Positioning

- applying the narrative approach to consultancy work in organizations

By Gitte Haslebo

1. Introduction

On a war monument in Canberra these words are inscribed: "…and the horizon is but the limitation of your vision". I have not seen it myself but the quote intrigues me. The horizon in the landscape is the borderline between what exists and what does not exist – as seen from where I stand. Only what I can see exists in my immediate perception. It is a challenge to comprehend that the horizon and what is visible to me is determined by my position, as **my position is not visible to me**. I cannot experience but only assume on a theoretical level that my position determines my perspective on the landscape. And I can guess that if I move away from my position, my perspective will change. It is difficult to imagine what will then be visible to me. Believing that the landscape will look more beautiful or be more passable will entice me to move.

An organization can be seen as a landscape with numerous participant actors. The individual actor, engaged in his own work, takes his own version of reality for granted. As long as the other actors appear to adhere to the same version of reality, the validity of it is never questioned. As long as things go smoothly, no individual actor needs to give much consideration as to how his own position functions as an observation post for perception, understanding and action. But when his actions fail to lead to the desired results, it becomes necessary for him to pause, take a meta position and explore his underlying assumptions.

How does this become possible? It is this process I wish to explore in my article. How can organizational actors – managers and employees – discover their own position and how it determines their perceptions, understandings and actions? How can managers and employees become willing and able to shift their position and challenge their underlying assumptions? Which

methods can be applied by the consultant to facilitate position shifts and creation of new insight in organizations?

To me the term 'position' means something more fundamental than 'perspective'. 'Position' is the standing point from which the perspective is formed. This is why I have chosen to focus on position shifts.

From a wide variety of methods which I have applied and further developed during many years of consultancy work, I have selected two which are based on story telling for this article. My main theoretical and methodological inspiration comes from the work by Peter Lang on systemic creation of narratives (Lang & McAdam, 1995), Michael White's narrative therapy (White, 2000) and David Cooperrider's appreciative inquiry and use of metaphors (Barrett & Cooperrider, 1990). These three sources base their work on very different experiences. Peter Lang has many years of experience with therapy, consultancy work in organizations as well as with international conflict resolution. His publications mainly concern his therapeutic practice. Michael White has primarily worked with family therapy, whereas David Cooperrider has developed and worked with theories and methods in organizational contexts.

This article has two purposes: One is to explore the potential for the creation of new insight in working with story telling in organizations. The other is to determine which psychological and ethical considerations are necessary, when ideas and methods are transferred from the narrative therapeutic practice to consultancy work in organizations. It is essential that ideas and methods are not merely copied. It must be taken into consideration that the context in which they are applied is different. But how is this done?

I will begin with a description of two story telling methods which I have worked with as an organizational consultant.

Each method is illustrated by a case consisting of a brief extract of a longer course of events in a specific consultancy assignment. Each extract is about an 'aha experience' – a sudden moment of realization when an important change occurs in the perception and understanding of the participant actor, which enables a following exploration of alternative courses of action. The extracts describe unique personal experiences whilst certain outer facts about the consultancy assignments have been altered so as to disguise the identity of the parties involved.

2. Using metaphors to create new narratives

Case 1: Some years ago I received a phone call from one of the directors in a large production company. He informed me that the board of directors considered calling in

external consultancy assistance in the attempt to resolve a fierce conflict between departments H and I. He asked me if I would consider taking on that task. To start out with we agreed to meet for an introductory consultation: The board of three directors and me.

The introductory consultation took place in the CEO's office. On his table was a huge pile of papers – the files on the case. Tapping on this pile, the director said that these were the facts about the conflict, and that we could take a look at them if needed. Later during our talk he revealed that the conflict had existed for several years and had had very negative consequences. First of all there was increasing dissatisfaction among employees of the departments which were dependent on the results produced by departments H and I. This dissatisfaction concerned the fact that departments H and I did not meet their deadlines, thereby delaying the work of the other departments. Secondly, there was a greater employee turnover within departments H and I than within any other departments, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to recruit new personnel for these two departments.

The three members of the board of directors were both angry and despairing. They could not bear having employees coming into their offices in tears. It had to end – but how? The two Heads of department were both indispensable professional experts. Both of them had promised good behaviour – nevertheless the conflict persisted. Therefore the idea to seek external assistance had arisen. The board proposed that I were to work with the two Heads of department and their managers towards the establishment of bearable cooperation between the two, and – should this prove to be an impossibility – report back to the board with information on which of the two proved to be the most difficult.

