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 inform, re-form, 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;
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. 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,

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. 54)

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 philosophy 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. 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. The literary analysis of autobiography confirms, the story of a life continues to be refracted by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself. This refracture provides 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. (pp. 296–297)

If we follow this premise that we are engaged in conversational becoming at the same time we are involved in narratives that make sense of our selves and the chaos of life. Our matter of forming and performing ourselves and others that we are becomes the person or persons of I believe, whether the self be always as many potential selves in our conversations. In this vein, describes self as an “experiential stable and emotionally felt way of being and one’s continuity through 1988, p. 160).

Narrative theory in this discussion of the implications of defining the human process of producing and performing ourselves and others that we are becomes the person or persons of self and identity.

A MODERN KN

In the twentieth century, Western vocabularies and narratives have developed vocabularies and narratives that are consistent, observable self and by others. This notion of self as a bounded, unique, integral system and as the center of emotive been powerful forces in modern j
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 thought and action. Even some forms of radical theory, under this rubric of consciousness vs. unconsciousness, human meaning and understanding is understood as structure and functioning of components that cybernetics calls systems, the psychological process called the family.

What happens to self and consciousness when language does not represent it, weaving in and out the Is and Thes?

SELF / Language and Socially Created

Our language possesses a reworking of Western philosophical notions of language. Emile Benveniste was one of a new wave of Western philosophical notions of "Subjectivity in Language" (1971) understood in language. A speaker's responsibility for the notion of consciousness is inconceivable. "Speaking subject" (as cited in Madison, 1988, p. 161) is a speaking subject" (p. 161). In the outside discourse, it is create discourse. In other words, it is this "subject or substance in the ep is a speaking subject (Gadamer, 1979). Consciousness of self is only in the instance. I use I only when I am you in my address. It is this subjective of person, for it implies an address of the one who in cited in Madison, 1988, p. 16.
Self: Narrative, Identity, and Agency

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 anyone self, anyone mind is not exactly like another (Harre, 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)

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 my opinion it is the opposite. The possibility have a position of primacy in how the individual and respondent absorbed in others, as nonisolated confronted even more, not less possibility, as discussed in chapter.

Another critique is that the selves results in a fragmented (1992) to this concern is that the multiplicity of the self because it is the same I that is between several positions. The invariance, or continuity anchoring self. (pp. 28-29)

Rather, the wonder is that cha This is fittingly illustrated by Madness of King George (Evar mad King George's performa Lear, the lord chancellor rema self." To which King George always been myself even w emphasis] myself and that's bered how to seem." Later w return, "Our old King is back some I am the person I was. words, what others experience the same King George moving It seems important at this tive and its emergence with within the modern-postmode

NARRATIVE AC

OF IDENTITY I

The Self as Storyteller

About twenty years ago, somenists began to move away from nitive psychology and its view
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. 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 dialogue.

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.

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 the construction of a life story without regard for the "actual" event; He introduced the term influenced new narrative that narrative is true is Life memories of childhood. This self psychotherapists working with present life difficulties by childhood sexual abuse needed Schafer in Language and social construction of human self. In his view we are all ourselves and to others, as The self, then, becomes me telling oneself and others through continuous and real (1988, p. 160). Like Spence, of the constructed narrative storytelling process, the mean. For him, the process of unity for change. A therapist help patients retell the sto change narratively conceiv, as this relationship, in this view are alv ourselves and to others, alv The self, then, becomes me telling oneself and others through continuous and ra 1988, p. 160). Like Spence, of the constructed narrative storytelling process, the mean. For him, the process of unity for change. A therapist help patients retell the sto change narratively conceiv, as this relationship, in this view are alv ourselves and to others, alv The self, then, becomes me telling oneself and others through continuous and ra 1988, p. 160). Like Spence,
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?
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 Polkinghome (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 multi-authored 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)

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.

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 relational aspects of self-construct of relational authorship and are narrative realities social and are the function of the social narrate to ourselves and other

arrangement of and are generated by one another and with them
tive realities give meaning and experiences of our lives always subject to shifting due
the social interaction shifts. (1990) referred to as "mean
Arriving at what he calls Gergen (1973, 1985, 1991b) and authorship and coauth
1969; Morse & Gergen, 197
construction:

Narrative accounts are em rendered socially visible expectations for future ev fundamentally possessor products of social interch.

That is, a narrative never as many selves and potent versations and our relation or who we believe ourselv (1994) distinguishes "are not social processes realized on
Gergen (1988b) goes so far

We need not assume that isolated individuals with atic byproduct. Invited is a emergent property of coe
des identity. If such were a necessary antecedent to

Shotter (1989) emphasize the construction of the t b importance of, the other— own plans and desires, unr
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)

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 preceeds 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."

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 with them, and how the story. And, whether we belief formative, we are responsible for choices we make, an emerges, the account that is the true one. How we choose behavior with a daughter c the same event: good, bad. We choose, for example, to lean about it, can influence the way he and his boss is shape have done what, and who side we are on, indicating w.

In another professional article (1993) talks about how socially created and maintained practices and narrative construction of legal discourse to serve power to guide or tell another version (and usually in the case emphasis than a client’s. A la interaction and therefore the flow of topics and setting the ple, Sherwin showed how “I clients . . . and retold their cli facilitated the attorney’s se encourages the legal professi are created and how legal i dominant discourse; this is depression psychotherapy theories and

Similarly, some feminist psychology have expressed a co general and psychology in scientific modes on which the professional operates un 1987, p. 24), in which the inceptualization and through feminist case, normative def ginalized peoples—are ger expertise intrinsically acts in

Drawing upon, critiquing, a
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. 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. 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.

Self: Narrator

To act or take action, Sarbuericates intentionality: "that same reason, to satisfy son Having self-agency or a se behave, feel, think, and clean up new possibilities or simities exist. Agency refers not pating in the creation of if concept of agency can be li to use that voice or not to u: I believe that self-agency accessed. It is not given to someone, just as we cannot e picipate in a process that max Harré (1995) refers to this in ring... People are born as tionists offer an account of actual personhood, and of hf variety can be discerned" (p people's agency is "exhibited in form to their lives while rem When I think of self-ager of to describe the resu the imprisoning past, preser Harre (1995) refers to this in
ing. People are born as tionists offer an account of actual personhood, and of hf variety can be discerned" (p people's agency is "exhibited in form to their lives while rem When I think of self-ager of to describe the resu

*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. Harre (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.

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, 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." 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; Shetter, 1991b, 1993a; Surrey, 1991). In Shetter'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 [Shetter later uses the term ordinary people] has been usurped in recent times by the third-person, external observer position [Shetter later prefers experts]. (Shetter, 1984, as cited in Shetter, 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.