A Relational View of Self and Narrative Identity

Central to the many linguistic and socially derived narratives that emerge in behavioral organization are those that contain the elements articulated as *self-stories*, *self-descriptions*, or *first-person narratives*. These self-stories influence our self-identities: they take a narrative form. Of this linguistic narrative realm, the philosopher Anthony Kerby (1991) suggests,

> On a narrative account the self is to be construed not as a prelinguistic given that merely employs language, much as we might employ a tool, but rather as a product of language—what might be called the *implied self* of self-referring utterances. The self, or subject, then becomes a result of discursive praxis rather than either a substantial entity having ontological priority over praxis or a self with epistemological priority, an originator of meaning. (p. 4)

For Polkinghorne (1988), stories are the way we achieve our "narrative identities":

> We achieve our personal identities and self-concept through the use of the narrative configuration, and make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing story. We are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives. Self, then, is not a static thing or a substance, but a configuring of personal events into an historical unity which includes not only what one has been but also anticipations of what one will be. (p. 150)

Like that of other narratives, the development of these self-defining narratives takes place in a social and local context involving conversation and action with significant others, including one's self. A linguistic and dialogic view emphasizes this social nature of the self—as emerging in and embodied in relationships—and it emphasizes our capacity to create meaning through conversation. This is the *linguistic relational view* of self proposed by Gergen (1987, 1989, 1991b), in which the self (and other) is realized in language and dialogue and becomes a linguistic dialogical self. Inherent in this view, as suggested earlier, is that a narrative never represents a single voice, but rather a multiauthored self, and because we are constituted in dialogue, we are ever-changing. In this vein, Sarbin (1990) interestingly suggests that because our self-narratives occur in a social context they are the products of "enforced collaboration" (p. 60).

I do not mean to minimize what seems like a characteristic of human nature—our constant search for self and self-understanding, or what Madison (1988) refers to as "desiring selves." In his words, self "is a function of the conversation with similar, desiring selves, a function of the self-reinforcing narratives they pursue together in their occasional, casual conversations as well as those more serious ones which last to all hours of the night" (p. 166). By desiring Madison means self-enhancement, the self we want to be and have the potential to realize. His emphasis too is on conversation with others: "We are constantly pursuing and constantly desiring with other selves that we can become the self we desire to be and can be who we are" (p. 166).

This storytelling self in the view of Bakhtin (1981) also takes a dialogic form. Bakhtin was partially yet significantly influenced by Dostoyevsky's literary form, in which the story was not singly narrated by *an* author but told by multiple authors, as each character gave a separate account of the story. In his analysis of Dostoyevsky's character constructions, Bakhtin suggested that each character (or an author) is a plurality of independent voices (which could be, for example, another character, a conscience, one's inner thoughts, or an imagined other) in dialogue, or what he called a *polyphony*. Bakhtin characterized the self as like a polyphonic novel, in which the self is not a single entity, one voice or one position, but a multiplicity of each. As Hermans et al. (1992) indicate, "The conception of the self as a polyphonic novel . . . permits one individual to live in a multiplicity of worlds, with each world having its own author telling a story relatively independent of the authors of the other worlds" (p. 28). I question, however, that they emerge *relatively independent* of each other.

The physician Rita Charon (1993) similarly refers to this kind of polyphony or narrating selves when she talks about patient narratives that emerge, and those that do not emerge, in medical settings:

> To tell about oneself in a therapeutic setting, whether medical or psychotherapeutic, posits a self who tells and a self about whom the teller tells, the therapeutic telling [like any telling] generating an author, an implied author, and a character. . . . Although patients' accounts of themselves are based on *true* events, by nature of the narrating situation patients will produce a certain version of the *true* events [emphasis added]. . . . Contrary to commonly held assumptions, then, the patient is not the person . . . multiple contradictory voices must be heard and recognized [who] together compose the person who suffers. (p. 89)

Self-stories, and notions of self, are simply one version of many versions that are influenced by the narrating situation. People's selves that emerge and the stories they tell about themselves vary in relation to the social context and conversations with other individuals in that context.