For ethical reasons I could not accept the latter part of this request, and it thus appeared to be necessary with one more consultation with the board. During this second consultation I requested that the board took an active part in the conflict resolution. We agreed that the first phase should consist of individual interviews with the three directors, the Heads of department H and I and their managers. In the second phase all parties were to be brought together in a process of a couple of sessions.

During the initial phase I particularly wondered why and how the conflict could have persisted for such a long time – for several years in fact. This circumstance made me assume that there were many participant actors within the conflictual system who had accumulated valuable experience in surviving it. I also had the feeling that the stories which were told to me about the conflict had in fact been told several times before. So I wondered how to start a process during which the stories could be told in new ways allowing for alternative courses of action. I considered changing the title of the problem, i.e. the much used word 'conflict', but decided to keep it and

focus on working with metaphors instead. As part of the individual interviews I decided to give each interviewee the task of conjuring a metaphor for the conflict and then draw a picture of it.

> The first interview was with the director who had initially contacted me. After an introductory conversation about the goal and context of the interview, I asked him to draw his picture of the metaphor. Following a brief thinking pause, he drew a boxing ring with two men wearing large boxing gloves. Outside of the ring he drew people watching the fight. When he had finished his drawing, we both sat quietly watching it. I then posed different questions about the actors in his drawing. He explained to me that the two boxers depicted the two Heads of department, while the people watching the fight were their managers and employees. I then went on to inquire about the thoughts and feelings of the actors. The director explained that the two boxers were exhausted, and that parts of the audience found the fight very entertaining while others were bored with it. Then he paused for a while, studying his drawing. Suddenly he proclaimed: "Oh, something is missing! There's no referee! There's no one to make sure they stick to the rules or to stop the fight!". "Who could that be?", I asked. He replied immediately: "Well, that would be me or all of us on the board of directors. They can't stop the fight themselves".

In his reply there was a moment of sudden insight containing both astonishment in discovering his own absence in the drawing and relief in seeing a possible role in the conflict for him and the other members of the board.

What had happened? How did this moment of realization come about? What happens when metaphors are part of the method? What are the conditions for the creation of new insight? To answer these questions we must embark on a journey through the world of epistemology.

Within systemic thinking there is an important distinction between linear and circular thinking (Haslebo, 1997). Thinking linearly, we assume that we can describe the world independently of ourselves as the observer. The world *is*, independently from us. Thinking circularly however, we assume that we construct our world according to the lenses we look through, the language we use, and the communication we participate in with others. Linear thinking is our everyday logic which we use to make sense of events, determine cause and effect, and create the assumption that the causes must be removed in order for the effects to be different.

The everyday logic of the board of directors was that the cause of the conflict was to be found in the behaviour and interaction of the two Heads of department (i.e. "Who is the bad guy?"). Their unfortunate and inappropriate behaviour and interaction were then explained in terms of their personality traits. The directors' efforts were mainly focused on trying to understand which

personal qualities made the Heads of department act so unfortunately. Thus all blame and responsibility was assigned to these Heads of department. What the directors failed to acknowledge, however, was the relations between themselves and the two Heads of department. The invisibility of these relations stopped them from wondering how the conflict had been allowed to persist for years. They had chosen to focus on a small section of the world of which they themselves were not a part. As long as they failed to view themselves as part of the bigger picture, it was impossible for them to become active participants in the course of events. When they discovered themselves **as being a part of the pattern of events, it also facilitated a shift from a focus on the individual to a focus on relations**. For a very inspiring account of the different implications of the individual and relational line of thought I can refer to the book with the fascinating title: Relational responsibility – Resources for sustainable dialogue (McNamee, Gergen, & Associates, 1999).

Working with the metaphor paved the way for a shift in the director's frame of mind – from linear to circular thinking. In his moment of realization was both this shift in his frame of mind, unveiling his position in the picture, and feelings of astonishment, relief, pleasure and a desire to commit himself and get involved. How does working with metaphors bring this about?

When problematic stories are told and retold in organizations while strong emotions are tied to them, it is difficult to liberate one self from them. As Peter Lang points out, deep feelings and moral standpoints contribute to the experience of only one reality and one story (Lang & McAdam, 1995). However, the metaphor enables new and partially unpredictable ways of experiencing reality. In well known stories, the perceptual blindness is significant. Events and participant actors not included in the original version are not visible, and present events are categorised around the main theme of the story.

