816). Narrative therapy is gaining recognition and being increasingly embraced in the disciplines of Psychology, Sociology, Theology, and Literature. It is regarded as an integral component in the process of healing vulnerable individuals in the African context.

### ***1.7.5 Julian Müller's approach to narrative counselling***

Julian Müller is a Professor of Practical Theology at the University of Pretoria and is recognised as one of the leading South African theologians. He extensively utilises narrative therapy as a fundamental tool within the context of pastoral care. Müller frames himself as a practical theologian, working on narrative theories within the South African context. He first advocated for the eco-hermeneutical theory in an attempt to integrate the principles of eco-systemic and hermeneutics to build a theological frame of reference (1994). Later, he became inspired by a therapeutic approach that investigated the

metaphorical use of the narrative for understanding and practicing therapy. His unearthing of the richness of narrative theology led to the writing of his book *Om tot verhaal te kom* (1996) as a narrative approach to family therapy.

In discovering the meaning of the narrative metaphor, Müller became motivated by a growing need to research, teach, and practice narrative methods. His affiliation with Wentzel van Huyssteen (2006, cited in Müller, 2011:3) influenced his postfoundationalist understanding of theology, which he developed into a practical theological epistemology and methodology. Müller became interested in transversal rationality as a way of engaging with the interdisciplinary process. He chooses a postfoundational theology to postulate a theological framework within which the narrative approach coheres and describes the transition in contemporary society and the church and to understand and define a holistic pastoral ministry by using the grammar of transversal rationality. Contextuality is a fundamental concept of postfoundationalist language. Müller takes a very specific and distinct context as a departing point for theoretical consideration, avoiding a systematic, theoretical approach.

Drawing on the African landscape, Müller (2017) defines a framework for comprehending and developing a specific postfoundational practical theology. His narrative approach to practical theology prioritises the local over the global and specificity over oversimplifications. According to Müller (2017:86), the centrality of people and their stories necessitates a collaborative meaning construction with "co-researchers". His "Seven Movements" promote the recounting and retelling of unremarked stories, particularly those of vulnerable and marginalised people. Müller's (2017:86) approach to practical theology takes cognisance of the perspectives of "co-researchers", conducting research *with* people rather than *on* them. The strength of this approach is that the researcher's focus is tangible, contextualised, and parochial, however, it transcends the local through engaging in cross-disciplinary dialogue, producing analyses that point beyond the local.

Müller's postfoundational approach to practical theology focuses on interdisciplinary research, utilising transversal rationality as a practical way of doing interdisciplinary work that provides a concrete framework for narrative counselling. This postfoundationalist approach is attentive to the dangers of relativity and subjectivity in multiverse rationality, and the rigidity and misleading claims of the universal reason. Transversal rationality, as proposed by Schrag and Van Huyssteen (2006a:19, cited in Müller, 2011:3), provides a practical, trustworthy interface between disciplines, embedded in philosophy and methodology. This transitional, social-constructionist approach embraces the person as part of the advancement of a desired reality that makes sense to him or her (Müller, 2011:3). It simultaneously creates the most profound and the most precarious instant, a moment of genuine pastoral concern.

### ***1.7.6 Narrative counselling in the global context***

In the global context of pastoral care, Ruard Ganzevoort has been one of the most important voices in the discourse of story and narrative counselling. He is a professor and dean of the Faculty of Religion and Theology and chief diversity officer of the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. He focuses on pastoral theology and psychology, narrative approaches, trauma, sexuality, and culture. Ganzevoort has published and edited 16 books and more than 130 professional or scientific journals. In his role as President of both the International Academy of Practical Theology and the International Society for Empirical Research in Theology, Julian Müller brings exceptional insights into the nuanced significance of religion and faith in society. He is a pioneering practical theologian who delves into the study of stories and narratives as a means of enhancing pastoral care. His approach to theology is characterised by a unifying perspective that prioritises diversity and inclusiveness, emphasising the value of dialogue. As a practical theologian, Julian Müller's research focuses on lived religion, examining how individuals shape their connection to the sacred and how they engage with the tradition(s) from which they draw their beliefs and practices.

As far back as 1993, Ganzevoort asserted that "a story is not just a way of conveying information; it is a way of interpreting facts" (1993:278). Every story assigns a meaning to the events it describes. Because human life may be understood as a constant process of interpreting and organising the world in images and stories, storytelling is an important component of life. Ganzevoort (1993:278) goes on to say that when experiences are organised into a framework or sequence (plots), disconnected pieces of life are placed through an interpretation process. Likely, events are first perceived subconsciously, and then experiences are interpreted and arranged into a narrative (1993:278). This interpretive process comprises language, identity, and continuity. Ganzevoort (1993:278) observes that we depict life stories as narrative patterns of interpretation through which we strive to comprehend the meaning, purpose, and value of life by examining the events that unfold within it. Practical theologians have developed various hermeneutical methods within the field of pastoral care.

### ***1.7.7 Differences and similarities in Müller and Ganzevoort's approaches to narrative counselling***

In comparison to Müller's "Seven Movements", Ganzevoort (1993:285-286) identifies four basic characteristics of narrative within the pastoral care setting: The plot, setting, character, and tone. The *plot* refers to a recognisable continuous decorative design that connects events (1993:285-286). The *setting* refers to the pattern that is formed by political, social, economic, and cultural factors. *Character* refers to the personal touch represented by symbols, metaphors, and rituals that influence the person's relationships (1993:285-86). And lastly, *tone* describes the overarching emotional setting of the story (1993:285-286). Ganzevoort (1993:285-286) suggests that these four characteristics are inherent in

every narrative, although their relative significance may vary. Practical theologians worldwide have developed numerous hermeneutical strategies within the field of pastoral counselling.

In pastoral care and narrative counselling, the focus is on interpretation rather than strict factual accounts. The process of interpreting one's experiences holds more significance than the interpretative rules that govern those experiences. Ganzevoort (1993:285-286), however, shifts the movement away from rule-oriented hermeneutics and directs attention to understanding and analysing the process of interpretation itself. Since the Enlightenment, three philosophers – Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and Gadamer – have highlighted this shift (1993:285-286, cited in Klaasen, 2020:2). They were more interested in understanding the unfolding of the interpretation of facts within personal settings and temporal frameworks. Hermeneutics is defined as "the methodology for arriving at an understanding of written texts held to be meaningful at a personal level" (1993:285-286). Practical theologians have developed various hermeneutical methods within the field of pastoral care.

Ganzevoort and Müller agree share many commonalities in their perspectives on practical theology and narrative counselling. While Ganzevoort emphasises the relevance of story in pastoral care, especially for the marginalised in the context of dominant narratives by the powerful, it is important to note that he assumes a somewhat uniform global culture due to increased access to other cultures through technology. This view, however, does not consider that the marginalised poor do not have access to technology. Müller elevates God above Ganzevoort (Klaasen, 2020:5), underlining the influence of the counsellor to effect change rather than the counselee introducing and maintaining change. This brings up the question of power dynamics between counsellor and counselee.

The following section provides an outline of the forthcoming chapters.

## **1.8 Outline of Chapters**

This thesis consisted of the following five chapters:

### **CHAPTER 1 – Introduction to the Study**

The first chapter of the study begins by clarifying its foundational components. These include providing a description of the background, presenting the study's rationale, explaining the chosen methodology, delineating the research problem and relevant research question(s), elucidating the overarching aims and objectives, and conducting a preliminary examination of the existing literature.

### **CHAPTER 2 – An Overview of Narrative Counselling**

In this chapter, an exploration is undertaken into the burgeoning literature surrounding narrative approaches in pastoral care and counselling. Special attention is given to the methodologies of Ruard

Ganzevoort and Julian Müller, with a particular emphasis on their applicability in both the global and South African contexts, respectively. The intent of this literature review is to furnish a comprehensive background and context for the research topic, thereby establishing a robust foundation for the study.

### **CHAPTER 3 – Julian Müller’s Narrative Approach to Counselling**

In this chapter, the study undertakes a thorough examination of Julian Müller's narrative counselling approach, specifically within the South African context. The research focuses on key themes, including transversal rationality theory, postfoundationalist ideology, social constructionism principles, and Müller's seven movements in practical theology. This analysis aims to illuminate and explore the intricacies of Müller's narrative counselling approach within the distinctive socio-cultural landscape of South Africa.

### **CHAPTER 4 – A Critique of Julian Müller’s Narrative Approach in the Context of Impoverished Communities**

This chapter analyses several aspects of Müller's narrative method and presents an evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses.

### **CHAPTER 5 – Conclusion and Recommendations**

In the final chapter, an assessment is undertaken to evaluate the effectiveness of narrative counselling approaches in the South African context. The discerned outcomes offer insights and recommendations for the implementation of such strategies within this specific setting.

## **1.9 Conclusion**

While narrative counselling is gaining increasing prominence worldwide, traditional approaches to caring for individuals and communities necessitate ongoing critical engagement to ensure their continued relevance and effectiveness. Traditional counselling approaches are problem-focused and do not address the uneven power dynamics between the counsellor and the counselee, especially in global counselling approaches (Klaasen, 2018a:3, cited in Klaasen, 2020:2). Narrative re-enactment affects power dynamics in counselling. In contrast, African pastoral counselling considers the community's cultural customs but ignores or inhibits the subconscious support of a singular biblical perspective (Acolatse, 2014:173, cited in Klaasen, 2020:2).

South Africa is a distinctive country known for its 11 official languages, diverse subcultures, civilisations, and a wide array of religions. Against this backdrop, narrative therapy can provide essential designs for promoting understanding and bringing cooperative healing, especially to people in marginalised communities. However, this diversity can also pose significant challenges for counselling, including issues such as inequality, language barriers, marginalisation due to poverty, gang

violence, and racial discrimination. This is equally true for marginalised communities across the globe. These obstacles are exacerbated by struggles with negative socioeconomic backgrounds and inadequate financial resources. Another drawback is that because of its in-between aspect, practical theology and narrative counselling are not taken seriously by other disciplines.

The following chapter, Chapter 2, offers a comprehensive exploration of narrative counselling, elaborating on how the key concepts are applied within the context of this study. Additionally, it incorporates a literature review encompassing narrative counselling in both the global and South African contexts, with a specific emphasis on the perspectives of Ruard Ganzevoort and Julian Müller.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Overview of Narrative Counselling**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, the discussion will centre on the developments and advancements in pastoral care and counselling, specifically, narrative counselling. There is a rapidly growing corpus of literature on narrative counselling, which indicates that it is becoming progressively prevalent across the world. This section will consist of a literature review on narrative counselling in the global and South African contexts by focusing on the approaches of Ruard Ganzevoort and Julian Müller. A literature review is both a process and a product. As a process, it involves searching for information related to a topic, becoming familiar with the relevant research, and identifying issues and gaps in the research.

The literature review will identify the key authors and key arguments that are relevant to this study. The process will encompass summarising, synthesising, and critiquing the literature gathered through a comprehensive search. It is intended to provide the necessary background and context for the research project, offering a strong foundation upon which the study will be built. Moreover, the study will further focus specifically on Julian Müller's narrative approach to counselling, in the context of communities impoverished through marginalisation in the (South) African landscape.

#### **2.2 Clarification of Key Concepts**

This section defines the key concepts employed in this study.

##### ***2.2.1 Pastoral care***

*Pastoral care* refers to the provision of emotional, spiritual, and practical support to individuals within a religious or educational setting. It serves as the foundational form of support offered by both individuals and pastors during times of crisis. This form of care is recognised as a fundamental component in nurturing the holistic emotional well-being of Christian communities across the globe. Byrne and Nuzum (2020:208) define 'pastoral care' as a "relational endeavour" that is "enhanced through the appropriate use of touch, ritual, and gesture alongside the use of silent reflection and deep listening".

##### ***2.2.2 Pastoral counselling***

*Pastoral counselling* is a type of counselling with a therapeutic approach in which pastoral theology and secular psychology are combined to provide a holistic approach to therapy in which faith, theology,



and psychology all play important roles (Lucerna & Gayoles, 2018). As a subset of pastoral care, Magezi (2016) defines pastoral counselling as the use of a range of healing (therapy) strategies to assist individuals in dealing with difficulties and crises in an improved developing manner.

### **2.2.3 Narrative**

*Narrative* refers to the use and telling of stories to cooperatively promote understanding. Narratives manifest in various forms, including the storytelling of an individual's life, as well as in films, books, poems, and photographs (Neuman, 2006). Neuman (2006) describes six main elements of a narrative as:

- “the telling of a story or tale as it unfolds from the view of the person;
- a sense of movement or process (i.e., a before and after condition);
- interactions or connections within a complex, detailed context;
- an individual (or group) involved in a phenomenon takes action and makes choices;
- coherence or the whole holds together; and
- the temporal sequencing of a chain of events” (2006:474).

Both researchers and participants, or “co-researchers”, according to constructionist philosophy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017), are socially positioned in the world, and empirical facts are acquired and analysed through interaction to reflect the phenomenon examined. Conversation is the central focus in unstructured in-depth interviews, where the interviewer and participant co-create the reality of the interview through the dialogue of questions and replies (Neuman, 2006). Hinchman and Hinchman (1997) describe narrative as "discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and thus offers insights about the world and/or people's experiences of it" (1997:xvi).

### **2.2.4 Narrative counselling**

*Narrative counselling* is a specific approach that has been utilised in pastoral care and counselling. It involves not only the description and interpretation of experiences but also deconstruction and deliverance. Pastoral therapists view reality as socially produced under the narrative paradigm, emphasising the relational character of identity, agency, and knowledge. Wessels (2015) states that the narrative approach focuses on the stories, or narratives, of a person's life. It rests upon the conviction that such tales can be utilised to pinpoint and examine latent issues causing vexation or complication. Narrative counselling provides a framework for individuals to explore and reframe their life experiences. It enables them to build resilience and make meaning out of difficult circumstances.

## 2.3 A Brief Overview of Pastoral Care and Pastoral Counselling, and their Differences

... all persons, whether young or old, sick, or healthy, rich or poor, have ongoing needs for meaning, love, relationship, and community, and pastoral care is the form ministry takes as it strives to help people meet these needs (McClure & Miller-McLemore, 2012:269–270).

While they maintain distinct meanings, the terms "pastoral care" and "pastoral counselling" are often used interchangeably across different regions globally, denoting the concept of *cura animarum* (Magezi, 2007:655-656). Pastoral counselling focuses on pastoral caring in the form of discourse and conversation aimed at alleviating emotional distress within the scope of pastoral ministry. On the other hand, pastoral care encompasses a wide range of caring actions. Benner (1992:14-15, cited in Magezi, 2016:1) notes that:

Much as pastoral ministry is broader than pastoral care, so too is pastoral care broader than pastoral counselling. And to attempt to reduce all pastoral care to counselling is to fail to recognize both the breadth of pastoral care as well as the distinctive nature of counselling.

