

Before we can appreciate the importance of Narrative Therapy in the contemporary world, it is necessary to understand something of the history of ideas and their effect upon the perceptions and realities of people. Specifically, it is essential to understand the two domains of cognition--the one called variously essence, paradigm, reason, scientific objectivity, and the other called being, narrative, meaning and subjectivity. The first part of this essay will attempt to elucidate these two streams in the history of ideas, and to situate Narrative Therapy in the postmodern context. The latter part of this essay will focus on Narrative Therapy as a postmodern method.

Part I: The Postmodern World

[Three umpires] are sitting around over a beer, and one says, "There's balls and there's strikes, and I call 'em the way they are." Another says, "There's balls and there's strikes, and I call 'em the way I see 'em." The third says, "There's balls and there's strikes, and they ain't *nothin'* until I call 'em."

(Anderson 1990)

From the earliest days of humankind, everything was understood through stories. Early stories dealt with the "why" questions. "Why do

we have to die?” “Why are we here?” “Why is there pain?” The answers did not have to be literally true, but they had to satisfy people’s curiosity “by providing an answer less for the mind than for the soul” (Doan, 1994, p. 1). The tenor of the answers framed cultures, so that, for example, the distinctly moral flavor of the answers as set down in *Genesis* framed Western Society as one in which the answers accounted for the consequences of people’s behavior. In other cultures other, perhaps more whimsical explanations may have prevailed to explain these questions, and so those cultures were framed in a slightly different manner.

Regardless of cultural context, however, all of the stories were sufficient to make life meaningful within that culture. It was the quality of meaningfulness rather than the factual truthfulness that gave the story credibility. “The hearers of the story believed that it was true because it was meaningful, rather than it was meaningful because it was true” (Doan, 1994, p. 2).

It was perhaps Plato, who, in his search for objective truths (“essences” or universally true principles apart from the individual) over meaning, began the stream in western thought of what Jerome Bruner(1986) has called “paradigmatic”—as opposed to “narrative”—-cognition. Bruner defines these as “two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought. Each provides distinct ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality. The two (though

complementary) are irreducible to one another” (p. 11). He further defines the paradigmatic mode as attempting “to fulfill the ideal of a formal, mathematical system of description and explanation. It employs categorization or conceptualization and the operations by which categories are established, instantiated, idealized and related one to the other to form a system” (p. 12).” Paradigmatic cognition aims to establish truth, whereas narrative cognition aims to convince on the basis of its meaningfulness; the narrative mode “rings true”; or, in Bruner’s terms, it possesses the qualities of “verisimilitude” or “lifelikeness”.

The narrative mode of thought is characterized by good stories that gain credence through their lifelikeness. It is not concerned, as is the paradigmatic mode, with abstract and general theories, but with the particulars of experience. Universal truth conditions are not established through narrative, as they are in the paradigmatic mode, but events are realistically connected across time: the story unfolds. The narrative mode leads to a multitude of varying perspectives; the paradigmatic mode, following from Plato’s essences, leads to established principles.

Firmly grounded in the platonic tradition of essences, Descartes set out to doubt whatever he could not prove, and thus heralded in the rise of modernism. His cogitation began a shift in the way people experienced reality. His modern rationalism brought with it a search

for objectivity established on the tenuous foundation of individual consciousness (“I think therefore I am”).

The paradigmatic stream has nourished science and brought about this great age of technological wonder. Without the systems of mathematics and science that developed from paradigmatic thought, we would not have the mastery that we have achieved over the natural world, the ability to communicate instantaneously throughout the world, or the methodology to continually advance our knowledge. Paradigmatic thought has created a world-view and a language of its own, a language that has become indispensable for what Gregory Bateson (1972) has called the world of the “non-living”.

While paradigmatic cognition has reigned supreme from Descartes’s time to the present, it has not been without its detractors. The Romantic Movement emphasized the individual and sought to free the unconscious mind (Schneider 1998). Existentialism, which shares a number of similarities with Romanticism, reacted against any kind of universal system or ethical absolute that stands above and apart from the individual. Rollo May’s (1961) summary of Existentialism emphasizes this contrast with paradigmatic thought.

Existentialism means centering upon the *existing* person; it is the emphasis on the human being as he is *emerging, becoming*. The word “existence” comes from the root *ex-istere*, meaning literally “to stand out, emerge.” Traditionally in Western culture,

existence has been set over against essence, the latter being the emphasis upon immutable principles, truth, logical laws, etc, that are supposed to stand above any given existence.

Existentialism postulates the primacy of existence over essence—the individual over objective reality, narrative over paradigmatic cognition. The individual actualizes his or her existence through choice. Truth, rather than being a part of the essence of objective reality, is experienced as an inward passion or the “recovery of Being. (May 1961)” To the extent that Existentialism has succeeded in overthrowing the idea of a universal or essence, the end of the idea of “absolute truth” has resulted. “Existentialism is the philosophical basis for postmodernism”(Veith 1994). Because of its emphasis on being, the language of Existentialism is narrative.

Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell, all of which are reworked in the story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semi-conscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue. We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meaning of our past actions, anticipating the outcome of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed. (Brooks 1984)

The eminent hermeneuticist Paul Ricoeur (1991) calls paradigmatic language the language of instrumentalization and describes it as the most dangerous trend of our culture. He points out

that it has become our only model of language—the model of science and technology (p. 448). The purpose of scientific language is to reduce a word to a single meaning, as it must do to fulfill the scientific and technological methodology that spawned it.

