

Narrative Family Therapy in Couple Counseling: A Conceptual Review of Communication, Emotional Intimacy, and Relationship Reconstruction

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Abstract - Relationship distress among couples is frequently associated with ineffective communication, diminished emotional intimacy, and the influence of dominant narratives that shape how partners perceive themselves, each other, and their relationships. Narrative Family Therapy (NFT) offers a collaborative, strengths-based therapeutic approach that assists individuals and couples in separating themselves from problem-saturated stories, reconstructing preferred identities, and developing healthier patterns of interaction. This conceptual article examines the theoretical foundations, principles, and clinical application of Narrative Family Therapy within the context of couple counseling. Drawing upon systems theory and contemporary empirical literature, the article explores how interventions such as externalization, deconstruction, mapping the influence of problems, identifying unique outcomes, and reauthoring conversations facilitate meaningful therapeutic change. A case illustration involving a married couple experiencing persistent communication difficulties, emotional disconnection, and challenges with physical intimacy is presented to demonstrate the practical application of the model. The discussion integrates recent research examining the effectiveness of Narrative Family Therapy in improving communication, emotional expression, empathy, relational satisfaction, and intimacy among couples while also considering the influence of therapist self-awareness, cultural responsiveness, ethical decision-making, and systemic thinking. Although emerging evidence supports the effectiveness of Narrative Family Therapy across diverse relational contexts, additional empirical research is needed to examine its long-term outcomes, cross-cultural applicability, integration with other systemic models, and effectiveness with neurodiverse couples and individuals experiencing complex relational challenges. The article concludes that Narrative Family Therapy provides marriage and family therapists with a flexible, collaborative, and culturally responsive framework that empowers clients to reconstruct preferred narratives, strengthen relational functioning, and promote sustainable therapeutic change.

Keywords: Narrative Family Therapy; couple therapy; communication; emotional intimacy; reauthoring conversations

Introduction

Healthy couple relationships are built upon effective communication, emotional intimacy, mutual trust, and the ability to navigate life's challenges collaboratively. However, many couples experience relational distress characterized by recurring conflict, emotional disconnection, and ineffective communication patterns that negatively affect relationship satisfaction and long-term stability (Lebow, 2022). Difficulties in expressing emotions, resolving conflict, and understanding one another often become reinforced through repetitive interactional patterns, creating dominant narratives that shape how partners perceive themselves, their relationship, and the problems they face (Madigan, 2011; White & Epston, 1990). These problem-saturated narratives can contribute to feelings of hopelessness, blame, resentment, and emotional withdrawal, making it increasingly difficult for couples to develop meaningful and lasting change.

Marriage and family therapists frequently encounter couples whose presenting concerns extend beyond observable behaviors and communication deficits to include deeply rooted beliefs, personal identities, and socially constructed meanings that influence relational functioning. Narrative Family Therapy (NFT), developed by Michael White and David Epston during the 1980s, provides a collaborative, strengths-based approach that emphasizes the stories individuals construct about their lives and relationships (Glass, 2017; White & Epston, 1990). Rather than viewing clients as the problem, Narrative Family Therapy separates individuals from the problems affecting their lives through a process known as externalization (Madigan, 2011). This therapeutic perspective allows couples to examine the influence of problem-saturated stories while identifying personal strengths, exceptions to the problem, and alternative narratives that support healthier relational functioning.

Unlike traditional pathology-focused models, Narrative Family Therapy assumes that identities are socially and culturally constructed through lived experiences, relationships, language, and broader societal influences (Rice, 2015). Consequently, therapeutic change occurs when individuals critically examine dominant narratives, discover unique outcomes that contradict those narratives, and collaboratively reauthor preferred stories that better reflect their values, strengths, and hopes for the future (Glass, 2017; White & Epston, 1990). This systemic perspective aligns with the foundational principles of Marriage and Family Therapy by recognizing that relational difficulties emerge within interconnected interpersonal, familial, cultural, and environmental systems rather than solely within individual pathology.