Pastoral care is a critical component of holistic emotional wellness for Christian communities around the world. I share the viewpoint of Patton (2005) and Doehring (2014) who assert that during times of crisis, it is the fundamental and essential care offered by both community members and pastors to the faith community (Patton, 2005; Doehring, 2014, cited in Moodley & Rabson, 2023). Patton (2005:4, cited in Moodley & Rabson, 2023) distinguishes three great paradigms of pastoral care: the *classical* (from the patristic period through the Reformation), the *modern* (from the early eighteenth to the late twentieth century: the Enlightenment age), and the *postmodern*. According to Hove (2022, cited in Moodley & Rabson, 2023), pastoral presence is beneficial in providing consolation through connection since it represents the presence of the concerned other, fellow believers, and a compassionate God. It is a type of loving act that is frequently performed during the loss of loved ones, illness, suffering, and trauma (Byrne & Nuzum, 2020, cited in Moodley & Rabson, 2023).

Pastoral care has traditionally been defined as the deliberate enactment and embodiment of a theology of bodily presence. Pastoral care, for example, is defined by Byrne and Nuzum (2020, cited in Moodley & Rabson, 2023) as a "relational endeavour" that is "enhanced through the appropriate use of touch, ritual, and gesture alongside the use of silent reflection and deep listening" (p. 208). Another view defines pastoral care as being associated with teaching, preaching, counselling, or attending to the specific needs of individual members of a particular church. It is actions motivated by love, kindness, and mercy (Chivasa, 2017:2).

Penninx et al. (2022:381, cited in Moodley & Rabson, 2023) define “pastoral care” as a "ministry of presence", with presence understood as bodily presence. Pastoral care describes a highly particular method of caring for human life because it was created by God, belongs to God, and is saved by God in Christ (Louw, 2015, cited in Moodley & Rabson, 2023). The discipline of pastoral care involves reflection on theology, theory, and the practice of care to develop competent, efficient, and credible practices (Agbiji & Landman, 2014, cited in Moodley & Rabson, 2023). These practices are guided by a framework for education, training, conduct, and performance to ensure the provision of spiritual and religious care services to patients and staff in medical contexts, regardless of their religious affiliations. Furthermore, pastoral care is not limited to the confines of a church or religious organisation. It extends to individuals in various settings, including hospitals, prisons, schools, and community centres (Agbiji & Landman, 2014, cited in Moodley & Rabson, 2023).

Pastoral counselling is a type of counselling with a therapeutic approach in which pastoral theology and secular psychology are combined to provide a holistic approach to therapy in which faith, theology, and psychology all play important roles (Lucerna & Gayoles, 2018). Furthermore, it enables people to acquire coping techniques and experience empathy, encouragement, and reinforcement during difficult times (Lucerna & Gayoles, 2018). Magezi (2016) concurs and further expounds on this view by stating that pastoral counselling, as a subset of pastoral care, is the use of a range of healing (therapy) strategies to assist individuals in dealing with difficulties and crises in an improved developing manner.

## **2.4 Developments and Advancements in Pastoral Care and Counselling**

Van Arkel (2000:143-160, cited in Magezi, 2016) has outlined the significant developments and advancements in pastoral care and counselling, as well as pastoral theology. His mapping was based on existing literature in the field. Van Arkel's approach emphasises the significance of distinguishing four types of pastoral care: mutual care, pastoral care, pastoral counselling, and pastoral therapy. *Mutual care* provides assistance to people within a community, whereas *pastoral care* fosters communal development via collaborative efforts. *Pastoral counselling* entails a set agreement or contract concerning time and place. *Pastoral therapy* is specialised and uses long-term reconstructive therapeutic strategies to cure deep, chronic difficulties. It is distinct from psychological counselling, which serves as a broader ministerial duty, and pastoral therapy, which is specialised and employs therapeutic techniques (Van Arkel, 2000:143-160, cited in Magezi, 2016). These contrasts are critical in comprehending the evolution of pastoral care. Van Arkel's four forms help to improve the general standard of pastoral care. In the West and in Africa, where there is no divide between viewpoint and practice, pastoral care is affected by psychotherapy results (Gerkin, 1997:23-51; Heitink, 1993:90-97, cited in Magezi, 2016).

While the discipline of pastoral care certainly involves reflection on theology, theory, and the practice of care, there are valid concerns about its credibility and efficacy. Critics argue that pastoral care relies too heavily on religious beliefs and practices, which may not resonate with individuals who do not identify as part of a particular religion or have different spiritual perspectives. Moreover, some question whether pastoral care should extend beyond traditional places like churches or religious organisations. They argue that while it may be appropriate for providing support within those contexts where faith is central to people's lives, extending it to secular settings such as hospitals or schools can blur boundaries between religion and professional roles. This could lead to proselytisation rather than offering neutral support services. In this context, alternatives like secular counselling or psychotherapy might provide a more inclusive approach by focusing primarily on evidence-based interventions without relying solely on spiritual frameworks.

## **2.5 Understanding Narrative Counselling: A Brief Overview**

Against the backdrop of pastoral care and counselling then, narrative counselling is a therapy that analyses and shapes a person's life stories, helping clients examine their experiences, discover sequences, and improve self-awareness. Müller (2004) explains that it can help individuals to cope with difficult experiences like grief or trauma, understand how choices impact desired outcomes, and deconstruct limitations. Narrative counselling views each person's life as an individual narrative, best understood in their cultural and historical context. Additionally, Müller (1994) notes that it rests upon the conviction that such tales can be utilised to pinpoint and examine latent issues causing vexation or complication by providing a framework for individuals to explore and reframe their life experiences, thereby building resilience and making meaning out of difficult circumstances.

Müller's view resonates with that of Davies and Dreyer (2014) who state that narrative counselling approaches present an effective therapy for alleviating grief and anguish, providing both spiritual solace and emotional support. These techniques align harmoniously with religious principles such as 'hope' and 'new life', effectively addressing the needs of individuals facing challenging or troubling circumstances (2014:1). Morgan (2001:1) expounds on these different techniques noted by Davies and Dreyer (2014), highlighting that there are many themes that make up the concept of narrative counselling, and that every counsellor has a different approach to these conceptions.

Morgan (2001:1) explains that narrative counselling might refer to particular ways of understanding people's identities, the effects of problems on their lives, the unique approaches to engaging with people about the challenges they face, and distinct ways of understanding therapeutic relationships and the ethical considerations associated with counselling. It is an exploration to unknown places and discoveries, with numerous options and routes to explore. Narrative counselling, Morgan (2000:1) argues, aspires to be a compassionate, non-blaming approach to counselling and community work that

places individuals as experts at the forefront of their own lives. It sees problems as distinct from individuals and considers that people have a wide range of skills, capabilities, viewpoints, principles, commitments, and skills that will help them decrease the impact of problems in their lives. The counselee enacts a significant role in plotting the direction of the journey (2000:2).

In narrative counselling, Morgan (2000:1) emphasises the significance of maintaining an open mind and being interested. The counsellor must be informed of the client's preferences and inclinations and is required to participate in narrative interactions. Humans, Morgan (2000:5) contends, are conceptual beings that seek meaning in their daily lives. This results in a dominating storyline that influences the person's current and future actions. Among the several rules that guide narrative approaches, two stand out for Morgan: the counsellor should always retain a curious position, and always ask questions to which they honestly do not know the answers. These two concepts influence the principles, posture, spirit, standards, commitments, and beliefs of narrative counselling (2001:3).

Morgan's view on these two concepts is reinforced by Müller (2015), who "strongly argues for the not knowing position of the narrative approach as the only acceptable approach in an intercultural therapeutic situation" (2015:33). This approach is depicted by "mutual conversational co-creation of new stories", "historically situated interchanges between people", comprehension based on "vicissitudes of social processes", and "negotiated understanding" (2015:34). Morgan similarly argues that narrative conversations are steered and concentrated by the interests of the person telling the story. She pinpoints different examples of stories in narrative, to illustrate how the storyteller selects certain events as important over others to fit with a particular plot.

## **2.6 Different Types of Stories**

Narrative counselling, according to Morgan (2000:4), is also referred to as 're-authoring' or 're-storying' discussions. Stories, as these descriptions imply, are crucial to understanding narrative modes of operation. For various people, the word 'story' has diverse connotations and meanings. For narrative counsellors, stories include: events, linked in sequence, across time, according to a plot (2000:4). Humans are inherently analytical beings who continually engage in everyday experiences and events, striving to impart significance to them. The narratives we construct about our lives are crafted by linking specific events in a chronological sequence over time, with the aim of comprehending and providing meaning to these experiences (2000:4). The plot of the narrative is based on this meaning. As we go about our daily lives, we continuously attach meaning to our experiences.

Stories define our personalities and interactions, both past and present. They may be associated with people, families, or communities (Morgan, 2000:5). A person's story may represent them as successful, proficient, or ineffective when it comes to trying something new. Families may be stereotyped as loving,

boisterous, or unstable (2000:5). The narrative of a community may identify it as secluded, engaged with politics, or economically robust. All of these stories take place at the same time, and occurrences are understood in accordance with the prevailing narrative. Living necessitates negotiating between dominant and alternative stories, as well as mediating and decoding what we have experienced (2000:5).

Morgan depicts a narrative as a connecting link that integrates collective events to form a story (2000:5). Each of us has stories, for example, about ourselves, our competencies, skills, relationships, failures, and achievements. The narrative gains depth and complexity as more events are selected and integrated into the overarching plot (2000:5). As the plot thickens, other events are recollected and integrated, contributing to the narrative's increasing prominence in the storyteller's life. Consequently, it becomes easier to identify new instances of events that align with the meaning established by the counselee (2000:5).

## **2.7 Thick Versus Thin Descriptions**

Our cultural background influences our perspectives on life and storytelling. In interpreting people's stories, Morgan (2000:5) identifies thin descriptions and thick descriptions. Thin descriptions are other people's perceptions of an individual's actions or identities, which can lead to erroneous judgements and concealed knowledge, talents, skills, and competencies. A thin description offers a limited perspective on life's complexities and contradictions (2000:8). It doesn't leave much space for individuals to convey their personal interpretations of their behaviours and the context in which they occurred. These thin descriptions often result in thin conclusions that are presented as the absolute truth of an individual's identity and their struggle with a particular situation, typically emphasising shortcomings, imbalances, or vulnerabilities (2000:8). Such inferences weaken individuals by offering a distorted picture of the problem-filled tale.

Thick descriptions or alternative narratives are stories that people wish to experience. Narrative counselling is interested in discussions that seek alternate stories, instead of merely problem stories and thin conclusions. The counsellor's function is to assist the individual in identifying these narratives and to overcome being held captive by the issues they are experiencing (2000:8). Counsellors are eager to learn how to unearth these rich descriptions of stories. Narrative counsellors aim to engage with individuals in a collaborative process where they explore the stories that individuals recount about their lives and interactions. They delve into the effects, significance, and conditions that have influenced the development and evolution of these narratives (2000:8). Alternative narratives can help individuals escape from the grip of their difficulties by reducing the effect of problems and creating new options for living.

Morgan's Western perspective describes stories as a crucial aspect to understanding narrative modes of operation (2000:4-5). She depicts a narrative as corresponding to a connecting link that integrates collective events to form a story. Klaasen (2020), a South African scholar, makes a clear distinction between the terms 'narrative' and 'story', yet acknowledges that in common usage, 'narrative' and 'story' are often used interchangeably. The primary difference, Riley and Hawe (2005, cited in Klaasen, 2020) claim, is as follows:

[W]here the primary data ends and where the analysis of the data begins. Frank (2000) points out that people tell stories, but narratives come from the analysis of stories. Therefore, the researcher's role is to interpret the stories in order to analyse the underlying narrative that the storytellers may not be able to give voice to themselves (p.227).

## **2.8 Narrative Counselling in the South African Landscape**

In recent years, South Africa has experienced a notable increase in the use of narrative counselling. This technique has grown to be a crucial component of therapeutic processes in the country, garnering recognition for its ability to create an empowering and secure setting. By granting individuals the means to regain authority over their lives, this approach undeniably exerts considerable sway throughout South Africa. Klaasen (2023:1) posits that the resuscitation of Christianity in diverse and creative forms on the African continent, separate from colonial and imperial ambitions, has significant consequences for traditional pastoral theology, pastoral care, and narrative counselling. According to Klaasen (2023:1), the African worldview that embraces wholistic healing bridges the gap between the spiritual and scientific, connecting the spirit and body. This therapeutic approach stands in contrast to the traditional Western perspective, which predominantly views healing through a physiological lens.

The disparities in worldviews and the resulting divergence in healing systems are examined in consideration of their implications for pastoral theology and pastoral care. According to Klaasen (2023:1), the Western and African worldview approaches to healing are diametrically opposed and cannot be condensed to a single point of view. The philosophy of the West emphasises autonomy, liberty, deductive reasoning, and self-determination, whereas the African worldview emphasises the relevance of humanity within a society as reflected through customs, images, and relationality (Klaasen, 2023:1). This is an important distinction in pastoral care.

Narrative counselling involves not only the description and interpretation of experiences but also deconstruction and deliverance. According to Francois Wessels (2015), a leading South African scholar on narrative counselling, pastoral therapists under the narrative paradigm view reality to be socially produced, emphasising the relational character of identity, agency, and knowledge. Grentz (2006, cited in Wessels, 2015) states that personhood is "bound up with relationality" and that the completeness of

relationality is "ultimately in relationship with the triune God" (Grentz 2006, cited in Wessels, 2015:2). Our identities, he claims, originate through the "dialogue between the "I" and the social context"; the self therefore becomes an ongoing process "rather than... a given which exists prior to social relationships, forming a narrative with both past and future perspectives" (Wessels, 2015:2). In the South African landscape, Julian Müller is recognised as one of the most prominent African theologians who employ narrative therapy as a tool within pastoral care.

## **2.9 A Brief Introduction to Julian Müller's Approach to Narrative**

Julian Müller, a well-known and innovative figure in the field of narrative counselling, emerged as an innovative thinker during his early career. Born in Germany in the mid-1950s, he began developing his ideas and theories related to this line of work. During the 1980s, Müller's (2004:294) journey into practical theology led him to South Africa. His influential contributions formed a framework for understanding and assisting individuals facing emotional and psychological challenges through unique methods. He focused on using stories or narratives to gain deeper insight into one's life experiences.

Müller was widely recognised for incorporating various narrative methods such as metaphor, analogy, creative visualisation, and role play into his counselling sessions (Dreyer, 2014). This approach encouraged co-researchers to delve deeper into their issues while fostering meaningful relationships with their counsellor. As a result of this collaborative exploration process, individuals gained a more thorough understanding of the challenges they faced and potential solutions that could be employed. Müller (2004; 2005) also emphasised the significance of acknowledging each person's unique story in comprehending how they arrived at their present situation. This recognition enables more effective support in progressing forward. Consequently, his innovative counselling techniques have become widely adopted across various disciplines, including psychology, social work education, and mental health services, owing to their close alignment with contemporary narrative practices.

In Müller's (2017:87) perspective, narrative counselling approaches deviate from rigid and predetermined techniques in analysing and comprehending stories. Instead, they adopt a holistic viewpoint that recognises the communal construction of narratives while prioritising active engagement from the storyteller. By actively participating, fresh interpretations are nurtured which have the potential to alleviate spiritual anguish as well as emotional and psychological distress.