“But,” writes Ricoeur, “it is the task of poetry [or narrative] to make words mean as much as they can and not as little as they can. Therefore, [the aim is] not to elude or exclude this plurivocity, but to cultivate it, to make it meaningful, powerful, and therefore to bring back to language all its capacity and meaningfulness. (p. 449)

Herein lies the dilemma for psychotherapy. In order to legitimize itself as a scientific discipline, traditional psychotherapy has historically assumed a language that is not only inadequate to its subject matter, but is at odds with its ends. The subject matter of psychotherapy is clearly subjective experience, and the language of subjective experience is narrative. The aim of psychotherapy is in the realm of meaning not the establishment of universal truth. Nietzsche understood this and wrote, “Man can stretch himself as he may with his knowledge and appear to himself as objective as he may; in the last analysis he gives nothing but his own biography.” (Ellenberger 1970)

Just as the power of the paradigmatic mode of cognition lies in the realm of objective truth, so the power of the narrative mode lies in

the realm of meaning—a realm populated with intentionality, human time and subjective space.

Narrative convinces...because it provides a web of meaning and of connectedness to events, which reassures people that things happen as they do because they take place in a moral universe. As such the narrative mode deals with what Bruner refers to as “the vicissitudes of intention” (p. 17). In our view, this is the proper domain of therapy: how people feel about themselves when their actions repeatedly fail to match their intentions, or their intentions fail to measure up to their aspirations. It follows that narratives are conversations about the dramatic ironies to which intentions are susceptible—the many ways in which they surprise and confound people. As such the subject matter of therapeutic conversations is, invariably, intentions gone awry. (Doan, 1994, p. 3)

Paul Ricoeur (1984) suggests that time becomes “human time” to the extent that it is organized within the context of a narrative.

Time—past, present, and future—then becomes organized around a single entity, the narrator, or more precisely, the intentionality of the narrator. The narrator is free to plot his or her own course and to respond subjectively to the unforeseen contingencies of each future moment. Within the narrative, the storyteller becomes empowered; he or she becomes the protagonist of the story instead of a minor character in someone else’s script.

This is not to say that the storyteller is a permanent and consistently recognizable self. The postmodern self—or selves—is continually “under construction”. “We create and recreate ourselves, along with our ever-changing realities; it is distinctly human; it is what we do” (Socor 1996). Social constructionism postulates that the self is neither a stable nor an intrinsic entity, but is, instead, the chronicle which emerges from coherently connecting—and thus imbuing with meaning—otherwise discrete and disparate events within the social arena. This view of the self is a fundamental tenet of postmodern theory. Personal identity unfolds like the plot of a story, interacting constantly with events and people, and becoming personal through narrative reflection. For “to make a plot is already to make the intelligible spring from the accidental, the universal from the singular, the necessary or probable from the episodic” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 41).

Clearly, social constructionism represents a distinct paradigmatic challenge to more traditional modes of conceptualizing informed by the empiricist heritage. Engaged in the pursuit of knowledge through observation, this latter method of inquiry is committed to precisely what constructionism questions. That is, to the fundamental assumption that there are objective actualities in the world independent of their subjective observer which, furthermore, are discoverable if the principles of a rigorous rationality are properly applied. (Socor 1996)

The narrative mode redefines the relationship between the observer and subject. Both are placed in the story being performed, in which the observer has been accorded the role of the privileged author in its construction.

In what Kenneth Gergen (1990) refers to as “the postmodern turn” the very foundations of the empiricist paradigm were profoundly shaken as the way in which the world was known underwent a kind of conceptual revolution. He attributes this revolution to the “technological achievements of the past century (which) have produced a radical shift in our exposure to each other” (Gergen 1991). It is because of our increasing ability to interact with other—and often quite different—selves over vast distances, by radio, television, telephone, and the internet, that we have become socially overstimulated. “We are, as it were, perpetually “online”(Socor 1996)”

Perhaps because there are so many voices available or perhaps because we have found so many of them to be irrelevant, the postmodern period is marked by the absence of any overriding story, sacred or otherwise. Judeo-Christianity, whose story sustained the West during most of the past two millennia, is fragmented and the object of cynicism and disillusionment. The faith in technological progress that marked the first half of this century has been lost in the aftermath of nuclear threat. The story of the triumph of democracy has become the story of greedy politicians. No story seems able to

provide either legitimacy or sufficiency equal to the pace of change in this world, and so people look for meaning in their own stories.

The contemporary world has witnessed the recent demarginalization of people who have found voices of their own and begun to carve out a sense of identity for themselves in the wake of the loss of a consensual belief in a single truth.

