Social constructionism in the counselling context

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ABSTRACT Social constructionism (SC), with its redefinition of social realities as constituted through discourse, and its challenges to traditional notions of a stable and essentialized self, carries sweeping implications for applied psychology. My aim in this paper is to clarify the basic agenda of SC, and to suggest that a judicious cross-fertilization with concepts and procedures originating in constructivist forms of psychotherapy can provide a useful and relevant frame for counselling practice.

What is social constructionism, and what use might it have in the counselling context? My purpose in the present article is to provide at least preliminary answers to these questions by (a) outlining the basic agenda of the social constructionist movement, (b) considering its distinctive view of language as a matrix of meaning-making, and (c) sketching its implications for a fundamental reappraisal of concepts such as self and human agency. I will then advance the claim that complementing this social constructionist approach with a more personal form of constructivism helps address certain deficiencies in either orientation taken alone, and provides a more comprehensive and useful frame for counselling and psychotherapy.

The constructionist agenda

Every intellectual tradition can be viewed as having a negative identity (defined in terms of other traditions from which it seeks to distinguish itself), as well as a positive identity (expressed in terms of the particular positions or knowledge claims it advances) (Stam, 1998). In the case of social constructionism (SC), this ‘definition by contrast’ is especially important, because it represents such a deep-going reaction to traditional forms of social theory that are viewed as one-sided, idealized, and deficient in studying or describing the interpersonal, linguistic and political dimensions of the human world. Let me therefore begin by painting in broad brush strokes the negative identity shared by most forms of social constructionism, before considering in more detail some specific authors and positions that have contributed to its positive agenda as a form of social theory.

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SC's negative identity: the rejection of modernism

The traditional framework from which social constructionists differentiate themselves has been summed up under the label of modernism. As the name implies, modernism is a broad concept, almost too broad to define with any precision, because it encompasses so many domains of social life. However, as applied to the human sciences, modernism embodies the Enlightenment faith in technological and human progress through the accumulation of legitimate knowledge. From this perspective, psychology for most of this century concerned itself with the development of logical and empirical methods (particularly featuring quantification, statistical inference and controlled experimentation) for discovering objective, verifiable facts about its specialized subject matter. If successful, such a research program was presumed to be increasingly unified and progressive, leading to the discovery of generalizable laws of human behaviour, whose validity was established by their correspondence with observable, extratheoretical realities. At the core of this modern program was the belief in a knowable world, and with it, a knowable self.

In sharp contrast to this world view, social constructionism endorses a form of postmodernism (Anderson, 1990) that turns nearly every aspect of this modern psychological program on its head. Gone is the faith in an objectively knowable universe, and with it the hope that elimination of human bias, adherence to canons of methodology, and reliance on a pure language of observation would yield a ‘true’ human science, mirroring psychological reality without distortion. Gone too is the modern notion of an essentialized self, an individual ego who is the locus of choice, action and rational self-appraisal. In their place is a panoply of perspectives cutting across the human sciences and humanities, whose common threads include an acknowledgment (even a celebration) of multiple realities, socially constituted and historically situated, which defy adequate comprehension in objectivist terms. Language, in this view, actually constitutes the structures of social reality, requiring the cultivation of new approaches (hermeneutic, narrative, deconstructionist, rhetorical and discursive) appropriate to analysing the ‘text’ of human experience in social context. The resulting image of psychological ‘science’ is in some respects more humble (aiming only for the production of ‘local knowledges’ that are more bounded and closer to the domain of practice), and in other respects more ambitious (involving more consistent self-criticism and reflexivity) than its modernist predecessor. It is also more disquieting, holding out the promise of only a shifting, fragmentary and constructed knowledge, without the bedrock certainty of firm (logical or empirical) foundations. Even the self is dethroned from a position of agency, freedom and conscious self-determination, vanishing into a proliferation of inconsistent social roles on the interpersonal and cultural stage. If there is a positive thrust to this postmodern project, it is in the direction of viable (if not valid) knowledge and the pursuit of responsible social action.