In contemporary society, an individual's dignity and self-worth are often influenced by their wealth or privilege, ultimately shaped by the prevailing social structure. Regrettably, those who lack these qualities tend to be overlooked and disregarded as insignificant. Müller (2017:87) emphasises the significance of affording individuals the opportunity to share their narratives beyond their immediate circle. This practice can lead to a deeper understanding of the true value of life.



In the field of narrative research, Müller (2015) suggests that researchers actively aim to understand and embrace transformative identities rather than remaining detached from their subjects' experiences. Moreover, according to Müller (2017), there exists a relationship between our personal experiences and our research endeavours. This connection gives rise to a combined yet limited comprehension of both ourselves and the specific components related to the subject matter (Brown & St Pierre, as cited in Müller, 2004).

Although this study will attempt to focus specifically on Julian Müller's narrative approach to counselling, it is necessary to situate Müller's approach within the global context and trends in narrative counselling. Consequently, Müller's work will be compared to that of Ruard Ganzevoort, one of the foremost global scholars on narrative counselling.

## **2.10 Ruard Ganzevoort's Approach to Narrative Counselling**

Ruard Ganzevoort, a leading scholar in the field of global pastoral care, has made significant contributions to the advancement of discourse surrounding story and narrative counselling. As a professor and dean at Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, he boasts extensive expertise in various fields, encompassing not only pastoral theology and psychology but also subjects like narrative strategies, trauma research, evolving patterns of sexuality, and cultural dynamics. His profound knowledge is aptly showcased through significant achievements, including the authorship of 16 books and valuable contributions to over 130 professional journals, either as an editor or author himself. Ganzevoort truly exhibits his vast proficiency within this field.

Furthermore, his influence extends beyond the academic sphere. He has held prestigious positions including as president of both the International Academy of Practical Theology and the International Society for Empirical Research in Theology, highlighting his esteemed standing (1989–2019). Leveraging his expertise as a practical theologian, Ganzevoort (1993) investigates narratives to enhance pastoral care services. His research primarily revolves around religion's complex role in society – an endeavour that frequently questions conventions while fostering harmony through dialogical theological perspectives.

According to Ganzevoort (1993:278), stories not only communicate information but also provide interpretations of facts. Each story highlights the importance of the events it portrays. Since human life relies on understanding and organising the world through narratives and images, storytelling plays a crucial role in our existence. Moreover, when experiences are structured into plots or sequences, fragmented aspects of life gain significance by being interpreted (1993:278). Initially, events may be subconsciously perceived before undergoing interpretation and organisation into narratives (1993:278). This interpretive process utilises language usage as a tool for shaping one's identity formation while

maintaining coherence throughout their personal journey. Ganzevoort firmly asserts that we describe life stories as narrative patterns of interpretation (1993:278) in which we endeavour to understand the significance, purpose, and worth of life through the events that occur in it.

According to Ganzevoort (1993:285-286), the emphasis in pastoral care and narrative is on interpreting experiences rather than relying solely on factual information. Rather than strictly adhering to interpretative rules, the primary focus is on understanding how these experiences are comprehended. Ganzevoort (1993:285-286) argues that there has been a shift towards hermeneutics within this field, moving away from an approach centred on rigid rules. Klaasen (2020:2) concurs and propounds the view that influential philosophers such as Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and Gadamer emphasised the importance of interpreting facts within personal contexts over time, reinforcing this transformation. The consensus seems to be that hermeneutics is defined as "the methodology for reaching an individual-level understanding of meaningful written texts" (1993:285-286). Practical theologians have developed various techniques within pastoral care to effectively apply hermeneutics.

Ganzevoort showcases his expertise as a theorist and exhibits a profound comprehension of how religious truth materialises for believers, by placing emphasis on inclusivity and encouraging discussions that embrace diverse viewpoints (1993:278). This approach not only promotes meaningful debates among followers but also integrates multiple perspectives into conversations about divinity. An essential component of Ganzevoort's primary area of study revolves around the examination of how different faith traditions influence individuals from diverse backgrounds and their connection with their sacred beliefs (1993:278). His research delves into the ways these dynamic interactions shape personal connections to spiritual dimensions, a pivotal aspect of Ganzevoort's investigations.

In the realm of pastoral care, Ganzevoort (1993:285-286) has identified four crucial components within narratives. These elements consist of the *plot*, which links events together with a consistent decorative pattern; the *setting*, influenced by political, social, economic, and cultural factors; *characters* depicted symbolically through rituals that shape relationships; as well as *tone*, which establishes an emotional atmosphere surrounding the story (Ganzevoort, 1993:285-286). While these components can be found to some extent in all narratives, their level of importance may differ. In contemporary global practices of pastoral counselling, practical theologians have devised various hermeneutical strategies for interpretation (1993:285-286).

## **2.11 The Meaning of Personal Narratives in Pastoral Practice and Research**

While narrative approaches are relatively new to practical theology, for Ganzevoort (2011) they share a long history. Narrative approaches have in recent times acquired prominence, yet their link to religious practices has an illustrious history. The primary basis for theological thought is frequently narratives

that are closely related to religious rituals. These human stories are intertwined with the narrative of God. Ganzevoort's (2011:214-223) views rest on the assumption that rituals and ceremonies bring faith practices to life by reliving narratives, enabling modern congregations to participate with their own life experiences. This can be seen in Bonaventure's thirteenth century *Breviloquium*, according to Ganzevoort (2011:214-223). In this work, he suggests that Scripture uses a variety of forms to elicit different emotions, such as offering scenarios, which render promises, promoting morality, issuing admonitions, as well as assurances and warnings (2011:214-223).

This viewpoint is consistent with Jerome Bruner's dichotomy between rational thinking that relies on arguments/truths and narrative thinking based on lifelikeness. Ganzevoort (2012) underscores the significance of narrative for practical theology by declaring that "Religious practices that form the core material for theological reflection in practical theology are often directly related to narratives" (2012:214). Pastoral counselling and spiritual care, Ganzevoort (2011:214-223) contends, concentrate on individual stories as they connect with culture. Religious education seeks to transmit significant narratives from one era to another. Even when practical theologians study culture in general, they search for deeper narrative meanings in social actions.

## **2.12 Methods for Analysing Narratives**

Studying religious practices involves contemplating how multiple narratives intersect, diverge, and converge from one another. Subaltern voices challenge the interpretative hegemony of dominant groups by articulating the personal experiences of women (Neuger 2001, cited in Ganzevoort, 2011), persons of diverse ethnic origins (Andrews, 2002, cited in Ganzevoort, 2011), or LGBTQ<sup>1</sup> believers (Kundtz & Schlager, 2007, cited in Ganzevoort, 2011). Ganzevoort (2011:214-223) identifies at least three fundamental aspects of narrative approaches: In the first dimension, narrative strategies are used in practical ministry and religious communication, such as giving sermons and caring for others. The second phase entails the examination of scientific evidence and the dissection of religious bias in narratives. The third empowers people who are marginalised by giving them an arena to tell their own individual stories.

These three elements converge, making a straightforward explanation of narrative techniques difficult. Ganzevoort explores Paul Ricoeur's impact and developments in practical theology to understand how the narrative turn happens (2011:214-223). In dealing with the challenges surrounding the study of narrative, he presents a systematic approach for employing analytic techniques to narratives (2011:214-223), which offers an evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses.

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<sup>1</sup> LGBTQ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer.

Ganzevoort's assertion that narratives and narrative approaches hold great significance in practical theology is widely accepted by most theologians. This acknowledgement becomes particularly evident within the domains of pastoral care and counselling, where narrative has gained traction, as well as in preaching through employing a storytelling approach (known as narrative preaching) and religious education (Ganzevoort, 2012:218-219). Owing to such developments, research on narratives has become increasingly prominent across these areas in recent years (2012:218-219). Although there is consensus among scholars about the importance of narrative in practical theology, Dreyer (2014:1-2), however, argues that there is no agreement on its exact meaning for both the theory and practice of this discipline. The concept of "narrative", he contends, has become so widely used and ambiguous that establishing a common understanding becomes challenging.

According to Lamarque (2004:394-395, cited in Dreyer, 2014:1-2), defining narrative brings further complications due to a three-way ambiguity involving the product (the story told), the act of narration, and different objects associated with it (such as reading a narrative). Similarly, determining what constitutes a "narrative approach" proves elusive. Moen (2006:2, cited in Dreyer, 2014:1-2) proposes various possibilities where it can be seen as a frame of reference, a reflective tool during the process of inquiry, or a research method employed when presenting study findings. Even within narratology, which focuses on studying narratives themselves (Pier & Landa, 2008, cited in Dreyer, 2014-12), reaching a consensus on their definition can be challenging. While Ganzevoort and Müller approach narrative counselling from different perspectives, they find common ground on many aspects of practical theology and narrative counselling.

### **2.13 Divergent Perspectives and Convergences in Müller and Ganzevoort's Approaches**

Although Ganzevoort highlights the relevance of story in pastoral care, stating that it should be used as a healing tool for the marginalised in the face of the prevailing narratives of the powerful (2011:214-223), he presupposes a uniform world culture because of access to other cultures through technology. This view, however, does not consider that the marginalised poor do not have access to technology. Müller elevates God above Ganzevoort (Klaasen, 2020:5), underlining the influence of the counsellor to effect change rather than the counselee introducing and maintaining change. This brings up the question of power dynamics between counsellor and counselee.

Ganzevoort's narrative approach embraces theological and ideational approaches (Klaasen, 2020), but Müller's social construction of reality serves as the lens through which pastoral care is viewed. Ganzevoort holds the same opinion as Müller, that narrative counselling transfers the emphasis from rule-based hermeneutics to the analysis and understanding of the interpretation process. *Hermeneutics*

is described by Ganzevoort as "the methodology for arriving at a personal understanding of written texts held to be meaningful" (1993:285-286). He observes that three philosophers – Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and Gadamer – have emphasised this trend since the Enlightenment (1993:285-286). They were more concerned with comprehending the unfolding of facts within personal contexts and time reference.

In comparison to Julian Müller's "seven movements" (2004; 2005), namely:

- A specific context described;
- In-context experiences that are listened to and described;
- Interpretations of experiences made, described and developed in collaboration with 'co-researchers';
- The description of experiences as it is continually informed by traditions of interpretation;
- A reflection on the religious and spiritual aspects, especially on God's presence, as it is understood and experienced in a specific situation;
- A description of experience thickened through interdisciplinary investigation;
- And the development of alternative interpretations that point beyond the local community.

As already noted earlier, Ganzevoort (1993) identifies four main story features that are found in the pastoral care scenario: The plot, pattern, character, and tone. The plot is a distinct continuous aesthetic design that connects events. The pattern established by political, social, economic, and cultural forces is referred to as the context. Character is the personal touch reflected through symbols, metaphors, and rituals that influence a person's interactions. Finally, tone characterises the story's overall emotional atmosphere (Ganzevoort, 1993:285-286). These four elements are present in every story, but their relevance varies. According to Ganzevoort (1993), pastoral care and narrative are interpretive in nature rather than purely factual. The emphasis is on the interpretation of experiences, which holds greater significance than the interpretative rules that are embedded within those experiences.

Both in South Africa and globally, the recognition and importance of narrative in practical theology are well established. Dreyer (2014), however, notes that there has been dissent among practical theologians regarding the value and limitations of narrative approaches. Julian Müller's methodological framework had substantially contributed to narrative approaches. His use of metaphoric narrative reveals some key difficulties within theological practice. By reflecting on the literary side in these disputes, Müller's narrative approach preserves its influential nature while keeping crucial ties with religious practice. Integrating multiple perspectives may function as a guide for those traversing between strictly scientific approaches or a disproportionate emphasis on instantaneous action (Dreyer, 2014).

## 2.14 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have aimed to elucidate key concepts by highlighting the distinction between pastoral care, pastoral counselling, narrative, and narrative counselling. Additionally, I have provided an overview of the developments and advancements in pastoral care and counselling, specifically narrative counselling. To achieve this, I conducted an extensive literature review. The objective of the literature review was to identify prominent authors and significant arguments that pertain to this study. The literature review encompassed the writing process of summarising, synthesising, and critiquing the literature that emerged from a comprehensive literature search, serving as a foundational background and contextual framework for the research project. In the broader global context, the literature review focused on Ruard Ganzevoort's approach to narrative, which briefly introduced Julian Müller as one of the leading scholars of narrative counselling in the South African landscape.

There is a rapidly growing corpus of literature on narrative counselling, which indicates that it is becoming progressively prevalent across the world. It is important, however, to critically engage with traditional modes of care for individuals and communities. Traditional counselling approaches tend to focus on problems and fail to address power imbalances between counsellor and client, particularly in global counselling practices (Klaasen, 2018a:3, cited in Klaasen, 2020:2). The use of narratives can influence these power dynamics within the therapeutic process. Conversely, African pastoral counselling takes into account cultural customs but may overlook or suppress alternative perspectives that are based on a singular biblical framework (Acolatse, 2014:173, cited in Klaasen, 2020:2).

Chapter 3 further explores important concepts and will provide an in-depth review on Julian Müller's transversal rationality, postfoundationalist, and social constructionist approach to narrative counselling.

## CHAPTER 3

### Julian Müller's Narrative Approach to Counselling

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a comprehensive review of Julian Müller's approach to narrative counselling in the South African context, focusing in particular on his theory of transversal rationality, his postfoundationalist approach, his Seven Movements of practical theology, and the notion of social constructionism. Central to the postfoundationalist approach to narrative counselling is the role of socially constructed interpretations and meaning. This approach is attuned to the potential pitfalls of both relativity and subjectivity within a multiverse rationality, as well as the rigidity and false claims of universal rationality (Müller, 2011:2-3). As a result, it seeks to transcend both foundationalist and nonfoundationalist claims.

#### 3.2 Clarification of Key Concepts

##### 3.2.1 *Transversal rationality*

The notion of "transversal rationality" is a way of providing a responsible and workable interface between disciplines, as proposed by Schrag and Van Huyssteen (2006a, cited in Müller, 2011:3).

In this multidisciplinary use of the concept of transversality there emerge distinct characteristics or features: the dynamics of consciousness, the interweaving of many voices, the interplay of social practices are all expressed in a metaphor that points to a sense of transition, lying across, extending over, intersecting, meeting, and conveying without becoming identical (Schrag & Van Huyssteen 2006a:19, cited in Müller, 2011:3).

##### 3.2.2 *Postfoundational*

The postfoundational approach to theology emphasises the multidisciplinary element of research. Radical hermeneutics posits that there is no inherent truth at the core of human existence (Schrag 1992:75, cited in Müller, 2011:2-3). This stance arises due to limitations in our intellectual and communication abilities, underscoring the unattainability of absolute or definitive interpretations. Consequently, it advises against seeking a singular ultimate knowledge as the basis for everything (referred to as *Letztebegründung*). Schrag (1992:75, cited in Müller, 2011:2-3) argues that the pursuit of such is misguided. On the other hand, relativism's hasty and superficial argument that every interpretation is as good as any other is similarly incorrect (Schrag, 1992:75, cited in Müller, 2011:2-3).

Given that no finite mind can encompass the multitude of interpretations necessary to make a judgement that all interpretative claims are relative, it becomes apparent that no finite mind can attain an absolute, rigorously univocal, and timeless interpretive truth. Müller's (2011:2-3) postfoundationalist approach is sensitive to both the danger of relativity and subjectivity, and thus seeks to move beyond both foundationalist and nonfoundationalist claims.