That “single vision,” as William Blake called it, is the same drive toward understanding all things as the Same, which has been identified by Emmanuel Levinas (1991) as the central force in Western thought since Plato. It is, moreover, the same force that Luce Irigaray (1991) identifies as the central patriarchal drive to minimize humans’ dependency upon their mortal bodies and upon their mother, the earth—and hence the male dependency upon women. This force’s gradual loss of authority in the explosion of modernity has meant that...there is no longer an effective or credible margin in place with which to set off those who are the Same (mostly white, heterosexual, European males), aligned with *the* one truth, from those who are Other, different. As peoples who have hitherto been designated Other—women, people of various colors, former colonials, those of homoerotic orientation, even teenagers—begin to speak out and identify themselves with their own stories, they are no longer content to remain marginal characters in the dominant story. They create their own worlds of meaning for themselves and speak their own languages within those worlds.(Parry 1994)

Gergen (1991) discusses the process of the transformation of the “modern self” into the “postmodern selves” in his book, The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life. He describes the past as a time when the systems in which people found themselves were relatively stable. Small and essentially permanent communities, in which neighbors remained the same over a lifetime and the number of intimate contacts a person had was limited by distance, affirmed the view that one had recognizable and enduring characteristics, like the communities in which one was reared. Furthermore, the number of points of view that one encountered was limited by distance and by the perspectives of the local newspaper’s editors. The question of who one was (or if one was) was rarely considered because one maintained a relatively secure and permanent role and place within the system. Prior to the mid-twentieth century, the self-concept, like the social environment, was knowable and relatively stable. Gergen (1991) maintains that these conditions and the self-concept supported by them have been radically altered by the emerging technologies, which have opened the windows to the seemingly endless diversity of the world at large. These technologies have allowed a myriad of diverse and disparate environments into the homes and consciousness of people with increasing frequency and ease.

Just as fundamental sameness and a kind of psychic “hush” imposed by unbridgeable distances defined a self which was the same over time and deeply, even silently, interior, so now has technological capacity spanned all distance, rendering it virtually irrelevant. What was a recognizable and uniform world, which encouraged an introspective contemplation and a conversation with one’s own (separate) self, has been quite literally transformed, so that uniformity yields to diversity and silence to ceaseless colloquy. Where there was social and political individuality—and a concomitant psychological singularity of identity—there is an increasingly communal society and polity, giving rise, Gergen (1991) maintains, to its psychological counterpart in identities, collective selves, and a community of equally “true” voices. And where there was isolation, there is ever present and immediate—although often short lived—opportunity for relationship and connection, and the notion of singular causes leading in inexorable linear fashion to identifiable effects is eroding in the wake of a technical ability to construct and deconstruct endless causes to any effect one may conceive. And of course, the idea of self is inevitably altered as people absorb the voices and even the lives, of once mysterious and unknowable “others” (Socor 1996)

Gergen (1991) views this transformation from what he calls the essential to the relational self as occurring in three phases. In the first stage, one becomes disoriented as he or she observes the self donning different social roles, different ways of being, to achieve social gains. “Here, social saturation has disrupted traditional ways of

understanding oneself. As one is increasingly faced with new relationships...a steadfast sense of just who one is is shaken” (Socor 1996). This situation is especially driven by the fact that formerly confirming cues from face to face relationships give way to impersonal and relatively short-lived forms of contact. Gergen (1991) calls this the stage of “strategic manipulation,” implying that there is still a conception of an actual self doing the manipulating. Over time, however, this constant fluctuation of roles erodes the confidence of one self and ushers in the stage of “pastiche personality.”

In this second stage the individual experiences a liberation from the discomfort caused by a sense of being manipulative and abandons the notion of one self. One becomes optimistic at the prospect of the vast possibilities which are opened, and “life becomes a candy store for one’s developing appetites”(Gergen 1991).

In the third and final phase, a fully postmodern conception dominates all self-understanding. Who one is becomes totally contingent upon the specific relationships in which one finds oneself at any given moment.

“The self here possesses no achieved and final identity, does not persist over time, and clearly bears no conceptual or experiential ties to the idea that “a sense of ego identity...is the accrued confidence that the inner sameness and continuity prepared in the past are matched by the sameness and continuity of one’s meaning for others...” (Erikson, 1950, p. 261).

In a postmodern world, contingency replaces permanence and confidence is undone by context” (Socor 1996).

Not only does he see the self as completely relational, but Gergen (1991) also suggests that the boundary between self and other is obscured if not eradicated by the saturation of modern communications technology. The nihilistic implications of this postmodern vision are truly frightening. How, in this new world, can one discern meaning? What kind of psychological future is suggested in this abolition of essential stability and this dance from role to role? The methodology that seems to address these pertinent questions and that is clearly suggested by the constructionist perspective is that of narrative.

The postmodern world began and is sustained in language. If Gergen (1991) is correct, the self is saturated as the result of the impact of mass communication. The indeterminate nature of postmodern selfhood is sustained within a web of social constructions that are driven by language. The stories we are told and the stories we tell ourselves drive our concepts of who we are at any instance and determine our actions. It is therefore within the realm of language and narrative that we must look to find some stability and coherence in this postmodern whirlwind.

Through language, specifically reflective self narrative, we link the events in our lives and provide coherence and meaning to them,

but we do not do so in complete isolation. Through conversation, we establish a link with other subjectivities, and in a kind of hermeneutical circle, fashion and refashion our stories. It has been suggested (Gergen and Gergen, 1997) that society actually privileges certain specific story forms for its own stability and survival in the context of the potential nihilism of the postmodern world.

Perhaps the major stabilizing force lies in the linguistic link between and among individuals. There must be some consensual acknowledgement that what emerges from my subjective ruminations bears some relationship to what emerges from yours. In order to be real, my naked subjectivity must be adorned in our agreed upon language and bear some resemblance to your experience.

