

# An Empowerment Narrative Leadership Program for a Disadvantaged Community

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This research is providing social workers with a deeper insight into the process of empowering people from disadvantaged communities with leadership abilities by applying a narrative approach in group work and to develop members' individual potential within their social construction of leaders and leadership. **Method:** This research was undertaken following the developmental and utilization model of Grinnell with a combined qualitative and quantitative research approach. The research was performed from a postmodern and social constructivist paradigm and therefore relied more on the qualitative research perspective. **Results:** The research includes guidelines for a group work narrative leadership program. The impact of the social constructionist approach on the group members re-authors their narratives. **Conclusions:** Group work by means of the narrative approach in social work is recommended because it has become evident from this study that a richer description of the lives of people can be gained.

## Keywords

postmodern, narrative approach, social construction, group work, outcome study, empowerment, disadvantaged community

In postapartheid South Africa (SA), “disadvantaged communities” could be seen in the stories that were told at SA’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Descriptions from these stories of disadvantaged communities are longing for transformation, as individuals or groups of people (communities) face special problems, such as lack of money or financial support and poverty, and are deemed to be without sufficient power or other means of influence. In these communities, there are people experiencing pain and suffering (Kotzé & Kotzé, 2001). In SA, 56.8% of the population lived in poverty in 2009 with Limpopo having the highest rate where 78.9% of the province’s citizens lived in poverty (Statistics South Africa, 2013). In SA, national poverty is defined as the percentage share of people living below the poverty line. The population living below PPP\$1.25c per person per day in 2011 was 4.0%. Reports on poverty do not reflect the exact poor’s experience in SA. The major causes of poverty are income inequality, increase in the unemployment rate, lack of landownership, and the worsening of education attainment (Ajuruchukwu & Sanelise, 2016). In 2011, Statistics South Africa (2014) reported that 32.9% of all households in SA were living below the upper-bound poverty line of R620 per month.

Weyers (2011) states that when one considers community development (even through group work), one should take the involvement of external representatives/practitioners into consideration but also involve as many individuals from the community in the process as possible. This statement is reiterated by Hall and Midgley (2012) who state that local people in communities are vital resources for development. This initiated

the idea to apply group work to enhance community members’ leadership abilities to encourage local community development. One of the reasons why social workers use group work methods is that a group acts as a mediator between the individual and the society (communities; Abels & Abels, 2001). Since 1994, social development and the empowerment of individuals and communities have become a priority in SA (Nyandeni & Ross, 2012; Weyers, 2013). MacPhee et al. (2014) proved that leadership programs can be directly linked to empowerment. Therefore, the aim of this study was to empower disadvantaged individuals to discover their potential as leaders and to apply it in their own lives through the use of the narrative leadership program.

## Narrative Approach

The narrative approach in therapy shifts away from the modernist approach to the postmodernist approach. To understand this, it is important to distinguish between the modern approach and the postmodern approach. Modernism strives to obtain an objective science to develop a universal morality. The

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important features of the modernist discourse are that the world is independent from the experts and can be studied in an objective way. In postmodernism the opposite is true, the postmodernist view has no definite version of reality and there is no objectivity. Postmodernism literally means “after modernism” (Maree, 2007). Ritzer (2012, p. 630) states that “postmodernists also reject the ideas of a grand narrative” yet narrative therapy is birthed from postmodern philosophy (Robinson, Jacobsen, & Foster, 2015). Postmodern approaches (such as constructivism and social constructionism) believe that there are no limits to measure and describe the world in an objective, universal way (Freedman & Combs, 1996). In social constructivism and the narrative approach, the realities that people construct differs from one person to another. The narrative approach is characterized by stories that gain credence through their lifelikeness and “are not concerned with procedures and conventions for the generation of abstract and general theories but with the particulars of experience” (White & Epston, 1990).

This research adopts the postmodern, narrative, social constructivist worldview which emphasizes that the realities are socially constructed and established through language and realities are organized and maintained through narratives. There is no objective truth in the social constructive worldview.

White and Epston’s (1990) narrative theory makes the assumption that people experience problems when the stories of their lives do not represent their lives. Narrative therapy then becomes a process of “re-storying” the lives and experiences of individuals in therapy and is drawn on the theory of Foucault (Aczel, 2003; White & Epston, 1990), which is included in the narrative approach theory. Foucault (Aczel, 2003; White & Epston, 1990) states that power and knowledge are inseparable and the externalization of the problem assists persons in identification and separation from unitary knowledge and “truth” discourses that are subjugating them. Unique outcomes can be identified and become part of the re-authored story in defiance of the power of a problem. The unique outcomes give space for alternative stories to develop. These alternative narratives can come forth from previous neglected or subjugated knowledge.