This linguistic relational view of self is in sharp contrast with psychology's more usual definition of self, which Bruner (1990) chides for being "whatever is measured by tests of self-concepts" (p. 101). In terms of the narrative metaphor, stories (self and other) determine who we are or who we or others think we are (Bruner, 1986, 1990; Gergen, 1994; Gergen & Gergen, 1986, 1988; Kitzinger, 1987; Shotter, 1988, 1991a; Surrey, 1991). From Bruner's (1990) narrative perspective,

> Selves we construct are the outcomes of this [narrative, storytelling, and language] process of meaning construction. . . . Selves are not isolated nuclei of consciousness locked in the head, but are "distributed" interpersonally. Nor do Selves arise rootlessly in response only to the present; they take meaning as well from the historical circumstances that gave shape to the culture of which they are an expression. (p. 138)[6]

We must remember then that the self-stories we hear in therapy are not the only story or necessarily *truer* than other stories.

"Edges" Where Change Occurred

It was within the ranks of social psychology and among social construction theorists in particular that "an increasing concern with personhood—with person, agency, and action (rather than with causes, behaviour and objects) built and that the notion of the social construction of the self fully emerged" (Shotter, 1989, p. 135). Although several (Gergen, 1982, 1989; Harré, 1979, 1983; Harré & Secord, 1972; Polkinghorne, 1988; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Shotter, 1975, 1989) can be given credit for taking this notion to the edge in suggesting that the self, and self-identity, are socially constructed in language, Gergen, Harré, and Shotter have made pivotal contributions, and in different ways; all focus on the *process* of identity creation and not its structure.[7]

Gergen's (1977) research on how people's self-concepts and self-esteem vary in relation to the social context and the comments of the individuals within that context has been perhaps the most visible early effort to assign primary influence to the social and rela-

tional aspects of self-construction. From this he advanced the notion of relational authorship and suggested that the self and self-identity are narrative realities socially constructed in language. Self-identities are the function of the socially constructed stories we continually narrate to ourselves and others. One's self-identities are a manifestation of and are generated by persons in conversation and action with one another and with themselves. These socially constructed narrative realities give meaning and organization not only to the events and experiences of our lives but also to our self-identities, which are always subject to shifting definitions and a variety of explications as the social interaction shifts. This process is similar to what Bruner (1990) referred to as "meaning-making" (p. 12).

Arriving at what he calls a socially constructed "relational self," Gergen (1973, 1985, 1991b) moves beyond the concepts of individual authorship and coauthorship (Gergen, 1973; Gergen & Taylor, 1969; Morse & Gergen, 1970), to the self as a multiauthored social construction:

> Narrative accounts are embedded within social action. Events are rendered socially visible . . . and are typically used to establish expectations for future events. . . . Narratives of the self are not fundamentally possessions of the individual; rather they are products of social interchange—possessions of the socius. (Gergen & Gergen, 1988, p. 18)[8]

That is, a narrative never represents a single voice. We are always as many selves and potential selves as are embedded in our conversations and our relationships. These self-identities, who we are or who we believe ourselves to be, like the notion of self, Gergen (1994) distinguishes "are not personal impulses made social, but social processes realized on the site of the personal" (p. 210). In fact, Gergen (1988b) goes so far as to say,

> We need not assume that human nature is a property of single, isolated individuals with relatedness a secondary and problematic byproduct. Invited is an analysis in which the individual is an emergent property of community—in which relationship precedes identity. If such were broadly realized, conflict might not be a necessary antecedent to communion. (p. 405)

Shotter (1989) emphasizes that we must pay attention not only to the construction of the *I* but also to the construction of, and the importance of, the other—the *you:* "I act not simply 'out of' my own plans and desires, unrestricted by the social circumstances of

my performances, but in some sense also 'in to' the opportunities offered me to act. . . . The relationship is ours, not just mine" (p. 144). Shotter talks of the formative nature of the *you* in communication (and relationship) as "a process by which people can, in communication with one another, literally in-form one another's being, that is, help to make each other persons of this or that kind" (p. 145). Thus, the narratives *I* tell about *you* are part of the process of your identity, and vice versa. Harré (1983), like Gergen and Shotter, argues for the conversational construction of the person as well as institutions and organizations.[9]

This linguistic, dialogical, and relational path takes us beyond the view of narrative therapy as storytelling and story making and the self as the narrator. Because unless we extend this view, we succumb to the risks and concerns associated with modernist objectivity: who chooses and who directs the story to be told, how it is told, and what emerges from it.

