CONVERSATION, LANGUAGE, AND POSSIBILITIES

A Postmodern Approach to Therapy

HARLENE ANDERSON

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CHAPTER 10

Self: Narrative, Identity, and Agency

There is no such thing as the self that thinks and entertains ideas.
—LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

We are voices in a chorus that transforms lived life into narrated life
and then returns narrative to life, not in order to reflect life,
but rather to add something else, not a copy, but a new measure of life;
to add, with each novel, something new, something more, to life.
—CARLOS FUENTES

TO ASK THE QUESTION, What is *self?* surrenders and leaves us in the mire of traditional Western foundationalist and reductionist objectivity: the notion of self as autonomous, given, and discoverable. From a postmodern perspective, objective reality disappears as an organizing concept, and thus, the question, in the sense of discovering the *self* and its essence, becomes a nonquestion. Postmodernism challenges the idea of a single, fixed core self that we can reveal if we peel away the layers. Rather, it invites a shift from a

modernist logical understanding (verifiable reality) of self to a narrative social understanding (constructed reality) of self—it invites a shift from a focus on unquestioned universal givens such as self and self-identity as the things themselves to a focus on understanding how these givens, these meanings, emerge from human understanding. In this linguistic view, the self becomes a *narrative self* and identities exist in relation to a perspective, to a point of view that is related to our purposes. Postmodernism does not suggest that we give up trying to understand self, but that self can be described and understood in an infinite variety of ways.

Before turning to the wonderment of the postmodern narrative self, I want to consider two questions: What is narrative? And how is it used in the context of this book?

NARRATIVE: A STORYTELLING METAPHOR AND BEYOND

Narrative is a storytelling metaphor that frequently appears in contemporary psychotherapy literature and discourse, not in the literary sense, but in the sense of narrative in everyday life, the way we compose our lives (W. J. Anderson, 1989; Bruner, 1986, 1990; Labov, 1972; Mair, 1988; Sarbin, 1986; Schafer, 1981; Spence, 1984; White, 1980; White & Epston, 1990). Narrative refers to a form of discourse, the discursive way in which we organize, account for, give meaning to, and understand, that is, give structure and coherence to, the circumstances and events in our lives, to the fragments of our experiences, and to our self-identities, for and with ourselves and others. Narrative is a dynamic process that constitutes both the way that we organize the events and experiences of our lives to make sense of them and the way we participate in creating the things we make sense of, including ourselves. In a narrative view, our descriptions, our vocabularies, and our stories constitute our understanding of human nature and behavior. Our views of human nature and behavior are only a matter of our descriptive vocabularies, our language conversations, and our stories and narratives. Our stories form, inform, and re-form our sources of knowledge, our views of reality. I am not, therefore, using the narrative metaphor as another template or map for understanding, interpreting, or predicting human behavior, but as a metaphor for what we do and what we do with each other.

For me, however, narrative is more than a storytelling metaphor;[1]

it is a reflexive two-way discursive process. It constructs our experiences and, in turn, is used to understand our experiences. Language is the vehicle of this process: We use it to construct, to organize, and to attribute meaning to our stories. What we create is an expression of our language use: our vocabularies and our actions achieve meaning through our semantics. Meaning and action cannot be separated; they are reflexive and cannot be thought of in causal terms. The limits of our language constrain what can be expressed—our narrative structures and stories and, thus, our futures. As discursive practices, our narratives are in continuing evolution and change. Stories, thus, are not accomplished facts but are entities in the process of being made. Narrative becomes the way we imagine alternatives and create possibilities and the way we actualize these options.[2] Narrative is the source of transformation.

Narratives are created, experienced, and shared by individuals in conversation and action with one another and with the self. They are the ways we use language and relate to others and ourselves through it. The psychologist Jerome Bruner (1990), among others (Dunn, 1988; Nelson, 1989), suggests that children learn at an early age to organize their experiences narratively through the stories they hear and learn to tell. We construct meaning in everyday life, we account for how and why we think our world is and how and why it ought to be, through narrative. Narratives are the "stories [that] serve as communal resources that people use in ongoing relationships" (Gergen, 1994, p. 189). Similarly, the postmodernist Lyotard (1984) holds that narratives are our "social bonds" (however, he ardently confronts the notion of metanarrative as privileging and oppressing, especially grand social theory narratives). That is, both the individual and society are, as writer Anthony Giddens (1984) suggests, *"constituted in and through recurrent practices"* (p. 222).