According to Morgan (2000), what can be constructed can be deconstructed and reconstructed. Austad (2009) notes that the key question for workers to ask is: “How can we assist people in re-authoring new stories for lives/relationships?” The problem with this scenario is that many of these narratives entail unattainable goals, which lead to problem-saturated narratives which are reinforced through social expectations that are internalized by the individual (Lopesa et al., 2014; Robinson et al., 2015). Narrative therapy assists people by distancing their lives and relationships from the stories they judge to be impoverishing (Mertz, 2014). The approach leads workers to think about people’s lives as stories and to work with individuals to experience their stories in ways that are meaningful (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Maree, 2007; Reynecke, 2000; Toseland & Rivas, 2014; Vaandrager & Pieterse, 2008). Narrative theory therefore focuses on how group members unknowingly create and maintain their realities through life

stories and subjective experiences (Chang & Nylund, 2013; Lopesa et al., 2014; Maree, 2007; Mertz, 2014; Ricks, Kitchens, Goodrich, & Hancock, 2014; Toseland & Rivas, 2014).

When this research was conducted, very little focus existed between narrative therapy and social group work in the SA context. The application of narrative practice is that, with the will of the client and the facilitation of the worker, persons can develop the future life story they would like to see for themselves (Abels & Abels, 2001; Freedman & Comes, 1996; Müller, 1996; White & Epston, 1990). Every individual, group, and community has their own story and realities.

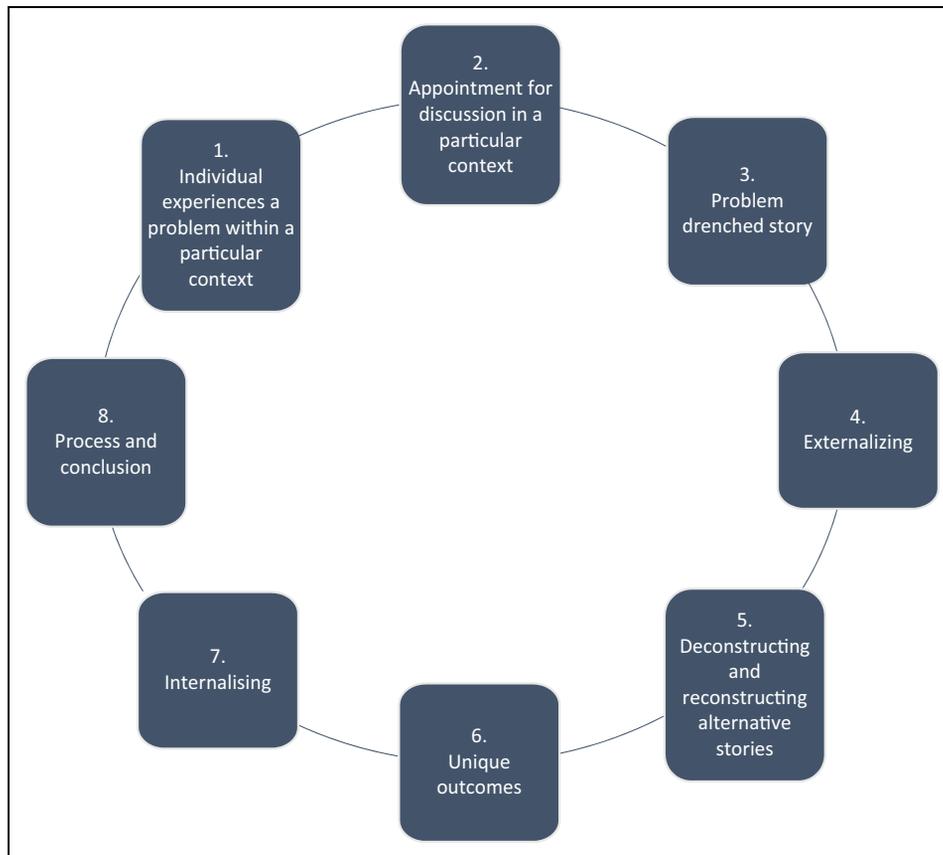
In other countries, narrative therapy in group work has increased with corresponding successful outcomes (Baumgartner & Williams, 2014; Chang & Nylund, 2013; Hall, 2011; Jefferson & Harkins, 2011; Lopesa et al., 2014; Mertz, 2014; Ricks et al., 2014; Robinson et al., 2015; Toseland & Rivas, 2014).

It is evident that a need exists in SA for the effective empowerment of persons as leaders in community development. There are general social constructions of leadership (Daft, 2011). Leadership is seen as a key concept of community capacity building (Madsen & O’Mullan, 2014). Leadership development programs have shown to be an effective way to enhance leadership behavior and performance (MacPhee et al., 2014). Tsheola and Nembambula (2015) say that there are multiple styles of leadership. Maxwell (2008) states that leadership is influence and that people influence other people.

In SA, group work is seen as one of the five methods (case work, group work, community work, research, and management) of social work (Weyers, 2011). Capuzzi and Douglas (2010) believe that the majority of people in a group benefit from a group’s experience. Toseland and Rivas (2014) state that social workers use group work to meet the needs of individual group members, the group as a whole and the community. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that group work should not be seen as an “isolated” method, but rather that it has the potential to influence the psychosocial functioning of individuals on a micro- and macro-level as well.

The group that was used during this program was a treatment group instead of a task group because individuals in the group were connected by their common, personal needs and situations rather than working together to complete a certain task (Nicholas, Rautenbach, & Mainstry, 2010; Zastrow, 2012).

