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# Double Listening and the Danger of a Single Story

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# Double Listening and the Danger of a Single Story

## **Abstract**

This paper describes the roots of double listening and its role in avoiding the danger of a single story. Double listening is defined. Additional topics include background information, suggestions for the practice of double listening, and practical examples. Also discussed is the relationship of double listening to active listening, narrative therapy, and solution-focused therapy.

## **Keywords**

double listening, preferred identity, alternative story, counter story, dominant story, narrative therapy

## **Author Statement**

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## Double Listening and the Danger of a Single Story

Hidden Potential High School (HPHS) is full of stories. To many people in the community, HPHS, a continuation high school, is full of a bunch of “losers” who could not survive at traditional high schools. But this is just one story of HPHS. If you talk to the students, more stories emerge: stories of homeless families, of fifteen-year-olds being sent out to the streets to survive on their own, of domestic violence and child abuse, of friends and family killed by violence, of parents dying, of students missing years of school while their parents grapple with drugs, alcohol, the law. These are the stories of teens struggling to stay in school against impossible circumstances beyond their control.

A few weeks ago, a student in my English class turned in another student’s essay as his own. One of my colleagues recommended that I investigate who had helped him and turn in both names to the principal for disciplinary action. I did some sleuthing of my own. It did not include following the path of cheating ring. I knew Jorge (all participants’ names have been changed) was grappling with English as a second language, so I questioned him about what had persuaded him to get the work from another student, instead of completing it himself. The story that emerged was one struggling with English in school for years, one of not understanding what the teachers said quickly enough to process the instructions, and then not being able to complete the work, because the instructions were incomprehensible - hardly reasons for unearthing and prosecuting a cheating ring. I could have turned in Jorge for cheating. The evidence was clear and I even had a confession. This is the danger of single story.

In her TED talk entitled *The Danger of a Single Story*, novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) describes numerous examples of how a single story limits our ability to recognize the full picture of the people in our world. In her words, “The consequence of the

single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar.” Similarly, according to Yuen (2007), single stories can “crush hope and promote the construction of ‘disabled’ identities” (p. 4). The danger of seeing only a single story resonates deeply with me as a parent, teacher and counselor. It highlights the need to identify and use the specific skills that uncover the multiple stories of our common humanity. Double listening is such a skill.

### Roots of Double Listening

The skill of double listening is useful for opening up multiple stories. Double listening has its roots in the practice of helping others find and develop preferred, alternative stories in narrative therapy. White (2006) coined the term “doubly listening” to describe his way of listening to people talk about trauma and its aftermath. The story about the person’s response to trauma often languishes in the shadows of the more dominant trauma story. White employs doubly listening to investigate a more complete story of the person and his or her responses to trauma.

According to White, it is important to actively support people to speak about trauma, while simultaneously listening for the ways people have responded to the trauma and as well as to what they value. The stories of how people may have responded to trauma are often dismissed and diminished, which leads to a sense of personal desolation and shame. Developing people’s stories of responding to trauma and preserving areas of value in their lives builds a powerful counter story to the “trauma victim” story. Acknowledging and honoring this counter story can then be used to help people develop a preferred sense of self. The skill of hearing both stories is “doubly listening.”

An example of White's use of doubly listening is his description of his work with trauma victim "Julie". Julie's experiences with trauma spanned decades and multiple relationships. White spent the first part of the therapeutic conversation listening to Julie describe her life-long history of abuse. With careful double listening, he was able to help Julie find exceptions to the trauma story in small instances where she had felt strongly about the value of children's lives. White was then able to use the story of Julie's valuing of children's lives to identify, acknowledge and honor a strong alternative story to the original story of Julie as the passive recipient of abuse. Thickening this alternative story helped Julie develop a more complete narrative, including a preferred sense of herself, thereby diminishing the effects of the single story of a trauma victim.

### **Relationship of Double Listening to Active Listening**

Double listening is not a departure from the attending skills commonly used by counselors. Counselors listen. Counselors paraphrase, reflect what clients say and even help clients find new words to describe their feelings. These attending skills are important for helping clients to feel heard, understood and validated (Chen & Giblen, 2002). Pare (2013) includes re-stating, paraphrasing, confirming understanding, recapping, summarizing as important skills for encouraging clients to share. These are the process skills of active listening. They are also needed for double listening.