A sense of personal realness requires that the “I” receive the affirming embrace of the “we”. For we know that the emperor has no clothes, but saying so undresses us all. Instead we agree—most of us, most of the time—to the truth that we are fully attired. And we know it so because we say so at the same time that we also know that we can “unsay” and “resay” (Socor 1996)

The very relativity which hovers so precariously on the edge of nihilism is thus anchored in the linguistic connection that we maintain, one to another. We construct our stories, we allow them the formative power to determine who we are, but they are only real, effective, and powerful, when they are recounted to--and co-constructed with--an

other through the vehicle of language. It is through this linguistic link with others that we provide and discern meaning. The hopeless dance from role to role is chaotic only when one dances alone; in synch with an other, the dance becomes a creative act. A therapy that is to be effective in the post-modern world must operate within this dialogue.

If the person is a fabric, constantly being woven with the threads of language, then a therapy that would seek to facilitate change must actively and linguistically participate in the weaving. If the realm of meaning is entered through stories—as it seems to have been from the beginning of human time—then effective therapy must participate in the telling and retelling of stories. If there are indeed many selves, then a therapy that would seek to empower must address and co-construct those selves with power. If we are different selves in different contexts, then a therapy for our post-modern condition must provide a safe place for our own preferred stories to emerge. If our own story is now to replace the dominant religious and cultural stories of the past, then an effective therapy must strive to give voice to our own preferred story.

Part II: Narrative Therapy

If a therapist must have a theory of personality, then the most helpful one is that of an identity as a mental, abridged anthology of stories, any one of which can be replaced by a story from the total collection. Therapy thus involves editing the abridged edition of perceptions of the present and past. A change in these perceptions is a change in the personality, and a change of shared perceptions is a change in the relationship (Madanes 1990)

The primary focus of a narrative approach to therapy is people's expressions of their experiences of life. These are expressions of people's experiences of their lived worlds, and, as such, engage people in interpretive acts. Through these acts of interpretation, people give meaning to their experiences of the world and communicate their experiences to others. Meaning does not pre-exist the interpretation of experience, just as essence does not precede existence. Meaning is found in the interpretations people give to their experiences. *These experiences and the meaning that we give them are inseparable and make up what we call narratives.*

The acts of interpreting experience are dependent upon people's engagement with interpretive resources that provide frames of intelligibility. Among these resources are the systems in which people

function, the culture or dominant narratives that make up their worlds, and the organizing metaphor that predominantly sustains their thought.

Sarbin (1986), one of the main advocates of the narrative approach, views narrative as a way of organizing episodes, actions, and accounts of actions in time and space. He also suggests that narrative organizes our fantasies and daydreams, our unvoiced stories, our plans and memories, even our loving and hating. He discusses four basic metaphors through which we order our world: Formism, mechanicism, organicism, and contextualism.

Formism stresses the organization of the world on the basis of the form of objects, that is, on the basis of their perceivable similarities and differences. Personality trait theories and classifications of disorders provide such classifications on the basis of similarity and difference. Some examples of statements that reflect organization based upon the metaphor of Formism are the following: “I’m a very open person;” “I’m a depressive type;” “I’m an alcoholic.”

The root metaphor of *mechanicism* is a familiar dominant narrative in Western civilization. This worldview considers events as the products of the transmittal of forces. The relationship between events is determined by an efficient causality. The S-R basis of behaviorism is an example of this metaphor in psychology. In the self-narratives of people with this worldview, we would hear such

statements as, “My problems were caused by the early death of my mother” or “As the child of an alcoholic, I never trust anyone.”

Organicism considers the world as an organism, rather than as a machine or set of forms. Organicism locates parts within organic wholes, like organs in a functioning body. The fully developed organic structure is the end-product of a developmental sequence. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and Kohlberg’s stages of moral development are two psychological perspectives based on this metaphor. Likewise, such statements as, “When she reaches a more appropriate stage of maturity, she will understand” indicate thinking based on this metaphor.

The root metaphor for *contextualism* is the historical event, and it is the basic metaphor of story or narrative. The central element is the historical event that can only be understood when it is located in the context of time and space. Examples of contextualism in psychology can be found in such diverse thinkers as James, Mead, and Freud—all of whom had an interest in the distinction between the meanings of the pronouns *I* and *me*—the former representing the narrator or author, and the latter, the protagonist. Within this metaphor, the person is able not only to imagine him- or herself traveling to a place or visiting somebody, but, as an author, to describe him- or herself as an actor. Such narrative construction is possible because the I can imagine the Me in the future and can

reconstruct the Me in the past. Contextualism is found in statements like, “It is the first time in my life that I have found the courage to discuss this issue” or “When my teacher’s opinion differs from my own, I find it difficult to keep my footing.”