### **3.2.3 Social constructionism**

The interconnectedness of our lives within social and cultural structures greatly influences the meaning behind our perception, beliefs, actions, and interpretations. Contextuality and belief systems intertwine with personal encounters to shape their significance profoundly (Van Huyssteen, 2006a:24, cited in Müller 2011:3). Müller (2011:3) delineates socially constructed interpretations and meaning as being an integral part of the postfoundationalist approach to narrative counselling (Müller, 2017:87). It employs a holistic understanding and a social-constructionist process to which the storyteller is invited, whilst engaging in the creation of new meaning and outcomes to mitigate spiritual, emotional, and psychological suffering (Müller, 2011:5).

## **3.3 Julian Müller: Pioneer in Narrative Counselling**

Julian Müller is a Professor of Practical Theology at the University of Pretoria and is recognised as one of the most prominent South African theologians who utilises narrative therapy as a fundamental tool within the field of pastoral care. He served as the editor of the journal, *Practical Theology in South Africa*, and held the position of chairperson for the Society for Practical Theology in South Africa (Dreyer, 2014). As an accomplished researcher himself, Julian Müller conducted valuable studies within this field. Furthermore, he provided guidance and mentorship to numerous master's and doctoral students under his supervision (Büchner & Müller, 2009, cited in Dreyer, 2014). Over the years, Müller has played a vital role in advancing practical theology in South Africa.

Framing himself as a practical theologian, Müller's work revolves around narrative theories in the South African context. In elucidating his viewpoint on the use of narrative in practical theology, Müller (2013) differentiates between *narratology* and the *narrative metaphor*. Central to his approach is the importance of comprehending narratives as a phenomenon and being able to analyse them (2013). Dreyer (2014:2) makes the case that Müller leverages this distinction to establish a clear divide between his artistic interpretation of stories and empirical-analytical methods used in studying narratives (Müller, 2012, cited in Dreyer, 2014:2). This contrast becomes more pronounced when considering various descriptions of Müller's evolving narrative approach over the past decade. However, it also raises concerns about how effective narratives are within practical theological methodology.



In discovering the meaning of the narrative metaphor, Müller became motivated by a need to move away from merely teaching narrative therapy, towards researching and practicing narrative methods. Initially, he advocated an eco-hermeneutical concept (1994; 2011:1) to merge the concepts of hermeneutics and eco-systemic in advancing a theological framework. He was later introduced to the therapeutic movement using narrative as a directing metaphor (2011:1) for practising and understanding therapy. Since 1990, he has dedicated himself to teaching, focusing on pastoral narrative therapy. He aspired to go beyond mere sharing of information about narrative therapy and incorporate its principles into his instructional approach – both in the material taught and the methods implemented (2011:1). This gradual progression led him towards recognising the significance of employing storytelling not only as a part of his instruction but also in his research endeavours.

### ***3.3.1 A time of transition***

Müller contemplates the idea of transition by asking: What defines our current time as a period in flux? He suggests numerous answers to this query. Various words, metaphors, and concepts have been employed to capture and portray this transitional phase we find ourselves in (2011:1-5). Some examples include: “modern to postmodern; secular dualism to post-secular holism; structural to poststructural; positivistic to relativistic; rational-argumentative to narrative; propositionalistic to cultural-linguistic; fundamentalist to postfoundationalist; maintenance to missional” (2011:1-5).

According to Müller (2011:1-5), the selection of terms to best characterise this transition is contingent upon the inclinations of individual scholars. The multitude of diverse concepts underscores the intricacy of this continuous transformation. He argues, however, that it is widely accepted that a turning point is evolving, hence we find ourselves in a time of transition (2011:1-5). Patterns continue shifting over time (Müller, 2011:1), leading people's contemporary interpretations of the world, and speech, to differ substantially from previous generations. Müller's affiliation with Wentzel van Huyssteen (2006, cited in Müller, 2011) influenced his postfoundationalist understanding of theology, which he developed into a practical theological epistemology and methodology (2006; 2009).

### **3.4 Müller's Postfoundational Approach to Narrative Counselling**

The postfoundational approach to theology emphasises the significance of conducting multidisciplinary studies, alongside other essential factors. In this context, transversal rationality assumes a critical role (2011:1). Since 2009, Müller has been committed to developing an effective methodology for employing transversal rationality as a practical tool in interdisciplinary endeavours (2011:1). Van Huyssteen posits that “embodied persons, and not abstract beliefs, should be seen as the locus of rationality. We, as rational agents, are thus always socially and contextually embedded” (2006a, cited in Müller, 2011:3). He further refers to the postfoundationalist notion as “a form of compelling

knowledge”, which is a way of seeking a balance between “the way our beliefs are anchored in interpreted experience, and the broader networks of beliefs in which our rationally compelling experiences are already embedded” (Van Huyssteen, 2006a:22, cited in Müller, 2011:3).

The notion of transversality, as asserted by Müller (2013:3), presents an opportunity to enhance efficient communication across diverse fields. In contrast to the belief in a single, universal language and standardised logic assumed to be universally applicable, transversality recognises that this perspective can hinder interdisciplinary dialogues (2013:3). This challenge arises from its underlying theoretical principle, which presents difficulties when striving for adaptation within varying contexts. Conversely, transversality promotes a receptive mindset that appreciates diverse viewpoints rather than pursuing an absolute truth. Müller (2013:3) contends that Foucault's exploration of the intersection between knowledge and power provides an intriguing illustration when challenging entrenched ideas perpetuated by conventional educational institutions known as "universities", which heavily rely on rigid principles. Our goal is to challenge conventional beliefs and engage in ongoing self-assessment through a variety of diverse systems that follow different principles and democratic structures (Müller, 2013:3-4). Müller advocates for the adoption of the concept of "multiversity," thus working towards diminishing power imbalances by making knowledge universally accessible in society.

According to Müller (2013:4), radical hermeneutics' assertion that people lack a fundamental truth at the core of existence, while relativism suggests that every interpretation is as valid as any other, is misguided. Transversal rationality, as defined by authors such as Schrag and Van Huyssteen (2006a, cited in Müller, 2013:4), aims to envision a responsible and viable intersection point between disciplines. It highlights the interplay of consciousness, intertwined voices, and communal endeavours in a metaphor that suggests a perception of change (Van Huyssteen, 2006a, cited in Müller, 2013:4). Van Huyssteen (2007:421, cited in Müller, 2013) argues that transversal reasoning is about finding an epistemic space for interdisciplinary examination, thorough introspection, and comprehensive understanding, rather than merely opening or closing oneself off to different viewpoints. The interdisciplinary conversation, according to Van Huyssteen (2007:421, cited in Müller, 2013), has inherent limitations because it refers back to the contextual, interdisciplinary boundaries of our own disciplines.

### **3.5 A Transversal Perspective to Postfoundational Practical Theology**

Van Huyssteen (2007:422, cited in Müller, 2013:5) emphasises the significance of cross-disciplinary reasoning and calls for interdisciplinary dialogue between theology and science. He argues that different theological systems will have varying levels of success when engaging in transdisciplinary discussions. Müller (2013:5) posits that a fresh perspective to ethnography emphasises narrative and postfoundational approaches within practical theology. This method focuses on individuals' specific

experiences across various aspects of their lives. Within this framework, both intellectual and emotional adaptation are necessary, making it easier to navigate within a postmodern and postfoundational practical theology context (2013:5). Postfoundational ideas have contributed towards the development of a new understanding of practical theology (Müller, 2009), which prioritises personal stories from real-life situations over broader settings (Müller, 2011:1-5).

Müller became interested in transversal rationality as a way of engaging with the interdisciplinary process. He opted for a postfoundational theology to propose a theological framework that aligns with the narrative approach. This approach elucidates the shift in contemporary society and the church, aiding in the comprehension and delineation of a holistic pastoral ministry by using the language of transversal rationality (Müller, 2009:199-228). Contextuality is a fundamental concept of postfoundationalist language. Müller takes a very specific and distinct context as a departing point for theoretical consideration, avoiding a systematic, theoretical approach. To illustrate this transition, he reflects on how his personal use of language has changed throughout various stages of his academic journey. It elevated his understanding of how he experienced transformations within its application (Müller, 2011:1).

Müller's postfoundationalist approach to practical theology focuses on interdisciplinary research, utilising transversal rationality as a practical way of doing interdisciplinary work that provides a concrete framework for narrative counselling. This postfoundationalist approach is attentive to the dangers of relativity and subjectivity in multiverse rationality, and the rigidity and misleading claims of the universal reason (Van Huyssteen, 2006a:19-22, cited in Müller, 2013:3). Therefore, it consists of an effort to move beyond both foundationalist and nonfoundationalist claims. Transversal rationality, as proposed by Schrag and Van Huyssteen (2006a:19, cited in Müller, 2013:3), provides a practical and trustworthy interface between disciplines, firmly grounded in philosophy and methodology. This transitional, social-constructionist approach incorporates the individual into the construction of a meaningful reality that resonates with them (Müller, 2011). It engenders both the most profound and the most delicate moments, representing a moment of genuine pastoral concern (Müller, 2005).

Müller's postfoundationalist perspective emphasises the need to actively engage with particular narratives and individual circumstances rather than focusing exclusively on a broad picture. While it is related to hermeneutics in some ways, this approach goes beyond interpretation by including self-reflection and contextual understanding into its definition of knowledge and procedures. According to Van Huyssteen (2006a:10, cited in Müller, 2011), rationality should be given to physically present persons rather than abstract beliefs. This perspective recognises that our capacity to reason is always influenced by the social dynamics and situational circumstances in which we exist as thinking beings (Müller, 2011). Van Huyssteen (2006a:10, cited in Müller, 2013:5) argues for the pursuit of an

equilibrium between our entrenched beliefs to our personal understandings, and how we integrate that into a wider belief system, supported by experiences that are rationally entrenched. Müller agrees with Van Huyssteen and contends that this postfoundational understanding is a repositioning from an “emphasis from individual to social, from subjective towards discourse” (2011:3-5).

### **3.6 Social Constructionism and Narrative**

Müller (2011:3) argues that the interconnection of our lives within social and cultural structures has a profound influence on how we perceive, believe, act, and interpret things. Our experiences are shaped by the context in which they occur as well as our belief systems. According to Van Huyssteen (2006a:24, cited in Müller, 2005:80), this interconnectedness is key to understanding the meaning behind these aspects of life. When arguing for a postfoundationalist rationality, Van Huyssteen (Gifford-book 14) does not employ the vocabulary of social constructionism, but he unquestionably follows an analogous way of thinking. He is referring to Schrag, who has moved:

...aggressively... beyond the restrictions of Sartre’s subject centered consciousness to transversality as an achievement of communicative praxis. Talk about the human subject is now revisioned by resituating the human subject in the space of communicative praxis. Thus the notion of transversal rationality opens up the possibility to focus on patterns of discourse and action as they happen in our communicative practices, rather than focussing only on the structure of the self, ego, or subject (Schrag, 1992:153, cited in Müller, 2005:80).

The postfoundationalist movement includes a shift in focus from individual to social, from subjective to discursive, which creates a new paradigm in the social sciences. The concept of socially constructed interpretations and meaning is unmistakably associated with the postfoundationalist perspective. Van Huyssteen (2006a:24, cited in Müller, 2005:80) posits that

... we relate to our world epistemically only through the mediation of interpreted experience, and in this sense it may be said that our diverse theologies, as well as the sciences, offer alternative interpretations of our experience... Alternative, but not in the sense of competing or conflicting readings, but of complimentary interpretations of our experience's many dimensions.

The concept of "received interpretations", which primarily focuses on culture, tradition, and cultural discourses, as argued by Müller (2005:80), all contribute to interpretations. Consequently, while we may occasionally have the false impression of possessing a unique grasp of reality, it is always received. Therefore, instead of being individually and subjectively formed, it is co- or socially constructed (2005:80). The cultural and societal norms encountered in our personal experiences profoundly influence our behaviour, perception of the world, and understanding of things.

Meyer (2014:6) concurs with Müller and posits that the principles of social constructionism necessitate paying attention to the many cultural and social practices that influence the construction of interpretations of narratives. Social constructionism, Meyer (2014:6) contends, assumes that certain community traditions or speech shape how people perceive and act. Consequently, postfoundationalism pushes us to recognise how traditions shape knowledge (2014:6).

Müller (2011:3) emphasises the significant role of socially constructed interpretations and meaning in narrative counselling from a postfoundationalist perspective. This approach centres on embracing holistic understandings and employing social-constructionist processes during storytelling sessions (Müller, 2017:87). Through active participation in creating new meanings and outcomes, individuals can alleviate spiritual, emotional, and psychological suffering (Müller, 2011:5)

According to Van Huyssteen (1997, cited in Müller, 2013:5), a postfoundational rationality necessitates that we look beyond disciplinary boundaries, local communities, or civilisations if we want to advance knowledge (Müller, 2013:5). By liberating ourselves from intellectual limitations imposed by our environments or traditions, we can effectively examine theories, reinterpretations, and convictions (Huyssteen, 1997, as cited in Müller, 2013:5). Müller (2011:1-5, cited in Müller, 2013:5) emphasises that Christian theology should affirm its relevance in a postmodern landscape by acknowledging and embracing its uniqueness. It should adapt to transdisciplinary norms of reasoning influenced by societal changes and contextual influences. Practical theology is a versatile and expansive field, its methods varying based on the context and subject of study. It encompasses both qualitative and quantitative approaches, as well as narrative and artistic methods (2013:5).

Müller distinguishes between the utilisation of narratives in practical theology and narratology. Narratives are seen as a subject to be comprehended and analysed within practical theology, while narratology takes a more structuralist and analytical approach (Müller, 2013:5). The goal should therefore encompass not only breaking down barriers within practical theology but also across human sciences, social sciences, and even natural sciences. By doing so, we will gain greater insight into humanity's circumstances, dynamics within society itself, and religious communities (2013:5). Additionally, this inclusive approach will assist us in addressing specific needs from multiple perspectives among marginalised communities. It will develop and foster greater awareness of the unique insights that practical theology can provide to assist these communities in moving forward.

Since 2006, Müller has published several articles (2009; 2011; 2017; 2020) exploring the significance and application of the postfoundational approach in practical theology. His work led to the development of a framework called “The Seven Movements” (2004; 2005), which can be used to do research in practical theology (2011:1).

### **3.7 Müller's Seven Movements of Postfoundational Practical Theology**

Müller's draws on the African landscape, prioritising the local over the global and specificity over oversimplifications. He notes that the central role of people and their stories necessitates a collaborative process of meaning construction with "co-researchers" (Müller, 2017:86). His seven movements promote the recounting and retelling of stories, particularly those of vulnerable and marginalised people. Müller's approach to practical theology takes cognisance of the perspectives of "co-researchers", conducting research *with* people rather than *on* them (2017:86). The strength of this approach is that the researcher's focus lies in the researcher's tangible, context-specific, and localised focus. However, it also transcends the local by actively participating in cross-disciplinary dialogues, leading to analyses that extend beyond the local context.

