

The Frames of Our Cultural Narratives: How Neurobiology and Metaphorical Frames Inform the Work of Wraparound.

“ It may have to be believed to be seen.” –Native American saying (Deloria, 1973)

Wraparound is a widely used, value-based process of creating teams of families, youth, professionals, natural supports, and community members which are organized by a collaborative team process to develop and conduct need-driven, individualized, culturally-responsive, strength-based plans to address the needs of children and youth at risk and their families (VanDenBerg, Bruns, and Burchard 2003). As a wraparound provider, when I travel to a conference and listen to a stranger talk about his wraparound experience, he need only use a few words such as, “hard to find community resources,” “the difficulty of really using strengths,” “It’s a process,” and “fidelity” to readily communicate the complex set of experiences we both have had working in wraparound. I believe that understanding the neurobiological and conceptual processes that create the shared meanings of the words we use in practice will contribute to the adoption of more effective applications of the wraparound process.

These words, exchanged with a fellow practitioner of wraparound, are expressions of shared understandings or ‘frames’ as first defined by the linguist, Charles Fillmore (1989). These frames are a reflection of shared neurobiological structures that we develop as a result of our parallel experiences. For example, the role of the child and family team facilitator and the conceptualization of the use of natural resources are two frames shared by those whose parallel activities in wraparound have created parallel neurobiological structure of those experiences. George Lakoff, a cognitive linguist, points out that, “Words are defined relative to frames and conceptual metaphors. Language “fits reality” to the extent that it fits our body and brain based understanding of that reality.” (Lakoff 2008 p. 15). Lakoff argues that we reason and experience the world through these frames rather than by what is a false belief that we access irreducible objective representations of reality, the facts, in our brains. The frames communicated through the words ‘child and family team leader’ and ‘natural resources’ are defined by the neurobiological recording our experience that constrains and constitutes how we think in the wraparound process.

There is, also, an all-important emotional component to our thinking about our work in wraparound. Antonio Damasio’s *The Feeling of What Happens* 1999 describes

the frames that occur within our cultural narratives as maps that traverse our conscious and unconscious experience. They are both created by our (internal and external) experience and, in turn, are used to understand our experience. Damasio work reports that these maps of neuronal bundlings have “somatic markers” of emotional experience that result in synaptic emotional records being bundled together with our ideas. According to Damasio, our conscious and unconscious understanding is imbued with emotions that have a significant roll is guiding our thinking in the direction of a sense of well being and safety and away from distress and danger.

Our Bi-Conceptual Frames

Larger frames are narratives, or cultural stories, which consciously and unconsciously guide us every day. “ Narratives are frames that tell a story.... A narrative has a point to it, a moral. Its about how you should live your life ----or how you shouldn't.” (Lakoff 2008 p 250). In *Thinking Points*, 2006, George Lakoff states that there are, in our culture, two prototypical metaphoric narratives, utilizing a common family frame. These two narratives compose a dominant bi-conceptual moral understanding, which informs much of our thought. On the one hand, there is the narrative of the strict father family characterized by loyal devotion, self-reliance (related to the narrative of rugged individualism), and self-control. In this family, obedience is rewarded and disobedience is punished. On the other hand, there is the narrative about a nurturant parent family whose actions are guided by empathy and responsibility toward others. Particularly relevant to our work in wraparound is the fact that we reason by both these narratives each of which has a moral relating to how we, or others we deal with, should lead our lives. In addition each narrative has related “somatic markers” which provide a sense of well being or distress to our experience of these narrative frames. I believe that understanding that we think in terms of these bi-conceptual narratives frames will supports our efforts to facilitate change for the families we work with and the communities we work in. One direct application of working with frames is related to the use of the concept of strengths in wraparound.

The Concept of Strength in Bi-Conceptual Frames

Strength is a common word from standard (culturally grounded) discourse which several decades ago was introduced in client-centered program delivery. Its emergence in the lexicon of the helping profession reflected a different conceptualization, in line with psychological thinking, that moved away from the uncovering of inherent pathology to building on existing ego and related social competencies. Wraparound's embrace of a strengths approach, connecting family members skills, interests, beliefs, and traits with goal related activities, was an important strategic component in its development. But it is not the meaning of the word strength (defined by Microsoft Word's dictionary as: "the physical or mental power that makes something or somebody strong") or the connection of skills and interest to meeting family needs alone through which I readily can understand a newly acquainted fellow wraparound practitioner when he says, "it's really hard to stay strength-based." Rather, I am informed by shared and embodied fundamental, cultural narrative frames that align around our strength related experiences and that have been captured in our parallel, somatically marked neurobiological brain structures.