Working with metaphors helps to create new stories by transferring meaning from one context and world of experience to another (Barrett & Cooperrider, 1990). In the illustrated case, meaning was transferred from a culturally familiar context (a boxing ring) to an organizational context of cooperation in a management system with several levels. **Discovering the absence of his own position and thus the absence of one level in the organization became a turning point for this director** who went on to produce a long line of ideas for alternative courses of action. In the above article, Barrett & Cooperrider unveil how creative metaphors can bypass thoughts on defence, criticism and self-criticism. The Danish organizational psychologist Ulla Andersen describes this phenomenon with the illustrative term "the transformational power of metaphors" (Andersen, 1998).

3. Using stories of ups and downs as a way to achieve multiverse

Case 2:

One late afternoon I received a telephone call from the CEO of a small private company. He told me that the company, which was only a few years old, was a pioneer venture, fighting to gain market share with new concepts and ideas. The business had to relate to various interested parties and numerous unpredictable factors were at play. The board of directors felt like they moved from one extraordinary crisis to the next. The work load and time pressure had always been immense, but during the last couple of months their stress level had increased significantly. Lately in informal talks, people had begun to discuss looking at job advertisements – thus the CEO contacted me at this point in time. He expressed serious concerns about whether or not it was still possible to keep the board of directors together – they were all indispensable professional resources. We had an introductory consultation, by the end of which we had agreed on consultancy assistance to the board of directors four hours once a month for half a year. The fact that we agreed on six sessions of approximately half a day each was the result of the CEO's assessment of what would be realistic considering the four directors' time pressure and my assessment of the time needed to achieve new insight and results in each session.

We decided on a theme for the first session: "What can we, the board of directors, do to support each other more and take better care of our selves?".

Preparing for the first session I considered which method I could create that would let each director tell his or her personal story about time pressures and stress levels in order to raise the mutual understanding and create more ideas for courses of action. I had already been informed by the CEO that the directors spent much time in both formal meetings and spontaneous conversations and that their communication was good.

I came up with a method consisting of three phases: A phase of individual preparation during which each director would draw out two curves on a diagram. The horizontal line of the diagram would represent time and the vertical line ups and downs. One curve would illustrate ups and downs for the individual director, while the other curve would illustrate ups and downs for the organization. During the second phase, I would invite each director to describe his or her own experience of ups and downs from the individually chosen starting point and up until the present day. I then planned to interview each presenter about the personal meaning for him or her of the events, about the factors which turned low points to high points, etc. Following this I would allow

the others to comment on the presentation whilst focusing on the new impressions and thoughts they themselves gained about the working life and possible courses of action of the presenter. A third phase would follow during which we would discuss how the directors' newly gained insights could be used in their attempts to realise the group's wishes of mutual support and care.

Case 2, cont.:

When each story had been told, there was great astonishment about the diversity of the stories. Not only were the points in time defined as ups and downs different, but what was most surprising to the directors were the great differences in the interaction of the two curves. In one case the two curves moved opposite to each other (see Figure 1 below): A low point for the organization was a personal high point. For this director a personal high point equalled an adrenaline kick due to intense economic challenges (equalling an organizational low point). For two other directors the curves were very similar (see Figure 2 below). One of these explained how her personal ups and downs were determined by the atmosphere amongst the personnel. Whenever the personnel felt pessimistic about the future, this director experienced an organizational as well as a personal low point, and whenever they were optimistic about the future, she experienced an organizational and personal high point. In the case of the fourth director there was no clear pattern.

During this process many statements of wonder and surprise were made, such as: "I never knew you felt this way. How come you never told me?" Sometimes the reply was: "I never knew I felt like this myself!".
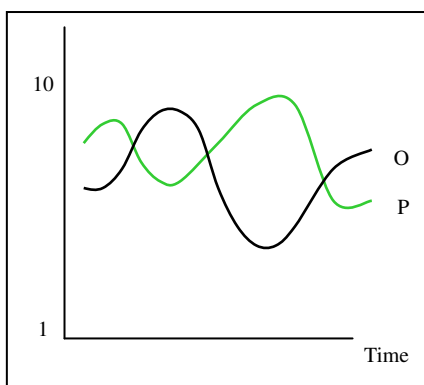