Müller has developed the essential elements of a postfoundational approach to practical theology into seven movements that ultimately lead to the realisation of the fundamental requirements of postfoundationalist practical theology (Müller, 2005:78, cited in Loubser & Müller, 2011). In order for practical theology to meaningfully reflect God's presence, these minimum requirements must be: locally contextual; socially constructed; directed by tradition; exploring interdisciplinary meaning; and point beyond the local (Müller & Loubser, 2011:4) Every movement comes with a distinct set of methodological standards. Distinct ways for gathering, describing, and/or interpreting data accompany these movements. Each phase is represented by an appropriate metaphor, which metaphorically describes the nature of each movement as it relates to the research process and the development of 'thick' descriptions (Müller, 2005:82, cited in Müller & Loubser, 2011:4).

A postfoundational concept of practical theology allows those conducting research to be integrated into a particular setting to achieve authentic comprehension, but it further enables us to expand beyond the context itself to understand how wider macro discourses influence our current narrative (cf. Demasure & Müller, 2006:417, cited in Müller & Loubser, 2011:4). According to Browning (1991:34, cited in Müller & Loubser, 2011:4), a true practical theological approach will involve a defined and purposeful movement from context to theory and back to context. Müller (2005:787) refers to this methodological approach as "... the circle of practical wisdom", and has created many baseline conditions for conducting research in the discipline of postfoundational practical theology.

### **3.8 The Step-By-Step Development of a Postfoundationalist Practical Theology**

Müller has "translated" Van Huyssteen's (1997:4, cited in Müller, 2005:81) synopsis and explanation of postfoundationalist theology into practical theological concepts. In developing a practical theological research method, he expounds on these theories in seven movements. Table 1 below provides an

example of doing practical theology to explain how the research method is applied in a real research project on HIV and AIDS<sup>2</sup> (Müller, 2005:81). The research is structured into seven movements that depict the underlying assumptions and framework of postfoundationalist practical theology, which serves as the basis for this study. Each section in this project has established methodological guidelines specific to its respective movement.

**Table 1. Example of doing practical theology**

<b>POSTFOUNDATIONALIST THEOLOGY</b>	<b>POSTFOUNDATIONALIST PRACTICAL THEOLOGY</b>
<p><i>...a postfoundationalist theology</i> wants to make <b>two moves</b>. First, it epistemically crucial role of <b>interpreted experience</b>, and the way that <b>tradition</b> shapes the epistemic and nonepistemic <b>values</b> that inform our reflection about God and what some of us believe to be <b>God's presence</b> in this world. At the same time, however, a postfoundationalist notion of rationality in theological reflection claims to <b>point creatively beyond the confines of the local community</b>, group, or <b>interdisciplinary conversation</b>.</p> <p>(Van Huyssteen 1997:4, cited in Müller, 2005:81)</p> <p><b>(Some phrases written in bold by JM)</b></p>	<p><b>The context &amp; interpreted experience</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A specific context is described.</li> <li>2. In-context experiences are listened to and described.</li> <li>3. Interpretations of experiences are made, described and developed in collaboration with "co-researchers"</li> </ol> <p><b>Traditions of Interpretation</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. A description of experiences as it is continually informed by Traditions of Interpretation.</li> </ol> <p><b>God's presence</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. A reflection on, as it is understood and experienced in a specific situation, God's presence.</li> </ol> <p><b>Thickened through interdisciplinary investigation</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. A description of experience, thickened through interdisciplinary Investigation</li> </ol> <p><b>Point beyond the local community</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. The development of alternative</li> </ol>

<sup>2</sup> HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) and AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome).

	interpretations, that point beyond the local community.
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(Müller, 2005:81)

The seven movements indicated in the right column of the Table, as applied to the research study, are interpreted in the following manner:

### 1. A specific context is described

*“The context/ action field/habitus of this research is in the first instance the orphaned and vulnerable children living within the HIV and AIDS environment of South Africa. Secondly the level of involvement and the discourses which determine the faith-based organisations’ involvement in these children’s lives”* (Müller, 2005:83).

#### Methods used:

- Conducting interviews with individuals providing care to HIV and AIDS infected/affected children.
- Employing a social-constructionist approach to interpret these interviews.
- Researching and applying existing techniques for listening to the narratives of children (Müller, 2005:83).

### 2. Listening to and describing in-context experiences

*“The team of researchers does empirical research, based on the narrative approach. They listen to the stories of children, grandparents, and caregivers in order to gain understanding of the in-context experiences”* (Müller, 2005:83).

#### Methods used:

- Identifying two institutes as case studies and using volunteers to gain an understanding of and be sensitive to the language and environment of children.
- Empowering and training expert helpers to establish meaningful relationships with the affected children.
- Overseeing these experts to conduct specific tasks, including narratives, drawings, etc., in order to listen to the children’s stories (Müller, 2005:83).



### **3. Interpreting, describing, and developing experiences made in collaboration with “co-researchers”**

*“According to this research approach, the researchers are not only interested in descriptions of experiences, but also and foremost in their (co-researchers) own interpretations. The researcher in this phase does not, in the first instance, look for data, but for meaning/interpretation given by the co-researchers” (Müller, 2005:83).*

#### **Methods used:**

- Interpretation conducted in continuous cycles of feedback and in partnership with "co-researchers".
- Utilisation of multi-angular theoretical sampling where necessary, drawing from various sources, means, places in time, and persons to expand the scope and match the richness of the information (Müller, 2005:84).

### **4. A description of experiences as it is continually informed by traditions of interpretation**

*“There are specific discourses/traditions in certain communities and in faith-based organisations, which inform perceptions and behaviour. The researchers will have to identify these discourses and try and gain some understanding on how current behaviour is influenced by these discourses by listening to the co-researchers, but also by listening to the literature, the art, and the culture of a certain context. The informative theological traditions should also be listened to” (Müller, 2005:84).*

#### **Methods used:**

- Dialogue interpretation.
- Reviewing research narratives that exist in the arts, literature, and other forms of culture (Müller, 2005:84).

### **5. A reflection on the religious and spiritual aspects, especially on God’s presence, as it is understood and experienced in a specific situation**

*“This is not a forced effort by the researchers to bring God into the present situation. It is rather an honest undertaking in order to really hear and understand the co-researchers’ religious and spiritual understanding and experiences of God’s presence. Again this should be integrated into the social-constructionist process. The researchers’*

*own understanding of God's presence in a certain situation is also a valuable contribution they have to make" (Müller, 2005:85).*

**Methods used:**

- Listening for clues regarding God's experiences in children's narratives.
- Interacting with implicit and explicit clues using ways appropriate to the children's world and language (Müller, 2005:85).

**6. A description of experience, thickened through interdisciplinary investigation**

*"Interdisciplinary work is complicated and difficult. Language, reasoning strategies, contexts, and ways of accounting for human experience differ greatly between the various disciplines (Midali 2000:262). Therefore no one-size-fits-all methodology can be applied. But this interdisciplinary movement is part and parcel of Practical Theology. It includes the conversation with other theological disciplines and with other relevant disciplines. The researcher has to listen carefully to the various stories of understanding and make an honest effort to integrate them all into one" (Müller, 2005:85).*

**Methods used:**

- Literature review.
- Interviews with peers from other fields.
- Focus groups; engagement (Müller, 2005:85).

**7. The development of alternative interpretations, that point beyond the local community**

*"Practical theological research is not only about description and interpretation of experiences. 'Alternative interpretations' mean that this way of doing (practising) theology is also about deconstruction and emancipation. The bold move should be taken to allow all the different stories of the research, to develop into a new story of understanding that points beyond the local community. This should not be confused with generalisation. It is rather a case of doing contextual research with such integrity that it will have possibilities for broader application. According to the narrative approach, this will not happen on the basis of structured and rigid methods, through which stories are analysed and interpreted. It rather happens on the basis of a holistic understanding and as a social-constructionist process in which all the co-researchers are invited and engaged in the creation of new meaning" (Müller, 2005:86).*

**Methods used:**

These methods are for information distribution and can be done in a variety of ways, such as:

- Groups/workshops/seminars with stakeholders.
- On multiple levels.
- Coordinated distribution to various faith groupings.

Müller's seven movements, as applied in the above research study, illustrate how practical theology is rooted in the local and contextual environment while also being closely tied to individuals within that setting. Instead of being constrained by a rigid framework of theories applied to specific situations, it resembles an unfolding narrative born from unique experiences and circumstances (Müller, 2005:86). This approach embodies postfoundationalist theology, wherein understanding emerges as researchers engage with a specific context. Its identity thrives on striking a balance and embracing the discourse between traditions and current circumstances (Müller, 2005:86). This practical theological narrative serves as both a model and a systematic story. Meyer (2014:2) concurs with Müller's seven movements and suggests that the utilisation of the narrative approach and the seven movements of practical theology facilitate the development of narratives. These narratives advance gradually from movement one to movement seven within the framework provided by practical theology (2014:2). Initially, a problem-saturated story is introduced, which subsequently transforms into an alternative narrative, liberating the co-researcher from the constraints of a narrowly defined (thin) future storyline (2014:2). This movement leads to the emergence of an alternative narrative that extends its reach beyond local communities, significantly broadening its scope.

Meyer (2014:10) argues that the above approach to practical theology, derived from a postfoundational standpoint and impacted by the seven movements, has culminated in the formation of alternative interpretations (2014:10). It highlights the departure from overarching narratives in favour of the construction of a narrative that serves as a resource for meaning-making (Müller, 2005:85–86, cited in Meyer, 2014:10). Consequently, this constructed narrative can be employed across diverse lived experiences, transcending local communities while encompassing various comprehensive frameworks. According to Müller (2005:86), it presents an interconnected narrative that allows the practical theologian to engage in the processes of "story-telling" and "story-development" while upholding moral values. Consequently, it embodies practical theology through its empathetic nature, descriptive qualities, and its boldness in dismantling harmful narratives while cultivating empowering new ones (Müller, 2005:86).

### 3.9 Conclusion

This chapter unpacked Julian Müller's narrative approach to counselling in the South African context. This review focused on his theory of transversal rationality, postfoundationalist perspective, his seven

movements in practical theology, and his social constructionism concept. Müller's postfoundationalist approach emphasises the significance of socially constructed interpretations and meaning within narrative counselling. It acknowledges both the risks associated with relativity and subjectivity in a diverse rationality framework, as well as the limitations posed by rigid universal rationality along with its invalid assertions. In the next chapter, I attempt to offer a critique on Julian Müller's work by investigating the strengths and weaknesses of his approach to narrative. I also analyse the effectiveness of the narrative approach in the context of impoverished communities in the South African landscape.



## Chapter 4

# A Critique of Julian Müller's Narrative Approach in the Context of Impoverished Communities

### 4.1 Introduction

Julian Müller's narrative approach has made a substantial impact on the field of counselling, emphasising the profound influence of personal stories on individuals' identity and life experiences. Narrative counselling has gained broad acceptance both globally and in South Africa. Julian Müller's use of narratives significantly influences the theoretical framework and highlights various challenges within practical theology. This chapter attempts to examine various aspects of Müller's approach to narrative and offers a critique of its strengths and weaknesses.

### 4.2 A Critique of Julian Müller's Narrative Approach: Potential Strengths and Weaknesses

Müller's postfoundational approach to practical theology focuses on interdisciplinary research, utilising transversal rationality as a practical way of doing interdisciplinary work that provides a concrete framework for narrative counselling. This postfoundationalist approach is attentive to the dangers of relativity and subjectivity in multiverse rationality, and the rigidity and misleading claims of the universal reason. Transversal rationality, as proposed by Schrag and Van Huyssteen (2006a:19, cited in Müller, 2011:3), provides a practical, trustworthy interface between disciplines, embedded in philosophy and methodology. This transitional, social-constructionist approach embraces the person as part of the advancement of a desired reality that makes sense to him or her (Müller, 2011:3). It simultaneously creates the most profound and the most precarious instant, a moment of genuine pastoral concern. Müller's narrative counselling approach stands out for its emphasis on treating individuals as "co-researchers," engaging in research with them rather than conducting research on them. The researcher's focus is not only palpable, contextualised, and parochial but also transcends the local through cross-disciplinary discussions, yielding findings that point beyond the local (Müller, 2005; Müller & Loubser, 2011).

By adopting a metaphorical narrative approach which represents the creative side in epistemological discussions, Müller helps maintain the transformative essence and significant connection between practical theology and religious practice (Dreyer, 2014:2). For Dreyer, integrating multiple approaches can aid theologians in avoiding both exclusively scientific perspectives that undermine the purpose of practical theology, as well as overemphasising immediate praxis without proper reflection (2014:2). In explaining his perspective on the use of narrative in practical theology, Müller (2013) differentiates between 'narratology' and the 'narrative metaphor'. This distinction facilitates an understanding of his

narrative approach. To Müller, narratology “is based on the knowledge of narratives as a phenomenon and the ability to analyse and interpret the narratives. It therefore also works with stories, but is structuralistic and analytical in the analysis thereof” (2013:4).

Müller’s distinction between narratology and narrative as metaphor clearly delineates his 'arts-based' narrative approach (2012, cited in Dreyer, 2014:2) with the conventional empirical-analytical approaches to studying narratives. The contrast becomes particularly noticeable when juxtaposed with the various descriptions of Müller's evolving narrative approach in recent years (Dreyer, 2014:2). Yet, it also brings forth significant questions about the significance and scope of narrative within the methodology of practical theology. Dreyer (2014:4) posits that the discipline of 'narrative ' at present is diverse, fragmented, and in some cases very specialised. The scope of this study does not allow for a study or summary of the many narrative approaches; however, I will attempt to address some of the issues regarding the importance and extent of narrative under potential strengths and weaknesses of Müller’s approach to narrative.

### **4.3 Narratology: A Brief Summary of the Narratological Approach to Examining Narratives**

Prince (2019:1) posits that *narrative narratology* is the study of the effects of sex, gender, and sexuality on narrative construction. *Feminist narratology* investigates how sex, gender, and sexuality influence narrative. *Cognitive narratology* focuses on thought processes in narrative production and processing. *Natural narratology* emphasises experiential aspects, while *unnatural narratology* examines nonmimetic or anti-mimetic narratives (2019:1). The scope extends to the interplay between location and story, as well as the distinctions between imaginative and nonfictional narrative representations. Narratologists strive to create an explicit, complete, and scientifically supported model of their unique human object (2019:1).

Narratology investigates the similarities that all conceivable narratives have along with what distinguishes them as narratives (Prince, 2019:1). It aims to define the narratively relevant collection of customs and standards controlling narrative generation and processing. The eighth issue of *Communications* (cited in Prince, 2019:1), dedicated to the structural analysis of narrative and featuring contributions from French or francophone pioneers of narratology, marked the inception of this structuralist-inspired endeavour, evolving into discipline by 1966.

Prince (2019:1) posits that in the classical period of narratology, the primary goal was to elucidate every aspect of a story – both its content ("what" is portrayed) and the way it unfolds ("how"), including any pertinent regulations (2019:1). While historical narratology aspired to exist independently within

poetics rather than merely serving as a foundation for critical analysis or interpretive assistance, the identified narrative elements proved beneficial for independently scrutinising individual texts. This approach resulted in the generation of an extensive corpus of narratological criticism (2019:1).