Recent research has demonstrated growing empirical support for Narrative Family Therapy across diverse clinical populations. Studies have reported improvements in communication skills, emotional expression, empathy, relationship satisfaction, emotional intimacy, and conflict resolution among couples participating in narrative-based interventions (Boostani-Kashani et al., 2021; Heidari & Mortezaee, 2021). Additional research suggests that narrative interventions help couples reconstruct relationship narratives, strengthen intimacy, and reduce maladaptive communication patterns by encouraging collaborative meaning-making and the development of preferred relational stories (Ghavibazou et al., 2020; Lebow, 2022). Researchers have also highlighted the model's flexibility, collaborative stance, and cultural responsiveness, making it particularly applicable for clients from diverse backgrounds and those seeking to redefine identities constrained by dominant cultural or relational narratives.

Despite these promising findings, the existing literature continues to reveal important limitations. Much of the available research consists of relatively small samples, short-term intervention studies, or investigations conducted within limited cultural contexts (Lebow, 2022). Furthermore, relatively few studies have examined the long-term effectiveness of Narrative Family Therapy with married couples, neurodiverse individuals, or couples experiencing complex relational issues such as emotional infidelity, chronic communication difficulties, and diminished emotional intimacy. These gaps underscore the need for continued conceptual and empirical research examining Narrative Family Therapy across diverse populations and clinical settings.

The purpose of this conceptual article is to examine the theoretical foundations and clinical application of Narrative Family Therapy in couple counseling while synthesizing contemporary research regarding its effectiveness in improving communication, emotional intimacy, and overall relationship functioning.

Drawing upon systems theory, Narrative Family Therapy principles, and current empirical literature, this article explores how therapeutic interventions—including externalization, deconstruction, mapping the influence of the problem, identifying unique outcomes, and reauthoring conversations—facilitate meaningful therapeutic change within couple relationships.

Specifically, this article addresses the following objectives:

1. Examine the theoretical and systemic foundations of Narrative Family Therapy within couple counseling.
2. Synthesize contemporary research regarding the effectiveness of Narrative Family Therapy in improving communication, emotional intimacy, and relational satisfaction.
3. Analyze how narrative interventions promote therapeutic change through the reconstruction of preferred relational narratives.
4. Discuss the clinical implications, limitations, and future research directions for Narrative Family Therapy within marriage and family counseling.

The article begins by presenting the conceptual framework that guides Narrative Family Therapy and its relationship to systems theory. A thematic review of the literature follows, highlighting empirical findings related to communication, emotional intimacy, therapeutic interventions, and cultural responsiveness. The discussion then synthesizes these findings to examine the strengths and limitations of Narrative Family Therapy, its implications for clinical practice, and recommendations for future research. By integrating foundational theory with contemporary empirical evidence, this article contributes to the growing body of literature supporting Narrative Family Therapy as a collaborative, culturally responsive, and evidence-informed approach for strengthening couple relationships and promoting lasting relational change.