The concept of strength, according to cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson 1980, has its origin in infancy. At that time, our embodied experiences including our efforts exerted toward a desired end, whether or not achieved, are captured neuronally and, in a very primitive manner, form mappings or an early cognitive concept of the meaning of strength. It is to these embodied concepts that later social experiences are mapped by more elaborated and differentiated neuronal bundlings and connections. Marco Iacoboni (2008), *Mirroring People: The New Science of How We Connect with Others*, describes the function of "mirror neurons" which from infancy encode our embodied experience of other in our brains in a way that allows us to give meaning to our social relations.

From a cognitive linguistic perspective, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) describe a word such as strength as an ontological metaphor. Strength is metaphorically understood as an entity or, more commonly, a 'thing', which both constrains and constitutes an embodied, culturally grounded concept. In this way, socially experienced strength

becomes understood as something used by someone to change a state (usually from a less to a more desired state). This process of someone or something using strength to change a state is a fundamental narrative providing structure to much of our thinking. For example, a wraparound plan uses a family's 'strengths' to accomplish its goals or a parent uses her strength to change a child's behavior from one state to another.

Participants in wraparound carry and define experience through a bi-conceptual lens, both strict father and nurturant parent concepts. "Neural binding" (Lakoff 2008 p 25 – 26) is a process that links the central concepts of strength in the wraparound activity to each of the bi-conceptual, parental frames. Marco Iocaboni 2008 (p 77) describes one manifestation of this process of connection through neural binding as "logically related" sequences of mirror neurons that "are probably the key neuronal elements for understanding the intentions associated with the observed action." Neurobiological structures, therefore, not only provide for the conceptual connection of strength to these cultural frames but also allow us to understand the intention of potential or observed application of strengths by parents, youth, and wraparound team members.

The Strict Father Strength

All involved in the wraparound experience are subject to the strict father and nurturant parent narratives. In our culture there is a dominance of the powerful strict father concept of strength characterized by loyalty, control, obedience, and volitional self-determination. These concepts readily map to the perception that the strengths of professional interventions as well as successful parenting are related to a focus on problem resolution, following directions, expert leadership, self-control, and will power. I have often heard the comment from a team member about a parent "The problem is she does not set limits with her children." The strict father narrative is: If the parent wanted to stop the behavior, used self-control, and followed our directions, the problem would be solved. It is usually these very team participants who see their role as setting limits with the parent as the best path to the parent's development of better self-control and self-responsibility. The strict father metaphorical concept of strength: strength is like dominance, strength is like obedience, and strength is like self-control, commonly provides a powerful frame for understanding the best the way to change from one state to

another state. This frame is also experienced with its accompanying somatic markers. Wraparound team members accessing strict father concepts sense that they will feel better if the parent can use self-control, show her dominance, and secure the child's obedience, since strict father activity is believed to be the right thing to do to ensure well being in the family.

The strict father cultural narrative is particularly relevant to the large number of women and children participating in wraparound who have experienced the bodily and socially compelling impact of domestic violence and abuse. For traumatized woman and children, the strict father frame of strengths including, obedience, dominance, and self-control have been imbued with bodily and social experiences that create intense somatic markers, profound survival-related emotions, for which a sense of well being means something quite different than those on the wraparound team who do not share similarly socially organized or somatically imbued strict father frames. These women and children need wraparound team facilitators who are aware of how all team members' thinking is organized by these cultural frames, both charged and uncharged by violence. They also need wraparound team facilitators who can direct team members to engage in a process that helps them to define and manifest strength in terms of the other cultural frame defined by Lakoff as the nurturant parent whose strength is related to empathetic responsibility as a means of changing things from one state to a more desired state.

The Nurturant Parent Strength

In order to implement the nurturant parent familial concepts in wraparound and to change the thinking and consequent behaviors of participating families, it is instructive to identify an even more basic narrative structure and consider how significant roles are framed in relation to this structure. Underlying our strict father and nurturant parent cultural family narratives is a fundamental narrative that family life proceeds on a path or journey which starts from a beginning point, involves providing for well being along the way, contains barriers, or adversity, that must be overcome, (using strengths), and works toward a goal, perhaps grandchildren, having children go to college, retirement or some version of the American Dream.

