

# Narrative Therapy for Employees Affected by Restructuring: An Innovative Approach in Change Management

Original Article

**Burhanuddin<sup>1\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Departement of Management, Faculty of Economics, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia  
Email: <sup>1\*</sup> [dr.burhanuddin@unm.ac.id](mailto:dr.burhanuddin@unm.ac.id)

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## Abstract

This research explores the application of narrative therapy in supporting employees affected by organizational restructuring. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research involved 20 employees from different departments to understand changes in their narratives before and after the intervention. Results showed that narrative therapy was effective in helping employees reframe their experiences positively, through externalization techniques and the creation of new stories. The findings confirm the importance of narrative approaches in enhancing employee adaptation and engagement during organizational change processes.

**Keywords:** Narrative Therapy, Organizational Restructuring, Employee Coping, Change Management, Workplace Mental Health.

## 1. Introduction

Organizational restructuring is a common practice for businesses aiming to meet changing market requirements, enhance operational efficiency, and sustain a competitive edge. Such changes are frequently accompanied by intense negative psychosocial responses such as anxiety, pervasive job insecurity, and lowered morale (Kiefer et al., 2021). Under more traditional approaches to change management, human relationships are often overlooked in the process of structural and procedural shifts. This shortcoming points towards the growing need for creative solutions to such problems, like narrative therapy, which allows people to reclaim ownership over their histories and experiences through retelling them, especially in the face of overwhelming changes.

Drawn upon postmodern and social constructionist frameworks, narrative therapy provides powerful tools for individuals dealing with workplace challenges by helping them rethink their predicaments (White & Epston, 1990). Some recent works have shown that the use of narrative techniques can counter the adverse impacts of a shift in organizational dynamics by allowing employees to detach, counter the prevailing narratives of subjugation, and redefine stronger pro-empowerment ones (Atkinson & Wells, 2018; Lu et al., 2022). Unlike traditional counseling approaches, narrative therapy stresses cooperation and co-authoring new meanings, thus, it is especially relevant in change management situations where employee buy-in is crucial.

Though narrative therapy has great potential, its use in organizational environments—especially about restructuring—remains little-researched. Although studies on resilience-building and communication techniques during change (Mishra & Bhatnagar, 2020) abound, few studies have looked at how narrative interventions might help psychological adaptation. This study intends to close this gap by investigating the effectiveness of narrative therapy as a tool for helping workers impacted by restructuring, so supporting academic discourse and useful change management strategies.



The results of this study could give therapists looking for creative ways to handle workforce transitions, organizational leaders, and human resource experts insightful analysis. Including narrative therapy into change management strategies helps businesses create a more resilient and involved workforce, guaranteeing better organizational changes. Building on current research (e.g., Van der Kolk et al., 2023; Grant, 2022), this paper supports a more all-encompassing and human-centered method of restructuring procedures.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Understanding People Through Their Stories: How Narrative Therapy Helps During Workplace Changes**

At its heart, narrative therapy recognizes something deeply human - we make sense of our lives through the stories we tell about ourselves (White & Epston, 1990). When companies go through restructuring, it's not just org charts that get shaken up - people's sense of who they are at work gets disrupted too. The way employees interpret these changes makes all the difference. Those who can see restructuring as a chance to grow rather than just a threat tend to bounce back stronger and feel better about their jobs (Mishra & Bhatnagar, 2020).

Narrative therapy is so powerful because it starts with truly listening to people's experiences. During tough transitions, employees often feel invisible or like their contributions no longer matter. But when managers use narrative techniques, they can help people rewrite those discouraging stories (Atkinson & Wells, 2018). It's not about pretending everything's fine - it's about helping employees discover new perspectives on their situation. Research shows this approach works - employees who reframe their experiences this way report feeling less stressed and more able to adapt (Kiefer et al., 2021).

One of the most helpful tools in narrative therapy is what we call "externalization" - helping people see that they are not their problems. When facing restructuring, this means helping employees understand that the changes happening around them don't define who they are (Van der Kolk et al., 2023). Simple shifts in language can make a big difference. Instead of thinking "I'm failing because of these changes," employees can learn to think, "We're all working through this challenge together." Studies show this mindset leads to better problem-solving and emotional strength during tough transitions (Grant, 2022).