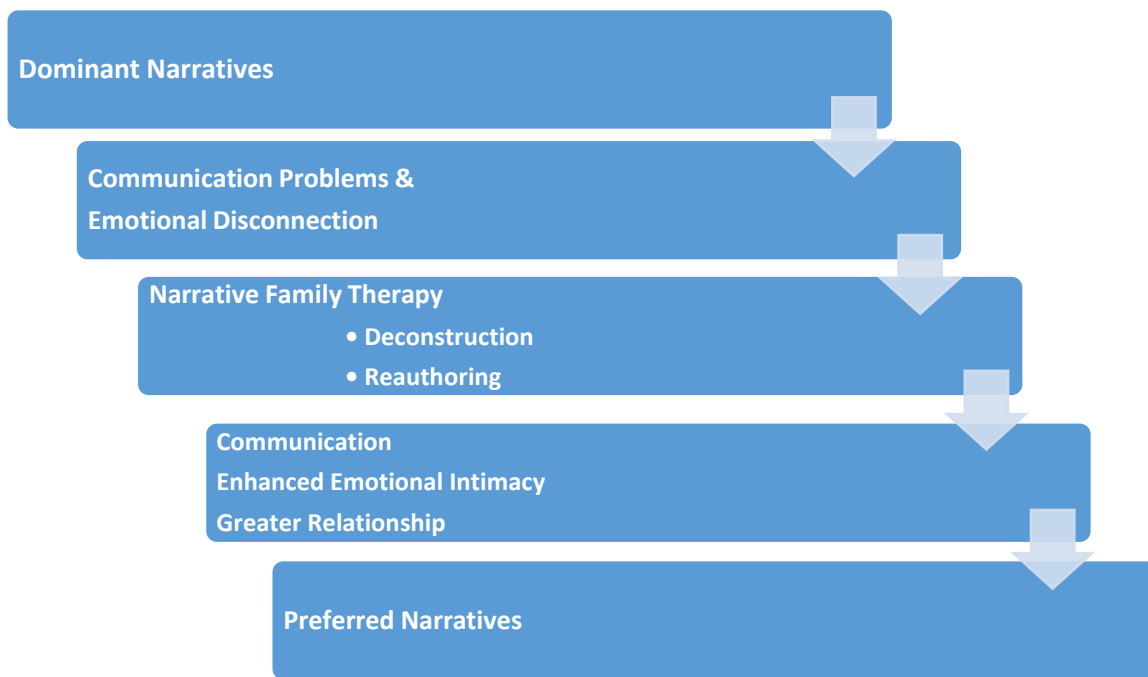
Conceptual Framework

This article is guided by **Narrative Family Therapy (NFT)**, a postmodern and strengths-based approach developed by Michael White and David Epston. Narrative Family Therapy proposes that individuals' identities and relationships are shaped by the stories they construct about their experiences. Rather than viewing people as the problem, the model separates individuals from the problem through **externalization**, allowing clients to challenge problem-saturated narratives and develop preferred stories that reflect their strengths, values, and goals (Glass, 2017; Madigan, 2011; White & Epston, 1990).

The framework is also informed by **Systems Theory**, which views couple difficulties as the result of reciprocal interaction patterns rather than individual deficits. From this perspective, communication problems and emotional disconnection develop through ongoing relational processes and are influenced by personal, family, and sociocultural experiences (Rice, 2015).

Within this framework, dominant narratives influence communication, emotional intimacy, and relationship satisfaction. Narrative interventions—including externalization, deconstruction, mapping the influence of the problem, and reauthoring conversations—help couples reconstruct healthier relationship narratives. As couples develop preferred stories, they strengthen communication, increase emotional intimacy, and improve overall relationship functioning. Contemporary research supports the effectiveness of Narrative Family Therapy in enhancing communication, empathy, and intimacy among couples (Boostani-Kashani et al., 2021; Ghavibazou et al., 2020).

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



Literature Review

I. Narrative Family Therapy and Couple Relationships

Narrative Family Therapy (NFT) is founded on the premise that individuals construct meaning through the stories they tell about themselves and their relationships. Developed by White and Epston (1990), the model encourages clients to separate themselves from problem-saturated narratives and collaboratively develop alternative stories that promote resilience, hope, and relational growth. Rather than focusing on pathology, NFT emphasizes clients' strengths and their capacity to redefine personal and relational identities (Glass, 2017; Madigan, 2011).

In couple counseling, narrative interventions have been associated with improvements in communication, empathy, emotional expression, and relationship satisfaction. By externalizing relational problems, couples are better able to work together against the problem instead of blaming one another, creating opportunities for healthier communication and greater emotional connection (Boostani-Kashani et al., 2021). This collaborative approach aligns with the systemic principles of marriage and family therapy, which recognize that relationship difficulties emerge from interactional patterns rather than individual deficits (Rice, 2015).

Recent empirical research has continued to support the effectiveness of Narrative Family Therapy in strengthening couple relationships. For example, Boostani-Kashani et al. (2021) found that couples who participated in narrative therapy demonstrated significant improvements in communication skills, emotional expression, and empathy compared with a control group. Similarly, Ghavibazou et al. (2020) reported that narrative interventions improved communication patterns and marital satisfaction among women experiencing relationship distress. These findings suggest that helping couples reconstruct their relational narratives can promote healthier interactions and strengthen emotional bonds.

Although the current evidence is promising, much of the existing research has been conducted with relatively small samples and within specific cultural settings. Additional studies involving more diverse populations and long-term follow-up are needed to better understand the effectiveness of Narrative Family Therapy across different relationship contexts. Nevertheless, the literature consistently supports NFT as a collaborative and

strengths-based approach that assists couples in improving communication, increasing emotional intimacy, and developing more satisfying relationships.