According to Prince (2019:1), the narrative turn has been influenced by other disciplines and narratological criticism, prompting an exploration of narrative frameworks and concepts. The reliance on narratives in various activities, practices, and domains, despite its impact, biases, inadequacies, and challenges, evolved into postclassical narratology. This evolution eventually transformed the discipline into a more expansive field of knowledge (2019:1). In contrast to narratology and its hermeneutical approach, the social constructionism paradigm is closely linked to the practice of adapting a narrative style for organising personal encounters and beliefs.

According to Dreyer (2014:4), while narrative has found applications in diverse ways across the social sciences and humanities, its complete embrace and integration into these disciplines are not universal. Hyvärinen's (2006, cited in Dreyer, 2014:4) distinction between two predominantly independent factions of narrative theory – a *metaphorical family* often found in 'narrative-turn' literature, and a *narratological family* that employs a more theoretical analysis of storytelling – proves to be especially valuable. Hyvärinen (2006, cited in Dreyer, 2014:4) remarks that the epistemological dilemma in the two disciplines – the social sciences and humanities – played a crucial role in the emergence of the metaphorical family. The acute epistemological crises in these fields, he writes, “were an obvious reason for interest in these new metaphors: narratives and stories seemed to provide scholars with more complex and less objectivistic forms of knowing than the previous laws, experiments, and abstract theories” (Hyvärinen, 2006:22, cited in Dreyer, 2014:5).

Dreyer (2014:4) points out that the distinction between metaphorical and narratological storytelling techniques does not necessarily align with a division between quantitative or qualitative research methods. Those who value measurable data might lean towards the narratological side, while advocates of metaphorical perspectives see traditional academic inquiries with narrative tendencies as forming their own distinct classification system (2014:4). Narratology and metaphorical approaches are clearly grounded in various research paradigms, each with its own set of distinct epistemological, methodological, and ontological presumptions. Thus, these approaches diverge significantly from one another. Even though Hyvärinen (2006:37, cited in Dreyer, 2014:5) has acknowledged some similarities in their investigative domains, scholars aligned with the narratological school typically overlook differences in narrative-turn literature, and vice versa.

Ganzevoort's (2011:7) view asserts that qualitative empirical research, particularly when utilising narrative methodologies, garners support from many practical theologians. However, some experts

evaluate and deconstruct narrative studies, taking into account subjectivity and audience context while emphasising marginalised voices. Despite these differences, narratological research grapples with two crucial issues (2011:8). The first is the epistemological query of whether narratives act as open windows into past reality or merely exist as interpretations tailored to specific contexts. The second involves an ethical dimension concerning selection processes, where certain stories are highlighted over others, with an awareness of the subjective nature of research based on personal accounts (2011:7). The decision related to selecting volunteers presents a consequential ethical choice which yields consequences concerning resultant outcomes.

In the 'narratological' study tradition, narrative data analysis has been receiving a lot of interest. Tohar et al. (2007, cited in Dreyer, 2014:6) recommend using five codes – *hermeneutic*, *semic*, *symbolic*, *proairetic*, and *cultural* – from Roland Barthes' theory. Riessman (2008, cited in Dreyer, 2014:6) explores four promising narrative data analysis methodologies: thematic analysis, structural analysis, dialogic performance analysis, and visual analysis. Such evaluation methods, Dreyer (2014:6) posits, can be used for many types of texts, inquiries, keeping action sequences in mind, and making conceptual conclusions. Ganzevoort (2012:218-219) agrees with Dreyer and asserts that narratives and narrative approaches hold great significance in practical theology, a viewpoint widely accepted among most theologians. This acknowledgement, according to Ganzevoort (2012:218-219), becomes particularly evident within the domains of pastoral care and counselling, where narrative has gained traction, as well as in preaching through employing a storytelling approach (known as narrative preaching) and religious education (2012:218-219).

Owing to these advancements, research on narratives has gained prominence across these areas in recent years (Ganzevoort, 2012:218–219). Despite Ganzevoort and Müller approaching narrative counselling from different perspectives, they find common ground on many aspects of practical theology and narrative counselling. Although narrative and stories play a part in the metaphorical approach, narrative denotes the researcher's epistemological viewpoint rather than the use of stories as study material to be analysed and understood. This research is sensitive to power concerns, particularly the power of so-called academic knowledge and discourses (Foucault's knowledge and power) (cited in Dreyer, 2014:5), and it rejects any 'grand narratives' (Lyotard) (cited in Dreyer, 2014:5). As a result, the metaphorical family is often associated with postmodernism and deconstruction.

#### **4.4 Metaphor of Narrative**

Loubser and Müller (2011:5) posit that the narrative concept was already present in Jean-Francois Lyotard's (1984:29f, cited in Loubser & Müller, 2011:5) contemporary philosophy, in which he offered narrative and theoretical understanding as two separate categories of discussions. According to Lyotard (1984:18, cited in Loubser & Müller, 2011:5), while both discourses have valid functions, only narrative



provides insights that cannot be obtained through any other means. Consequently, narrative can legitimise scientific knowledge without depending on previous universal and absolute overarching narratives (Lyotard, 1984:18, cited in Loubser & Müller, 2011:5). The idea of a story in the formulation of an alternative knowledge theory was advocated as early as the advent of postmodernism. It serves as a foundation where a plurality of knowledge can interact to generate understanding. Paul Ricoeur (Loubser & Müller, 2011:5) recognises the utility of the narrative model or metaphor, acknowledging narratives as a means for both the development and modification of identity (Demasure & Müller, 2006:412, cited in Loubser & Müller, 2011:5). He validates the narrative's transforming quality by describing how events and facts are chosen and connected.

The selection and connection of events in storytelling is not a singular method. On the contrary, it offers various possibilities to narrators through chance. This suggests that narrative material need not be limited or constrained. The model for storytelling opens numerous avenues for imaginative composition of narratives (Demasure & Müller, 2006:412, cited in Loubser & Müller, 2011:5). People, shaped by diverse customs, craft stories about themselves and their experiences, attributing meaning to these encounters within specific contexts. Narratives carry a creative inclination that mirrors the dominant discourses in one's social circle or community (Loubser & Müller, 2011:5). The act of storytelling reveals different degrees of impact. Demasure and Müller (2006:412, cited in Loubser & Müller, 2011:5; Ganzevoort, 1993) suggest that stories offer more than just concepts; they portray an individual's life story, which becomes evident upon inquiry. Therefore, every person possesses a distinct narrative identity that acts as a source for interpreting past and future events.

Demasure and Müller (2006:413, cited in Loubser & Müller, 2011:5) note that the distinctive experiences of both the storyteller and the listener can influence how a narrative is expressed and interpreted. They use Gadamer's (1982) "horizon" concept to highlight the importance of the context of both the creator of a narrative and the storyteller in shaping their story. According to Gerkin (1991:20, cited in Loubser & Müller 2011:5), Gadamer initially utilised the idea of horizon fusion to clarify how different people comprehend text or other discourses such as the narrative. The term "horizon" suggests that "... every humanly constructed text or artifact... emerges from, and is an expression of, a horizon of understanding or meaning" (Gerkin, 1991:20, cited in Loubser & Müller, 2011:5). The interaction between the narrator and the interpreter is thus guided by a distinct and specific horizon of meaning that influences their understanding of the story. This emphasises another crucial direction of a story that allows for numerous interpretations and understandings, inspiring individuals to devise a personal narrative of meaning (Demasure & Müller, 2006:413, cited in Loubser & Müller, 2011:5).

People are thus not constrained by the notion that one interpretation alone is accurate and permissible, and that the way they act and think must be ordered by this widely recognised idea of significance and

meaning. Instead, they can opt for a perspective that will serve as an inspiration of change and transformation expanding opportunities for reaching maximum achievement. The notion that their story is not set in stone liberates Individuals. Rather than the modernist clash of horizons, a fusion of horizons now exists (Demasure & Müller, 2006:413, cited in Loubser & Müller, 2011:5).

Narrative counselling, notes Müller (2011:15), aims to help a client dismantle a self-defeating narrative by employing deconstructive listening and deconstructive questioning techniques. The counsellor supports the individual in externalising the difficulty and pursuing alternative outcomes, thereby enabling fresh interpretations of a narrative (Loubser & Müller, 2011:5). Narrative therapists argue that, to serve as a metaphor for living one's life, these innovative interpretations should take precedence over other narratives. The successful establishment and maintenance of an alternative dominant narrative, along with the resulting alternative interpretations, lead to a reshaping of a person's attitudes, perspective, and eventual actions (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008:367, cited in Loubser & Müller, 2011:5).

As depicted in Table 1 in Chapter 3, the researcher collaborated with the co-researchers in crafting a preferred alternative narrative. This alternative narrative now serves as a guiding metaphor for aspiring towards a better future and leading a preferred and fulfilling existence, using the metaphor of the Tree of Life and the David narrative metaphor. The illustration explains how these metaphors were used during the seven movements of postfoundational practical theology (Loubser & Müller, 2011:1). It demonstrates how these metaphors assisted the co-researchers in externalising facets that comprised their problem-saturated narratives, identifying unique outcomes amidst these stories. Alternative narratives are created that serve as a vehicle for transformation and instil hope in the face of apparent despair (Loubser & Müller, 2011:5).

In employing the narrative model for data collection and interpretation, the researcher specifically used the metaphor of the Tree of Life and the David narrative as an analogy to guide the co-researchers in reflecting on their current narratives crafting a meaningful and purposeful alternative narrative. This approach was driven by the statement of Freedman and Combs (1996:1), highlighting the potential influence of the metaphors we choose to organise our lives and work on the construction of our perceptions and subsequent behaviour.

Müller's metaphor of narrative positions individuals as authors of their own life stories. He underscores how they use storytelling to interpret and construct their experiences. This approach allows individuals to revise and reshape their narratives, leading to a more empowering outlook on life events and fostering a transformative perspective of their experiences. It highlights the agency individuals have in shaping the narrative of their lives. Müller (2005:78) has broadened the postfoundational notion of practical

theology into seven distinct actions. When implemented with appropriate measures, these actions contribute to meeting the minimum requirements for achieving outcomes in postfoundationalist practical theology.

#### **4.5 The Advantages of Müller's Seven Movements**

Müller (2005:82) defined specific methodological criteria for each action undertaken during the inquiry, and accompanying procedures were designated to collect, describe, and/or interpret data at each stage. By employing David and Goliath as a foundational metaphor, additional metaphors accompany and illustrate the unique nature of each movement as it pertains to the study's procedures and the development of 'thick' descriptions (2005:82). The reporting of the research process has been divided into the five requirements of a postfoundational notion of practical theology. These are described below:

The first criterion for postfoundationalist practical theology is to be locally contextual, which includes the setting and interpreted experiences inside that setting. Three movements were created to guide the study of this requirement: 1). A specific context is described. 2). In-context experiences are listened to and described, and 3). Interpretations of experiences are made, described, and developed in collaboration with co-researchers (Müller, 2005:82).

The second criterion is that it can be socially constructed, referring to interpretational traditions. Movements four and five elaborate and direct this necessity: 4) The interpretation of personal experiences, often influenced by interpretative traditions (Müller, 2005:83-86).

The third criterion is to be guided by tradition, correlating with God's presence, and explored in the fifth movement. Stage five involves assessing the acknowledgment of God through adherence to established customs and encourages discussions on religious topics when contemplating one's spiritual beliefs. It also encompasses their perception of the presence and experience of God in specific circumstances (Müller, 2005:83-86).

Practical theological research, Müller (2005:83-86) posits, should explore interdisciplinary implications concerning divine presence during step six after this reflection has taken place. 6): An account of experience, thickened through multidisciplinary research (2005:83-86). The seventh movement of performing postfoundational practical theological research governs the final condition, which calls for moving beyond the local: 7). The formation of alternative interpretations that go beyond the confines of the local community. Every movement is accompanied by specialised procedures for collecting, describing, and/or interpreting data (2005:83-86).

Müller's seven movements are undoubtedly an intriguing and complex study method. It is an integrative narrative, which allows the practical theologian to participate with integrity in processes of both “story-telling” and “story-development” (2003a:305, cited in Dreyer, 2014:3). As such, this pragmatic theology narrative is both a method story and a paradigm story. His seven movements present a captivating exploration into narrative counselling, providing a unique perspective to understanding the human experience (Dreyer, 2014:3-8). The compassionate and genuine tone of these movements not only enriches our comprehension of this therapeutic approach but also motivates us to forge deep connections with our own personal narratives for growth and self-improvement benefits (Dreyer, 2014:3-8). Although Müller’s approach to narrative offers considerable benefits, it is vital to acknowledge some of its inherent limitations.

#### **4.6 Potential Weaknesses of Julian Müller's Narrative Approach**

A potential weakness of Müller's narrative approach to counselling is that practical theology finds itself in a precarious, vulnerable space between various disciplines, exposed to multiple narratives. It concurrently converses in the languages of the humanities, the social sciences, and theology (Browning, 1991; Heitink, 1993, cited in Müller, 2017:86). Müller (2017:87) contends that this borderland, in-between landscape, is assumed, fostered, and facilitated by narrative inquiry. The narrative approach focuses on people's stories that stem from the imagination, which is often considered something abstract and detached from reality (2017:87). Imagination, however, is not theoretical, but contextual, embodied, and local.

This type of research, based on story and not on "data", has methodological challenges. Only three "tools" are available to the researcher, namely the telling of stories; the listening to stories; and the retelling of stories (2017:87). Ganzevoort (2011:8-9), in comparison to Müller’s seven movements, elaborates on narratives and offers a formal model that suggests six dimensions for examining and interpreting pastoral conversations, sermons, and related discourse. These include the "theological dimension", which considers the discourse's theological content within its context. The "religious dimension" explores how religious language presents itself in dialogue alongside symbols and practices. The "ethical dimension" considers ethical implications present in such discourse, while the "social dimension" investigates cultural and social influences on communication. Furthermore, the "psychological dimension" examines psychological and emotional components of the encounters. And lastly, the "rhetorical dimension" examines the persuasive techniques employed alongside narrative structures used to deliver messages effectively. By presenting this paradigmatic framework, Ganzevoort (2011:8-9) offers a comprehensive methodology for understanding complex nuances contained within religious discourses as well as other forms of pastoral conversations.

Whilst Ganzevoort (2011) asserts that narrative is widely accepted among practical theologians, Mauz (2009:281, cited in Dreyer, 2014:1) contends that the importance and scope of narrative within the context of practical theological approaches remain disputed among religious scholars. Although there is consensus among scholars about the importance of narrative in practical theology, Dreyer (2014:1-2) contends that there is no agreement on its exact meaning for both the theory and practice of this discipline. The concept of "narrative", he contends, has become so widely used and ambiguous that establishing a common understanding becomes challenging. Narrative consists of three essential components – the product (the story itself), the act of storytelling, and different objects associated with it (such as reading a narrative) (Lamarque, 2004:394-395, cited in Dreyer, 2014:2). Moen (2006:2, cited in Dreyer, 2014:2) extends this perspective, suggesting that the meaning of the “narrative approach” remains uncertain, encompassing elements such as framework, a reflective tool throughout an inquiry process, a research methodology, or a presentation mode within research studies. Even in narratology which examine narratives, a clear definition for this concept remains elusive and without consensus (Pier & Landa 2008, cited in Dreyer, 2014:2).

