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Exposing Northern Exposure:An Exercise in Creating Themes

Kristin Wright

Nova Southeastern University, kristin@ssss.nova.edu

Julio Vigil

Nova Southeastern University, julio@ssss.nova.edu

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**Exposing Northern Exposure:
An Exercise in Creating Themes
by Kristin Wright and Julio Vigil**

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In qualitative research literature, several recent articles have been written which explore the relationship between clinical practice and qualitative research (Chenail, 1994; Gale, 1993; Moon, Dillon, & Sprenkle, 1990). In a similar vein, Talley, Strupp, and Butler (1994) also recently edited a book in which they question why research has previously failed to inform clinical practice. These authors attempt to bridge the communication between the research and therapeutic communities by presenting thought-provoking articles in which researchers and clinicians utilize the ideas of both professions (Chenail, 1994; Gale, 1993; Moon, Dillon, & Sprenkle, 1990; Talley, Strupp, & Butler, 1994). The consensus seems to suggest that the skills which researchers find helpful in their work may also be useful for therapists and vice versa.

As both family therapists and beginning researchers, we discovered that many of the skills which inform our therapeutic conversations with clients also serve us well in our work as researchers. Upon completing our first qualitative research project, we identified the ability to "hear," "find," or "create" themes out of the information which evolved in our work as a paramount skill. We, rather surprisingly, agreed that this skill is also primary in our work as family therapists.

Both family therapists and qualitative researchers generate a great deal of information in their work and are therefore faced with the arduous task of "doing something with it." We identify with colleagues who speak of the overwhelming confusion they experience once expected to analyze the information they have collected. Ely (1991) refers to the researcher's discomfort sitting amongst mounds and mounds of data, contemplating, "What do I do with all of this?" (p. 140). So too, the family therapist toils over what to do with the wealth of information which evolves out of a family therapy session. Unfortunately, it is quite easy as therapists and as researchers to get lost in the content of information: unable to find or create an overarching theme or pattern that connects the data. And yet, it is this "chunking" of information into meaningful constructions that we believe is one of the most important skills for both researchers and therapists alike. The goal then for both professionals is to "find some way or ways to tease out what they consider to be the essential meaning" (Ely, 1991, p. 140) of the gathered information.

This "essential meaning" (Ely, 1990, p. 140) is what we understand to be a theme or pattern. Although we are cognizant of Leininger's (1985) distinctions regarding patterns and themes, for the purposes of this paper, we simply conceptualize the two terms as interchangeable. When referring to themes and/or patterns we are referring to the significant segments of interviewee/client stories which emerge over and over again.

We propose that the ability to create themes or patterns out of information does not come naturally and instead we suggest that this skill is one which requires constant nurturing and refining. It is through our own struggles and attempts to further develop this skill that we set out to find a fun way of practicing this ability. We especially wanted a way to practice our theme creating efforts without committing to the formal process of identifying a researchable question, performing interviews, generating data, taping interviews, transcribing interviews, etc. Therefore, we decided to create a playful way to practice the skill of categorizing information by analyzing a popular North American television series: *Northern Exposure*.

Northern Exposure provides an interesting challenge for researchers and therapists who want to enhance their ability to categorize information. Similar to an interviewee (or client) providing a story for researchers (or therapist), the writers of *Northern Exposure* provide a story for viewers to make sense of. Unique to this series, is that in each episode the writers connect three stories under a more encompassing central theme. Therefore, the information we as an audience receive has already been processed, and our task is simply to try to identify the theme which the writers have suggested.

Typically, in each episode of *Northern Exposure* there are three vignettes or stories being carried out by the various characters of the series. By the shows end, there is an evolved overarching theme that supports a central meaning or theme which connects all three vignettes.

Northern Exposure

Northern Exposure takes place in the small town (population 839) of Cicely, Alaska (Nance, 1992). The weekly series began with the story of Dr. Joel Fleishman, a recent graduate of medical school who was recruited to provide medical care for the townspeople of Cicely in repayment for his student loans. Dr. Fleishman is a native New Yorker who finds himself trying to cope with life in the remote outdoors of "the last frontier."

The episode we analyzed began with Dr. Fleishman narrating a story to Ed, a young Native American who befriended Dr. Fleishman when he first arrived in Cicely. Ed has gone up-river to find Dr. Fleishman who previously left Cicely on a house-call. After providing medical attention to a baby in a remote village, Joel (Dr. Fleishman) decides to stay. Wanting Dr. Fleishman to return, Maurice (the town patriarch) sends Ed to bring Dr. Fleishman back to Cicely. In his narration of the episode, Joel tells three stories that help to explain why Joel has decided to stay in the remote village. What follows is our construction of Joel's narration and the three stories or vignettes.