Contextualism presupposes an ongoing texture of elaborated events, with each being influenced by preceding episodes and influencing following ones and with each being affected by multiple agents who engage in actions. There is a constant change in the structure of situations and in the positions occupied by actors who are oriented to the world and toward one another as intentional beings. Often these actors have opposite positions, as if functioning on a stage as protagonists and antagonists, as they enter relationships of love, hate, agreement, or disagreement. The thoughts, feelings, and actions of the protagonists can only be understood as emerging from their relationships with antagonists, who are co-construing reality in often unpredictable ways. (Hermans-Jansen 1995)

Contextualism is the only one of the metaphors that is broad enough to allow for the human experience, and that is why it is the metaphor of the historian and the novelist. While formalism classifies events in such a way that they result in general traits, types, or characteristics, thereby limiting the human experience to flat and unrealistic characters, contextualism is sensitive to the particulars of time and space and considers characters in relationship to other characters and to the unfolding “plot” of the experience. The

oversimplified relationship of cause and effect that is at the root of the mechanistic metaphor is insufficient to account for the multiplicity of events (referring to the past, present, and future and to the relationships with other actors) that together form an interconnected totality. “The person as a storyteller does not react to stimuli but is oriented to the realization of purposes and goals and is involved in a continuous process of meaning construction. (Hermans-Jansen 1995, p. 9)” While contextualism acknowledges the developmental sequences of organicism, it also makes room for the unpredictable. The meaning that an individual gives to life events, such as a job change, relocation, an encounter with a significant other, the sudden loss of a friend, divorce of parents, a life-threatening operation, may have unpredictable consequences that cannot be accounted for in the organicistic metaphor. The structure of narrative and the root metaphor of contextualism provides the principle frame of intelligibility for people in their day-to-day lives. It is through this frame that people link together the events of life in sequences that unfold through time according to specific themes.

Narratives—life events infused with the meanings we give them—are constitutive of life; they have real effects in terms of the shaping of life. The person who has interpreted the world to be a dangerous place finds danger in life and composes subsequent narratives about these dangers. In this example, the idea that the

world is a dangerous place could be called the theme of a person's narrative. The many situations that the person selects that exemplify this theme constitute the plot. Polkinghorne (1988) has suggested that the meaning of an event is produced by how the event and the plot interact, each providing form for the other. Events that are chosen to become part of the plot structure are chosen on the basis of theme. The construction of a guiding theme may even lead to the generation of new events. In a detective novel, for example, the sleuth may set a trap for the suspect in order to test his or her hypothesis. In another example, the person who conceives of the world as dangerous may set out to test his or her hypothesis by walking a city street in the early hours of the morning. If that person remains safe *and the individual attributes the safe walk to the possibility that the world may not be so dangerous*, then the predominant story of a dangerous world may be shaken. Narratives are in a constant state of production, and these productions are potentially transformative of life.

Communities of people traffic in meanings that are relevant to and shared by their members. The meanings of experiences that may appear at first to be ambiguous or vague are negotiated within communities of people according to established procedures. Narratives have a cultural context and are informed by the knowledge and practices of life that are culturally determined. Our culture provides us

with a limited number of basic themes that function as organizing frames for the understanding and interpretation of life events.

Frye (1957) argued that narrative themes in our culture are determined by the experience of nature, particularly in the cycles of the seasons. Gergen and Gergen (1988) classify our cultural themes instead in terms of the storied changes over time toward a desirable end state. In their classification an individual telling what they term a progressive narrative might say, “I am learning to overcome my fear of danger by taking more risks.” A regressive narrative, on the other hand, is focused on decrements in the orientation toward a desirable end state, for example, “I can’t control my fears anymore.” Finally, in a stable narrative, the individual remains unchanged in respect to the valued end point. Murray (1938) used the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) to elicit such themes as achievement, affiliation, dominance, sex, etc, assuming that these themes expressed the client’s more or less unconscious needs.

More recently, Hubert Hermans (1995) of The Netherlands has conducted several studies that relate basic themes on the collective level to psychological motives on the individual level. In these studies, collective stories are distilled into two basic themes—heroism and love—and are matched to the individual motives of “striving for self-enhancement” and “the longing for contact or union with the environment or other people (p. 13). The studies confirm that

collective themes, represented by paintings and myths, were present in the self narratives of the subjects.

In both collective and individual stories, the plot ties together what would be simply a listing of chronological events under the organizing principle of the theme. Some events are highlighted; others are forgotten. “Story themes and psychological motives bring coherence and direction to events that are otherwise fragmented and dispersed over time and space. (Hermans-Jansen 1995).

Narratives—expressions composed of both the experience and the meaning that is attributed to it—are not merely streams of memory or organized representations of life. Narratives are constitutive of life.

In that it is through expressions (narratives) that people shape and reshape their lives, expressions are not an “academic” matter. Expressions cannot be considered a static reproduction of some experiences that they refer to: they are not ‘maps of the territory of life,’ not ‘reflections of life as it is lived,’ not ‘mirrors of the world,’ and not ‘perspectives on life’ that stand outside of what is going on. (White 1999)

Narratives are constitutive of life. They contain the key to how we perceive our world. They are the basis of our motivation, our affect, and our behavior. It is through our stories that we can be understood, and it is within the telling and retelling of our stories that we can be healed.

To effectively enter the space in which these potentially healing stories are created and revised, the narrative therapist must assume an entirely different posture than has the traditional modernist therapist. The therapist can no longer claim the status of expert. He or she can no longer lay claim to objective truth. The postmodern therapist can no longer operate within the realm of single selfhood if he or she wishes to interact with the many selves of the postmodern client. The therapist must constantly understand that his or her own perceptions, cognitions, affect, and motivations are also the product of narratives, colored by all of the discourses—culture, role, family, etc—that influence anyone else.

In Table I, Amundson and Stewart (1993) contrast the “therapy of certainty” that is representative of modernistic thought with a “therapy of curiosity” that is in keeping with the postmodern perspective of narrative.

