

Statement of Direction for Dissertation

Jim Knickerbocker

What am I interested in?

I want to help people with a personal problem to more easily *find* stories that may help them in some way to work through that personal problem. The specific personal problem is not my focus, but it is likely of a nature and severity that the person might seek counseling or therapy (e.g. loss of a job/spouse, addiction, relationship problem).

My investigation would need to include:

- Understanding current approaches to matching person, problem, and story, i.e. how does a *person* with a *problem* select a *story* that is helpful?
- Understanding the degree to which current matching approaches are viewed as inadequate (by therapy or counseling practitioners, their clients, and scholars), i.e. is too time-consuming or does not result in stories that are helpful.
- Understanding what it means when the person reading a story says the story was *helpful*.
- Describing new approaches that allow clients and therapists to more *quickly* find stories that may be more *helpful* than current approaches

Who might care about this topic?

I need to know the community of scholars with whom I am engaging in a dialogue. If possible, the external reader should be drawn from this group.

- Therapists and counselors who perform story-based therapy (e.g. bibliotherapy, cinematherapy, maybe narrative therapy)
- Individuals who are having a personal problem, whether they are formal clients of a therapist or counselor, or whether they are seeking self-help alternatives to traditional therapies; for simplicity, I will refer to all such individuals as “clients.”

Why do I believe current approaches are inadequate? (Client view)

I have created comments that might be made by a therapy client to dramatize some likely problems with the status quo:

My therapist and I are clear that the problems I am having with my wife are related to unresolved issues with my alcoholic mother, and my therapist says that cinema therapy might help me work through it.

We looked at some websites and books that had lists of films and looked under the category “alcoholism”. Wow, there are a lot of films listed, how do I pick the right ones? All that is listed is the name of the film, I can’t tell from that which one to pick! Ok, one of the lists had links to movie critic descriptions, which helped a little. And another small list had descriptions written by a therapist, which suggested why the film might help with which problems, but some of the descriptions barely mentioned alcoholism, which made me wonder why there were even in the alcoholism list. My therapist has seen a few of the films but not most of them.

I have seen a few of the films on the list and I don’t see how they are related to my problem: some of the films are more about the alcoholic’s struggle, not mine as an ACOA (Adult Child Of an Alcoholic), while others just featured alcoholics but didn’t really go into what was going on inside their heads or the heads of their kids, so I can’t see how it is helpful.

Besides, I don’t need a film that just says “yes, you are not the only ACOA in the world” I already know that, I’ve been to Al-Anon and have the T-shirt, I’m beyond that. I need a film that really shows an ACOA working on the issue and making some progress, and gives me ideas for how I can

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look at the problem and specific actions I can take. I'm not seeing that in these lists, and I don't have time to watch all 49 films on the list. How can I find the right films quickly?

Why do I believe current approaches are inadequate? (Scholar view)

Here I recast the problems mentioned above in more objective terms, and list some others:

1. There are a number of websites and books that contain lists of stories in various media (i.e. books, films). The lists are categorized by problem type (e.g. alcoholism) and occasionally have annotations to help the client/therapist to select an appropriate story. In some cases the lists include annotations written by genre experts (e.g. film critics, book reviewers). In rarer cases annotations are available that were written by therapists.
2. There may or may not have been sufficient intellectual rigor in the development of the lists, i.e. if someone said "that film has an alcoholic in it" the film may have been put on the list, regardless of the degree to which the film is really about alcoholism (is there just an alcoholic in the film, or is alcoholism central to the story?). An example of a more rigorous approach might be one using multiple raters using consistent objective rating criteria, and testing for inter-coder reliability.
3. The lists probably contain only a small percentage of the possible stories in that problem category, limited mainly by the personal knowledge base of the person(s) who created the list.
4. The categories are usually quite broad (e.g. alcoholism) and do not take into account the very different and important facets of the problem (e.g. being an alcoholic vs. being a child/spouse/adult child of an alcoholic)
5. The lists are usually quite long, with many more titles than the client can practically use.
6. Film critic annotations are often not readily available, and such annotations were not intended for therapeutic use and thus may not be helpful in story selection. Therapist-generated annotations are rarely available.
7. Even when annotations are available, reading such annotations is time consuming and the free-form nature of the annotations is not readily amenable to automation to reduce the search time: there are not numerical ratings on criteria helpful to the search process, e.g. "this story is a 3.5 on a 1-to-10 scale of relevance to alcoholism"
8. The matching process does not explicitly match specific attributes of the client with the stories being considered, except to the extent that the client or therapist already knows the story and can compare that against client attributes to determine if the story would be appropriate and helpful to that client. For example, if the client relates best to stories set in present day America with suburban white male middle-class protagonists, it is difficult to select stories specifically based on these criteria.
9. Different clients may need different kinds of help from a story (e.g. not feeling alone, reframing, specific ideas for action, hope for a positive outcome) and the story lists rarely indicate what kind of help the story might provide.

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What could I do in a dissertation to contribute to the conversation & knowledge base?