The nurturant parent narrative states that along this journey, through empathy, we share with others an awareness that the experiences of others are, in ways, both different and similar to our own. It also offers that, on the journey, the responsibility we have for others is driven not just by the desire to provide care but an understanding of the interdependent nature of the solutions that create a genuine and lasting sense well being. The wraparound team facilitator's task is to help both the family and team members along the path of lived experience in a manner that truly enhances the family's well being by reflectively and selectively using a nurturant parent frame. The nurturant parent narrative instructs the team facilitator to foster opportunities for empathetic awareness of the needs of others (the child, the parent, or other team members) and for self-awareness by the parent, child, and team member of their own needs. The selection of actions by team and family members, informed by this type of mutual awareness, will be primarily according to a sense of responsiveness to others (nurturant parent responsibility) rather than effort to ensure that others respond obediently (strict father) to what they are being told.

It is important for the team facilitator to understand that team members (including even traumatized children and parents and the team facilitator himself) can experience, via somatic markers, a sense of well being attached to the culturally dominant frame of strict father strengths. Helping a team develop its use of nurturant parent strength, therefore, also means managing the disequilibrium and discomfort experienced turning away from a reliance on strict father frames and building up a sense of well being and new equilibrium with the adoption of nurturant parent frames. This emotional sense of well being associated with a nurturant parent narrative does not have to be invented. Like its cognitive component, it has been bundled neurobiologically into our brains starting from our infancy when our parents' responsive cueing was the strength that moved us from a sense of distress to a sense of well being and comfort. The team facilitator can draw on these existing responsible and responsive nurturant neurobiologically-based frames by fidelity to the wraparound process and through displaying courageous and persistent nurturant parent strength as the team facilitator and leader.

Two primary functions for a wraparound team facilitator are modeling (a powerful tool since, as Iacoboni 2008 states, mirror neurons are activated simply by

observing the intentional behavior of others) the nurturant parent frame and supporting of nurturant parent strengths related activities of parents and team members. This activity is illustrated, for example, in a situation where a child welfare worker has concerns about a parent not being home to supervise her anxious and depressed 11-year-old daughter after school. The wraparound team facilitator uses the team meeting to have the mother talk about how she worries about her child, how the extra money she earns working later in the afternoon pays for increased cost of utilities, and about she felt alone as a child when her mother had to work at night. The facilitator supports the mother's expressions of awareness of the child's experience and desire for her sense of security as strengths to find a solution for her daughter's afternoon needs. The facilitator also encourages the child welfare worker to share her worries about the child's security rather than make prescriptive directions to the mother. In doing so, the team leader's nurturant intent is to change the child welfare worker's frame from threatening and blaming in order to obtain compliance to a more nurturant parent perspective which recognizes the parent's real feelings about the child, the complex nature of decision making, and the parent's desire to do the right thing for her child as strengths to be used to find ways to meet the child's needs.

Simultaneously, the team facilitator models for and engenders in the child welfare worker an emotionally-based, somatically-marked sense that she is doing the right thing by understanding the complexity of the mother situation and by validating the mother's love and worry about her child. The team facilitator acts on the frame that by the mother's sharing of her concerns and identifying her needs which are then accepted, validated, and shared by other team members (strength of empathy), the mother and the team will be effective in finding a solution (strength of mutual responsibility) to this need that will support her child's well being and safety. As the child welfare worker connects nurturant parent responsibility with sustainable and empowering parental outcomes she will strengthen her sense of doing the right thing and feel more assured about the maintenance of the child's well being.

Conclusion

A reflective awareness of how thoughts and emotions, accessed in wraparound, are constructed and constrained by somatically marked, conscious and unconscious

frames is applicable to other aspects of wraparound practice. For instance, the concept of collaboration is neuronally bound in a positive way, with long term potential, to nurturant parent responsibility and, much more weakly, to strict father conceptual structures. In terms of roles, the frames of team facilitator, parent, and child welfare worker, for example, can often be neuronally connected to more fundamental narrative frames of hero, victim, and villain respectively. These hero, victim, and villain frames can greatly impair successful wraparound unless the team members reframe their roles in a manner in which power and responsibility are more effectively shared.

There is significant and growing consensus that these neurologically defined frames are, in great part, not present in our day-to-day consciousness (Edelman 2004, Lakoff 2008, Rock 2005, Westen 2007, and Damasio 1999). Wraparound facilitators and managers must, therefore, strive to expand their own and team members' reflective awareness of the cultural frames and conceptual metaphors that guide their thinking, decision-making, and behavior. As we become more reflectively aware of how meaning is brought to words and experience in our work and our lives, we will be able to create and facilitate wraparound experiences that truly engender empowerment and empathetically guide responsibility in our work with families and communities.

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