Although double listening draws on the same skills as active listening, it is more than just active listening. How we listen is not the only important point; what we listen for also matters. Double listening is a way of hearing that includes both attending to people's feelings AND hearing the content of people's stories. In describing skills for addressing conflict, Monk and Winslade (2013) explain that active listening encourages

counselors to concentrate on one story when they reflect and paraphrase but using double listening invites people to hear and respond to both stories. For example, one of my students explained that his grades were low because he was "lazy." Adults are often quick to label students who seem to have academic ability but fail to get good grades as "lazy" or "unmotivated," but "lazy" rarely captures the situation.

### **Isaac and Lazy**

I wanted to hear more about what Isaac meant by "lazy."

Isaac: I'm behind in credits because I'm too lazy to do all of my work. My teachers have always told me that I could pass if I would just do my work. They say I'm lazy.

Me: So you're saying that you think you're lazy because you don't complete your assignments at school?

Isaac: Yes. That's why I'm here (at continuation school).

Me: I wonder what keeps you from getting your work done.

Isaac: Well, when I work a lot of hours, I get behind on my school work and I don't always make it up.

Me: So you work and go to school full-time? That doesn't sound lazy to me. What gets you to work so many hours?

Isaac: (looking interested) I work as close to full-time as I can, because I'm supporting my mom and my little brother. I come to school during the day, then work at night.

Me: Whoa! It takes a lot of effort to work that much and attend school every day. No wonder you have trouble keeping up with all your school work.

Isaac: Yeah, and I help my little brother with his homework when I can too, because my mom doesn't speak English.

Me: That sounds like a lot for anyone to juggle. As an adult, I would have trouble keeping on top of all that.  
 Isaac: That makes sense. I have often thought of myself as lazy. But I guess I'm not so lazy after all.

Isaac's grades and presence at HPHS provided ample evidence for a deficit story about how Isaac's laziness had caused his low grades, his poor relationships with his teachers and his eventual transfer to continuation high school. Using only active listening skills, it would have been easy to focus on Isaac's feelings about laziness, his experience of adults calling him lazy and the relationship of laziness and his low grades. However, with the use of double listening, Isaac's comment about how his teachers told him that he would pass if he just "did his work" became a launching point into a more complex story.

### Double Listening Definitions

According to Pare (2013), double listening is "the practice of staying open to hopeful possibilities always on the other side of the struggle" (p. 89). Monk and Winslade (2013) define double listening as "listening at the same for expressions of the conflict story and for elements of other stories, particularly for those elements that might become part of a possible counter story" (p. 46). Even in the midst of difficulties, there are times when the problem does not exist, or when the problem is less present. For example, students with poor grades usually have at least one class where they are doing well, students who do not get along with their teachers usually have at least one teacher with whom they do get along, and students who seem irresponsible at school may be helpful at home or in their communities. Double listening means to listen for the dominant story as well as for other stories that may not be obvious from the surface.

### Practices of Double Listening

Monk and Winslade (2013) offer several suggestions for double listening. Part of double listening is to be receptive to the idea that these stories exist so that when they appear, one is capable of hearing them. The process of double listening can begin even before people start talking. For example, the students at HPHS attend school because they want to do better than their peers who have dropped out of high school. People who go to counselor generally have a sense of hope for a better outcome than the one they have been experiencing. In conflict mediation, Monk and Winslade note that there are various reasons people show up in the room, but people come to conflict mediation are at least partly hoping to work things out with the other party. Having hope for a different outcome in mind is a starting point for double listening,

Maintaining a curious stance is also important. Genuine curiosity leaves mental space to hear multiple stories; questions seeking to confirm the counselor's ideas are more likely to lead to a single story. Curiosity implies a stance of not knowing (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992). A not-knowing position implies that the counselor does not have unique access to the truth and encourages the client as the expert about his or her own experience. Using this tentative, not-knowing approach sets the stage for double listening, because it creates space for both the counselor and the counseled to visualize multiple stories, thus creating more possibilities about what can happen in counseling interactions (Monk 1997; Monk & Winslade, 2007).