In Figures 1-2, O stands for ups and downs for the organization whereas P stands for ups and down for the person.
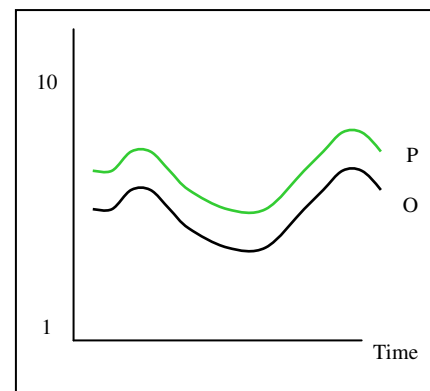
Figure 1: Two opposing curves

Figure 2: Two similar curves

In our following discussion it became clear that supporting each other and making valuable contributions to each others' work and problem solving became possible only once the group members became aware of what bothered each one of them.

In organizations where time pressure and demands for results are high there is seldom time to tell each other long and coherent stories about how phases and events are experienced. An organizational member may have had the opportunity to tell pieces of such a story on various occasions and to various people. However, being given the opportunity to tell the entire story in its coherent form may well be the first time the story teller listens to his or her own story – and it is thus most likely the first time the other members of the organizational group listen to it**. The story does not pre-exist, but becomes a story from the moment story telling begins.** The story teller is thus given the opportunity to be surprised and to wonder, not only about the stories told by other group members, but also about the story told by him or herself.

The questions I asked served two purposes: In part to explore the personal significance embedded in the story and in part to invite the other group members to place them selves in the position of the story teller and attempt to experience and understand the story 'from within'. This method increases the likelihood that the story teller feels listened to, seen, heard and understood – at least more than previously – on his or her own terms. This brings us to the heart of the term 'appreciation' – as opposed to praise, which is a judgement of another person based on the personal values of the observer. Feeling appreciated is the determining prerequisite of the creation of learning and new insight (Barrett & Cooperrider, 1990).

It has great effect when several stories are told in direct succession by use of dialogue facilitating methods, and these stories are varied and challenged by the circular questions (Tomm, 1988) posed by the consultant . It facilitates in the participants **a cognitive transition from universe to multiverse and from linear to circular thinking.** Altering communication reshapes the relations between the participants. Madsen (1996) illustrates how mutual understanding has three prerequisites: 1) One must discover and acknowledge the perspective of the other person, 2) One must have the ability and courage to leave one's egocentric perspective and to take on that of the other person, and 3) One must accept responsibility for one's own perspective.
Herein lies an essential insight.

Let me elaborate on the third prerequisite: Using our everyday logic, which is very much characterized by linear thinking, we tend to perceive our actions as natural reactions to the actions of others. This conviction is often very strong: "I have no choice but to respond in this manner". **However, with the discovery of one's own position (meaning the point of view from where one's perspective is created) comes the possibility to realize how one's actions are in fact also personal choices and how they thus become a personal responsibility.**

4. Inspiration from narrative therapy

The narrative approach as a parallel movement within the fields of linguistics, literature, anthropology and psychology has become increasingly popular and influential over the past 15-20 years (Gergen, 1994). Within the field of psychology it is particularly those working with family therapy who have embraced the narrative approach and developed new creative ways of interacting therapeutically with families. Among the most renowned therapists within this field is Michael White who in the 1980's developed several methods which have proven to be very effective in the treatment of 'heavier' issues such as anorexia, schizophrenia, and marital abuse – issues which many therapists had thus far given up on. The Swedish book 'Nya väger inom den systemiske terapin' (White, 2000), which is a translated compilation of a string of articles from the 1980's, is fascinating reading.

White's narrative family therapy is based on social constructionism which briefly described descends from the philosophical belief that our view of reality is created through our social interaction in a culture. Reality is created as a result of verbal negotiation (Gergen, 1990). Reality is organized, understood, retold and maintained through the telling of stories (or narratives). The story organizes events in time, places them in relation to one another and ascribes meaning to them. Some events are singled out as being the most important and determining the following events. The stories contain leaders and followers, friends and enemies, good guys and bad guys or prosecutors, victims and rescuers. Each story has a beginning, a plot, an (expected) ending and a line of consequences. It is often charged with energy, excitement and the power of association.