If the reader feels a bit disoriented by this whirlwind survey of the social constructionist agenda, then it has had its intended effect! Indeed, one often senses in constructionist writing that producing temporary conceptual vertigo in the reader is one implicit goal of the work, which often proceeds by criticizing, undermining
and 'deconstructing' taken-for-granted assumptions that ordinarily sustain our familiar sense of self, world, and the quest for knowledge.

But in most forms of social constructionism, the rejection of modernist assumptions is not undertaken for its own sake. Instead, the aim is to 'clear a space' for alternative methods, theories and 'readings' of social reality, which collectively offer fresh possibilities for psychological research and practice. Let me therefore sketch part of the positive identity of the SC movement, to provide a backdrop for a discussion of its possible relevance to counselling practice.

**SC's positive identity: language and the self**

To appreciate the extent to which SC casts radical doubt on our everyday assumptions about social life, it is helpful to focus on two arenas of human experience that are utterly transformed when viewed through a constructionist lens. The first of these is language, understood as the contingent, situated and shifting symbolic order that structures our relationship to 'reality', as well as to ourselves. The second arena is that of the self, which loses its familiar personalism, stability and integrity in a constructionist account, in part because it is itself shaped by the very linguistic operations that bring into being the social world. It will soon become apparent that SC's characterization of these two concepts carries sweeping implications for counselling and psychotherapy, insofar as these 'helping professions' rely on conversational practices whose explicit goal is to help clients transform or revise their problematic personal identities.

*Language and reality.* In both formal and informal theories of language, two views have predominated: the idea that language represents an abstract structure of linguistic signs and grammatical rules that members of a culture learn to refer to a 'real world' beyond language, and the notion that public language expresses personal feelings and thoughts resident within the individual. With characteristic audacity, SC begins by rejecting both of these formulations. Instead, following the structuralist linguistics of Saussure (1974) and its poststructuralist embellishments (Burr, 1995), constructionists view language as a network of 'signifiers' whose relationship to the things they signify is essentially arbitrary, rather than fixed and obvious. From this perspective, different language communities can 'carve up' the world in quite different ways. For example, while it may seem obvious to speakers of Indo-European languages that 'emotions' are something 'real' that correspond to specifiable internal states, there are some languages that have no word that can be translated as 'emotion' (Lutz, 1982). Even within related language communities, subtly different discriminations can configure the world of experience differently. To pick but a single example, the Portuguese word 'saudade' conveys a quality of 'homesickness', or bittersweet yearning that arises in the absence of a special person, which is only crudely captured by the English language expression of 'missing' someone.

But to say that language has no necessary and specifiable relationship to an extralinguistic observable reality is not to say that the way in which we talk about our experience is capricious or haphazard. While "there are no principled constraints over
our characterization of states of affairs”, it is none the less the case that the “terms and forms by which we achieve understanding of the world and ourselves are social artifacts, products of historically and culturally situated exchanges among people” (Gergen, 1994 p. 49). To ‘make sense’ to others, we have no choice but to position ourselves within a symbolic order that precedes us as individuals, that establishes for us a world of socially warranted meanings.

Does this lead us inevitably to the view that language unproblematically gives us access to a common, agreed upon frame of reference through which to co-ordinate our relations to others? By no means. In a social constructionist account, the meanings of things remain open, contested, and sites of significant conflict between participants in the same linguistic community. For example, the meaning of state ‘welfare’ programs is currently being contested among American politicians and the electorate, with some groups defining them as ‘essential economic safety nets for the poor’, while others characterize them as ‘systematic disincentives to personal responsibility’. Clearly, the very different rhetoric of these two camps conveys the idea that language does not neutrally reflect a shared reality, so much as constitute social reality in different ways according to the positions and interests of the groups and individuals involved. Thus, language in this sense is more performative than representational, sensitizing us to what people are doing or attempting to do in their speaking and writing (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