Vignette One - Fireworks

This story begins with Joel moving into Maggie's home. Maggie is a young independent pilot who has shared a long-time love/hate relationship with Dr. Fleishman. In this vignette, the two of them are attempting to negotiate the nuances of living together and getting to know one another on a more intimate basis. The history of their relationship is marked by frequent arguing concerning Joel's desire to control his external world versus Maggie's desire to accept things as they come. In this particular story, anytime Joel and Maggie become intimate with one another, a

shotgun discharges. These incidents become problematic for Joel since he cannot explain why this is happening. In contrast, Maggie is not concerned with the "why," but simply relishes in the bizarre nature of these occurrences.

MAGGIE: Well, if there is a connection between you and me and the gun, I think that's kind of fun.

JOEL: Fun?

MAGGIE: Yeah.

JOEL: That's a turn on for you?

MAGGIE: Well, (laughs) yeah.

JOEL: Oh, that's great. Putting our lives at danger is an aphrodisiac for you. I'm living with a risk junky.

MAGGIE: I wouldn't paint it so negatively. You know, I just like surprises.

JOEL: Well, sorry. I don't. Having my car start in the morning and watching a good movie on cable is about as much surprise as I like.

MAGGIE: God. This is so like you. Everything has to be so controlled and safe. What is the point in living life like that?

Vignette Two - Falling in Love Again

In this story, Ruth-Ann, an elderly independent woman who owns the town general store experiences a great deal of confusion when confronted with the knowledge that she is in love with Walt, a local trapper. When Walt leaves to work his winter trap line, Ruth-Ann begins experiencing feelings that are reminiscent of teen-age love. Ruth-Ann becomes quite distressed when she perceives herself losing control of her independent life as she knows it. Ruth-Ann visits Dr. Fleishman for a physical examination:

RUTH-ANN: I keep forgetting things, my mind wanders, sometimes I find myself standing in a room, and I have no idea how I got there.

JOEL: Well, your B.P. is good. It's 144 over 86.

RUTH-ANN: The mood swings. One minute I'm on top of the world and the next minute I'm sunk in despair. It's so oppressive I can hardly breathe... You know Joel I am 77. Now I can't expect to be as sharp as I was when I was 65. Maybe, I'm just losing my marbles.

JOEL: Oh, Ruth-Ann you're not senile.

RUTH-ANN: Who am I kidding. I'm not sick. I know what's wrong with me. And I never should have come here in the first place. I'm sorry I bothered you.

JOEL: Oh, Ruth-Ann.

RUTH-ANN: It's not a medical problem and it's not your concern. What difference does it make if you know. I'm in love Joel. I'm desperately in love with Walter. . . . I don't need this. I don't want this. The heart palpitations, the mindless daydreams, the horrible stirring in the pit of my stomach. Yuk.

JOEL: Can't you think of it as something positive.

RUTH-ANN: Positive, look at me. I'm a grown woman and I've been reduced to a needy, vulnerable, school-girl. Well, I'm going to fight. I'm not going to let it get the better of me. I'll be just fine without him.

Vignette Three - "Mi Vida Loca" (My Crazy Life)

The final story introduces Chris, the town philosopher and radio disc-jockey. Chris is having renovations done to his trailer in an attempt to organize "mi vida loca" (my crazy life). He hires a local contractor to complete the work; however, problems soon arise. When Chris attempts to control the contractor, the plans of remodeling quickly go awry leaving Chris in the pits of chaos and his trailer near ruin. At the episode's mid-point, viewers are left with the scene of Chris exiting his damaged trailer, looking around the outdoors, and screaming from the depths of his soul.

Theme Development - Part One

The excerpts presented above took us to the episode's mid-session. In an attempt to get more familiar with each of the character's stories, we continued to re-play each of the vignettes. At the time, we were not interested in comparing the different vignettes, but simply wanted to note re-occurring ideas or words in each story. Individually, we noted our initial ideas regarding what we thought each character was experiencing. We then assigned one word headings or categories which seemed to encompass the story of each character. To see if there were any similarities and/or differences in what we had each come up with individually, we then discussed our thoughts with one another. At the mid-session of the episode, we had developed themes concerning "loss of control" and "life's transitions."

In vignette one, we agreed that Joel was struggling with the transition of living with someone after years of living alone and was feeling overwhelmed due to his life being unpredictable. His fears of the unknown were reinforced by the unexplainable gun-shots each time he and Maggie became intimate with one another. In vignette two, we noticed Ruth-Ann's frustration in realizing that she was in love with Walt and the loss of control she perceived this brought to her life. Lastly, vignette three illustrated Chris' failed attempt to achieve some level of stability and structure to what he perceived was an unorganized life. The common theme we constructed from the stories thus far revolved around each character's desire to maintain a feeling of control when their respective lives were in a state of transition. The words that we created to encompass these stories were struggle and transition.

At the episode's mid-session, we had some difficulty attempting to make a connection with the opening scene of the episode which involved Joel's telling of the story to Ed. This meta-perspective which Joel narrated evaded us. From our previous knowledge of how an episode typically evolves, we were hopeful that a connection would resonate for us later. Therefore, we returned to the data: the second half of the episode.

Vignette One - Re-visited

This story re-opens with Joel and Maggie talking about their differences. Joel apologizes for his previous "up-tightness" and explains that he knows he must change his ways:

JOEL: I know I gotta relax and be more open to what comes down the pike. I gotta be a more accepting and less controlling person...