Even though Müller's differentiation between narrative and narratology makes sense in light of the many descriptions of his (changing) narrative technique over the past few years, this differentiation raises several questions. These include:

- Is there a distinct difference between a "metaphorical" and a "narratological" approach in practical theology?
- What exactly does employing narrative metaphor imply?
- Does considering narratives as simply a metaphor mean that narratives should not be analysed and interpreted?
- How does Müller view narratology?
- Is adopting narratology always bound by structuralist principles, and does this exclude any analytical or empirical study and interpretation of stories from the methodology used in practical theology fieldwork?
- Are practical theologians limited to choosing between the 'metaphorical approach' or the 'narratological approach' when examining narratives, or are there additional approaches available within practical theology? (Dreyer, 2014:2).

The solutions to these issues remain uncertain, highlighting the fact that this in-between space, with its multitude of diverse social interactions, is indeed a precarious territory. It is a space for new life and new development, but not without sacrifice (Dreyer, 2014:4). If the researcher positions her-/himself in this region, it inexorably denotes an inclination for siding with the marginalised, and the helpless. It goes beyond academia's safe and authoritative philosophies and leads us to real corporeal individuals (2014:4).

Müller's use of narrative metaphor in his seven movements similarly raises some questions. It is, however, unattainable to provide a fair portrayal of all the intricacies in this methodology, or to provide a complete appraisal in this critique. Dreyer (2014:3-4) posits that there are numerous elements of this narrative approach that are highly valuable. One of the fundamental tenets of this research approach is that people's well-being is a genuine concern. It is research *with* people rather than *on* people. Dreyer (2014:3), however, notes that from a methodological standpoint, each of these seven movements can be questioned. He offers two observations:

1. Minimal consideration is given to the narrative aspect in this study paradigm (see figure in Chapter 3). Dreyer (2014:3) contends that there are occasional references (Müller, 2005:83, cited in Dreyer, 2014:3) to narrative in relation to postfoundationalism and social constructionism methodology ("The team of researchers does empirical research, based on the narrative approach") (Müller, 2005:83, cited in Dreyer, 2014:3), but no discussion on what a narrative is, and why it is utilised. Müller (2005, cited in Dreyer, 2014:3) ends the study with a few references to 'narrative' and 'story', but nothing more.
2. Müller (2005, cited in Dreyer, 2014:4) remarks that given this study approach:  
"[T]he researchers are not only interested in descriptions of experiences, but also and foremost in their (co-researchers') own interpretations. The researcher in this phase does not, in the first instance, look for data, but for meaning/interpretation given by the co-researchers" (Müller 2005:84, cited in Dreyer, 2014:4).

One of the methods employed is interpretation undertaken in "constant feedback loops and in collaboration with "co-researchers" (Müller, 2005:84, cited in Dreyer, 2014:4). It is not stated how this will be accomplished. There also is minimal information provided on how the 'stories' should be analysed and interpreted. Müller (2005, cited in Dreyer, 2014:4) does indicate that the formation of an alternative interpretation:

"[W]ill not happen on the basis of structured and rigid methods, through which stories are analysed and interpreted and evaluated. Instead, it rather happens on the basis of a holistic understanding and as a social-constructionist process in which all the co-researchers are invited and engaged in the creation of new meaning" (2005:86, cited in Dreyer, 2014:4).

In Dreyer's (2014:4) view, Müller doesn't clearly articulate how a holistic understanding can be achieved and how co-researchers will arrive at this 'new meaning'. Müller's narrative approach is marked by substantial epistemological assumptions regarding the connections between selfhood, identity, and narrative. It also adopts a social constructionist ontology, challenging traditional empirical

research methodologies and protocols. Dreyer (2014:4) suggests that Müller's significant emphasis on narrative should be assessed within the context of the narrative turn in the social and human sciences.

Müller (2005:86, cited in Loubser & Müller, 2011:3-4), however, contends that because it is both a paradigm-story and a method-story, the postfoundational notion of rationality informs the philosophy and practice of practical theology. To fit with the approach's obligations, this ideology should be translated into a methodology. A postfoundational conception of reasoning provides an integrative narrative in which theologians participate in storytelling and story-making, ensuring sensitive and descriptive engagement in deconstructing problematic discourses in the formation of alternative narratives (Müller, 2005:86, cited in Loubser & Müller, 2011:3-4). Müller argues that, before moving into method, a prerequisite of this approach would be openness to the context, discretion, and sensitivity, and being objective so that specific indicators of discourse can be heard (Müller, 2005:86, cited in Loubser & Müller, 2011:3-4).

According to Dreyer (2014:5), the subjectivity of 'co-researchers' as authors of their own life stories holds significant value, with their unique narratives considered more valuable than theoretical abstracts. The narratives of especially the oppressed and the marginalised have to be told and heard. In this context, Müller's social-constructionist approach embraces people in the pursuit of a meaningful life as an affirmation of their worth (Müller, 2011:3). This produces significant outcomes and triggers a critical point that demands sincere consideration, leading to substantial benefits and fragile situations. Müller (2017:88) argues that it is a choice for context and location and an opportunity for intervention and action. This is a decision that forces us to consider and converse with our African surroundings.

#### **4.7 Challenges to Narrative Counselling in the South African Landscape**

Moodley and Rabson (2023:1) posit that the function of pastoral counselling and care as a foundation for emotional well-being becomes especially evident when the bereaved, the psychologically distressed, the abused, the marginalised, and the impoverished are ignored. This is especially true in resource-poor countries such as South Africa, where competent psychiatric therapies cannot meet demands (2023:1). The adoption of narrative counselling is on the rise worldwide, including in Africa. Despite the continent having numerous psychological and community wellness issues that clinicians and therapists are well-suited to address, Asiimwe et al. (2021:815) highlight that there are still obstacles hindering the widespread use of community counselling in Africa. These obstacles are further intensified by negative socioeconomic backgrounds and political marginalisation, stemming from insufficient financial resources, ongoing struggles, gang violence, poverty, and racial discrimination crises (2021:825).

People indeed encounter genuine hardship and disadvantage due to poverty and low socioeconomic status, with lasting consequences that extend to future generations. Wagle (2023:1) highlights that poverty and low socioeconomic position compel individuals to accept their inferior status in society. This becomes particularly challenging when economic inequality is deeply rooted, enabling the affluent segments of society to lead a lifestyle that the marginalised masses can scarcely conceive of (2023:1). These challenges are becoming ever more intertwined with the normative concepts of fairness, equity, and social justice (2023:1).

Two approaches to measuring poverty are identified by Decerf (2020:326): the absolute and relative approach to poverty. *Absolute poverty* is when personal income is insufficient to provide for the true cost of sufficient nutrition and clothing. Decerf (2020:326) notes that the absolute poverty line is determined by the true cost of living rather than the societal income level. People are relatively poor when their income is significantly lower than the income standard in their society. The true cost of social involvement varies with living standards. As a result, the *relative poverty* line is determined by the income level of the society under consideration (2020:327).

Poverty is an economic, political, and social problem, and reducing the suffering caused by people's disadvantageous conditions is a moral concern that must be addressed by the state (Wagle, 2023:1) and the church. Wilson and Ramphele (1989) state that it is a matter of pastoral care, and the church must not give up on making a genuine impact in the lives of individuals, families, and communities. The quintessential nature of poverty, however, makes deciding on a single strategy that would produce the best results an arduous exercise.

In the post-apartheid South African context, emerging adults undergo a challenging transition from childhood to adulthood. Pastoral counselling, as explained by Dreyer (2016:643), plays a crucial role in helping individuals cope with the transition to post-modern South Africa. This involves addressing aspects such as identity construction, societal pressures, career choices, complex emotions, psychological, social, and physical changes, as well as the impacts of overwhelmingly challenging formative years and historical influences (2016:643). Examples of such include poverty, poor education, dysfunctional families, political upheaval, and exposure to violent crime, to name a few. Schlebusch (2005, cited in Dreyer, 2016:643) posits that special skills and approaches are required to overcome the dangers of suicide, sexual abuse, and other forms of trauma. This involves necessary conciliation "between the world of the story and the world of the interpreter" (Ricoeur, 1982:78, cited in Dreyer, 2016:645) because of the diversities and disparities between the two worlds.

Pastoral counselling aims to assist individuals in expanding their perspectives and envisioning a world beyond their current circumstances. Through a social constructionist lens, it involves listening to and



collaboratively constructing an alternative narrative with the counselee. Dreyer (2016:644) defines narrative counselling as a therapeutic practice that uses storytelling to acquire a deeper understanding of societal and personal problems. In Africa, there exists an increasing shift toward the adoption of cumulative ideas and approaches in the field of mental health treatment since the postcolonial years (Nwoye, 2018, cited in Asiimwe et al., 2021:816). In various African countries, professionals are striving to comprehend individual and community emotional issues through a broader relational and contextual lens. However, they face challenges related to the stigmatisation and resistance within social-cultural and political frameworks toward counselling (Puffer et al., 2019, cited in Asiimwe et al., 2021:816). Narrative therapy is gaining traction and recognition within the disciplines of psychology, sociology, theology, and literature. It is increasingly seen as an essential element in healing vulnerable individuals and alleviating the afflictions of the marginalised, both on a community and individual level, within the African landscape.

The expanding body of literature on narrative counselling points to a global surge in its popularity. However, it remains crucial to critically engage with traditional modes of care for individuals and communities. As denoted by Klaasen (2018a:3, cited in Klaasen, 2020:2), traditional counselling approaches tend to focus on problems and fail to address power imbalances between counsellor and client, particularly in global counselling practices. The use of narratives can influence these power dynamics within the therapeutic process. Conversely, African pastoral counselling takes into account cultural customs but may overlook or suppress alternative perspectives that are based on a singular biblical framework (Acolatse, 2014:173, cited in Klaasen, 2020:2).

#### **4.8 Conclusion**

South Africa distinguishes itself as an exceptional nation, with 11 official languages and a rich tapestry of subcultures, civilisations, and religions. In this diverse setting, narrative counselling plays a crucial role in fostering understanding and cooperative healing among individuals residing in marginalised communities. However, this wealth of diversity also presents several challenges for counselling efforts, including language barriers hindering effective communication, issues of gang violence, inequality, and marginalisation stemming from poverty. This predicament holds true not only within South African boundaries but also resonates with other disadvantaged societies around the world. The presence of negative socioeconomic backgrounds coupled with limited financial resources further compounds these obstacles. Additionally, the interdisciplinary credibility accorded to practical theology and narrative counselling is unfortunately lacking due to their hybrid natures.

Human dignity and identity are frequently shaped by factors such as wealth, social standing, and privilege. Unfortunately, individuals lacking these attributes are sometimes perceived as invisible and without worth by certain segments of society. According to Müller (2017:87), individuals' stories

should have the freedom to evolve into a new narrative of meaning and understanding that goes beyond the confines of the local community. Müller also emphasised the significance of acknowledging each person's unique story in comprehending how they arrived at their present situation; thus, enabling effective support for moving forward. Müller's (2011:3) transitional, social-constructionist approach embraces the individual as an integral part of the progression towards a desired reality that holds meaning for them.

The researcher embarks on a collaborative journey with co-researchers to construct a preferred alternative narrative. This alternative narrative serves as a guiding metaphor, inspiring efforts toward a better future and the pursuit of a preferred and fulfilling existence (Loubser & Müller, 2011:1). Müller's metaphorical approach supports the afflicted in externalising aspects of their problem-saturated tales, allowing them to discern unique outcomes among these stories. Alternative narratives that serve as a vehicle for transformation and give hope in the face of apparent despair are generated (Loubser & Müller, 2011:5). It simultaneously gives rise to the most profound and the most precarious moment – a moment of genuine pastoral concern. As a result, Müller's innovative counselling techniques have found widespread adoption across multiple fields, including psychology, social work education, and mental health services, owing to their strong alignment with contemporary narrative practices. The next chapter concludes the study and provides recommendations for affective approaches to narrative counselling in the South African context.



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# Chapter 5

## Conclusion and Recommendations

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter will conclude the study by providing a brief evaluation of narrative approaches and summarising some of its potentials and critiques. I also attempt to address the question: To what degree does pastoral counselling enhance emotional well-being for marginalised communities? And how effectively does pastoral counselling foster human dignity and worth among individuals in these communities? The study concludes by offering some recommendations for narrative approaches relevant to the South African context.

### 5.2 An Evaluation of Narrative Approaches: Promises and Critiques

Ganzevoort (2011:10-11) highlights four benefits and some criticisms of narrative counselling. Firstly, it offers the possibility of connection with theology by rethinking Boisen's renowned words "living human document" (2011:10). Previously employed to underscore the difference between lifeless literature and living persons, narrativity now emphasises the connections between textual content and meaningful actions of people (2011:10). It enables practical theology to apply biblical theological frameworks and concepts and to investigate their connection with human documents.

Ganzevoort (2011:10) asserts that a narrative perspective serves as a metatheoretical framework. Narrative methods offer the advantage of proximity to the phenomena under investigation, facilitating a clearer understanding of the relationship between social science and theology and the exploration of diverse approaches within each discipline. According to Ganzevoort (2011:10), the metatheoretical aspect and the increasing body of literature on narrative in social science create significant potential for collaborative research. The foundational storylines, with their inherent normative hypotheses, can be identified across various paradigms and methodologies (2011:10). Adopting a narrative perspective involves employing a hermeneutical approach that prioritises individual narratives and religious constructions over generalisations and quantitative statistics.

Ganzevoort (2011:10) contends that, from a theological standpoint, this is imperative to ensure fairness to the marginalised and voiceless, as well as to acknowledge the religious individual. Considering the realities of an increasingly divided society, it is warranted from a sociological perspective. People create their own assortment of components from numerous religious systems and beliefs (2011:10). Exploring a narrative theory and method for our practical theology helps us avoid academic isolation in situations where people are predisposed to engage in a narrative mode. Even if one rejects the notion that all of

human life and experience is narratively structured, Ganzevoort (2011:10) posits that our human practices do.

A critique of narrative approaches is their potential to be excessively linguistic, intellectual, and analytical. Ganzevoort (2011:10) aims to broaden the concept of narrative by incorporating rituals, practices, and mental and physical actions. The model is more focused on words and meanings, which could make verbal expertise an unfair advantage. Narrative approaches ignore normativity difficulties, particularly when embracing subjectivity in humans and presuming that human stories are as normative as biblical stories. Ganzevoort (2011:11) contends that narrative methods may vary, but the narrative turn does lead to a reconsideration of human subjectivity. However, acknowledging subjectivity does not diminish the normative nature of a practice. A narrative exploration of practices can unveil the implicit normativity within them and its connection to the underlying tradition. How these promises and critiques are assessed, as suggested by Ganzevoort (2011:11), hinges on one's inclination towards a specific narrative technique and religious beliefs. Despite academic disputes, it appears reasonable to suggest that narrative approaches will continue to be an important position in practical theology. They provide a new perspective on religious knowledge and a new way to examine practice.