The Narrating Process: A Caveat

Narrative theory, of course, has been conceptually useful in a variety of social science arenas besides psychotherapy: medicine, anthropology, law, culture theory, and organizational development and management (Brody, 1987; Bruner, 1990; Charon, 1993; Coles, 1989; Davis, 1992; Feldman, 1990; Kleinman, 1988a, 1988b; Sachs, 1985; Sherwin, 1993; Turner, 1980; Wilkins, 1983). Common to all these writers is that our socially arrived at narratives are the only human nature and behavior that we know—our understandings, our descriptions, our methods of observing social organization, the tools through which we understand problems, and our modes of action are all nothing more than expressions of our language use, vocabularies, and stories. Whether in the legal process, the medical process, the anthropological process, or the psychotherapeutic process, the professional participates with the client in a *narrating process* of the telling, retelling, and creating—or inventing and reinventing—of the client's past, present, and future.

The way we participate as professionals in this narrating process, our position in it and our mode of action, marks the distinction between a modern and a postmodern process. In this participation, professionals have special responsibility for the way they position themselves and the choices they make in the narrative telling, hearing, and creating process—in the relational means of joint construction of the new narrative. As therapists, for instance, we

choose how we talk with and about clients, what we select to talk about with them, and how we participate in the way they tell their story. And, whether we believe that language is representational or formative, we are responsible for the way we use language, the language choices we make, and how these influence the account that emerges, the account that is privileged, the account that is deemed the true one. How we choose, for example, to ask about a father's behavior with a daughter can attribute different judgments about the same event: good, bad, or questionable behavior. How we choose, for example, to learn about, and what we choose to learn about it, can influence the way a story about a conflict between a man and his boss is shaped: where blame is posited, who should have done what, and who should do what. It can also signal whose side we are on, indicating what we think the solution should be.

In another professional area, culture of law and lawyering, Sherwin (1993) talks about how legal practices and institutions are socially created and maintained through professional discursive practices and narrative constructions. He critiques the use of dominant legal discourse to serve as a tool for people in positions of power to guide or tell another's story, thus giving the professional's version (and usually in the dominant community's discourse) more emphasis than a client's. A lawyer, like a therapist, can dominate the interaction and therefore the story that emerges by controlling the flow of topics and setting the pace. Using divorce cases as an example, Sherwin showed how "lawyers constructed the identity of their clients . . . and retold their clients' stories in a way that reflected and facilitated the attorney's sense of legal reality" (p. 46). Sherwin encourages the legal professional to take a serious look at how laws are created and how legal ideologies are maintained through the dominant discourse; this process would be equally applicable to psychotherapy theories and practices (including diagnoses).

Similarly, some feminist scholars within philosophy and psychology have expressed a critique of mainstream social science in general and psychology in particular in relation to the modernist scientific modes on which they are based. Through these modes, the professional operates under an "aura of objectivity" (Kitzinger, 1987, p. 24), in which the individual is the unit of study and conceptualization and through which normative definitions—in the feminist case, normative definitions of oppressed and socially marginalized peoples—are generated. Such perceived professional expertise intrinsically acts to perpetuate a discipline's legitimacy. Drawing upon, critiquing, and contributing to postmodern notions

of self and self-identity as constructed and interpreted within and influenced by sociocultural, historical, and political discourses, these scholars resonate with the notions of individual narrative accounts of identity and the self as always open to constant revision (for other work compatible with this definition of self see: Flax, 1990; M. Gergen, 1994, 1995; Grimshaw, 1988; hooks, 1984; Joy, 1993; Kerby, 1991; Kitzinger, 1987; Ricoeur, 1988, 1991). And, like Ricoeur, they warn about confusing self-identity and core-self (Flax, 1990; Kitzinger, 1989). From the perspectives of the socially, dialogically constructed *I* and the constant rewriting of self-identity, a core narrating *I*, a core-self is a myth.[10] The narrating *I* and the socially and dialogically constructed *I* are reflexive—the narrator, in the process of narrating, is becoming.

Cecelia Kitzinger (1987), feminist psychologist and scholar, for instance, challenges *lesbianism* as a psychological category. She claims that the individualistic, humanistic focus of contemporary liberal psychology approaches personalizes the political, promoting a reality of a "private and depoliticized identity" (p. 45) and avoids and ignores what she believes is an institutional, sociopolitical, and sociocultural position.[11] In marked contrast, and in a provocative and compelling argument, Kitzinger bids for a social constructionist alternative and proposes what she calls "'accounts' of lesbian identity" (p. 90), emphasizing that the observer has no direct access to the individual experience and that the *identity account* is the unit of analysis, not the individual.