Communication and Emotional Intimacy in Couple Therapy

Effective communication and emotional intimacy are essential components of healthy couple relationships. Communication enables partners to express their thoughts, emotions, and needs, while emotional intimacy fosters trust, vulnerability, and mutual understanding. When communication patterns become characterized by criticism, defensiveness, avoidance, or emotional withdrawal, couples often experience increased conflict and decreased relationship satisfaction (Lebow, 2022). Persistent communication difficulties may reinforce negative beliefs about the relationship, making it more difficult for partners to reconnect emotionally. Narrative Family Therapy addresses these challenges by encouraging couples to examine the stories they have developed about themselves and their relationships. Rather than focusing on assigning blame, therapists help couples externalize the problem and identify how dominant narratives contribute to ineffective communication and emotional distance (Madigan, 2011). This collaborative process allows partners to recognize exceptions to problem-saturated stories and develop new narratives that support empathy, mutual respect, and healthier interaction patterns (White & Epston, 1990).

Recent research supports the effectiveness of Narrative Family Therapy in improving communication and emotional intimacy. Boostani-Kashani et al. (2021) found that couples participating in narrative therapy demonstrated significant improvements in communication skills, emotional expression, and empathy compared with those who did not receive the intervention. Similarly, Mohammadi et al. (2013) reported that couples who completed narrative therapy experienced significant increases in emotional and communicative intimacy, suggesting that narrative interventions can strengthen both emotional connection and relationship satisfaction. Ghavibazou et al. (2020) also found that narrative therapy improved communication patterns among women experiencing low marital satisfaction, reinforcing the value of helping couples reconstruct healthier relational narratives.

Collectively, these findings suggest that Narrative Family Therapy offers an effective approach for couples experiencing communication and intimacy challenges. By helping partners separate themselves from the problem, explore alternative perspectives, and develop preferred relationship stories, therapists can facilitate stronger emotional connections and more satisfying relational interactions.

Narrative Interventions and Therapeutic Change

Narrative Family Therapy promotes therapeutic change through collaborative conversations that help clients separate themselves from their problems and reconstruct preferred relationship narratives. Rather than directing clients toward predetermined solutions, therapists adopt a curious, nonjudgmental stance that encourages exploration of the meanings couples assign to their experiences (Madigan, 2011). This collaborative process empowers clients to become active participants in creating change.

One of the primary interventions in Narrative Family Therapy is **externalization**, which separates the individual from the problem. By viewing issues such as poor communication or emotional disconnection as external influences rather than personal flaws, couples are better able to work together against the problem instead of blaming one another (White & Epston, 1990). This shift often reduces defensiveness and creates opportunities for more productive dialogue.

Another key intervention is the identification of **unique outcomes**, which are moments when the problem has less influence over the relationship. Exploring these exceptions helps couples recognize existing strengths, successful interactions, and personal resources that may have been overlooked because of dominant, problem-saturated narratives (Glass, 2017). Therapists then use these experiences to facilitate **reauthoring**

conversations, allowing couples to develop alternative stories that reflect their values, resilience, and desired future together.

Research supports the effectiveness of these interventions in improving relationship functioning. Narrative therapy has been associated with increased communication skills, empathy, emotional expression, and relationship satisfaction among couples (Boostani-Kashani et al., 2021). These findings suggest that therapeutic change occurs not by changing individuals themselves, but by transforming the meanings they assign to their experiences and strengthening preferred relational narratives. Consequently, Narrative Family Therapy provides a flexible and collaborative approach that helps couples build healthier interaction patterns and sustain long-term relational growth.

Cultural Considerations and Clinical Applications

Narrative Family Therapy is recognized for its culturally responsive and collaborative approach to treatment. The model acknowledges that individuals' identities are shaped by family experiences, culture, language, gender, religion, and broader societal influences. Rather than imposing predetermined interpretations, therapists encourage clients to define their own experiences and construct narratives that are meaningful within their cultural and social contexts (Madigan, 2011). This client-centered perspective makes Narrative Family Therapy well suited for working with couples from diverse backgrounds.

Therapists are also encouraged to maintain cultural humility by recognizing their own biases, values, and assumptions throughout the therapeutic process. Building a strong therapeutic alliance requires respect for clients' lived experiences while avoiding the imposition of the therapist's personal beliefs or preferred solutions (Miller & Forrest, 2009). This collaborative stance promotes client autonomy and aligns with ethical principles within the marriage and family therapy profession.

Narrative Family Therapy has demonstrated clinical utility with couples experiencing a variety of relational concerns, including communication difficulties, emotional disconnection, infidelity, and life transitions. Because the approach focuses on identifying strengths and preferred narratives rather than deficits, it can be adapted to meet the unique needs of individuals, couples, and families from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds (Glass, 2017). Although additional research is needed to examine its effectiveness across broader populations, current evidence suggests that Narrative Family Therapy provides a flexible and culturally responsive framework for promoting relational resilience and meaningful therapeutic change.