Empowerment-focused practice has become a key word in interdisciplinary social sciences (Jefferson & Harkins, 2011; Ubbink, Roux, & Strydom, 2013). Terre Blanche, Durrheim, and Painter (2006) see empowerment as a process by which client systems are helped to identify and develop their strengths. Lama (2014, p. 390) defined it as “a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional and multi-layered concept which is described as the feeling that activates the psychological energy to accomplish one’s goals.” A key goal of social work practice is empowerment which is “the process of helping individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities...” (Zastrow, 2012, p. 39). Empowerment is essential in social work as traditional “top-down” approaches (Hall & Midgley, 2012). The “bottom-up” approach (followed in this study) places a



**Figure 1.** A possible way to implement the narrative approach.

strong emphasis on “doing it yourself” rather than everything being done by professional service providers (Jefferson & Harkins, 2011). Social workers who engage in empowerment-focused practice seek to develop the capacity of clients to understand their environment, make choices, take responsibility for those choices, and influence their life situations through organization and advocacy (Zastrow, 2012). The narrative approach that goes hand in hand with social construction is culture friendly. The group member(s) will have their own construct of leaders and leadership in their community and in their culture. The social construction approach in the research will empower the group members to use their own constructs to re-author their narratives in the leadership group work program.

### The Group Work Program

With the development of the empowering group work program on the narrative approach theory, the group members were included in the development process. The group work program consisted of eight weekly sessions and was evaluated afterward by two external consultants. Through the use of a questionnaire, the group members themselves were also given the opportunity to evaluate the perceived value of the program in terms of the development of their leadership abilities.

The overall structure is a treatment group work framework which means that the group work sessions followed certain phases: namely, the beginning (preparation and beginning), middle (exploration and utilization), and end (conclusion) phases (Nicholas et al., 2010; Toseland & Rivas, 2014). The film “Lion King” was used as a central aid for externalization during the group work sessions. According to Ricks, Kitchens, Goodrich, and Hancock (2014), movies have the potential to provide a unique opportunity in narrative counseling. This is because using narrative therapy with movies, the counselor can allow clients to act as directors in their own life movie and can help clients tell and retell their life stories. Using this technique, clients are able to reframe their life stories (Ricks et al., 2014). During the research, the group work sessions were presented in Afrikaans, due to the fact that the participant’s home language is Afrikaans, despite this the language of the movie was English. This was not a problem as the participants had English as a second language at school and could understand English.

Two of the outcomes of the Afrikaans narrative leadership group work program were new Afrikaans groups. Figure 1 provides a method to describe a way to implement the narrative approach. After conclusion of the eight group sessions, some of the group members compiled their own groups in their community which they guided and managed as facilitators. The researcher acted as supervisor for the group facilitators and

formed part of their reflection sessions. This is in line with Hall's (2011) argument that group members can educate other individuals on how to use these techniques to empower themselves. In order for the community to develop further, the group members are seen as a key tool to convey to others what they have learned during the group sessions of the empowering leadership program where the narrative approach was implemented.

### Implementation of the Narrative Approach

The implementation of the narrative approach is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 (from Ubbink, 2005) reflects a *possible* way to implement the narrative approach, derived from the work of Abels and Abels (2001), Freedman and Combes (1996), Kotzé (2000), Kotzé and Kotzé (2001), Maree (2007), Morgan (2000), Müller (1996), White (2000), and White and Epston (1990).

Figure 1 illustrates how an individual experiences a problem within a particular context. The individual is led in a narrative approach which makes him or her the expert of his or her own life. Individual life experiences neither in the past, present, nor the future (problem-saturated description) is in line with how he or she relates to it and therefore a need to rewrite their own stories in terms of what he or she experiences within a particular context exist (Ubbink, 2005).

The person makes an appointment for discussion: As a result of his or her experiences, the individual contacts the worker who provides narrative therapy. The individual hopes that a discussion will alleviate the seriousness of the problem (Ubbink, 2005).

The person tells his problem drenched story: The individual is highly aware of the story he or she will tell the group worker, as this is the story that the individual lived and that marginalized him or her in their particular context. According to the individual and the community, he or she is the problem. The problem rules the individual's life and is his or her dominant story (Abels & Abels, 2001; Freedman & Combes, 1996; Kotzé, 2000; Kotzé & Kotzé, 2001; Maree, 2007; Morgan, 2000; Müller, 1996; Ubbink, 2005; White & Epston, 1990).

Then questioning the story begins: The social worker investigates to what extent the individual may have succeeded in addressing the problem. By asking questions in an externalized manner, the group worker assists the individual in separating the problem drenched story from him or her (Abels & Abels, 2001; Freedman & Combes, 1996; Kotzé, 2000; Kotzé & Kotzé, 2001; Maree, 2007; Morgan, 2000; Müller, 1996; Ubbink, 2005; White & Epston, 1990).