When, as in this study, the *account* is defined as the primary unit of study, then, although account gathering must depend initially on individual account providers, these people's psychologies are incidental to the research: because the account is no longer tied to the individual who provided it, the researcher can pursue her study of the account per se, broadening the research to find evidence of these accounts in the sociocultural milieu, to discover the ideologies with which they are associated and the political interest that dictates their promotion or suppression. This approach serves to draw attention to the political, rather than the personal, features of lesbian accounts of identity (p. 90).

Self-Agency and Change: "The Stories We Tell Ourselves"

It is through these self-narratives that we become actors, performers, or agents and that we derive a sense of social or self-agency. By *self-agency* I refer to a personal perception of competency for action.

To act or take action, Sarbin (1990), among others, suggests, indicates intentionality: "that human actors engage in conduct for some reason, to satisfy some purpose, to make sense of" (p. 50). Having self-agency or a sense of it means having the ability to behave, feel, think, and *choose* in a way that is liberating, that opens up new possibilities or simply allows us to see that new possibilities exist. Agency refers not only to making choices but to participating in the creation of the expansion of possible choices. The concept of agency can be likened to having a voice and being free to use that voice or not to use it.

I believe that self-agency is inherent in all of us and is self-accessed. It is not given to us. As therapists we cannot give it to someone, just as we cannot empower someone else; we can only participate in a process that maximizes the opportunity for it to emerge. Harré (1995) refers to this inherent competency as "potential asserting. . . . People are born as potential persons, and social constructionists offer an account of how potential personhood becomes actual personhood, and of how in that development some important variety can be discerned" (p. 372). In Shotter's (1995a) words, people's agency is "exhibited in their two-way ability to give shape or form to their lives while remaining rooted in their culture" (p. 387).

When I think of self-agency, I think of two words that clients often use to describe the results of successful therapy: *freedom* (from the imprisoning past, present, and future) and *hope* (for a different future) (Anderson, 1991b, 1992, 1995). New self-stories, new first-person narratives that permit the telling of a new history that is more tolerable, coherent, and continuous with present intention and agency, evolve. This is similar to what Shotter (1991a) means when he speaks of providing "new and empowering accounts of ourselves instead of disabling ones." It is like the British oral historian Ronald Frazier's response to his analyst's question, "What exactly are you hoping for?" Frazier said, "To find, to re-create a past with a certain certainty that I can put it behind me and go on with my life" (cited in Shotter, 1991a). Both Shotter and Frazier refer to a sense of agency, a sense of freedom, a sense of hope.

I like Freeman's (1993) suggestion that what seems like seeking freedom from a past is in fact seeking freedom from an "expected course of things" (p. 216). The prison is the imagined future, not the (imagined) history.[12]

I am reminded of Tom, the unemployed high school coach and English teacher in rural South Carolina in Pat Conroy's *The Prince of Tides*, who tries to free himself of his past, his present, and his

future as he searches for who he can be. He looks back in reflection on his troubled "defenseless, humiliated, and dishonored" family, and his abusive and turbulent childhood—as he tries to untangle, make sense of, and reconcile his life.

> I wish I had no history to report. I've pretended for so long that my childhood did not happen. I had to keep it tight, up near the chest. I could not let it out. I followed the redoubtable example of my mother. It's an act of will to have a memory or not, and I chose not to have one. Because I needed to love my mother and father in all their flawed, outrageous humanity, I could not afford to address them directly about the felonies committed against all of us. I could not hold them accountable or indict them for crimes they could not help. They, too, had a history—one that I remembered with both tenderness and pain, one that made me forgive their transgressions against their own children. In families there are no crimes beyond forgiveness. . . .
>
> Though I hated my father, I expressed that hate eloquently by imitating his life, by becoming more and more ineffectual daily. . . . I had figured out how to live a perfectly meaningless life, but one that could imperceptibly and inevitably destroy the lives of those around me. (Conroy, 1987, pp. 8, 101)

At one point, he describes the still empty pages of the leather journals stacked on his shelves that his sister sent him each Christmas as "an eloquent metaphor of my life as a man" (p. 614): "I lived with the terrible knowledge that one day I would be an old man still waiting for my real life to start" (p. 634).