Research Gap

Although literature supports the effectiveness of Narrative Family Therapy in improving communication, empathy, and emotional intimacy, several gaps remain. Much of the existing research has relied on relatively small samples, short-term interventions, and limited cultural populations, reducing the generalizability of findings. In addition, few studies have examined the long-term effectiveness of Narrative Family Therapy with married couples experiencing complex relational concerns such as emotional infidelity, neurodiversity, or chronic communication difficulties. Future research should include larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and comparative studies evaluating Narrative Family Therapy alongside other evidence-based couple therapy models. Addressing these gaps would strengthen the empirical foundation of Narrative Family Therapy and provide clinicians with a deeper understanding of its long-term effectiveness across diverse relationship contexts.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Narrative Family Therapy provides a collaborative and strengths-based framework for understanding and addressing relationship distress. Unlike traditional therapeutic approaches that emphasize pathology or individual deficits, Narrative Family Therapy views problems as separate from the individuals experiencing them. This perspective enables couples to examine how dominant narratives influence their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors while creating opportunities to develop healthier and more adaptive relationship stories (White & Epston, 1990; Madigan, 2011).

The case presented in this article illustrates how Narrative Family Therapy can be effectively applied to couples experiencing communication difficulties and diminished emotional intimacy. The couple entered therapy reporting persistent conflict, emotional disconnection, and frustration regarding unmet relational needs. One partner perceived the other as emotionally unavailable, while the other experienced repeated rejection when seeking physical intimacy. These recurring interaction patterns reinforced a dominant narrative in which both partners believed their emotional needs would remain unmet, resulting in withdrawal, frustration, and decreased relationship satisfaction.

Through the use of narrative interventions, the couple was encouraged to externalize the problem rather than blame one another. Externalization shifted the therapeutic focus from identifying a “problem partner” to examining how ineffective communication patterns influenced the relationship. This collaborative process reduced defensiveness and allowed both partners to explore their experiences with greater empathy and openness. As therapy progressed, the couple began identifying exceptions to their problem-saturated narrative, recognizing moments when communication and emotional connection had been successful. These unique outcomes became the foundation for reauthoring conversations that emphasized their shared strengths, commitment to the relationship, and desire to reconnect emotionally.

The findings reported in the literature support these therapeutic outcomes. Research demonstrates that Narrative Family Therapy can improve communication skills, emotional expression, empathy, and intimacy by helping couples reconstruct healthier relationship narratives (Boostani-Kashani et al., 2021; Ghavibazou et al., 2020; Mohammadi et al., 2013). Rather than simply teaching communication techniques, Narrative Family Therapy facilitates a deeper change in how couples interpret their experiences and understand one another. This shift in meaning often leads to greater collaboration, stronger emotional bonds, and increased relationship satisfaction.

The literature also highlights the importance of therapist collaboration, cultural humility, and ethical practice throughout the therapeutic process. Narrative therapists adopt a nonexpert stance that encourages clients to become the authors of their own preferred stories while respecting their cultural identities, values, and lived experiences (Glass, 2017; Miller & Forrest, 2009). This collaborative approach strengthens the therapeutic alliance and supports client autonomy, making Narrative Family Therapy adaptable to couples from diverse backgrounds.

Although the evidence supporting Narrative Family Therapy continues to expand, limitations remain. Much of the current research relies on small samples and short-term interventions, limiting the ability to generalize findings across broader populations. Additional longitudinal and culturally diverse studies are needed to examine the sustained effectiveness of Narrative Family Therapy and compare its outcomes with other evidence-based couple therapy models. Despite these limitations, the existing literature suggests that Narrative Family Therapy provides marriage and family therapists with an effective, culturally responsive, and evidence-informed approach for helping couples strengthen communication, rebuild emotional intimacy, and create lasting relational change.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings presented in this conceptual review suggest that Narrative Family Therapy offers marriage and family therapists an effective framework for addressing communication difficulties, emotional disconnection, and relationship distress. By emphasizing collaboration, client strengths, and the reconstruction of preferred narratives, therapists can help couples move beyond problem-saturated stories and develop healthier patterns of interaction. The use of interventions such as externalization, mapping the influence of the problem, and reauthoring conversations encourages couples to view challenges as shared experiences rather than individual shortcomings, fostering empathy and reducing blame.