1. Review the literature of story-based therapy to understand how stories are believed to help the reader
2. Check the literature to determine the extent to which the community of scholars perceives the “matching problem” as a real problem, and to understand what has already been tried to address the problem
3. Interview therapists who use story-based therapy to find out to what extent they perceive the “matching problem” as a real problem and what they have tried to address it
4. Explore the experience of clients who are trying to find a story (e.g. through the use of in-depth interviews, surveys, focus groups). How do they conceptualize their personal problem, how do they approach the search process (e.g. do they only talk to the therapist, do they consult the lists of stories, how do they use the lists), what success do they have, what frustrations do they experience?
5. Using all of the above to clearly define the matching problem, explore ways in which a similar matching problem has been addressed by other domains
6. Propose ways in which the matching problem could be addressed in the context of story-based therapy. For the purposes of the dissertation, I would stop short of empirically testing the proposed methods.

What are the untested assumptions I am currently making, and which ones do I want to address in the dissertation?

For some of these assumptions, I may simply document them as starting assertions, some I may need to validate in a literature review, some I may need to test empirically in a later study (outside of the dissertation).

Untested Assumption	How I plan to address assumption
<i>About the helpfulness of stories to address personal problems</i>	
1. Stories can be helpful to client personal problems	Literature review
2. There is an operational definition of the “story benefit” i.e. the story’s efficacy in helping the participant with his/her problem	Literature review, or propose one
3. There is a measure of the “story benefit”	Literature review, or propose one
4. There are different ways in which a story might help a client (e.g. not feeling alone, reframing, specific ideas for action)	Literature review
5. The different ways in which a story might help a client is relevant to the matching problem	Test empirically in a later study
<i>About the “matching problem”</i>	
6. Someone besides me believes this problem (i.e. matching people, problem, and story) is a problem worth fixing	Literature review
7. No one has tried to address this problem before in a rigorous way (at least in the therapeutic domain)	Literature review
8. No one has tried to address this problem before in an automated way (at least in the therapeutic domain)	Literature review
9. Other domains (beyond the therapeutic domain) have made progress with the “matching problem”	Literature review

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Untested Assumption	How I plan to address assumption
10. This problem can be studied empirically	Starting assertions
11. This problem is amenable to an automated or mechanical solution	Starting assertions
<i>About ideas to address the “matching problem”</i>	
12. There are ways to characterize the story content that may be meaningful to a potential story reader (e.g. rating of relevance to the client problem, rating of the kind of help the story might provide)	Literature review; if none exists, propose in dissertation, but test empirically in a later study
13. There are ways to define and measure the “story-to-reader characteristic matching” (i.e. the relationship between story characteristics and reader characteristics)	Literature review; if none exists, propose in dissertation, but test empirically in a later study
14. Increasing the “story-to-reader characteristic matching” will improve the perceived helpfulness of the story	Propose in dissertation, but test empirically in a later study
15. What I call the “PLU effect” (relating to a story when the protagonist resembles the reader in some way) improves some readers’ perceived helpfulness of the story	Propose in dissertation, but test empirically in a later study
16. What I call the “Archetype effect” (relating to a story when the story’s archetypical structure resembles the reader’s perceived archetypical story) improves some readers’ perceived helpfulness of the story	Propose in dissertation, but test empirically in a later study

What literatures may I be drawing from and/or building upon to explore the problem area?

- Clinical Psychology domain: Bibliotherapy, cinema therapy.
- Marketing domain: Personalized marketing, mass customization, collaborative customization, recommender systems, collaborative filtering
- Human learning domain: Experiential learning, reframing theory, vicarious or observational learning

Key Questions to Explore in Literature Review

About the helpfulness of stories to address personal problems

- a. Does the literature suggest that there are different ways in which a story might help a client with a personal problem (e.g. not feeling alone, reframing, specific ideas for action)?
- b. Does the literature have an operational definition and defined validated measure of the “story benefit” i.e. the story’s efficacy in helping the participant with his/her problem?
- c. Are there other related domains (e.g. vicarious and observational learning) that may have shown progress on defining or measuring a similar benefit?
- d. Does the literature indicate that the benefit of stories has been empirically demonstrated?

About the “story matching problem”

- e. Does the literature suggest that anyone believes there is a “story matching problem” (i.e. matching people, problem, and story), and that it is a problem worth fixing?
- f. Does the literature suggest that anyone one has tried to address the story matching problem before in a rigorous or automated way?

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- g. Does literature in other domains (beyond the domain of story therapy) indicate these other domains have made progress with a similar “matching problem?”

About ideas to address the “matching problem”

- h. Does the literature indicate that anyone has attempted to categorize story content in ways that may be meaningful to a potential story reader (e.g. rating of relevance to the client problem, rating of the kind of help the story might provide)?
- i. Does the literature indicate that anyone has attempted to match reader characteristics with story protagonist characteristics (e.g. gender, race, etc.) to improve story benefit?
- j. Does the literature indicate that anyone has attempted to use archetypes (either reader’s archetype or story archetype) to improve story benefit?