Externalizing: The individual externalizes the problem which gives him or her an opportunity to evaluate his or her relationship with the problem. The individual

can look at the problem from a distance, evaluate it and decide whether it is justified, and find a new identity of choice (Abels & Abels, 2001; Freedman & Combes, 1996; Kotzé, 2000; Kotzé & Kotzé, 2001; Maree, 2007; Morgan, 2000; Müller, 1996; Ubbink, 2005; White & Epston, 1990).

Deconstructing and reconstructing alternative stories:

The social worker facilitates the deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of the individual's story. The influence of the components of the problem on the life of the individual is evaluated. The narrative operates by deconstructing and then giving new meaning by questioning the individual and co-operating with him or her to give new and rich descriptions to their stories and bring together the past, present, and future in alternative stories (Abels & Abels, 2001; Freedman & Combes, 1996; Kotzé, 2000; Kotzé & Kotzé, 2001; Maree, 2007; Morgan, 2000; Müller, 1996; Ubbink, 2005; White & Epston, 1990).

Unique outcomes: Together the group worker and individual explore and cultivate alternatives, while the group worker listens carefully to times in the individual's life when the problem diminished or had little to no influence on the person's life. Attention is given to exceptional periods that differ from the dominant problem-drenched story to get unique outcomes for alternative possibilities as part of their new life story (Abels & Abels, 2001; Freedman & Combes, 1996; Kotzé, 2000; Kotzé & Kotzé, 2001; Maree, 2007; Morgan, 2000; Müller, 1996; Ubbink, 2005; White & Epston, 1990).

The person internalizes by forming his or her own changed life story utilizing the alternatives written into their story of choice. The person experiences feelings of success, while rediscovering his or her capabilities and continues to rewrite (re-constructs) their life story (Abels & Abels, 2001; Freedman & Combes, 1996; Kotzé, 2000; Kotzé & Kotzé, 2001; Maree, 2007; Morgan, 2000; Müller, 1996; Ubbink, 2005; White & Epston, 1990).

At the end of the process, the person concludes and feels empowered and has a new life story. The person's abilities and success achieved need to be reinforced. Internalizing the positive will help him or her in the present and the future to be able to function adequately. If needed, the participant may wish to take up the matter with the group worker again in future (Ubbink, 2005).

## Method

### Research Design

The research had an exploratory purpose (Morris, 2006) since narrative group work design in SA is a relatively unfamiliar field (Babbie, 2014; Fouché & De Vos, 2011; Reyneke, 2000; Strydom, 2011a; Swanepoel, 2003). This research was undertaken within the developmental research and utilization model

(DR&U model; Grinnell, 1981) with a combined qualitative and quantitative research approach. This model consists of analyses, development, evaluation, distribution, and acceptance phases (Roux, 2002; Strydom, Steyn, & Strydom, 2007).

This research was performed from a social constructivist paradigm, and the research epistemology was qualitative by nature. Two external evaluators and the group members themselves were also used to do the evaluation. The group work leadership development program was also evaluated by group members by means of the researcher's self-compiled questionnaire.

The qualitative research process is more dependent on contextual data (Creswell, 2014). In other words, researchers encode and describe their research which, even though it only deals with that part of the problem it addresses, becomes the researcher's reality because it is based on the observers' observations (Du Plessis, 2000; Valkin, 1994). An embedded mixed-method design (Delpont & Fouche, 2011) was implemented with regard to the empirical investigation of group work. The qualitative paradigm or construction approach was combined with the quantitative approach because they have complementary strengths (Baumgartner & Williams, 2014; Delpont & Fouche, 2011; Sarantakos, 2005; Silverman, 2008).

### *Participants and Sampling*

Six disadvantaged individuals (females) of the Greenspark community in Fochville were the participants for the study. The program was open to anybody from the community to attend. Five to seven members are ideal when treatment group work is undertaken (Nicholas et al., 2010; Toseland & Rivas, 2014) because the group should be small enough to allow it to accomplish its tasks, yet large enough to permit members to have a positive experience (Corey, 2012; Nicholas et al., 2010). The ages of participants varied from 22 to 45 years. Their occupations varied; two group members were shelf packers for different companies, a court clerk, a teacher at a nursery school, an assistant who helps with brick work, and the lastly an administrative official. The respondents were interested in being empowered as leaders while being members of a group. Persons to partake in the group sessions were obtained as a result of prior involvement of the researcher in the community. The participants made their own voluntary informed choice to be in the group after they had seen the advertisement. They also participated in a meeting with the researcher before the group work sessions started.

The participants were sampled by using a nonprobability sampling technique, namely, purposive sampling, and is based on the judgment of the researcher and is composed of elements that contain the most characteristic, representative attributes of the population that best serve the purpose of the study (Strydom, 2011).

### *Procedures*

Pamphlets were distributed in the community advertising the development of leadership in the community. Community

members with this need came forward for the leadership group work program. The researcher met these community members on a specific date and time and after the group meeting all six persons declared themselves willing to participate in the study. After the sessions, the researcher was interested to know how the group influenced the individual group members (Jackson, 2003). A tentative program was cast that was evaluated by two external consultants and the group members.

### *Data Collection*

Data were gathered through group interviews that were performed with participants. All interviews were performed in Afrikaans, the home language of all participants. Besides information from normal group discussion, video recordings were made of the group sessions, as well as verbatim transcriptions of the videos. Field notes were taken and observations were employed in this phase of the study.