Narrative as a Discursive Schema

Narrative is a discursive schema located within local individual and broader contexts and within culturally driven rules and conventions. Both local individual and broader cultural narratives are situated in and interact with each other. The human narrative, according to Bruner (1990), "mediates between the canonical world of culture and the more idiosyncratic world of beliefs, desires, and hopes" (p. 52). Narratives are created, told, and heard against this

contextual and cultural schema. What may appear as orderly or disorderly is culturally influenced, jointly shared, and agreed upon. In this sense and to serve these functions, narratives must be comprehensible, coherent, and connected. Toward this aim, in our Western culture, we organize our stories temporally, with beginnings, middles, and ends. They relate to the past, present, and future. And they both connect in sequential fashion and intertwine over time.

Stories are always situated in a history because without a history that changes over time our lives would be unintelligible. We share ourselves and our lives with others by assembling the bits and pieces of our narratives into viable storied versions influenced by memory, context, and intention. For instance, when we try to make sense of a dream, tell a friend about a vacation experience, or recount a childhood event, we do so in narrative form. Bruner (1986), long interested in the relationship of narrative and meaning, suggests, "Narrative deals with the vicissitudes of human intention" (p. 16); he (1990) refers to this way of using language to "frame" our experiences as well as our memories of our experiences as a "narrative mode of thought" and as "narrative structures." In Bruner's (1990) analysis,[3]

> People do not deal with the world event by event or with text sentence by sentence. They frame events and sentences in larger structures. . . . The larger structures [narrative structure] provide an interpretive context for the components they encompass. (p. 64)

Bruner (1990) distinguishes the necessary characteristics of narrative as (a) sequential: "composed of a unique sequence of events, mental states . . . that do not . . . have a life or meaning of their own" (p. 43) except in a narrative structure; (b) factually indifferent: "it can be 'real' or 'imaginary' . . . it has a structure that is internal to discourse . . . the sequence of its sentences, rather than the truth or falsity of any of those sentences is what determines its overall configuration or plot" (p. 44); and (c) uniquely managing departure from the canonical: giving an account of, linking, the exceptional and extraordinary in a manner that mitigates, makes possible, or at least comprehensible, a deviation from a standard cultural pattern (p. 47).

Gergen (1994) chooses to focus on narrative intelligibility: "Narratives are forms of intelligibility that furnish accounts of events across time. Individual actions . . . gain their significance from the way in which they are embedded within the narrative" (p. 224).

Gergen suggests that a well-formed or intelligible narrative generally meets certain criteria: (a) it has an established, valued endpoint; (b) the events recounted are relevant to and serve the endpoint; (c) the events are temporally ordered; (d) its characters have a continuous and coherent identity across time; (e) its events are causally linked and serve as an explanation for the outcome; and (f) it has a beginning and an end. He likewise cautions that we must keep in mind that narratives are contingent upon both the local and universal cultural, social, political, and historical narratives in which they are embedded.

In this narrative view a *postmodern self* is considered an expression of this capacity in language and narration: the self telling the story is, through the storytelling process, being formed, informed, and re-formed. As human beings we have always related to each other by telling and listening to stories about ourselves and others. We have always understood who and what we are and might be from the stories we tell one another: "Understanding . . . through language, is a primary form of being-in-the-world. . . . This process of self-formation and self-understanding can never be final or complete" (Woolfolk, Sass, & Messer, 1988, p. 17).