For Tom, forgiveness took the place of the tyranny of the past as indicated in his words "through the procedure of remembrance, I would try to heal myself" (p. 101). It allowed him to take the journals off the shelf, so to speak, and like Frazier to "go on with his life." And, as Shotter proposes, he was able to give shape and form to his life while remaining rooted in his culture:

> My life did not really begin until I summoned the power to forgive my father for making my childhood a long march of terror. . . . I think we began to forgive our parents for being exactly what they were meant to be. We would begin our talks with memories of brutality or treachery and end them by affirming over and over again our troubled but authentic love of Henry and Lila. At last, we were old enough to forgive them for not having been born perfect. (Conroy, 1987, pp. 282, 631–632)

Our self-narratives can permit or hinder self-agency. That is, they create identities that permit us to do or hinder us from doing what

we need or want to do, or they simply allow us to feel that we could or could not act if we so chose (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988a; Goolishian, 1989; Goolishian & Anderson, 1994). In therapy we meet people whose "problems" can be thought of as emanating from social narratives and self-definitions or self-stories that do not yield an effective agency for the tasks defined. Women, for example, who are either self-labeled or labeled by others as "adult survivors of childhood incest" can develop narratives that fix a self-identity that is inherently self-limiting (Anderson, 1992). I am reminded of Rita,[13] who grew up in an incestuous family, and who was in anguish for years as she tried to live with, in her words, "the Rita others saw and liked" and "the Rita I saw and didn't like."[14] Reflecting on her experience in therapy, she said, "I now feel free to get on with my life. When I realized that I could be both of those people, I'm still me. I'm still both of those people, but I like me now." Through therapy Rita developed a new identity that included among other things two previously conflicting identities: "me"/"not me." The new identity, "Both are me," freed Rita from anguish and allowed her to get on with her life. Rita's dilemma illustrates how such labels can keep the past alive in a way that maintains the woman's identity as victim or survivor, and forms an obstacle to her more viable and liberating self-definitions. This is similar to Freeman's (1993) notion of "rewriting the self," referring to "the process by which one's past and indeed oneself is figured anew through interpretation" (p. 3).

From an interpretive, meaning-generating perspective, change is inherent in dialogue: change is the telling and retelling of familiar stories; it is the redescriptions that accrue through conversation; it is the different meanings that are conferred on past, present, and imagined future events and experiences. Change becomes developing future selves. What becomes important in therapy are the individuals' first-person narratives (Gergen, 1994; Gergen & Gergen, 1983, 1986, 1988; Kitzinger, 1987; Shotter, 1991b, 1993a; Surrey, 1991). In Shotter's words,

> The conduct of social life is based upon a right we assign to first-persons to *tell* us about themselves and their experience, and to have what they say taken seriously. . . . All our valid forms of inquiry are based upon such a right. . . . The authority of first-persons [Shotter later uses the term *ordinary people*] has been usurped in recent times by the third-person, external observer position [Shotter later prefers *experts*]. (Shotter, 1984, as cited in Shotter, 1995a, p. 387)

When familiar ways of conceptualizing the individual no longer fit with my shifting experiences of relationships and conversations with and about clients, these views of self, self-narrative, self-identity, and thus, self-transformation were a welcomed conceptual tool. They partly inspired the shift (described in chapter 4) from thinking of systems as a people collective—as a contained entity that acts, feels, thinks, and believes—to considering systems as consisting of individuals who coalesced around a particular relevance (Anderson, 1990; Anderson & Goolishian, 1988a; Anderson, Goolishian, & Winderman, 1986a, 1986b; Goolishian & Anderson, 1987a). This renewed interest in the individual was not in terms of the Western psychological sense of the individual as bounded by and possessing a core self, but rather the individual in relationship. These alternative views were also part of a shift to thinking differently about change in therapy: self was no longer the subject of the verb change; a client was no longer the subject that a therapist changed. And these views constitute a major distinguisher between a collaborative language systems approach to therapy and other narratively informed postmodern therapies.

In my view the purpose of therapy is to help people tell their first-person narratives so that they may transform their self-identities to ones that permit them to develop understandings of their lives and its events, that allow multiple possibilities for ways of being in and acting in the world at any given time and in any given circumstance, and that help them gain an access to and express or execute agency or a sense of self-agency. To restore or achieve self-competency, one must transform one's self-story. It is exactly this self-story transformation that allowed what Rita experienced as contradicting selves—constraining selves—to say, "I can be both of those persons." Such freeing descriptions lead to a transformation of self. Therapy becomes a transformative event—the natural consequence of dialogic conversation and collaborative relationship.

In the next chapter, I address what a postmodern therapy philosophy looks like in two other domains: educating therapists and consulting with organizations.