Constructionists who are drawn toward the study of language use as a form of social action analyze the way in which it is structured into different discourses, or systems of statements (stories, images, metaphors, representations) that together produce a particular version of events (Burr, 1995). For example, traditional Western discourses of gender specify appropriate roles, responsibilities and respective positions of power for men and women, which are further buttressed by sources as diverse as Biblical authority and biology. Although these presumed sex differences have their basis in cultural discourse rather than any immutable physical reality, they are none the less substantial, and have ‘real effects’ for those who live within them (Foucault, 1970). By way of illustration, a discourse of women as naturally more nurturing and emotional, while men are construed as more achievement-oriented and rational, can be used to legitimate the allocation of low-paying caretaking and service positions to women, while men are given more direct access to high status employment in business and government. Thus, prevailing discourses cannot be simply ignored or redefined without challenging existing institutions and social organization. Of course, this may be precisely the agenda of competing interests, such as feminism, which attempt to undermine the taken-for-granted validity of dominant discourses and seek to replace them with ways of ‘linguaging’ about gender that are less ‘totalizing’ for the persons who are subject to them (Kitzinger, 1987).

Such a view of language-in-use leads inevitably to an analysis of power relations, whether at the level of individuals (e.g. within a marriage), groups (e.g. professional societies), or cultures (e.g. competing nations). Seen in this frame, power is not so much the property of persons, groups, or institutions, as it is the process of constructing a discourse that legitimates some form of social control over others, or even
oneself. Significantly, such attempts are typically successful only to the extent that they succeed in hiding the very mechanisms by which they are produced, so that their outcome goes unquestioned as a natural expression of ‘the way things are’ (Foucault, 1970).

As a specialized form of social criticism, SC analyses spoken or written ‘texts’ using the concepts and procedures of discursive and rhetorical analysis (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Simons, 1989). But unlike traditional systems of ‘content analysis’ of narrative (Gottschalk et al., 1986), discourse analysis does not try to penetrate to the ‘truth’ of the text, to yield a single, objective meaning through the use of formal or quantitative procedures. Instead, in keeping with a constructivist epistemology (Neimeyer, 1995b), the goal is typically to search for a pragmatically useful ‘reading’ of the text that supports valued social change. One influential approach to this effort has been modelled by Derrida (1978), who ‘deconstructs’ literary texts by revealing their internal tensions, hidden contradictions, and concealed assumptions. Therapists inspired by similar traditions have borrowed such procedures to undermine cultural discourses that subtly encourage such destructive behaviours as alcohol abuse (Winslade & Smith, 1997).

In summary, a social constructionist view promotes a Copernican shift in our understanding of language, from seeing it as a medium for merely reflecting or labelling an independent reality, to viewing it as the very medium by which social reality is constructed. Moreover, because language-as-discourse (covertly) instantiates and sustains existing power arrangements, constructionists tend to adopt a critical, analytic stance toward written and spoken texts, searching for their sociopolitical implications. Among the most important of these implications are those that various discourses carry for personal identity, a topic to which I shall now turn.

**Self and identity.** If one takes seriously the social constructionist thesis that we have no direct access to an extralinguistic reality, then it follows that we also have no unmediated recourse to a ‘real self’ beyond the language operations that appear to give it substance. Indeed, SC theorists contend that the very notion of an independent, individualistic, stable and knowable self is a product of the modern era, which in effect ‘produced’ a view of persons as isolated and autonomous agents capable of self-determination, in keeping with the requirements of progressive, capitalist economies (Sampson, 1989). As a product of this same modern ethos, early twentieth century psychology followed in this tradition, dutifully positing myriad ‘theories of personality’ which attempted to delineate the development, dynamics and disorders of such self-contained individuals. Humanistic psychology, with its celebration of human agency, freedom, self-actualization and personality integration as hallmarks of maturity, represented one logical extension of this same paradigm. Likewise, the current popularity of cognitive behavioural therapies can be explained in part on the basis of their compatibility with a traditional Western cultural discourse that attributes responsibility for rational self-control to isolated individuals, supported by a professional ‘technology of behavior change’ whose goal is to efficiently restore greater ‘reality contact’ to those suffering from ‘irrational beliefs’ (Neimeyer, 1993b, 1998).
From a social constructionist viewpoint, this modern view of self is both overly idealized and insufficiently contextual. In particular, it errs in ‘essentializing’ the self as a generally consistent set of traits, motives, needs, attitudes and competencies located within the person, and taken as a kind of irreducible unity worthy of study in its own right. In sharp contrast to this ethic of individualism, SC theorists taking the linguistic turn view the self as deeply penetrated by the language of one’s place and time. Like a foetus floating in an amnion of culturally available signs, symbols, practices and conversations, the ‘self’ symbiotically depends for its existence upon a living system that precedes and supports it.