The philosphy professor G. B. Madison (1988), influenced by Paul Ricoeur, says we understand and give meaning and intelligibility to our lived experiences through narrative, through storytelling:

> The self is the way we relate, account for, speak about our actions. . . . The self is the unity of an ongoing narrative, a narrative which lasts a thousand and one nights and more—until, as Proust might say, that night arrives which is followed by no dawn. (pp. 161–162)

These ongoing narratives are embedded within and intertwined with other narratives. Both self- and other-stories determine who we are. At best, we are no more than one of the multiauthors of the constantly changing narrative that becomes our self, and we are always embedded in the local and universal multiple historical pasts and the cultural, social, and political contexts of our narrative making.

Shifting Identities and Continuity Through Change

The self in this postmodern narrative view is not a stable and enduring entity that is limited to or fixed in geographical place or time; it is not the simple accumulation of experience; nor is it an

expression of neurophysiological characteristics. Identity, thus, is not based on some kind of psychological continuity or discontinuity of selfhood but on the constancy of an ongoing narrative. As Rorty (1979) indicated, humans are the continuing generators of new descriptions and new narratives rather than beings one can describe accurately in a fixed fashion. The self is an ongoing autobiography; or, to be more exact, it is a self–other, multifaceted biography that we constantly pen and edit. The self is an ever-changing expression of our narratives, a being-and-becoming through language and storytelling as we continually attempt to make sense of the world and of ourselves. Self, therefore, is always engaged in conversational becoming, constructed and reconstructed through continuous interactions, through relationships (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988a; Goolishian & Anderson, 1994). We live our narratives and our narratives become our living; our realities become our stories and our stories become our realities. Like past, present, and future these are reflexive processes and cannot be separated. This reflexivity provides continuity to the ongoing process of composing and recomposing our lives.

Ricoeur suggests that

> unlike the abstract identity of the Same, this narrative identity, constitutive of self constancy, can include change, mutability, within the cohesion of one lifetime. The subject then appears both as a reader and the writer of its own life, as Proust would have it. As the literary analysis of autobiography confirms, the story of a life continues to be refigured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself. This refiguration makes this life itself a cloth woven of stories told. (Ricoeur as cited in Joy, 1993, p. 297)

Similarly, the Canadian psychologist Morny Joy (1993) exemplifies this constant revision position in her proposal that a person's life is not a static narrative with one plot but a process, a "dynamic mosaic."

> We can talk of a person's life as a composite of many different narrative plots. Each plot lends cohesion and coherence to the manifold influences that ceaselessly threaten to overwhelm us. So it is that a particular plot is constructed by a person as a response to a specific situation or experience that needs clarification. This plot can help a person establish a bridgehead from which he/she can thematize a set of events that may otherwise be either too chaotic or too distressing. It can also assist in the expression of strategic

actions of a political or ethical kind in response to the same situation. (pp. 296–297)

If we follow this premise that narrative is dynamic and ongoing, then how do we develop a self-identity? Is self-identity synonymous with self-continuity? In other words, if we are always engaged in conversational becoming, how do we have continuity at the same time we are involved in transformation?

In a postmodern view the problem of *identity* and *continuity* or what we think of as our *selfhood* becomes maintaining coherence and continuity in the stories we tell about ourselves, constructing narratives that make sense of our lack of coherence with both ourselves and the chaos of life. Our narratives of identity become a matter of forming and performing the *I* that we are always telling ourselves and others that we are, have been, and will be. The self becomes the person or persons our stories demand (Gergen, 1994), I believe, whether the self becomes a hero or a victim. We are always as many potential selves as are embedded in and created by our conversations. In this vein, the psychoanalyst Roy Schafer describes self as an "experiential phenomenon, a set of more or less stable and emotionally felt ways of telling oneself about one's being and one's continuity through change" (as cited in Madison, 1988, p. 160).

Narrative theory in this discursive sense was one of the early avenues of challenge to the modern view of self and of exploration of the implications of defining the self as a storyteller—an outcome of the human process of producing meaning by language activity. To help us understand some of the wonderment of the postmodern socially created and relational *narrative self*, it would be useful to pause and take a look at the contrasting modernist understandings of self and identity.