Perhaps most hopeful is how narrative therapy helps people imagine new possibilities. During restructuring, this means supporting employees as they picture their future in the changed organization (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021). When people co-create stories about where they're headed - stories that highlight growth and new opportunities - they're more likely to feel excited rather than afraid. The data backs this up: companies that use these approaches tend to keep more of their employees and see smoother transitions overall (Pässilä et al., 2023).

## **3. Methods**

### **3.1. Research Design and Participants**

Our study takes a qualitative case study approach to truly understand employees' lived experiences during organizational restructuring. We engaged with 20 employees across various departments who had worked at the company for over two years and were directly impacted by recent structural changes. This purposive sampling approach helped us capture diverse perspectives while ensuring participants had substantial organizational experience to reflect upon (Smith & Anderson, 2021).

We reached out via company email with full transparency about the study's purpose, benefits, and our strict confidentiality protocols. Each participant signed a consent form explaining their rights

and our data privacy policies. Recognizing the emotional weight of discussing restructuring, we began each session with a brief check-in to help participants feel comfortable sharing their stories - because real insights come when people feel safe to be honest (Johnson et al., 2022).

The heart of our data collection was in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasting 45-60 minutes. We conducted these face-to-face in comfortable meeting rooms (or virtually when needed), always asking permission before recording. This human-centered approach created space for authentic storytelling rather than rushed responses (Lee & Wang, 2023).

### **3.2. Data Collection Procedure**

We designed our interview guide using narrative therapy principles, pilot-testing it with non-participants first to ensure our questions made sense. The guide explored how employees made meaning of the restructuring and its impact on their professional identities, because how people tell their experiences shapes how they cope (Brown & Patel, 2022).

Each interview felt more like a meaningful conversation than a formal Q&A. We paid attention not just to what people said, but how they said it - their pauses, emotions, and body language told us as much as their words (Davis, 2021). After transcribing recordings verbatim, we stored all data securely and anonymized it immediately, because trust matters in research.

### **3.3. Data Analysis Approach**

We analyzed the transcripts using narrative analysis, not just looking for themes, but listening to how people constructed their restructuring stories. Our open coding process identified patterns while staying true to each person's unique voice (Wilson & Zhang, 2023).

To keep ourselves honest, we used peer debriefing - having colleagues review our coding - and triangulated interview data with our observation notes. This helped ensure we weren't just hearing what we expected to hear (Martinez et al., 2022). The goal was to honor participants' authentic experiences while identifying opportunities for more empowering narratives.

### **3.4. Narrative Therapy Implementation Steps**

Our therapy sessions began by building genuine connections. We explained how rewriting work stories could help, but more importantly, we listened - really listened - to how people were making sense of the changes (Taylor, 2021). Many participants initially framed themselves as "victims" of restructuring; our job was to help them see they were still the authors of their stories.

The externalization process was often transformative. When Maria (not her real name) said, "This restructuring ruined my career," we worked together to reframe it as "I'm navigating restructuring while growing my skills." This subtle shift made the challenge feel manageable rather than identity-shattering (Chen & Kim, 2023).

Finally, we co-created new stories focused on future possibilities. Together with participants, we identified their strengths and opportunities in the new structure. As one participant put it, "I went from fearing the changes to seeing how I could shape them," - which is exactly what narrative therapy aims to achieve (Robinson et al., 2022).

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1. Employee Narrative Analysis Before and After Narrative Therapy Intervention**

Before the narrative therapy intervention, employees' stories were filled with uncertainty and loss. Many described feeling "like a ship without a compass" during the restructuring, with their professional identities suddenly upended (Harris & O'Neil, 2022). One participant shared, "I went from knowing exactly who I was at work to questioning whether I still mattered." These narratives revealed deep emotional wounds that needed careful attention.

What's fascinating is how much our work stories shape our professional identities. When the organizational plot suddenly changes, it's like being thrust into an unfamiliar story without knowing your character's role anymore. Narrative therapy helped employees become authors rather than victims of their work stories (Peterson & Lee, 2023). As one team leader reflected, "I stopped seeing myself as someone whose role was taken away and started seeing myself as someone adapting to new challenges."

After the intervention, the shift in narratives was remarkable. Using externalization techniques, employees began separating their self-worth from the restructuring. Where they once said "This change ruined my career," they now said "I'm navigating this organizational change while developing new skills" (Chang et al., 2021). The most powerful transformation was seeing employees who initially felt powerless begin identifying new opportunities emerging from the changes.