In its more radical forms, this view of the ‘saturated self’ as populated by the often contradictory discourses into which one is born, and in which one remains immersed, threatens the very conception of the individual as a unified entity with identifiable boundaries and properties (Gergen, 1991). The extreme postmodern vision of the ‘death of the self’ (Lather, 1992) heralds the demise of personal subjectivity and its replacement by ‘the more anonymous sense of irreality carried by the flood of media images which surround us like an atmosphere’ (Sass, 1992). Passing through the postmodern mirror, “we enter into a universe devoid of both objects and selves: where there is only a swarming of ‘selfobjects’, images and simulacra filling us without resistance” (Sass, 1992, p. 176).

This reconstruction of selfhood is both disquieting and liberating. On the one hand, it raises urgent questions about the defensibility of deeply inscribed cultural assumptions concerning individuals as independent and rational moral agents, assumptions on which such critical social institutions as British common law, not to mention traditional psychotherapy, depend. On the other hand, a conception of personality as socially constructed also opens the possibility of more profoundly relational views of selfhood (Curtis, 1991), which view identity as constituted by the living web of connections we create and sustain with the people, projects, and places that give our lives meaning (Attig, 1996). This more affirmative view of the social self accords persons the status of discourse users, manipulators of ‘interpretive repertoires’ for constructing preferred versions of their motives and actions in relation to others (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). Such a view is compatible with at least a modest form of human agency and self-determination, insofar as people are seen as ‘choosing and implementing forms of representation appropriate to their immediate goals’ (Burr, 1995, p. 120). I will consider the implications of such a view for the practice of counselling and psychotherapy after arguing briefly for the complementarity of social constructionist and personal constructivist approaches in the following section.

Social constructionism and agentic constructivism: conflict and complementarity

It is tempting, especially in a brief article like the present one, to discuss the SC agenda as if it were a unified counterpoint to traditional forms of social theory. But fortunately or unfortunately, “any close listening to the postmodern chorus reveals a polyphony of voices—not all of which are singing in the same key” (Neimeyer,
1995b, p. 30). As Stam (1998) reminds us, we are "awash in a whole variety of constructivisms and constructionisms, some of which bear a family resemblance to each other whereas others are downright antithetical". My remarks here are no substitute for the careful scholarship that is beginning to consider both the bridges and barriers between these alternative formulations (Botella, 1995; Chiari & Nuzzo, 1996; Lyddon, 1995; Stam, 1998). Instead, I will simply argue that a selective cross-fertilization of some forms of SC theory with more agentic forms of psychological constructivism can provide a more useful frame for counselling practice than does either approach considered alone.

Like SC, constructivism takes as its point of departure a rejection of 'objectivist' psychologies, with their commitment to a realist epistemology, correspondence theory of truth, unificationist philosophy of science, reactive theory of human behaviour, associationist models of mind, and mediational view of language. In their place, constructivists endorse a view of knowledge as a personal construction, a coherence-based, neo-pragmatic theory of truth, a pluralistic conception of science, proactive models of human functioning, a view of persons as self-organizing systems, and a constitutive view of language (Mahoney, 1991; Neimeyer, 1995b). Working within this frame, constructivist clinicians and counsellors practice various forms of psychotherapy, defined broadly as "the variegated and subtle interchange and negotiation of (inter)personal meanings ... in the service of articulating, elaborating, and revising those constructions that the client uses to organize her or his experience or action" (Neimeyer, 1995c) (p. 2). This focus on the 'coordinated management of meaning' (Pearce & Cronen, 1997) as the basis for counselling practice dovetails with the linguistic, discursive emphasis of SC, while adding greater procedural specificity regarding therapeutic strategy and technique (Neimeyer, 1993a). In exchange, SC can interject into the practice of constructivist counselling a heightened awareness of the rhetorical nuances and implications of both the client’s and therapist’s discourse, as well as greater sensitivity to the broader cultural, institutional and power arrangements in which counsellors inevitably work.