TABLE 1. A therapy of certainty and curiosity

A therapy of certainty	A therapy of curiosity
Is uncomfortable with ambiguity; needs to have structure and clarity	Can tolerate confusion and ambiguity without moving to premature closure
Quickly insists on a diagnosis and adheres to descriptions from those diagnoses.	Moves more slowly in defining the problem, taking time to consider the experience in the room
Relies on problem-saturated descriptions of client behavior	Takes care to discover exceptions to the problematic behavior
Clients who don't “get it” are seen as “resistant”, and this “resistance” must be subverted,	When it seems that clients don't “get it,” it may be that we haven't asked the kind of questions that

broken through, etc.	will move the therapy forward.
Is concerned with asking and answering “why” questions	Asks circular questions and examines the effects of the problem.
Closes space by narrowing observations to one’s constructions/predispositions	Opens space by considering observations from many system levels
Assumes that a symptom serves just as a function...	Does not assume symptoms to be doing anything in particular, and may fit many theoretical explanations
Operates from a first-order perspective and does not consider the therapist-client system	Operates from a second-order perspective, always considering the therapist-client system
Is concerned with teaching, explaining, disseminating “expert knowledge”	Asks questions, looks for the special indigenous knowledge of the client
Discounts or overlooks the resources of the client	Takes care to discover what strengths are present...

Note. From Amundson and Stewart (1993). Copyright 1993 by the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy.

In a similar manner, Karl Tomm (cited in Smith, 1997) discusses the contrasting postures of certainty and curiosity as reflecting a wide continuum of closing space and opening space with clients. He prefers to open space for clients by considering more empowering distinctions and preferred behaviors, rather than closing space on the client’s ability to continue less desirable behaviors. Tomm refers to the closing of space or reducing the client’s options as “therapeutic violence,” and the opening of space or making room for more options as “therapeutic loving.” He speaks of these positions as “ethical postures,” utilizing Maturana’s definition of violence as “any imposition

of one's will upon another" and of loving as "opening space for the existence of the other." In this context, Smith wryly observes that it is understandable why traditionally therapists are referred to as "shrinks" (p. 23)!

Friedman and Combs (1996) have framed this posture in a set of eight questions for the narrative therapist to keep in mind.

1. Am I asking for descriptions of more than one reality?
2. Am I listening so as to understand how this person's experiential reality has been socially constructed?
3. Whose language is being privileged here? Am I trying to accept and understand this person's linguistic descriptions? If I am offering a distinction or typification in *my* language, why am I doing that? What are the effects of the various linguistic distinctions that are coming forth in the therapeutic conversation?
4. What are the stories that support this person's problems? Are there dominant stories that are oppressing or limiting this person's life? What marginalization stories am I hearing? Are there clues to marginalized stories that have not yet been spoken? How might I invite this person to engage in an "insurrection of knowledges" around those marginalized stories?
5. Am I focusing on meaning instead of on "facts"?

- 6 Am I evaluating this person, or am I inviting her or him to evaluate a wide range of things? (e.g. how therapy is going, preferred directions in life)?
- 7 Am I situating my opinions in my personal experience? Am I being transparent about my context, my values, and my intentions, so that this person can evaluate the effects of my biases?
- 8 Am I getting caught up in pathologizing or normative thinking? Are we collaboratively defining problems based on what is problematic in this person's experience? Am I staying away from "expert" hypotheses or theories?

One major effect of this "therapeutic loving" or opening of space for the client is that the client begins to have room for the perspective that he or she is not the problem, but that the problem is the problem (White 1987). This externalization of the problem is a major factor in the attitude of the narrative therapist. This is not a technique, but a perspective with roots far back in history.

In the Middle Ages, if a person was "sick," or "crazy," or "criminal," an external force, located in social or spiritual realms, was seen as the cause and means for the cure. Perhaps the ruler wasn't ruling well enough or the person was cut off from the appropriate spiritual community. In modern times, the emphasis is far more on the individual's responsibility, so that heart disease is seen as evidence

of poor diet and depression as a matter of individual chemical balance. According to Foucault (1980), the most politically powerful discourses in modern society divide us from each other and invite us to treat ourselves and our bodies as problematic objects.

Adams-Westcott, Daffron, and Sterne (1993) have written about how people who suffer abuse tend to internalize the traumatizing events as inner dialogues, and how these dialogues influence the theme of their subsequent narratives. They write

Problems develop when people internalize conversations that restrain them to a narrow description of self. These stories are experienced as oppressive because they limit the perception of available choices (p. 262).

David Epston (1993) has observed that this process of internalization happens not only with traumatic experiences, but with larger cultural experiences as well.

When the problem can be clearly separated from the person, it becomes possible to carefully examine the dynamics and direction of the interaction between persons and problems. The problem and person are situated in a kind of battle, and each victory and defeat can be charted. In separating from the problem, the person's narrative is no longer ridden with the kind of oppressive and subjugating language that identifies the problem as part of the person. The problem is also

divorced from the theme of the person's self-narrative, which results in space being opened for non-problem saturated alternative stories.

In order to be eventually deconstructed, the process by which the problem was first constructed, as well as its influence in the person's life, is of primary interest to the narrative therapist. In the earliest years we begin to set our themes by our parents' parameters. We learn what is acceptable and what is not; our very survival depends upon it. Problems are born when our own preferred stories are disallowed or discounted, often in the early years. Children learn that some things are unspeakable and must not be storied. Sometimes, especially where abuse exists, the child loses his or her voice in this conspiracy of silence. Even for those whose childhood was less harrowing, the world they formed through the stories they were born into and those they invented to make sense of it very likely continues to hold to them more stubbornly than they would like. The attentive narrative therapist must follow the tracks down through the history of the person to this point where parental love may have been contingent upon the child's silence or, at least, upon the child giving little privilege to his or her own story.