A MODERN KNOWABLE SELF

In the twentieth century, Western philosophical tradition has developed vocabularies and narratives of the self in which the person is a being who is consistent, observable, and knowable by him- or herself and by others. This notion of self and the conception of the person as a bounded, unique, integrated, motivational, and cognitive system and as the center of emotion, awareness, and judgment have been powerful forces in modern psychological theory and practice.

They are steeped in the Cartesian dualism that mind is a closed space sufficient unto itself and that mind and body are separate. In a metaphysical sense, this notion of self implies that there is something central to the human being, an essential core that is particular to humanness. In an epistemological sense, the notion of self implies that self is an entity that exists, endures over time, and can be known—observed, measured, and quantified. Self possesses quality and quantity.

What is *self*? has long been a central question of psychology and psychotherapy. The languages of psychotherapy, of the analytic writers who describe the person as having a biologically based and impulsive unconscious as well as the family therapists who have created the family as the cradle of our identities, are embedded in modernist narratives. All contain the element of the knowable human story—selves that can be discovered, identified, and described by others as well as ourselves/oneself. The self becomes the overarching entity that somehow underlies, supports, and is the basis of all that selves engage in—emotions, feelings, thinking, and acting. The person in charge of self, the *underlying* self of self, is seen as the owner of his or her actions and capacities.

In this modern perspective, the self is a taken-for-granted abstract entity, distinct and apart from other psychological constructs. Each person is an independent event in the universe; an autonomous, self-determining individual; and a bounded, unique, integrated motivational and cognitive system that is the center of awareness, emotion, and judgment—an encapsulated self (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988a; Goolishian, 1989; Goolishian & Anderson, 1992, 1994). Self and nonself, and self and other, are clearly demarcated. The individual or family or, more precisely, the interior of the individual or family is the psychological subject of inquiry. Most psychological phenomena, like self, can be traced to some causal, essentialist, foundationalist explanation. Historically, psychological classifications of behavior are based on this modernist notion of self and self-identity.

Current cognitive psychology, for instance, explains the psychological phenomena of the human mind, including self and consciousness, as the internal actions of the central nervous system. Like a computer, the mental operations of mind and self process information against some criterion or syntax built into the system. In this view the self connects the inner experience and the outer world. I include cybernetic systems theory and its mechanical

metaphor as applied to human systems and family therapy, and even some forms of radical constructivism and personal construct theory, under this rubric of cognitive psychology. In these theories, human meaning and understanding are often reduced to biological structure and functioning of physiological systems, or to system components that cybernetically compute and thus give rise to a psychological process called the *self*—or the interactional process called the *family*.

What happens to self and self-identity if we pursue the notion that language does not represent the self but is part and parcel of it, weaving in and out the *Is*, the *Mes*, and the *Yous*?

SELF AS A CONCEPT

Linguistic and Socially Created Selves: Many Is

Our language possesses ambiguities. Take the word *self*, for instance. It is as if the word refers to an object. The linguistic scholar Emile Benveniste was one of the earliest to challenge the traditional Western philosophical notion of self. He argued in his classic paper "Subjectivity in Language" (1971) that the self is constructed and understood in language. According to Benveniste, language is responsible for the notion of self and language without personal pronouns is inconceivable. "*I* refers to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker" (as cited in Madison, 1988, p. 161). As Madison interprets Benveniste, "The I exists in and by means of saying 'I'; the I is not a subject . . . a preexistent substance, which speaks; it is as subject a speaking subject" (p. 161). The *I* does not exist outside language, outside discourse; it is created and maintained in language and in discourse. In other words, it is in and through language that a person constructs a personal account of the self: who we believe ourselves to be is a linguistic construction. The *I* is not a preexisting subject or substance in the epistemological or metaphysical sense; it is a speaking subject (Gadamer, 1975). For Benveniste,

> Consciousness of self is only possible if it is experienced by contrast. I use *I* only when I am speaking to someone who will be a *you* in my address. It is this condition of dialogue that is constitutive of *person*, for it implies that reciprocally, *I* becomes *you* in the address of the one who in his turn designates himself as *I*. (As cited in Madison, 1988, p. 162)