### *Data Analysis*

The need for leadership came up in a community meeting that was held in Greenspark, a predominantly mixed race (colored) neighborhood in the North West. The subject "leadership" was introduced and the conclusion of the meeting was that leadership in their community was inadequate and needed to be addressed. While founding a community forum in the area, it became evident that the problems the community faces were definitely related to leadership. The possibility of a narrative approach group work empowerment program for developing leadership in this community was therefore investigated. A needs assessment was performed to determine the needs of the people for a leadership development program.

### *Trustworthiness*

For data collection and processing, video recordings (verbatim transcriptions were made of the videos) were used during the group discussions. Field notes and observations were used to collect data from the interviews and were also used to improve the validity and reliability of the research. Two external consultants evaluated the group's experiences in the group work process with the same questionnaire that was compiled by the researchers. The group members evaluated the group outcome for themselves and used the researcher's self-compiled questionnaire. The external consultants had separate meetings with the group in which the same questions were discussed and cross-checked. The external consultants each wrote a report after they met with the group. The conclusions were systematically drawn from the reports and researchers' own observations. The two external consultants' reports were consolidated into one set of answers and cross-checked for possible misunderstandings or misinterpretations. An evaluation of the program was performed by the group members in concerning the degree to which the program contributed to expanding the

**Table 1.** Description of the Structure of the Group Work Program (Ubbink, 2005).

Session	Objective	Procedure
1	Introducing the group work process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Obtained permission to do the research</li> <li>• Compiled rules with reference to social construction</li> <li>• Externalized group work process</li> <li>• “Wonder” question and reflection</li> </ul>
2	Externalizing the problem-filled story	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reference to social construction of group</li> <li>• Externalizing with film “Lion King”</li> <li>• Questioning with regard to the associations of group members</li> <li>• Reflection</li> </ul>
3	Dealing with letters about relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Admission of new group member (group decided on closed group)</li> <li>• Deal with the letters and the relationships</li> <li>• Reflection leadership characteristics in the “Lion King” film</li> </ul>
4	Leadership characteristics in the film “Lion King”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Link up with social construction of group</li> <li>• Leadership characteristics in the “Lion King” film</li> <li>• Deal with leadership characteristics of group members</li> <li>• Deal with leadership characteristics on recruitment pamphlet</li> </ul>
5	Collage on leadership characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Link up with social construction of group</li> <li>• Make a collage of leadership</li> <li>• Presentation of collage</li> <li>• Reflection</li> </ul>
6	A metaphor of the life of the group member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Link up with social construction of group</li> <li>• Explanation of metaphors</li> <li>• Reflection</li> </ul>
7	Leadership characteristics of the group/members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Link up with social construction of group</li> <li>• Present metaphor to group</li> <li>• Reflection</li> </ul>
8	Conclusion ritual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making practical arrangements for conclusion—(when, where, and how will they will get there, what to expect, and where the children will stay, etc.)</li> <li>• Compiled a certificate for group members—proof that they attended the group work sessions and giving them credit for their part in the group work process</li> <li>• Socialize and enjoy together. An animal farm was visited followed by dinner at a Casino. This was a new experience for most of the people because they never had the money or transport to experience it</li> <li>• Plans for follow-up groups. The group talked about the needs they think the people in their community have. It was decided to advertise group work. One of the group members will lead and will facilitate the group and the researcher will act as part of the group</li> </ul>

knowledge of the group members about themselves and leaders.

A qualified and accredited translator was used to translate the Afrikaans narratives into English. An Afrikaans language editor translated the English back into Afrikaans, in order to see that the narratives still conveyed the same meaning. In cases where the translations were not exactly correct, it was referred back to the translator.

### *Ethical Aspects*

The research was approved by the ethics committee of the North-West University in SA with the approval number 04K06. The ethical issues that were taken into consideration in this study were respect for the group and the individual group members, the relevance and value of the study, scientific integrity, to avoid the risk of harm and the likelihood of benefit, verbal and written informed consent, distributive justice, professional competence, privacy, and confidentiality. One of the researchers was always available to give individual counseling

after group sessions to address any problems that might arise during sessions. No form of intimidation was exercised toward participation (Strydom, 2011b). The group sessions were held in the local nursery school which can be considered a safe venue in close proximity to their children and their homes.

### **Findings**

The findings and data are a result of a literature analysis, external consultants' evaluation of the group's experiences in the group work process, and the group members use of a self-compiled questionnaire as well as the researchers' own observations. The conclusions were systematically drawn from the literature analysis reports and of the two external consultants, the results on the questionnaire and as well as of the researchers' own observations.