Another criticism is that narrative techniques often overlook power imbalances and personal motives (2011:11). While this may be true in simplistic interpretations, Ganzevoort has demonstrated that a narrative approach is capable of highlighting, rather than obscuring, power dynamics. He highlights the relevance of narrative in pastoral care, stating that it should be used as a healing tool for the marginalised in the face of the prevailing narratives of the powerful (2011:11). However, he presupposes a uniform world culture because of access to other cultures through technology. Conversely, this view does not consider that the marginalised poor do not have access to technology.

While a narrative approach is gaining increasing popularity worldwide, Klaasen (2020:2) points out that traditional modes of care for individuals and communities need ongoing critical engagement to remain meaningful and beneficial. Traditional counselling approaches, Klaasen (2018a:3, cited in Klaasen, 2020:2) writes, are problem-focused and do not address the uneven power dynamics between the counsellor and the counselee, especially in global counselling approaches. Narrative re-enactment has an impact on power dynamics in counselling. A distinction lies in African pastoral counselling, which takes into account the cultural customs of the community. However, it may overlook or impede the subconscious support of a singular biblical perspective (Acolatse, 2014:173, cited in Klaasen, 2020:2).

In the context of 11 official languages, diverse civilisations, subcultures, and religions, narrative approaches in South Africa can offer crucial frameworks for fostering understanding and facilitating

collaborative healing, particularly for individuals in marginalised communities. However, this diversity may pose numerous challenges to counselling, including language barriers, inequality, poverty-induced marginalisation, gang violence, and racial discrimination (Moodley & Rabson, 2023). This is equally true for marginalised communities across the globe. These obstacles are exacerbated by struggles with negative socioeconomic backgrounds and inadequate financial resources. As a consequence of a transforming political climate, De Villiers (2004:103, cited in Müller, 2013) explores the effects of social change on diverse religions and the scholarly fields that research these religions.

### **5.3 The Efficacy of Narrative Counselling to Foster Human Dignity: Addressing the Need for Existential Meaning and a Life of Worth in Marginalised Communities**

De Villiers proposes that in a new South Africa, religion and other fields devoted to religious inquiry need the aid of the sociological sciences, notably insights into globalisation, secularisation, modernism, individualism, and processes (De Villiers, 2004:117, cited in Müller, 2013). Subsequently, theology must assess the extent to which the circumstances in South Africa allow theology and organised faiths to make an impact on the public domain. According to De Villiers (2004:120, cited in Müller, 2013), when different cultural interpretations of religion have a negative impact on society, theology must be addressed by the social sciences.

As a result, the complexity of spirituality drives us toward social sciences and the arts. According to Germond (2001:30-31, cited in Müller, 2013), development is about individuals and their experiential worlds as much as it is about physical and social progress. He mentions Foucault, who stated, "What strikes me is that in our society, art is now only linked to objects rather than to individuals or to life itself" (Germond, 2001, cited in Müller, 2013). This is a specialised or created art that is crafted by experts. Germond questions what prevents each one of us to make our own lives a work of art (2001:30–31, cited in Müller, 2013). In doing this, he argues, we could advocate a practical theology in which all people's lives, particularly those of the impoverished and marginalised, are viewed as 'a work of art'. Consequently, we have an approach that is grounded in empirical facts while reaching past the confines of the social sciences.

### **5.4 Constructing Alternative Narratives or Preferred Narratives**

Germond's (2001:30–31, cited in Müller, 2013) perspective aligns with that of Freedman and Combs (2002:14, cited in Meiring & Müller, 2010:2). They similarly observe that Michel Foucault maintained a fascination with the narratives of individuals living on the margins of society. These narratives hold the potential to disrupt the excessive dominance of society's prevailing metanarratives. As indicated by Freedman and Combs (2002:13, cited in Meiring & Müller, 2010:2), Foucault claimed that knowledge

and power are inextricably linked. There are discourses/metanarratives in a culture that govern what information is supposed to be true, proper, or possible. This suggests that people's influence in society is determined by their power or access to the narratives that shape their society (2002:13, cited in Meiring & Müller, 2010:2).

For Freedman and Combs, "in the most marginalised and disempowered of lives, there are always lived experiences that lie outside the dominant stories" (2002:14, cited in Müller, 2010:2). Consequently, their mission is thus to assist people to realise the "influence of restrictive cultural stories in their lives, and to expand and enrich their own life narratives" (2002:14, cited in Müller, 2010:2). According to social constructionism, we view the world through the lenses of the society in which we live. The prevailing narratives that circulate throughout society thus construct our lives.

Practical theological inquiry integrates theological and practical dimensions, concentrating on assisting people and their struggles through daily conversations and interactions within specific social and cultural circumstances (Gerkin, 1991:13, cited in Loubser & Müller, 2011:3-4). It seeks to keep the Bible and the narrative of a person, place, and time in sync, while operating within the social world paradigm of Christian theology, traditions, and language. Practical theology is sensitive to context and circumstance; thus, its assumptions and hypotheses are modest. It highlights the importance of seeing, careful listening before speaking, and understanding people's stories (Pattison, 2000:42, cited in Loubser & Müller, 2011:3-4). Müller's (2005:86–75) postfoundational idea of rationality provides us with a consolidative narrative which includes the theologian in both processes of 'story-telling' and 'story-making'. This engagement necessitates descriptiveness and sensitivity in deconstructing problematic narratives and developing alternative narratives (cf. Müller, 2005:86).

Van Huyssteen (2004, cited in Loubser & Müller 2011:3-4) proposes three distinct movements for this kind of theological reflection:

- 1). Acknowledgment of contextuality, the function of interpreted experiences, and the impact of disciplinary tradition in people's values, as well as how these values reflect on God and His presence in the world (Müller, 2005:76–77, cited in Loubser & Müller, 2011:3-4).
- 2). An increased awareness of an epistemic duty that surpasses the finite boundaries of our specific field, community, and cultures, allowing us to participate in a reflective interdisciplinary discussion, where commonalities can be discovered (Müller, 2005:76–77; Van Huyssteen, 1999, cited in Loubser & Müller, 2011:3-4).
- 3). These shared resources can most effectively be expressed by utilising the notion of transversality which promotes different views to specific traditions, problems, topics, or disciplines. It allows for different voices to be interactive without being in contradiction with one another (Müller, 2005:76-77, cited in Loubser & Müller, 2011:3-4).

## **5.5 Fostering Human Dignity and Addressing the Need for Existential Meaning and a Life of Worth**

Narrative counselling goes beyond the mere description and interpretation of experiences; it is also about deconstruction and deliverance. Francois Wessels (2015) states that pastoral therapists within the narrative paradigm consider reality to be socially constructed, thus emphasising the relational nature of identity, agency, and knowledge. Stanley Grentz (2006, cited in Wessels, 2015) proposes that personhood is "bound up with relationality" and suggests that the fullness of relationality lies "ultimately in relationship with the triune God" (Grentz, 2006, cited in Wessels, 2015). He argues that our selves take shape within the "dialogue between the "I" and the social context", turning the self into an ongoing process "rather than ... a given which exists prior to social relationships, forming a narrative with both past and future perspectives" (Wessels, 2015:6).

As noted by Gerkin (1991:103, cited in Meyer, 2014:7), a faith community should care for its members through providing a narrative framework of ultimate meaning that serves as a model for living life. "It should offer a grammar, a narrative which can connect people's experiences with the ultimate metaphor of meaning that is contained in the Christian narrative" (Gerkin, 1991:103, cited in Meyer, 2014:7). George Lindbeck (1984:32, cited in Meyer, 2014:7) proposed the cultural-linguistic approach which can be useful for pastoral carers serving communities who have lost the normative basis for meaning and worth in their personal narratives. This lack of meaning and worth leads to the unravelling of one's life purpose.

Müller's narrative approach does not rely on structured and inflexible methods to analyse and interpret stories. He advocates for a comprehensive understanding and a social-constructionist process where the storyteller is actively involved in crafting new meaning and outcomes to alleviate spiritual, emotional, and psychological suffering (2011:5; 2017:87). Human dignity and identity are often shaped by wealth, social standing, and privilege. Unfortunately, individuals lacking these attributes may be perceived as invisible and worthless by some. Ganzevoort (2011) highlights the relevance of narrative in pastoral care, stating that it should be used as a healing tool for the marginalised in the face of the prevailing narratives of the powerful. For Müller (2017:87), people's stories should be allowed to develop into a new story of meaning and understanding that transcends the local community. Müller's narrative approach to counselling draws the researcher into the nuances of a transforming and flexible identity and does not leave one unimpeded or unchanged. Müller (2017:87) hypothesises that our own stories become part of our research, which means that "knowing the self and knowing about the subject are intertwined, partial, historical local knowledges" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005:962, cited in Müller, 2017).

Müller's postfoundational, narrative approach to practical theology provides a meaningful framework for reflecting on the experiences of the presence of God. It emphasises the influence of tradition on our understanding while guiding us to remain grounded, local, and contextual (Müller, 2005:77, cited in Loubser & Müller, 2011:3-4). His social constructionism approach underlines the relevance of narrative pastoral counselling by demonstrating how meaning is generated in relation to others (Demasure & Müller, 2006:416). When the once dominant narratives in society are exposed, revealing the construction and outcomes they have shaped in people's lives, marginalised voices are afforded an opportunity to be heard.

## 5.6 Recommendations

Based on the insights of this research, the following recommendations are proposed:

- It is acknowledged that there is a scarcity of mental health specialists in low-income areas of South Africa. Socioeconomic inequalities (together with governmental misuse of resources) reinforce emotional health inequalities, e.g., access to proper treatment (Padmanabhanunni et al., 2022, cited in Moodley & Rabson, 2023). Thus, to close the treatment gap, it is suggested that new psychological and counselling approaches be provided by non-specialists.
- Grief, anxiety, and despair are treatable, yet countless South Africans go undiagnosed and untreated, resulting in a "treatment gap" of more than 75% (Nyatsanza et al., 2016). It is therefore recommended to address this significant treatment gap by implementing measures to ensure the diagnosis and treatment of these treatable conditions.
- The rates of suicide, substance abuse, and domestic violence tend to rise in the absence of pastoral and other professional care for emotional well-being issues (Bulling et al. 2013, quoted in Moodley & Rabson, 2023). The use of narrative counselling as a culturally acceptable intervention is therefore advocated for to enhance mood, prevent suicide, and give locally relevant treatment by people from the same community, culture, and language, making the intervention more culturally acceptable (Nyatsanza et al., 2016:25-26).
- It is recommended to foster interdisciplinary cooperation, as emphasised by Müller's transversal rationality, for a comprehensive counselling approach. Encouraging collaborative research (Holland et al., 2010; Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2015, cited in Moodley & Rabson, 2023:5) may provide a valuable incentive to pursue such interaction to help communities while also producing useful empirical findings. To support this recommendation further, Lloyd (2023, cited in Moodley & Rabson, 2023:5) underlines the importance of religious institutions engaging in open discussions with its members and trained professionals in psychology to



address problems with emotional health. The idea is to foster collaboration and teamwork between pastoral counsellors and psychological practitioners, particularly during times of emotional distress.

- The implementation of educational programmes, the exploration of biblical insights into mental health challenges, and lessening the stigma of emotional suffering through open conversations are additional recommendations based on the insights of this research.
- Additionally, Lloyd (2023, cited in Moodley & Rabson, 2023:5) highlights the significance of continued pastoral support and counselling to reduce stigma, facilitated by readily available interventions, such as sermons on mental health. Engaging congregants in pastoral care and prayer is critical for addressing mental health challenges inside the church.
- The study advocates for incorporating theology, theory, and care practices in pastoral care, focusing on developing competent, efficient, and credible approaches. These practices should be guided by a framework for education, training, conduct, and performance to ensure the provision of spiritual and religious care services to individuals and communities, regardless of their religious affiliations. It acknowledges that pastoral care is not limited to the confines of a church or religious organisation, but extends to individuals in various settings, including hospitals, prisons, schools, and community centres (Agbiji & Landman, 2014, cited in Moodley & Rabson, 2023).

## 5.7 Conclusion

By studying Müller's method against the backdrop of a broader shift towards narratives in the human and social sciences, this study sought to contribute to ongoing discussions regarding the scope and role of narratives in practical theology. The objective was to explore Julian Müller's approach to narrative counselling in the South African landscape, with consideration for marginalised communities. The primary aim was to acquire an extensive comprehension of narrative counselling through an analysis of different viewpoints within the discipline. Subsequently, other viewpoints in this discourse were outlined, and the rationale for selecting a particular understanding relevant to the study was elucidated.

The study endorsed an interpretation of Müller's narrative counselling approach as postfoundational, socially constructed, and rooted in personal experience. It delved into the correlation between narratives and meaningful living, as documented in the literature, revealing an extensive body of research connecting individuals' stories to the concept of meaning. This aligns the study effectively with contemporary research within an interdisciplinary community of authors. Once this context had been

established, the study investigated how narrative counselling can contribute to providing alternative outcomes in the process of working towards a life of meaning and purpose.

Julian Müller's narrative approach to counselling provides a framework that is significant and culturally sensitive in dealing with emotional and mental health issues across a diverse landscape. His postfoundational approach to practical theology has culminated in the formation of alternative interpretations. Impacted by his seven movements, it highlights the departure from overarching narratives in favour of the construction of a narrative that serves as a resource for meaning-making (Müller, 2005:85–86, cited in Meyer, 2014:10). By introducing a problem-saturated story, which then evolves into an alternative narrative, it releases the storyteller from limitations imposed by a narrowly defined (thin) future storyline (Meyer, 2014:2). This particular movement leads to the emergence of an alternative narrative that extends beyond just local communities, thus broadening its scope significantly.

Consequently, this constructed narrative can be employed across diverse lived experiences, transcending local communities while encompassing various comprehensive frameworks. It presents an interconnected narrative that allows the practical theologian to participate in the processes of "story-telling" and "story-development" while upholding moral values. Müller's (2005:86) approach, therefore, embodies practical theology through its empathetic nature, descriptive qualities, and boldness in dismantling harmful narratives while cultivating empowering new ones (2005:86).

It underscores the significance of individuals' personal life stories, acknowledging the unique socio-cultural background of each person and community, contributing to a comprehensive counselling process. This approach aligns with psychological practices focused on empowering individuals through the reconstruction of their own life stories. It fosters personal development and resilience, promoting effective coping strategies. In the South African context, Müller tailors narrative approaches to individuals' unique personal narratives, fostering a deeper understanding of challenges and the attainable strength to overcome them. To achieve the best results by utilising Müller's narrative method, this study advocates that it is necessary to continuously evaluate and adapt cultural and socio-political factors specific to South Africa. Additionally, as it was argued, counsellors must incorporate local narratives and cultural knowledge into their counselling approaches (Koç, & Kafa, 2019:100-115) to ensure a successful outcome.

I conclude this study with the following quote:

*“And it's just dawned on me that I might be the author of my own story, but so is everyone else the author of their own stories, and sometimes, like now, there's no overlap.”*

— Jandy Nelson, *The Sky Is Everywhere* (Goodreads, n.d.)

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**RE: LANGUAGE EDITING**

This letter serves to confirm that I have edited the thesis titled:

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**By**

**Patrick Joseph**

This certificate does not cover any alterations made subsequent to the editing process.

Please feel free to contact me if you need any further information.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Lee-Anne Roux