Within the recent years there has been a growing interest in the application of the narrative approach in organizations. Conferences and courses in story telling within an organizational perspective have become popular. In such contexts, story telling is often perceived as a management tool and as a more exciting way of stating and broadcasting the organizational mission and visions and of motivating and bringing together employees in a shared commitment to the development of the organization. Applied in this manner there is a risk that the method is in fact primarily used as a part of a top-down process, strengthening the dominant story at the expense of the versatility of organizational stories which are neither told nor heard. Unless the new story is

anchored in the employees' experiences, there is a great risk that it will be perceived as a foreign element and thus have no effect on neither thoughts nor actions.

Narrative therapy focuses on the life story told by the client and on the significance allocated to the client's various problems through this life story. The purpose of the therapeutic intervention is firstly to deconstruct the life story and then to reconstruct it in a way that helps the client toward a greater feeling of self esteem and autonomy. However, the task of a therapist and that of the consultant are very different. In my opinion, when consulting in organizations one's task is not to listen to individual life stories nor to the dominant story of the organization. On the contrary, there is a great need for new ways of telling stories **about the organizational membership of managers and employees and about the origin, development, maintenance or solving of organizational problems**. One organizational psychologist, who has been inspired by the narrative approach in her work as a consultant, is Jane Palm. She describes – both on the theoretical level and in the form of cases – how supervision can be used as a way of exploring the client's organizationally anchored story, of reconstructing this story by bringing forth appreciative voices from within the self, and of creating in the client an understanding of the reality of other organizational members through shifts in perspectives (Palm, 1998). Her examples are taken from her work giving individual supervision to managers as an external consultant.

A person can be invited to tell his or her story in many different ways. White's version of narrative therapy incorporates important principles such as the creation of a therapeutic alliance against the problem, externalization of the problem (which is named in dramatic manners, e.g. "the evil anorexia" or "the blaming monster"), inclusion of family members in a mapping of the damaging effects of the problem, union of family members in a shared victim role and in a fight against the problem, and a search for unique results and alternative stories (Lundby, 2000). White's and Lundby's case stories are fascinating and convincing reading. However, in my opinion these principles cannot be directly transferred into an organizational context. White himself touches upon the concern that the principle of externalization might not be applicable to every type of problem. When an essential element of the story is assigning guilt and blame to others, White points out that it is not the problem which is to be externalised (i.e. in the case of violence). My many years of experience working as a consultant in organizations tell me that problem filled stories within organizations are always – to some extent – characterized by the blaming of others, by victimization, by judging others and by feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. In therapy as well as in consultancy work in organizations it is important **to encourage a distinction of the person**

and the problem. White uses externalization to encourage such a distinction. In systemic consultation in organizations it is more important to work with awareness of positions and shifts in perspectives as a way of exploring the problem, of discovering one's own role within the pattern of events, of becoming a participant actor and of taking responsibility.

In case one I illustrated how the exploration of the problem "The Conflict" through the use of a metaphor lead to the director's discovery of his own position and the widening of his perspective. He realized that a larger part of the organisation (than previously assumed) was relevant for the understanding of the problem. It is interesting to notice the connection between seeing oneself as part of the pattern and taking responsibility.

In narrative therapy as well as in systemic consultation it is an important challenge for the therapist/consultant to try to identify with the way the client experiences reality, his or her problems and possibilities, and to respect the way the world looks to the client. However, there are important differences. White might claim that the problem is the problem, whereas Campbell, for instance, who is one of the great writers about systemic consultation, would state that it is the way one thinks about the problem that is the problem (White, 2000; Campbell et al, 1991). When reading White's case stories, it is obvious to me that the social constructionist understanding that reality is constructed by people is an insight on which the therapist bases his work – it is not, however, an insight which the client needs to acquire. Taking into consideration the painful and life threatening problems which are dealt with in therapeutic interventions this makes good sense. The client needs help to change a costly and linearly understood story (a thin story) into a different story which generates more possibilities but is still, however, linearly understood (a rich story). In systemic consultation it is important to work on a meta level with respect to the problems as experienced by the client. In the case of a conflict ridden situation, questions on this meta level might for instance be: "When did you as a manager first notice that a conflict was on its way?" or "What made you use the term conflict to describe the events?". **Focus must be on how the organizational members create meaning**: How do we know what we think we know? When several stories are told about the origin, development, significance, etc. of the 'same' problem, it becomes clear that there are many versions of the story. In this way **a shift from linear to circular thinking can be encouraged and fostered**.