The departure of the narrative approach was performed by means of a literature analysis. From the literature analysis, it became clear that the narrative approach does not work with strategies, but with responsibilities, in which each individual

takes responsibility for his or her own social construction, which includes his or her choices for life (Maree, 2007; White & Epston, 1990). The narrative metaphor leads us to think about people's lives as stories and to work with them to experience their life stories in ways that are meaningful and fulfilling. Although the narrative method is primarily used in therapy, the same assumptions and principles are also applied in the context of group work development. A postmodern rather than modernistic approach is followed. The postmodern approach advocates the belief that events and experiences in everyday life have a direct impact on the development of the "self" (Maree, 2007; Ubbink, 2005; White & Epston, 1990). The researcher also subscribes to the beliefs that members of the community must play an active part in the identification of their own needs and can only be motivated and empowered through their own real-time experiences and achievements. The effects of a narrative approach to group work in the social work environment are thus studied with a view to self-development and self-empowerment.

Two external consultants evaluated the group's experiences in the group work process as the experience of experts should never be underestimated (Roux, 2002). It is interesting to note that no drastic differences in answers were obtained between the two external evaluations even though one was performed in a modernistic way and the other in a postmodernistic way. The following conclusions could be drawn from the evaluation reports by both external consultants regardless of the approach they followed:

According to external consultants' reports, the group members decided to join the group to improve their leadership characteristics. They found the group to be an excellent medium through which they could get to know and discover themselves. The film "Lion King" was an excellent aid that evoked emotions among the group members and the protected atmosphere in the group contributed to people moving out from behind the masks of their past. During the evaluation, members emphasized the fact that they were given the opportunity to get to know themselves, could voice their feelings and opinions, could tell their story, and could experience the support and protection of the group. From the reports of the external consultants, the film was an excellent method by which to externalize problems.

Additionally, from the report, external consultants showed that by reflecting in a group, the members of the group can be influenced positively during the narrative approach. Alternative ideas had been put on the table as a result of reflection and can lead to stories being socially constructed. Certain aspects were brought into play that many group members were unaware of and this stimulated the other members in the group. This led to an improved self-image, self-confidence, and understanding of other's problems.

The external consultants found that group sessions empowered the group members to act with self-confidence, to stand for something, and to assert themselves in various situations. Examples of feedback from the group members were: "Yes, I can now perform as a leader" (Group 1), "I now believe in

myself," and "I can now take a stand" (translated from Afrikaans).

The external consultants remarked on the success of the group work project that within the Greenspark community, these leaders can start empowering others, as the statement "Yes, I can now perform as a leader" indicates their willingness to empower others. In doing that, they can help build a well-functioning community. The narrative objectives, being to guide people in discovering alternative "truths" about themselves and to enable them to make their own decisions concerning their lives, were clearly achieved during the group sessions. The group members were able to reconstruct their "story" of choice rather than the problem-drenched story remaining the dominant one in the individuals' lives.

During the group meetings, the external consultants reported that the group members showed that it was never assumed that certain individuals present were experts on the lives of others and this was perceived as positive. This is because, during the duration of the group, neither group member nor the group facilitator indicated to others that they are experts of the lives of other group members. Therefore, an overall supportive environment was created to contribute to the success of the group work program.

It can therefore be said that the evaluation performed by the external consultants agreed that the group sessions had equipped and empowered the members to act as group facilitators and take the lead in future empowerment groups. With their self-confidence and leadership characteristics that were developed, they could easily act with confidence within their families, the church, and the broader community. Data were further collected from a questionnaire.

A self-compiled questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data. Closed questions were used in the provided questionnaire. The closed questions are depicted in column 2 of Table 2. In every case, the group member had to select the alternative that best described his or her own experience. The alternatives were as follows: "to a large extent" (3), "to some extent" (2), or "not at all" (1). The responses are also depicted in Table 2 and were calculated in terms of the number of evaluators, the frequency being all six participants being the total number of responses received, and a category mark being the marks allocated multiplied by the total number of respondents which were multiplied by 3. The latter was to ensure a maximum mark of 18 which would be calculated as 100%. The last column represents a percentage, being the category mark divided by the maximum of 18.

In reply to the question in the self-compiled questionnaire concerning the degree to which the program contributed to expanding the knowledge of the group members about themselves and leadership, 89% of the group members felt that they were leaders with a "voice." Some of them were unaware of the potential that had been evoked inside them. On a question regarding the degree to which the group sessions had helped group members in identifying their leadership characteristics, 89% of the group members indicated that they realized that they first needed to investigate their "inner self" before they

**Table 2.** Evaluation of the Program by Group Members.

Sessions	Question	Number of Evaluators	Category Mark	%
1	Do you believe leadership is a problem in your community?	6 × 3 = 18	17	94
2	Did you join the group work program because you experienced a problem with your leadership?	6 × 3 = 18	16	89
3	To what extent did the program broaden your understanding of leadership?	6 × 3 = 18	16	89
4	To what extent did your knowledge about leadership improve?	6 × 3 = 18	17	94
5	Did the group sessions give clear indications what leaders have to comply with?	6 × 3 = 18	14	77
6	Did the film/collage "Lion King" influence your experience of leadership?	6 × 3 = 18	18	100
7	To what extent did the group sessions help you to identify your leadership qualities so that you could take the lead?	6 × 3 = 18	16	89
8	Did you become aware of any characteristics during the program that you were never aware of before?	6 × 3 = 18	17	94
9	To what extent do you now have the confidence to take the lead in an educational program for leaders?	6 × 3 = 18	16	89
10	Did you in any way experience that the program empowered you as a leader?	6 × 3 = 18	18	100
11	Will you recommend this program to future leaders?	6 × 3 = 18	18	100

could take lead. Characteristics that were identified were inter alia, self-honesty, perseverance, self-confidence, responsibility, and good listening skills. A question was put to the group members as to whether they became aware of any characteristics during the group sessions which they previously were not aware of and whether they could consider it as an alternative in their leadership role. To this question, 94% of the group members indicated the following characteristics: "I could stick to my point of view," "I can listen to people's problems and help them," "accept that I can educate and manage my child," and "can now live my leadership spontaneously to the full, as well as the changes that accompany it".