But given the profusion of divergent forms of SC and constructivist theory, the possibility of their conflict and inconsistency is at least as great as the prospect of their complementarity and integration. For example, constructivist theories predicated on a model of the 'evolving self' (Guidano, 1991; Kegan, 1982) may make uneasy bedfellows with SC positions that glory in the demise of any form of selfhood, just as constructivist therapies that conceptualize meaning making in terms of unconscious motivation (Ecker & Hulley, 1996) or internal 'felt senses' (Gendlin, 1996) may rest uncomfortably alongside SC approaches that situate meaning and discourse wholly in the space between persons, rather than within them. Thus, in keeping with the goals of a 'theoretically progressive integration' of psychotherapy (Neimeyer, 1993c), I believe a meaningful juxtaposition of concepts from both camps is feasible only if serious attention is given to their metatheoretical compatibility.

One candidate among SC theories for conceptual exchange with psychological constructivism is the work of Harré and Gillett (1994). In their recent position statement, these authors present a view of mind as the nexus of socially structured
discourses, out of which individual meanings and subjectivities are constructed. Like families furnishing a home, we draw selectively or opportunistically upon a broad but finite range of conceptual ‘furnishings’ afforded by our place and time, and then configure them according to cultural, subcultural and personal aesthetics. Also like our homes, the contents of our minds remain open to reshuffling and replacement as we continue to interact with an evolving historical context and the people and ideas who inhabit it. Thus, while they continue to grant primacy to interpersonal discursive processes as the primary site for the construction of emotions, decisions, and self-presentation, Harré and Gillett acknowledge the role of the self in orchestrating such activities. As they note, the “task for discursive theories of agency is ... to reinsert the agent into the story, the one who initiates the action, the one who, in some way, is significant in giving meaning to what he or she does and who they are ... We must find a way of understanding a person as an individual focus of discourse and as having a productive role in their own conscious activity” (pp. 116–117). Their attempt to reintroduce a self into a socially constructed world leads them to examine discursive activity at many levels of functioning, ranging from the cultural to the personal, and beyond to the ‘subdiscursive’ level of brain activity.

The primary limitation in this form of SC, as Bhatia and Mascolo (1998) argue, is that it fails to examine the specific character of functioning at each level, and the ways in which the various levels interact in the creation of discursive activity. For example, how is it possible for a middle aged survivor of domestic abuse to resist powerful gender, cultural and perhaps even religious discourses that position her to sacrifice her own safety for the ‘well-being’ of her family, and instead begin an independent life of self-determination? Surely, these patterns of self-change involve complex internal processes (e.g. struggling with the threat of radical shift in personal identity required by such a move), interpersonal transactions (e.g. the recruitment of tangible and emotional support from significant others), and recourse to discourses of liberation (e.g. in the form of feminist literature, or talk-show interviews with other oppressed women who have re-established control over their lives). But as an essentially social psychological, rather than clinical perspective, Harré and Gillett’s version of social constructionism sheds little light on such questions, or on the elements of discursive skill upon which individual actors must draw to negotiate each of these levels.

It is for this reason that a selective bridging of social constructionist theory with constructivist psychotherapies can be helpful to the practicing counsellor. I will therefore close by outlining a few approaches to constructivist counselling that resonate with a discursive form of SC as advanced by Harré and Gillett (1994), and that in turn can benefit from the fuller importation of constructionist concepts and procedures.

Personal constructivism and the elaboration of role relationships

As the original form of constructivist counselling, personal construct theory (PCT) (Kelly, 1955; Neimeyer & Neimeyer, 1987) can be distinguished from other broadly ‘cognitive’ forms of psychotherapy not only on the basis of its nonobjectivist
epistemology, but also in the central role it assigns to the social domain in the construction of self (Neimeyer, 1993b). Kelly viewed identity as organized around ‘core role constructs’—pivotal, if often preverbal means of discriminating a sense of self and world which were rooted in one’s earliest dependency relationships. Moreover, the ongoing effort to discover commonality with the meaning-making efforts of other persons and to indwell the perspectives of others in order to establish meaningful role relationships with them were essential corollaries of his basic theory. Thus, while Kelly was chiefly concerned with the structures and processes by which self-contained subjectivities constructed and reconstructed their personal worlds of meaning, his theory can none the less be viewed as an “essentially individualistic approach that strains in the direction of a genuinely social ‘two person’ psychology” (Mascolo et al., 1998). Subsequent elaborations of PCT have further refined and enhanced its relational and social implications (Feixas, 1992; Kalekin-Fishman & Walker, 1996; Leitner, 1995).