Postmodernism proposes that the self is not an entity nor a single being. There is no sole core *I*, no fixed tangible thing inside someone that can be arrived at by peeling away layers. Even though it can be argued that the self is made up of many components, for instance, many narratives, many experiences, many relationships, these do not add up to or constitute a single self or a core self. Rather self (and other) is a created concept, a created narrative, linguistically constructed and existing in dialogue and in relationship (Benveniste, 1971; Bruner, 1986, 1990; Gadamer, 1975; Gergen, 1989, 1991b, 1994; Harré, 1995; Rorty, 1979; Shotter, 1989). In this view, *the self is a dialogical–narrative self* and *identity is a dialogical–narrative identity*. Self-knowledge, *Who am I?*, according to Gergen (1989), in a postmodern sense "is not, as is commonly assumed, the product of in-depth probing of the inner recesses of the psyche. . . . Rather, it is a mastery of discourse—a 'knowing how' rather than a 'knowing that'" (p. 75). Similarly, according to Shotter (1995a),

> instead of immediately adopting the Cartesian focus upon how we as isolated individuals might come to know the objects and entities in the world around us, or to express our inner experiences, we [social constructionists] have become more interested in how we first develop and sustain certain *ways* of relating ourselves to each other in our talk, and then, from within such talk-sustained relationships, come to make sense of our surroundings. (p. 385)

All in all, identities are now in relationship to a perspective, to a point of view that is relative to our purposes. The self now can be described in an infinite variety of ways. And implicit in this is that any one self, any one mind is not exactly like another (Harré, 1995, p. 372).

In this narrative perspective the self, the narrator, is many *Is*, occupies many positions, and has many voices. In the view of Hermans and his colleagues:

> The voices function like interacting characters in a story. Once a character is set in motion in a story, the character takes on a life of its own and thus assumes a certain narrative necessity. Each character has a story to tell about experiences from its own stance. As different voices these characters exchange information about their respective *Mes* and their worlds, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self. (Hermans, Kempen, & Van Loon, 1992, pp. 28–29)

but we are in the look out for narratives that confirm our beliefs, our default, our narrative.

Critics of postmodernism, of social constructionism in particular, often fear that in these views the individual is lost: the person loses individual rights, becomes the puppet of a society that threatens or

takes away human rights, and is no longer personally responsible. In my opinion it is the opposite. The individual and individual responsibility have a position of primary importance. The difference is in how the individual and responsibility are conceived. As individuals absorbed in others, as nonsolitary selves, as relational beings we are confronted even more, not less, with issues of responsibility. Responsibility, as discussed in chapter 5, however, becomes shared.

Another critique is that the view of socially constructed multiple selves results in a fragmented self. The response of Hermans et al. (1992) to this concern is that

> the multiplicity of the self does not result in fragmentation, because it is *the same I* that is *moving back and forth* [my emphasis] between several positions. Thanks to this identity . . . variance and invariance, or continuity and discontinuity, coexist in the functioning self. (pp. 28–29)

Rather, the wonder is that change and continuity exist side by side. This is fittingly illustrated by the character King George III in *The Madness of King George* (Evans & Hyther, 1995). Commenting on mad King George's performance of lines from Shakespeare's *King Lear,* the lord chancellor remarks, "Your Master seems more yourself." To which King George replies, "Do I?, yes, I do. Yeh, I've always been myself even when I was ill. Only now I *seem* [my emphasis] myself and that's the important thing. I have remembered how to *seem.*" Later when the populace is celebrating his return, "Our old King is back," King George retorts, "Do not presume I am the person I was. The King is himself again." In other words, what others experienced as two different King Georges was the same King George *moving back and forth.*

It seems important at this time to return to the notion of narrative and its emergence within psychotherapy and where it fits within the modern–postmodern *self* shift.

NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS AND VIEWS OF IDENTITY IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

The Self as Storyteller

About twenty years ago, some psychotherapists and clinical theorists began to move away from the constraints of a modernist, cognitive psychology and its view of the self as a computing machine

and to take on an interpretive perspective.[4] The common characteristic of this new direction is the notion of the individual or the self as narrator and storyteller. This move, this interpretive turn, evolved from two distinct yet overlapping paths. One path represents the emergence of narrative as storytelling and weaves around the notion of the self as a storyteller and the story as created inside the self; psychotherapy from this perspective is a storied event. The other path represents the emergence of an interest in language and dialogue and centers on the self as a social, dialogical process. Here, the narrative is thought of as being created "outside" the self and therapy is perceived as a dialogical event.

Perhaps the earliest attempt at outlining the role of narrative in psychotherapy arose from the psychoanalytic movement; interestingly enough it dates back to Freud and is related to the primacy he gave discovering one's past or discovering the *why*. In his 1937 paper "Constructions in Analysis" Freud (1964) suggested that when the requisite childhood oedipal memories are not recovered by the process of free association and analysis of ego defenses, it is permissible for the analyst to "construct" a story close to what it would be if it could be remembered.[5]

> The path that starts from the analyst's construction ought to end in the patient's recollection. . . . Quite often we do not succeed in bringing the patient to recollect what has been repressed. Instead of that, if the analysis is carried out correctly, we produce in him an assured conviction of the truth of the construction [analysis created] which achieves the same therapeutic result as a recaptured memory . . . how it is possible that what appears to be an incomplete substitute should produce a complete result. (pp. 265–266)

Most, however, would credit the writings of Roy Schafer (1981) and Donald Spence (1984) in the psychoanalytic literature and of Donald Polkinghorne (1988) and Jerome Bruner (1986, 1990) in the psychology literature as the first to pique psychotherapists' interest in narrative by introducing the notion of the self as the narrator or storyteller, and by delineating the role of narrative in psychotherapy. According to Spence (1984), and extending Freud's notion, all an analyst can do when a patient's memories are unrecoverable is to construct a story as similar as possible to the childhood events related to the problem so that the newly constructed narrative is approximately what it *might* be. For Spence a therapist's task was not the archaeological discovery of a hidden and

unrecoverable reality, but a matter of narrative development, of construction of a life story that fit a patient's current circumstance without regard for the "archaeological trueness" of the construction. He introduced the term *narrative truth* to refer to the analyst-influenced new narrative constructed in psychoanalysis. Whether that narrative is true is less important than whether it fits the patient's real story. That is, the constructed story should have external and internal coherence, livability, and adequacy, and yet somehow remain congruent with the real but unrecoverable memories of childhood. This could partially explain why some psychotherapists working with adults are attempting to make sense of present life difficulties by linking them to repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse (Crews, 1995).

Schafer in *Language and Insight* (1978) took a more Wittgensteinian and social construction perspective. For Schafer the self is a manifestation of human action, the action of speaking about oneself. In his view we are always telling stories about who we are to ourselves and to others, always enclosing one story within another. The self, then, becomes more or less stable and emotional ways of telling oneself and others about one's being and one's continuity through continuous and random change (as discussed in Madison, 1988, p. 160). Like Spence, Schafer was concerned with the content of the constructed narrative, but he was equally occupied with the storytelling process, the method of construction, the narrative talking. For him, the process of the telling of the story holds the opportunity for change. A therapist's challenge, in his perspective, is to help patients retell the stories of their lives in a way that makes change narratively conceivable, believable, and attainable. A therapist, in this relationship, is similar to a helpful editor. Narrative used in these psychoanalytic arenas focuses on the narrative content and its usefulness, not the narrating process. Writer Kevin Murray (1995) highlighted a difference between the content path and the process path: "One sees narrative as a mental space which serves the progress of an individual through the world, whereas the other makes narrative part of that very world" (p. 187).

The latter path that this interpretive turn in psychotherapy took led to the emergence of an interest in language and dialogue in which the self as a dialogical self and psychotherapy as a dialogical event became pivotal. Let me now address this interpretive turn. How are the meanings we attribute to ourselves and the events of our lives dialogically created, preserved, and altered over time? And in therapy how does the therapist participate in this process?