On a question in the self-compiled questionnaire concerning the degree to which the group members now have the

confidence to take the initiative in a training program for leaders, 89% indicated that they felt equipped as a result of the program and felt competent to manage a group. Their fears were dispelled and they did not feel self-conscious about what others thought of them. A further question to the group was whether they felt in any way empowered as leaders through attending the group sessions. To this question, 100% of the group members indicated that they had taken control over themselves and their leadership. Some of them expressed the view that they could motivate and support others and make decisions on their own.

The researcher had made her own observations in the empowerment narrative leadership program for a disadvantaged community that the research provides social workers with a method with regard to empowering people from previously disadvantaged communities through a narrative approach to group work from a postmodern and constructivism point of view. It gives a bird's eye view of the process involved in this paradigm where the social worker uses the narrative approach to more broadly describe the world of the group members and to create new narratives as well as new possibilities and meanings in the lives of group members and groups. The social worker facilitates the group narrative and experiences as well as molds the lives of everyone in the group, including that of the social worker himself or herself.

## Discussion and Application to Practice

The following guidelines regarding the group work process based on the narrative approach that is in bedded in social constructivist theory will be discussed, as well as applications to practice.

From a social constructivist point of view, themes and experiences that come to the fore during the group dialogues will be given priority to be discussed in group context. These themes and experiences are in line with time and dates of their life stories. Doing it this way, the group members must be made aware that they are the experts in the process which emphasizes the idea of "starting where the client is" (Toseland & Rivas, 2014).

Some of the group members' lives were enriched in such a way that they had enough self-confidence to start their own group sessions as facilitators. To understand the narrative approach and program, the structure of the group and management of the group processes are dealt with during the first group session as will be performed with other treatment groups (Toseland & Rivas, 2014). White (2000, p. 6) describes that process as follows: "narrative therapy engages with the idea that the establishment of identity is both a project and an achievement that takes place in the social domain, not a manifestation of specific properties of individuals that are given in particular accounts of 'human nature,' or something that evolves according to the rules of whatever it is that this 'human nature' is taken to be. According to this notion of identity, the development of a sense of personal authenticity is the outcome of social processes in which specific claim about one's identity—claims

are socially negotiated—are acknowledged or ‘verified’ by others.”

In Group Session 2, the film “The Lion King” was shown to the participants to externalize the problem-drenched story. The purpose was to externalize the problem pertaining to leadership, so that the person is separated from the problem (Van Heerden, 1996) and to question, in the group discussion, the leadership and the skills that come forth in the film. These stories that were told in the group were encompassed by problems; therefore, it was vital for participants to externalize what they saw.

Externalization is exceptional of the narrative approach and forms an integral part of the narrative process in group work. Externalizing practices are alternatives to internalizing practices. Externalizing locates problems not within individuals but as products of culture and history (Ricks et al., 2014; Robinson et al., 2015).

Specific aids can be used in the externalization process. In the course of this program, a movie was used as metaphor. With the film the “Lion King,” which has an African theme and served as a means to bring different cultures together, the participants could associate themselves to one of the characters in the movie without adding racial difference. It also served as a means to give participants the opportunity to associate with an animal and in that way they could identify leadership skills and externalize it. One of the group members indicated that the movie enriched her life in that it showed her aspects of what she do not want to be and the type of leader that she wants to be. This shows that certain aspects that cannot be verbalized by a group member can be enlightened by the use of metaphors.

To empower group members in practice, the concept of reflecting within the group adds value and enhances the process as it allows members to reflect on the dialogue of other group members among each other, while at the same time assisting understanding and externalizing the problem (Robinson et al., 2015).

In the narrative approach, deconstruction and reconstruction are a continuous process in the group dialogue and the group process as a whole. Narrative therapy is concerned with discovering, acknowledging, and “taking apart” (deconstructing) the beliefs, ideas, and practices of the broader culture in which the group lives, therefore externalizing and exposing the problem and the problem story (Morgan, 2000). With the fifth group session, group members made a collage for personal leadership skills. The rationale of the session was to facilitate the group to develop as a whole and to develop personal leadership skills. The development forms part of the continuous construction and deconstruction of the group member’s reality.