Remaining open to points where the stories part company sets the stage for hearing a counter story. According to Monk and Winslade (2013), this can happen in a single sentence. Winslade and Monk describe the word "but" as "a hinge around which two stories can swing" (p. 50). By tuning in to the possibility of more than one story, a listener can use "but" as a portal into another story. For example, at HPHS, Karla,

explaining her difficulty making a career decision, “I am conflicted about whether or not I want to work with elderly adults or children, but my most fun job was tutoring high school students.” Drew says, “I don’t like school, but I love Ms. Aguirre’s class.” In both of these examples, the word “but” provides an opening into another story that could be thickened.

Another double listening technique Monk and Winslade (2013) describe is the listening to the expression of emotions. When people express emotions, using double listening permits a more complex view of the situation. Like the flip side of a coin, the presence of one emotion can provide a clue to another implicit emotion, such as a person who expresses fear could have an implicit preference for safety. A person who is angry at least has some idea of something else he or she might prefer. Even a person feeling despair has the implicit story of hope that has been lost and might possibly be recuperated (Monk & Winslade, 2013).

### **Double Listening and Narrative Therapy**

Narrative therapy is rich with ideas of finding the counter story or the cracks in the problem story where people find small successes, or even times where the problem weighs less heavily on them. These cracks in the problem story can be opened up to help people see ways they may already be using to solve problems, but may not be aware of. Narrative therapists help people find these breaks in the problem story and help people develop a counter story, such as the story of their resistance to an overwhelming problem or a change they want to make. Monk and Winslade (2007) describe a conversation between a school counselor and a student with a history of problems getting along with teachers. The counselor used persistent questioning and double listening to help the student find previously unidentified times when he was able to stay calm in stressful situations. Another example follows.

### **Alex and the Break Up**

A HPHS student, Alex dated Lucas for two years. After he broke off the relationship when he moved out of the area, Alex did not want to accept that the romance was over. She clung to his increasingly infrequent texts and visits for several months. The stress of gripping the pieces of the relationship wore on Alex. She felt like a cloud hung in the air over her head.

Alex talked about being sick of being in limbo. She talked about moving on with her life. With tears in her eyes, she explained how she had called Lucas and told him that she was ready to move on, that being friends with no chance of moving back to more intimacy was more painful than breaking off the relationship completely.

We could have continued to discuss the dominant story of sorrow over the failed romance. Instead, I focused on the exceptions to the sadness story. I asked her how she was able to end the two-year relationship. We talked about how she was ready move on with her life, that the heartache of letting the crush go was less than the pain of being in limbo. We talked about the strength and courage she summoned to call Lucas, to tell him that she would not talk to him again for a long time, not even as a friend. Our conversation thickening the story of Alex's strength and courage helped her move on with her life, instead of staying stuck in the sadness story.

### **Double Listening in Solution-Focused Therapy**

The idea of double listening as an exception to a dominant story also appears in solution-focused therapy. In solution-focused therapy, practitioners believe that every problem has exceptions that can be identified and used to develop solutions. The skill of double listening plays an important role in the shift from problem to solution identification. Counselors are to “listen carefully for hints

that signal where, when and how exceptions occur as a step in helping clients develop solutions” (Sklare, 2005, p. 11). Sklare states that this shift requires “conscious effort and repeated practice” (p. 11). Double listening is part of this conscious effort. For example, a HPHS student named John described a time he did not get along with his math teacher, which had resulted in a suspension for John.

Me: What happened after you got suspended?

John: Things eventually got better.

Me: How did that happen?

John: I don’t know.

Me: It sounds like maybe you were able to change something. I wonder how you did that.

John: (thoughtfully and looking unusually interested in responding):

You know, maybe I did do something, but I don’t know what it was. Maybe I just started being nicer to her.

This conversation is a beginning point. The story of John is far from over, but “I just started being nicer to her” provides a counter story to use for building a solution. This is how double listening begins the shift from problem to solution identification in solution-focused therapy.

Double listening is the practice of hearing a person’s dominant story while simultaneously remaining open to the possibility of other equally important stories hidden by the dominant narrative. Double listening shares the skill set used for active listening, but is more. Additional skills needed for double listening include curiosity, awareness of the underlying implications of people’s behavior and expression of emotions, finding exceptions to the dominant story and the concept of identifying attitude shifts. Double listening is a common practice in both solution-focused therapy and narrative therapy. The skill of double listening is important because when the stories hidden behind a dominant narrative are identified and acknowledged, they can become powerful

counter stories, thereby inviting the complexity that prevents people from being defined by a single story.

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