For clinicians, Narrative Family Therapy provides flexibility in working with couples from diverse cultural, social, and relational backgrounds. Because the approach values clients' lived experiences and personal meanings, therapists can adapt interventions to align with each couple's unique values, beliefs, and cultural context. This culturally responsive perspective strengthens the therapeutic alliance and promotes client autonomy throughout the counseling process.

Marriage and family therapy training programs should continue to emphasize Narrative Family Therapy as an evidence-informed systemic approach. Graduate students and beginning clinicians can benefit from supervised practice in narrative techniques, including externalization, identifying unique outcomes, and facilitating reauthoring conversations. Ongoing professional development in cultural humility, ethical decision-making, and systemic thinking can further enhance therapists' competence when applying the model in clinical practice.

Finally, Narrative Family Therapy may be effectively integrated with other systemic approaches to address complex relational concerns. Combining narrative interventions with evidence-based communication strategies and emotionally focused techniques may provide a more comprehensive treatment approach for couples experiencing chronic conflict, emotional infidelity, or significant life transitions. Such integration allows therapists to tailor treatment to each couple's specific needs while maintaining the collaborative and strengths-based principles that characterize Narrative Family Therapy.

Recommendations for Future Research

Although Narrative Family Therapy has demonstrated promising outcomes in improving communication, emotional intimacy, and relationship satisfaction, additional research is needed to strengthen its empirical foundation. Future studies should include larger and more diverse samples to improve the generalizability of findings across different cultural, socioeconomic, and relational contexts. Researchers should also examine the long-term effectiveness of Narrative Family Therapy through longitudinal studies to determine whether therapeutic gains are maintained over time.

Comparative studies evaluating Narrative Family Therapy alongside other evidence-based approaches, such as Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), the Gottman Method, and Bowen Family Systems Therapy, would provide valuable insights into the relative effectiveness of these models for addressing communication difficulties and relationship distress. Such research may help clinicians determine which therapeutic approaches are most appropriate for specific presenting concerns and client populations.

Additional investigation is also needed to explore the effectiveness of Narrative Family Therapy with couples experiencing complex relational challenges, including emotional infidelity, neurodiversity, trauma, chronic conflict, and multicultural relationship dynamics. As the diversity of clients seeking couple therapy continues to increase, research should examine how narrative interventions can be adapted to meet the unique needs of these populations while maintaining cultural responsiveness and therapeutic effectiveness.

Finally, future research should explore the integration of Narrative Family Therapy with other systemic and evidence-based interventions. Examining how narrative techniques can complement communication

skills training, attachment-based interventions, and trauma-informed practices may contribute to more comprehensive treatment approaches and improve clinical outcomes for couples experiencing a wide range of relational concerns.

CONCLUSION

Narrative Family Therapy provides a collaborative, strengths-based, and systemic approach to helping couples improve communication, strengthen emotional intimacy, and reconstruct healthier relationship narratives. By emphasizing externalization, reauthoring conversations, and the identification of unique outcomes, the model empowers couples to separate themselves from problem-saturated stories and develop preferred narratives that promote resilience and relational growth. Rather than focusing on individual pathology, Narrative Family Therapy recognizes that relationship difficulties emerge through interactional patterns shaped by personal experiences, culture, and shared meaning.

The literature reviewed in this article demonstrates that Narrative Family Therapy can positively influence communication, empathy, emotional expression, and relationship satisfaction among couples. Although current empirical findings support the effectiveness of the model, additional research involving larger, more diverse populations and longitudinal designs is needed to strengthen the evidence base and evaluate long-term therapeutic outcomes.

This conceptual review contributes to the marriage and family therapy literature by integrating the theoretical foundations of Narrative Family Therapy with contemporary research and illustrating its application to couples experiencing communication and intimacy challenges. The findings reinforce the value of Narrative Family Therapy as a culturally responsive and evidence-informed approach that promotes collaboration, client empowerment, and meaningful therapeutic change.

As marriage and family therapists continue to serve increasingly diverse populations, Narrative Family Therapy remains a valuable clinical model for fostering healthier relationships and helping couples create lasting, preferred narratives that support connection, resilience, and overall relational well-being.

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