

Narratives of Belonging Workshop

Bias and Narratives October 27, 2020

Danielle Koresky, MA, BA, RECE.C

What's your story and why does it matter?

Who do you want to be? Why do you do the things you do? Where do these ideas come from? Much of what we think about ourselves and the views we develop come from our family of origin or the family we were raised in. Now some of you are thinking, "Yay" and some of you are thinking, "Oh crap!" But either way, whether we want to admit it or not, we are partly who we are because of our experiences. When we grow up and physically leave our family's home, some of the views we developed there stay with us for our whole life. Is that a good thing? Or are there things you want to change? Do you even know? Throughout this workshop we are going to be talking about our narrative, our biases, how to identify what they are and how we can change them if we want to. It's not easy, but you can. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's talk about one of the scary truths about changing yourself. Let's say there are things we want to change about our narrative or our own personal story and it's time to move out of our childhood home. So at this point, we meet new people, land a new job, get some new ideas, work on ourselves and make those positive changes or at least some of them because we know that working on ourselves is an ongoing process. But even if you make progress with this positive change in yourself, it can still feel like a setback when you're heading back to your childhood home for a holiday and you haven't seen your family for a while and almost immediately your insecure childhood-self pops out in your parent's living room and you're 37 years old!! What's going on??

Now I don't want you to call your parents after this workshop and get upset with them, that's not what this is about.it's about understanding our own story, how we got this story, what biases it may include and how we can change ourselves if we want to.

Where does your narrative come from?

So let's start at the beginning. It is a fact that every family member is emotionally affected by the other members of our family. Whether we like it or not, each family member's personality develops in relation and response to the other personalities in that family. The interactions within your family of origin teach you directly and indirectly how to respond to the world (indirectly can be sneaky) - think about a parent who tells her child that there are certain children who she can't invite to her

birthday party. Why are certain kids left out? Does this parent see some kids as different to hers? Why? Either way, by excluding certain people in her child's life, she is indirectly teaching her child how to respond to people in a negative way.

The family as a system

The way you communicate, develop relationships, solve problems and interact with people who are different than you was largely shaped by the family who raised you. Why is this? Well think about it, it makes sense. Dr. Bowen talked about the family as a system. He said that families are systems of interconnected and interdependent individuals. So if something happens to one family member, it affects the whole family. One common example is when people get divorced and then re-married and the family becomes blended, kids from each of the two parents all living under one roof now, well you can see how that decision affects everyone in the family system. Another example is, imagine in a different family there are two teenagers and teenager A is excelling life (according to their parent's definition of excelling) and teenager B is not. Teenager A's behaviour will affect teenager B's behaviour and vice versa. The more teenager B is unsuccessful, it might make teenager A feel the pressure of trying even harder so they don't disappoint their parents. And the more teenager A succeeds, the worse teenager B feels and maybe even gives up trying all together. Think about your own family, when something has happened to one of your family members, whether it was a positive thing or a negative one. Did it affect your family system? It is natural for families to strive to do things the same as they've always done because they want to feel that equilibrium in the family. It's scary for many of us to be different. We worry about being accepted for our differences but we also worry that by making a change in ourselves or our ideas it will rock or upset our family system. Some ways to upset our family system are things like: asking questions (example), challenging family rules (example), changing yourself or responding in ways that are different from the ways of your family of origin. I grew up with very loving parents but my mom was a slightly Authoritarian parent. In our house, we had love, we had laughter, but when trouble erupted, my sister and I had to do what my mother said, no if's, ands or but's. You know why?.. Because she said so. So there was me in my mid 20's... finished 4 years of University with an English degree thinking I know all the stuff but I can't get a job and I loved being with children so I decide to enrol in the ECE program at St. Clair. In my classes, I started learn about independent thinking, sharing control, helping kids to solve their own problems and it changed my life! When I had children of my own, I used these concepts that I learned in the ECE program to raise my children to think for themselves and not to be afraid of problems because they were an opportunity to learn. So fast forward to my mid 30's and I now have two daughters (ages 3 and 5 at the time) and one day we decide to go to my parent's house for a visit. The adults were upstairs and my girls were in the basement playing with Groovy Girl dolls. I could hear some yelling coming from the basement so I got up to see what was going on. The girls were fighting over this one doll they both liked the most, she had the nicest black wavy hair. So I sit on the ground and start talking with the girls, using the child-centred

conflict resolution with them which has worked very well for me over the years. The three of us are all talking together. Then my mom arrives in the basement and says, "Don't worry Danielle, you go upstairs and relax, I got this." My mom has a wonderful relationship with my girls. But I decided to stay in the basement to watch. My mom bent down and took the doll that they both wanted and asked the girls who had it first, then gave it to that girl, then took another doll out of the bin and handed to my other daughter and said, "Now play nicely." Then my mom looked at me and said, "See, that's how you do it." I said nothing. It was like I was 12 again and I didn't want to upset the family system. I love my mom, she's an extremely caring person but my beliefs about parenting grew to be different than hers. With the help of experience and a good ECE program, I had changed and I had learned how to respond to situations in ways that were different from those of my mom. But our original narrative and beliefs from our family of origin is strong within all of us. For the record, after my mom went back upstairs, I waited and watched my daughters start arguing again. This time, my daughters and I handled it with child-centred problem solving.

Working on yourself

So why wasn't I able to think for myself or identify and act on my own beliefs as a young adult but I could later in life? Was it just my new ECE education? I think it was more than that. New information can open your mind but to be able to be truly yourself takes more work.