Of even greater importance to the eventual deconstruction of the problem is a thorough mapping of the problem's influence in the behavioral, emotional, physical, interactional, and attitudinal domains. In order to map the influence of the problem in these various spheres,

Michael White (1990) has introduced the concept of relative influence questioning. These questions are designed to go beyond the restricted relationship between the problem and the person ascribed the problem. They are framed to “identify the effect of the problem across various interfaces—between the problem and various persons, and between the problem and various relationships (p. 43).” This broadens the field and opens more space for the eventual determination of alternative narratives and greater personal agency.

The problem’s influence upon the person, however, is still only half of the life story of the problem; the other half is the influence of various persons upon the life of the problem.

This (second set of questions) features those questions that invite persons to map their influence and the influence of their relationships in the “life” of the problem. These questions bring forth information that contradicts the problem-saturated description of family life and assist persons in identifying their competence and resourcefulness in the face of adversity (White 1990, p. 45) .

What do I do to allow the problem to win? How does this family member further empower the problem?

In externalizing the problem, the problem is seen as an entity, a kind of trickster. This trickster is fed by socially constructed messages and ways of thinking. This personified problem makes promises, threats, and engages in numerous tactics to keep the person in his/her

grip. By separating from the problem, the person becomes empowered. No longer saturated with the problem narrative, the person is able to recall other self-narratives in which the problem had no life. It is upon these “unique outcomes (White 1990)” that a new and more preferred story can be constructed.

For example, children who are predominantly anxious will have some moments, no matter how small or fleeting, in which they are a little less anxious. Therapists become curious about these aspects (“unique outcomes”). Re-authoring therapists may ask anxious children questions such as these: “How were you able to be less anxious at that moment? What did you do or say to yourself that may have helped you have more influence on the ‘anxiety’? Have there been other moments like these? What do these moments say about your hopes and personal qualities? (Smith 1997)

The client often remembers these moments of “unique outcome,” if at all, as trivial and lucky exceptions to the rule of a problem-saturated life. But, as therapists express interest in these exceptions and help link them together with other “unique outcomes”, new life is breathed into them. They begin to form an alternative pattern, a new narrative. The old story of the anxious person is joined by an alternative story of a person who has some influence over anxiety.

When these two stories are articulated and placed side by side, the client can determine which he or she prefers. If the client prefers

the more empowered alternative narrative, the therapist can be the other to whom the client retells and describes this preferred alternative to the old story. The therapist helps the client imagine situations in which the new story may be threatened. The client is invited to talk about people who may be inclined to give the old story new life and to explore strategies for dealing with them. How will the client help the new story to endure? How will the client embody this preferred self? “The more the therapist expresses curiosity and explores implications of this emerging story, the more “real” or concrete it becomes. This concreteness, in turn, helps this alternative account survive (Smith, 1997, p. 36).”

The re-authoring of a person’s narrative is one of two major sets of approaches to Narrative Therapy. Another set of approaches, those with a Hermeneutic/Dialogic emphasis, are based on the work of Harry Goolishian, Harlene Andersen, and Tom Anderson (Anderson 1988; Andersen 1991; Anderson 1992; Andersen 1993; Anderson 1997). Instead of helping clients to free themselves from opposing narratives and re-authoring their preferred stories, the hermeneutic or dialogic approaches assist clients in moving from stuck monologues to more liberating dialogues. This set of approaches does not intentionally invite clients to externalize the problem and engage in battle with the “trickster” problem personified. Neither does this approach determine “unique outcomes” and collaborate with the client on the authoring of

a new story. Instead, the client is helped to dialogue with the many different voices or narratives within, which are called forth in different relationships and situations. As with all narrative approaches, the therapist takes a stance of curiosity, of “not knowing,” and provides a safe place in which the various voices can express themselves.

These voices have been talking long before the therapist ever enters the picture. Before consulting a therapist most clients have had numerous conversations, both internal and external about the problem. Therapists using this approach will often begin therapy with questions designed to hear as many of these voices tell their story as possible. If a relationship is involved, the people in the relationship also lend their voices to the discussion. As these voices express themselves in the safe environment of the therapeutic container they begin to appreciate each others’ perspectives, and, through dialogue, begin to change their predominant narratives.

The sorting out of the various internal and external voices that is the hallmark of the dialogic/hermeneutic approach is also sometimes combined with the re-authoring approach to narrative therapy. To give one of many possible examples, this blending can include the facilitation of dialogue between the voice of the externalized problem (e.g. “anger”) and relevant others in the conversational system (e.g. the client’s brother). The client’s voice can dialogue with the brother’s inner and outer voices, and the client can then reflect on the meanings

of these dialogues. Thus, the client can be asked, “What does anger tell you to do with your brother? What does your brother say to you when anger gets in between the two of you and gets you to attack him? What do you think your brother says to himself when that happens? What would anger think if he could hear what your brother was thinking inside instead of what he actually said? As we’re talking about this would you be willing to say what you are saying to yourself now?” “Each client reflection can yield a new perspective or voice, which can in turn be included in the ever-evolving dialogue with others and within the client. (Smith 1997)”

Narrative approaches to therapy are uniquely appropriate to the postmodern world. In a world in which reality is constructed through language and structured upon a contextual metaphor, the narrative approaches work within that constructive process to help the client find and create his or her own preferred stories. The narrative approaches assume the existence of numerous selves and provide a set of processes through which the client can integrate and empower those selves within their preferred stories. In a world in which the discourse of the powerful is recognized as but one of many alternative perspectives, narrative therapy eliminates the expert position of the therapist and allows the therapist to assume the more equal and

horizontal role of facilitator so that the client can heal in his or her own preferred direction.