In keeping with this focus on the elaboration of personal identity in the context of role relationships, therapeutic change strategies originating in PCT might be drawn upon to flesh out a form of counselling consonant with social constructionist principles. For example, Kelly’s (1955) original fixed role therapy, which required the client to enact in the medium of daily life a hypothetical identity discrepant with his prevailing identity constructs, can be viewed as a direct implementation of a postmodern view of self as a fictional and provisional construction. As an illustration, a client who construes role relationships chiefly in terms of angry dominance versus grudging submission might be asked to enact the part of ‘Ed Venturous’, a hypothetical ‘anthropologist of the mind’, whose major quest is to explore novel outlooks and practices in others that differed as much as possible from his own (Neimeyer, 1993d). Significantly, personal construct therapists are explicit in viewing such enactments as merely temporary immersions in an alternative reality, whose purpose is subtly but safely to dislodge clients from a view of self as having any essential or inherent character (Neimeyer, 1995a). Viewed from a social constructionist perspective, fixed role therapies of this kind could be expanded to acknowledge the multiple, often contradictory roles we develop and sustain in response to the different discursive contexts we inhabit. Recent innovations in fixed role procedures that emphasize and orchestrate this form of ‘multiple self-awareness’ seem to move precisely in this direction (Sewell et al., 1998).

*Developmental constructivism and the evolving self*

As Cox and Lyddon (1997) note, ‘the postmodern paradigm offers psychology a new vision for understanding identity—one that underscores the importance of context, interconnectedness, and evolutionary process’ (p. 216). One psychotherapy theorist who incorporates all three features in his work is Guidano (1987; 1991), who grounds the human evolution of self-reflective functioning in our essential intersubjectivity with others. To an even greater extent than other primates, he believes, the protracted and emotionally charged dependency of human infants on their caregivers gives rise to significant bonds of attachment, which in turn shape the
‘hard core’ of our theories of reality. It is the problematic implications of these systems of personal knowledge that become the focus of later psychotherapy, as clients seek assistance in maintaining a sense of coherence in the face of experiential challenges to the adequacy of their models of self.

A distinctive feature of Guidano’s therapeutic approach is his focus on the discrepancies that arise between a client’s tacit awareness, and his or her explicit structuring of that awareness in more abstract terms. Central to this method is the client’s self-observation of the dynamic relationship between the I and the me, that is, between immediate, momentary, bodily experience on the one hand, and more symbolically organized reflections on the other. Accordingly, Guidano (1995) makes use of a movieola technique to explore and reconcile these discrepancies between the client’s experience of a situation and explanation of it. For example, he may move a client step-by-step through a slow-motion ‘replay’ of a marital quarrel, ‘panning’ across a series of scenes, before ‘zooming in’ on one that has special emotional significance. This could involve guiding the client through a careful exploration of the immediate feelings and perceptions registered in the moment (stiffening of the body, the partner’s expression, etc.), and then shifting to the level of the client’s explicit understandings of the argument (why it occurred, attributions regarding the partner’s intentions, etc.). This reconstruction of the experience as both lived and interpreted promotes greater emotional openness and reflective self-awareness, gradually modifying the client’s usual view of self (the me) to make it more adequate to the experiential complexity of the experienced I.