This before-and-after comparison shows how narrative therapy helps people rewrite their work stories. It's not about putting a positive spin on difficult changes, but about helping employees reclaim their agency in the narrative. As research by Thompson (2023) shows, employees who reframe transitions this way demonstrate 42% higher adaptability scores in organizational change scenarios.

#### **4.2. Key Themes in Employee Stories About Restructuring**

Three powerful themes emerged from employees' restructuring stories. The most poignant was loss, not just of positions, but of professional identities. One longtime manager confessed, "I didn't realize how much my job title defined me until it changed." This mirrors findings by Rodriguez (2022) about how organizational changes can trigger identity crises.

Many stories also contained strong themes of perceived injustice. Employees used phrases like "the powers that be" and "management doesn't care" – language revealing deep fractures in trust (Williams & Kaya, 2021). Interestingly, these narratives often included self-blame too, with employees wondering, "What did I do wrong?"

But amidst the challenges, hopeful narratives emerged. About 30% of participants naturally framed restructuring as an opportunity. One young professional shared, "This forced me out of my comfort zone in the best possible way." These "hidden hopefuls," as we came to call them, became crucial examples during the therapy sessions, showing alternative ways to story the experience (Morgan, 2023).

#### **4.3. The Transformative Power of Externalization**

The externalization technique proved revolutionary. Before learning this approach, employees' language showed how deeply they'd internalized the changes: "I'm failing because of the restructuring." After externalization, we heard: "The restructuring presents challenges I'm learning to navigate" (Silva et al., 2022). This linguistic shift represented a profound cognitive and emotional change.

What made externalization so effective was how it helped employees separate what they could control from what they couldn't. As one participant realized, "I can't control the reorganization, but I can control how I respond to it." This aligns with research by Kim (2023) showing that externalization reduces change-related stress by 37%.

The most touching outcomes were the new metaphors employees developed. Where they once described feeling "like discarded office furniture," they now spoke of being "like adaptable software getting necessary updates." These weren't just semantic changes – they represented fundamental shifts in self-perception (Adams & Zhou, 2021).

#### **4.4. Crafting New Stories for Organizational Adaptation**

The process of co-creating new narratives felt like collaborative storytelling sessions. Employees who began with "I'm lost" endings worked with facilitators to imagine "I'm growing" plotlines (Taylor & Greene, 2022). One participant's breakthrough came when she reframed from "My department was eliminated" to "I'm bringing my expertise to a new team."

These new stories didn't ignore difficulties but placed them in a growth context. As research by O'Connor (2023) shows, employees who develop "challenge narratives" (rather than "threat narratives") show 28% higher engagement post-restructuring. The most successful stories balanced realism with hope, acknowledging challenges while highlighting potential.

The real proof came in behavioral changes. Employees with new narratives volunteered for transition teams, mentored colleagues, and proposed innovative solutions, becoming active participants in shaping their organization's next chapter (Lee & Park, 2023). Their stories had transformed from tales of victimhood to journeys of adaptation.

## 5. Conclusion

According to this study, narrative therapy is a useful tool for staff members managing the psychological and emotional effects of organizational change. Using externalizing strategies helped staff members to separate their identities from the external obstacles they encountered, thus lowering their emotional load and increasing their flexibility. Furthermore, the development of fresh stories let staff members create more positive and empowering narratives, which finally helped them negotiate the transformation with more assurance and hope. Furthermore, the study also highlighted that the application of narrative therapy can have the added benefit of building better relationships between employees and management. By creating a safe space for dialogue, employees feel heard and valued, which in turn increases mutual trust and collaboration. This is important in creating a supportive work environment where employees can share experiences and learn from each other. As such, narrative therapy serves not only as a tool to support individuals but also as a mechanism to strengthen team dynamics and the organization as a whole.

The results further substantiate the relevance of accompanying employees to reinterpret their experiences when undergoing restructuring. By enabling people to find a silver lining and potential for growth in challenging times, businesses can foster higher levels of employee engagement and motivation. In addition to aiding people in adjusting to the changes, a narrative therapy process can also help make the restructuring achieve success by developing greater involvement, self-determination, and participation in the workplace. These findings would offer great support for the incorporation of narrative therapy within organizational change management methodologies.

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