By exploring your narrative from your family of origin you travel down a journey of self-awareness, self-acceptance, improved communication, new skills and more meaningful relationships. But it's difficult for some people. There are people who depend on others to provide them with a sense of worth and self-esteem which makes them less emotionally mature. Alicia Clark refers to this as being too relationship-oriented. People like this use their time and energy seeking approval from others. Adults who are relationship oriented struggle with being happy with their own decisions and they have trouble setting goals for themselves because their focus is always on pleasing others and not their own goals. Instead, it's important to be more goal-directed. To be able to feel what you want and say what you want without overly worrying about what others will think about you or criticize you is essential for positive, personal growth. And if you're goal-directed it doesn't mean ignoring the feelings and opinions of others but it's about living in a way that is truly expressive of yourself, your beliefs and your values even if they are different from your family, your partner or co-worker's beliefs. People who are goal-directed are able to think for themselves and are open to change.

Implicit and Explicit Bias

So now we know where our narrative came from and we know we want to be more goal-directed. The next step is thinking about what parts of yourself or your story you want to change. Maybe you'd like to become more open minded or less judgmental? Maybe you would like to identify your biases and get rid of them? Bias refer to

attitudes and stereotypes that we hold towards most anything, including people (Papillon, 2017). And I'm not saying it's solely the fault of our family of origin why we have certain biases; it can come from other places too such as culture or social media. But what I want to focus on is how to identify them and change them if necessary. We heard Megan tell us in her TedTalk that everyone has biases. Steffens & Jelenec, 2011 define implicit (or unconscious) bias as attitudes, stereotypes and beliefs that occur outside of our conscious awareness and control. An example of implicit gender bias could be a teacher who believes that boys are going to be better at subjects like math, science and technology and girls will be better at subjects such as English and Creative Writing. This teacher may not voice this opinion or even consciously recognize this bias but they could show it in unconscious ways such as how much effort they put into helping girls with their mathematics work or helping boys with their literacy work. With this example, this implicit bias can actually go as far as influencing children's future career paths.

One of the other problems with implicit bias is that it can become explicit. "Explicit bias" refers to the attitudes and beliefs we have about a person or group on a conscious level (Clarke, 2018). With explicit bias, individuals are aware of their prejudices and attitudes toward certain groups. And they would make obvious racist or discriminatory comments toward this particular group. This means that they surface in your conscious mind, leading you to potentially act on these thoughts.

How can we remove our biases? What tools do we need to do this?

You might not even be aware of the fact that you have this bias but most importantly, how do we remove them?

Even children can show bias. When my daughter was in 1st grade, I received a call from her teacher asking me to come into her classroom at the end of the day. She told me that there had been an incident during gym class that involved one of her classmates. This classmate named Aleena was new to the school; her and her family had just moved here from Pakistan and during a game in the gym, the teacher had asked everyone to find a partner (on a side note, I'm not a fan of asking kids to do this because I don't know about you but I was almost always picked last for these types of things so I made a promise to myself, to never let anyone feel left out, but that's a whole other rant). So anyway, the teacher tells me that her and all the young kids are in the gymnasium and once the teacher says to find a partner, most kids jump up and find a friend quickly. The teacher watched Aleena, her new student look around the room and approach a classmate to attempt to be partners with her (now remember, these kids are only in 1st grade). The girl Aleena chose moved away from her and said, "My Dad says that people like you smell funny." Then a boy chimed in, "Aleena has cooties!" Then another child repeated that. Then the teacher told me that my daughter walked up to Aleena, took her hand and turned it over to look at her palm and with a puzzled look on her face, she said, "Aleena doesn't have cooties; look there's nothing on her hand!" Then she took Aleena's hand in hers and looked up at the teacher to await the instructions of the game.

Believe in your ability to change

So I think we can all agree that because of the harmful nature of explicit or even implicit biases, it is critical to examine how we can begin to remove them in ourselves. I have a feeling we might talk about this during another one of our workshops so I will just offer a few simple ideas.

- 1) Educate yourself: Understand the definition of implicit and explicit biases, learn about other cultures or groups and what language and behaviours may come off as offensive. This new learning can come from a classroom but also through books, media and even conversations.
- 2) Get some training: Identify what your personal biases are, how they can surface, and find a training program if you need to that specifically helps you to overcome these biases.
- 3) Change your perspective: work hard to look beyond your own point of view and consider how someone else may think or feel. If a five year could do it, couldn't you?

I understand there are roadblocks that make it challenging to change but once we realize that, we can feel empowered to eliminate our biases and make positive changes in our life and in the way we treat and interact with others. Do you know where empowerment comes from? It comes from:

- Valuing yourself
- Having achievable goals
- And making a plan to reach those goals with an optimistic attitude.

What we are talking about is hard to do. Sometimes boosting your own confidence can help you to find the courage to change your narrative. So how do you do that?

- Believe in your ability to change. This is not fixed at birth. If you have a growth mindset and think you can improve, then you look at a challenge like an opportunity to learn and grow. We talk in Early Childhood Education about the mistakes that children make and how they are a rich opportunity for children to reflect and learn. So as adults, this is important too. We need to accept our mistakes and failures. People who make mistakes or fail **and keep trying anyway** are better equipped to respond to challenges in a constructive way. They learn how to try different strategies, collaborate with others, and they don't give up. So realize it won't be easy to change, accept that you're going to make mistakes along the way but don't beat yourself up about it. Abraham Maslow once said, "One can choose to go back toward safety or forward toward growth. Growth must be chosen again and again; fear must be overcome again and again."

So understand where you came from, what experiences you've had along the way to make you the person you are today. Identify your biases, so you can understand them and overcome them. Don't we want our future narrative to be something that we're proud of?

Thank you.