MAGGIE: Living with you is something I really wanted, but it just isn't working. You exhaust me. There's just so much of you and it's always working so hard.... You have to move out.

JOEL: What?

MAGGIE: ...Look, you hold on to everything so tightly that your knuckles are white, and I need somebody who can let go a little.

Vignette Two - Re-visited

After spending her time writing poetry and listening to love songs while attempting to fight her feelings for Walt, Ruth-Ann announces:

RUTH-ANN: I tried. Lord knows, I've tried. I'm just no good without him. I give up. I surrender. Let fate do what it will.

She later goes to the radio-station and has a message sent across the air-waves to Walt telling him, "There's no dignity in love. Come home."

Vignette Three - Re-visited

Following the scene of Chris' primal scream, Joel visits Chris to provide some Xanax to help Chris with his insomnia. Chris announces he is no longer having difficulties sleeping and is over his previous feelings of anxiety. Chris then explains his "ah-ha" experience:

CHRIS: . . . Great lesson. Real watershed. Though, you know, a guy like me tries to get his space together. Put a three piece suit on it. The universe with its big ursine paw just slaps it down like a house of cards you know. Ruins everything. Next thing you know I'm homeless, cast out like some sap, kneeling in the mud.... Well, thing is Joel, what is a house, but a metaphor for the mind. Isn't that what it's all about. You gotta tear down the old before you build the new. You gotta loose your mind before you find it. The universe whacked my house, it was really whacking my mind. . . . Give up man. Throw out all those old plans and sink your face in the hear and now. whether it works out or not I'm a free man.

As the episode came to an end, the viewers were left again with Joel's narration to Ed:

JOEL: See, it struck me. There is something for me to learn from Chris and Ruth-Ann, right? These people stopped struggling. They've given up the reins and basically opened themselves to whatever life handed them. . . . I never experienced such a sense of loss. Working so many years for something. Actually, kicking me out was probably the most loving thing she could have done for me although I didn't realize it until I came up here on a house-call.... At that moment, the experiences of the last week coalesced. To find myself I had to throw off the external trappings of my life.

Theme Development - Part Two

The excerpts presented above further illustrate a common theme which seemed to evolve in each story. The characters faced an epistemological crisis of sorts when they each acknowledged their

own inability to control the turmoil they were experiencing in their lives. Ruth-Ann gave up control by accepting and acknowledging her feelings for Walt. Chris relinquished his need to control the renovations to his trailer, which he equated with his need to control his mind. By letting go of these feelings, Chris was able to accept the chaos in his life. Joel's way of giving up control was to leave Cicely. Unlike Chris, Joel's life was too stable. He was imprisoned within his own existence. Therefore, he chose to physically disconnect from everything that was controlling him: his job, his relationships, and his life in Cicely.

We suspected that the narration Joel provided throughout the episode contained an embedded message for Ed. Witnessing Joel living and learning the ways of the Native Americans, left Ed feeling alienated from his own culture. In their conversation with one another, Ed questions if he too should stay with Joel and learn the ways of "his" people. The stories which Joel narrates to Ed seem to illustrate that, like the other characters, Ed also is being controlled by his beliefs or expectations of how he "should" be. Because Ed strongly identifies himself as a Native American and witnesses Joel, a New York Jew, living the stereotypical "Native American" existence, Ed is trapped into believing that he also should be living a life more consistent with his heritage. For us, Joel's stories exemplify that each person must pick his or her own path in life and that the path one chooses may not be appropriate or fitting for another.

In retrospect, we attempted to look at how we developed the themes which evolved. We followed a conceptual template which our professor, Ron Chenaill (personal communication, November, 1994) shared with us. To help look at how the ideas are connected, he suggested:

vignette ----- meta perspective
vignette ----- meta perspective
vignette ----- meta perspective

This simple template proved most useful when we picked an episode to analyze. With each story or vignette, we attempted to think about what message the writers were attempting to evoke. Once we came up with an idea for each story, we then attempted to connect the three. Of course, what we constructed as our theme was simply our construction. Similarly, when analyzing any data, either from a client or in an ethnographic interview, the themes that the researcher or the therapist develops speak only to that researcher. Another researcher may offer another description, another theme.

To many readers this exercise may seem a bit silly and even trite; however, we suggest it is these very type of playful exercises which encourage therapists and researchers alike to truly hone their craft. Thankfully, our colleagues have encouraged our attempts to be playful with theoretical ideas. Through this playfulness, we suspect our theoretical learning will become more than a remote discussion in a textbook and instead, will become integrated into useful and pragmatic ideas informing our work as researchers and therapists. This paper is our attempt to simply play at categorizing information and allow the readers to follow our process.

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Kristin Wright and Julio Vigil are doctoral students in the Department of Family Therapy at Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, 33314, USA. Kristin's e-mail address is kristin@ssss.nova.edu and Julio's e-mail address is julio@ssss.nova.edu