In case two I showed how the four directors' different versions of the story about personal and organisational ups and downs paved the way for a shift from linear to circular

thinking. This shift went hand in hand with a stronger curiosity to learn about each other and the personal meanings of stressful working conditions.

The systemic consultant primarily works with organizational units consisting of a few or many organizational members. This raises the issue of how other participants can become involved in the story telling. White (2000) has developed a special version of the reflective team which he calls 'The outsider witness group': In the course of therapeutic intervention with one client, former clients are invited to form a group with the task of making contributions to the client's story which is being transformed. White highlights the importance of careful consideration when recruiting to and forming such a group. The group members have different backgrounds and do not know each other, but have in common the experience of having participated in similar therapy. The group members have their own stories about the problem (i.e. abuse), but are not participant actors in the story told by the client. The group meets with the client once or a couple of times and then part. In an organizational context the situation is very different: **The organizational members share a past, present and future. They are all – to some degree – participant actors in each other's stories**. In organizations groups are defined by the formal organisation. The stories told by and within the organization originate from the internal relationships, **and the way in which the stories are told effects the future relationships.**

As Gergen outlines in his chapter 'Exceeding the narrative in the therapeutic context' a story is not to be understood as a story created by an individual. It is neither to be understood as lenses through which the world is seen, nor as an inner model determining the actions of the individual. Let me quote Gergen on a somewhat bluff statement: "When holding this belief system, one views the individual as isolated and solipsistic – as basically stewing in the juice of his own constructions (Gergen, 1997, p. 246).

In the social constructionist understanding, stories are formed and told in social interactions. A story is told in differing ways depending on context and relations. One employee's story about "When I was fired" is told in one version to a co-worker in the same company, in a different version to the new employer, and in a third version to a friend. Story telling forms, reshapes and develops our social relations. This point is essential when considering how story telling can be used as a method in consultancy work in organizations. **Choosing a theme, exploring the story and planning the process in which story telling takes part must be done with careful consideration as to the possible effects on relations among organizational members**.

5. Preliminary conclusions

When I began working on this article, I had the opinion that there were rich opportunities to be inspired by narrative therapy when developing new methods in systemic consultation in organizations. After having gone deeper into the study of theory and methodology and having analyzed my own consultancy work, I now have a somewhat different opinion.

The basis for developing new methods is more likely to be found in the social constructionist understanding of story telling than in any specific methods from narrative therapy. Thus, the journey is long. The work of Kenneth Gergen, who is a professor in psychology and a Theorist with a capital T, has been of immense importance to the development and terminology of social constructionism. He is less concerned with the practical side but gives numerous examples from therapeutic methods. Examples of consultation in organizations are missing (Gergen, 1994).

Extensive work on the development of story telling methods applicable to consultancy in the organizational context thus lies ahead. Such methods must in particular take into account the fact that the story tellers are organizational members with a shared past, present and future, and that they are all, to some extent, participant actors in each others stories.

With this article's two cases I have attempted to illustrate how story telling can be used as a method in consultancy work to create awareness of one's own position, shifts in position and perspective, shifts from linear to circular thinking, discovery of a multiverse, acceptance of relational responsibility and mutual understanding.

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Abstract

In this article I want to start a discussion on how story telling methods from narrative therapy need to be transformed before being applied to consultancy work in organisational contexts. Two short cases from my consultancy work in organisations are described in order to illustrate how such methods can be modified and applied. Describing two different ways of using story telling in an organisation, I explore how dialogue and circular questions can create awareness of one's own position, a shift in perspective, a discovery of multiverse, a shift from linear to circular thinking, relational responsibility and mutual understanding. Furthermore, it is argued that there is a long way from narrative therapy to the application of story telling methods in consultation in organisations. Substantial differences between the two contexts and between the tasks of the therapist and those of the consultant are outlined. Different sources of inspiration are used to clarify the potentials of story telling in consultation in organisations, mainly Kenneth J. Gergen, Peter Lang, Michael White and David Cooperrider. It is my preliminary conclusion that we as consultants have to be very cautious before transferring concrete methods from therapy into our work in organisations. No shortcut is possible. Nevertheless, I am convinced that a journey from the social constructionist understanding

of story telling entails great potentials for consultation in organisations. However, much conceptualisation and methodological development has to be carried out. With this article, I hope to have made a small contribution.