A good illustration of narrative approach’s deconstruction and reconstruction process can be given on the basis of this group session where the entire group used the individual group member collage performance for leadership. As part of the group discussion, the group put leadership in the context of the community. The existence of differences in leadership qualities was touched on and discussed; if differences were present

between the leader and the community, the group discussed how it should be dealt with. The alternative ways to deal with differences in a community were discussed and the outcomes were that there will be growth in people if differences are dealt with well. The group also came to the conclusion that differences form part of life and bring forth new ideas and energy. The experience of one of the members was that her insecurities changed to self-confidence which was noticed by her employer and other community members who acknowledged and gave her positive feedback.

Construction of preferred stories almost always goes hand in hand with the process of deconstruction (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Mertz, 2014). As stated by Lopesa et al. (2014, p. 665): “During the deconstruction phase, the central goal is to understand the problem in its context, circumstances, assumptions, effects, and influence on the person’s life in an attempt to separate the problem from the person (mainly using externalization). In the reconstruction phase, the main goal is to expand the narrative elaboration of novelties, or experiences that fall outside the domain of the problem-saturated narrative, gradually facilitating the emergence of an alternative self-narrative.” Each group member was asked to bring a metaphor of their lives to the sixth group session. The metaphor was used for the purpose of externalization. The deconstruction of the metaphor by the group members could still highlight unique outcomes in the group member’s story, leading to the group member’s development of an alternative self-narrative. One of the group members’ remarks during the group discussion was that “We learned and discovered something . . . I am a different person” (translated from Afrikaans).

The members acknowledged that they now understood the following alternative leadership characteristics: A leader must be “responsible,” must have “self-confidence,” is “disciplined,” must be “on time,” is “always prepared,” and must be well-dressed.

Group work by means of the narrative approach in social work is recommended because it has become evident from this study that a rich description of the lives of people can be gained. One of the group members responded so well to the narrative approach that the change in her was noticed by her employer and she became headmistress of a nursery school.

The process in the narrative approach of people’s description of their life and experiences gives meaning to the lives of people and influences what they do and how they live. The deduction can be made that narrative therapy is “culture friendly” as the positive outcomes of this group work program was high even though the social worker and group members were from different cultural backgrounds. This relates to Ricks et al. (2014) who state that narrative therapy can be beneficial in multiple populations and settings.

It is evident from the evaluation that empowerment is a process through which the client system is helped to identify and expand his or her strengths or abilities. Group work contributed to developing the “inner self” in the group members into new stories through which they could discover their strengths by way of interaction. This, in turn, provided them

with the confidence to go out into their community as leaders and initiate groups of their own.

Furthermore, according to the evaluations, externalizing the problem-drenched story contributed considerably to enriched descriptions of the group and its members. The distance that was created by externalization in the group work process gave the group members the ability to discover more about themselves and to deconstruct and reconstruct existing problems. The group members helped one another to identify alternative solutions, and members are challenged to question discourse established by culture and the community. The group members could take on leadership roles and the group work project can be repeated as an intervention in future to improve the function of individuals.

The empowerment of individuals and communities in SA is of the essence. Group work from a narrative approach may be considered the way by which individuals, groups, as well as communities could be empowered, especially from the point of view of developing their leadership abilities.

### Limitations of the Study

For the sake of scientific research, the most important limitations of this study will be highlighted:

The uncertainty of the researcher, who does not have experience with group work from a postmodern narrative approach, could have played a role in managing the group work leadership development program from an empowerment approach.

The modernist approach that is always followed with a group work development program could have had an impact on the researcher and on the group members during the group work process. The general view in the community is that the contents of a program already exist and are included.

The participation of the group and the creation of the content of the program itself were strange to the group members and could possibly lead to the idea that the researcher did not really know what the content was and that he had to compensate for it. The association with the group members' social construction further strengthened this and the actions and participation of some group members were dominant. The outcome of this association to social construction was, however, positive for the group members, especially to come to this on their own—that which they had a need for.

The “language” in more than one sense was an adjustment for the researcher. That which was really meant with the words and the content that was given to it was a discovery in itself. The use of language and the use of words by certain group members differ significantly from those of the researcher and the rest of the group members. The way in which the group members interpreted each other's language influenced the researcher to stay calm, and through reflection and questioning the content became clearer. With the postmodern approach of relativism and questioning, it could be handled in the group.

Group work from the narrative approach has been applied in this particular community. Limitations in the research will be there. With qualitative research, the outcomes as well as the

interpretations are unique and limited to the research. It cannot be generalized.

The narrative approach was initially strange to the group members, but it benefited them in the end to comply with their own social constructions. The decision of the group to exclude a new member was strange to the group worker, although the group was comfortable with it. Even though an accredited translator was used, there is a possibility that some of the nuances were lost in the translation process.

Further the lack of member checking and triangulation in the research can be a limitation to the credibility and/or validity of how accurately the account represents the participants' realities in the research.

Changes were observed in the group, but no data were really gathered about improvements in client's lives as a result of the group work experience. Future research can address this limitation, by repeating the research and adding the research aspect of investigating the outcomes and improvements in group members' lives as a result of the narrative group work experience.

Future quantitative research regarding the real value and applicability of the narrative approach in culture-sensitive multicultural countries like SA is needed to develop and implement this approach further.

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