My story being done,
 She gave me for my pains a world of sighs:
 She swore, in faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange.
 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful:
 She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished
 That heaven had made her such a man; she thanked me,
 And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,
 I should but teach him how to tell my story,
 And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake:
 She loved me for the dangers I had passed,
 And I loved her that she did pity them.
 This only is the witchcraft I have used. Othello, I iii 158

References

Adams-Westcott, J., Daffron, T., and Sterne, P (1993). Escaping victim life stories and co-constructing personal agency. Therapeutic Conversations. S. G. a. R. Price. New York, Norton: 258-271.

Amundson, J., & Stewart, K. (1993). "Temptations of power and certainty." Journal of Marital and Family Therapy **19**(2): 111-123.

Andersen, T. (1991). Guidelines for practice. The reflecting team: Dialogues and dialogues about the dialogues. T. Andersen. New York, Norton.

Andersen, T. (1993). See and hear and be seen and heard. The new language of change: Constructive collaboration in psychotherapy. S. Friedman. New York, Guilford Press.

Anderson, H. (1997). Conversation, language, and possibilities-- a postmodern approach to psychotherapy. New York, Basic.

Anderson, H. a. G., H. (1988). "Human systems as linguistic systems: Preliminary and evolving ideas about the implications for clinical theory." Family Process **27**: 371-393.

Anderson, H. a. G., H (1992). The client is the expert: A not-knowing approach to therapy. Therapy as social construction. S. M. a. K. J. Gergen. Newbury Park, California, Sage.

Anderson, W. T. (1990). Reality isn't what it used to be. San Francisco, Harper and Row.

Bateson, G. (1972). Steps to an ecology of mind. New York, Ballantine.

Brooks, P. (1984). Reading for the plot: design and intention in narrative. New York, Random House.

Bruner, J. (1986). Actual minds, possible worlds. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.

Doan, R. E. a. P., Alan (1994). Story Re-visions. New York, The Guilford Press.

Ellenberger, H. (1970). The discovery of the unconscious. New York, Basic Books.

Epston, D. (1993). Internalizing discourses versus externalizing discourses. Therapeutic Conversations. S. G. a. R. Price. New York, Norton: 161-177.

Foucault, M. (1980). Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977. New York, Pantheon.

Friedman, J. a. C., Gene (1996). Narrative Therapy: the social construction of preferred realities. New York, Norton.

Frye, N. (1957). Anatomy of criticism. Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press.

Gergen, K. (1990). "Toward a postmodern psychology." Humanistic Psychologist **18**: 23-34.

Gergen, K. (1991). The Saturated Self: dilemmas of Identity in contemporary life. New York, Harper-Collins.

Gergen, K. J. G., M.M. (1988). "Narrative and the self as relationship." Advances in experimental social psychology **21**: 17-56.

Gergen, M. M. a. K. (1997). Narratives of the self. Memory, Identity, Community. L. P. a. S. K. Hinchman. Albany, New York, SUNY Press: 161-184.

Hermans-Jansen, H. a. (1995). Self-narratives: the construction of meaning in psychotherapy. New York, The Guilford Press.

Madanes, C. (1990). Sex, love and violence: Strategies for transformation. New York, Norton.

May, R., Maslow, A, et al (1961). Existential Psychology. New York, Random House.

Murray, H. A. (1938). Explorations in personality. New York, Oxford University Press.

Parry, A. a. D., Robert E (1994). Story Re-visions: Narrative Therapy in a postmodern world. New York, The Guilford Press.

Polkinghorne, D. (1988). Narrative knowing and the human sciences. Albany, State University of New York Press.

Ricoeur, P. (1984). Time and narrative. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.

Ricoeur, P. (1991). Poetry and Possibility. A Ricoeur reader: reflection and imagination. M. J. Valdes'. Toronto, University of Toronto Press.

Sarbin, T. R. (1986). The narrative as a root metaphor in psychology. Narrative psychology: The storied nature of human conduct. T. R. Sarbin. New York, Praeger.

Schneider, K. (1998). "Toward a science of the heart: romanticism and the revival of psychology." Journal of the American Psychological Association **53**(3).

Smith, C., Ed. (1997). Narrative Therapies with Children and Adolescents. New York, Guilford Press.

Socor, B. J. (1996). The self and its constructions: A narrative faith in the postmodern world, Iona University. **1999**.

Veith, G. E. (1994). Postmodern Times. Wheaton, Crossway Books.

White, M. (1987). Family therapy and schizophrenia. Dulwich Center Newsletter. Adelaide, South Australia, Dulwich Center. **Spring:** 14-21.

White, M. (1999). Narrative Therapy, Dulwich Center. **1999**.

White, M. a. E., D (1990). Narrative means to therapeutic ends. Adelaide, South Australia, Dulwich Center.