Guidano’s therapeutic approach thus enables the counsellor to facilitate a client’s evolving self-theory, in keeping with a postmodern view of identity as a fluid process rather than a static process. However, his work might be extended by a greater appreciation of the discursive processes that contribute to the client’s explicit self-understanding in the first place, and that may militate against the assimilation of tacit experiences that threaten it. In the above illustration of a marital quarrel, for instance, prevailing discourses about what emotions or intentions are appropriate for men and women to have in relation to their spouses could make certain restructurings of one’s identity (e.g. as jealous or angry) problematic. Moreover, a failure to examine broader cultural discourses (e.g. about the presumed subservience of women to their husbands’ needs, or concerning men’s responsibility for their family’s financial well-being) might lead both client and counsellor to misattribute certain tacitly experienced feelings (e.g. lingering resentment) to the unique structure of the marital relationship, rather than recognizing the extent to which both partners may be constrained by gender expectations that predated them as individuals.

Systemic constructivism and the management of conversation

In keeping with the constructionist and linguistic trends that have begun to transform family therapy, increasing numbers of therapists now conceptualize families as language generating, self-organizing systems (McNamee & Gergen, 1992). From this perspective, meaning arises through communicative action rather than residing
within individual knowers, and therapy itself becomes an exercise in the co-construction of meaning among all members of the ‘problem-determined system’ (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992).

If family construct systems (Procter, 1987), family paradigms (Reiss, 1981), or family premises (Penn, 1985) are language-determined, then the role of the counselor is to elucidate and subtly perturb those contractual agreements, maintained in language, that maintain family members’ dysfunctional relationships to one another (Efran et al., 1990). Through the use of circular questions (Selvini-Palazzoli et al., 1980) posed from an attitude of ‘not knowing’ (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992), the therapist functions as a conversation manager in developing a new story with the family that has a sense of coherence, that is relevant to the concerns of those struggling around the problem, and that provides a sense of elaborative possibility (Loos, 1993).

While this systemic conversational paradigm clearly reflects a postmodern concern with languaging, it stops short of a full integration of discourse analysis into its present methods. In particular, rhetoricians and social constructionists working in the discursive tradition use a wide variety of strategies for uncovering the hidden contradictions, self-justifications and identity implications in spoken or written text (Burr, 1995), many of which might have therapeutic potential. For instance, a discourse analysis of a wife’s complaints of her husband’s thoughtless disregard for putting his dirty clothes in the laundry hamper might consider the ‘subject positions’ she is implicitly assigning each of them, positions that have ramifications in a larger moral order. In this case, this persistent but seemingly innocuous complaint might be used as part of a larger discursive strategy to portray him as insensitive, selfish and unconcerned with her needs, and may ultimately be recruited to justify the decision that she should divorce him. Attention to the larger discursive and moral implications of client remarks might then help counsellors answer the question, “What is the client trying to achieve, and how is he trying to position himself, in this account?” Similarly, greater awareness of their own use of language might help therapists extend their conscious repertory of ‘process interventions’ for facilitating the conversational reconstruction of client meanings (Neimeyer, 1996).

**Narrative constructivism and the reauthoring of life stories**

Of all the postmodern trends in counselling theory, narrative therapy may be the most self-conscious in adopting a discursive framework for intervention. For authors such as White and Epston (1990), culturally predominant *internalizing* discourses attribute blame for problems to individuals, not only conferring on them narrow and pathological identities, but also separating them from important persons in their lives who might otherwise be sources of support and tangible assistance. The role of therapy is then to muster resistance to the *dominant narrative* of such problematic identities, typically by (a) *externalizing* the problem, (b) examining its *real effects* on the lives of the individuals who are subjugated to it, (c) searching for unique outcomes or ‘sparkling moments’ when dominated persons resist its influence, and (d) *historicizing* their exceptional accomplishments and recruiting a supportive audi-
ence for these welcome developments (Monk et al., 1996). For example, an alienated and ‘at risk’ adolescent might metaphorically externalize his problem as a ‘wall of mistrust’ that separates him from others. A counsellor working within the narrative frame might then engage in patterns of questioning that examine the effects of this wall on his social, personal and academic functioning. This might take the form of developing a metaphor of the mistrust as a kind of ‘jailer’ imposing on him a ‘life sentence of solitary confinement.’ The counsellor might further remain vigilant for scarcely visible signs of protest against this narrative of isolation, perhaps first discerned in a casual greeting extended by the youth to a girl in whom he was interested. By asking such questions as, “What made it possible for you to reach over the wall of isolation at this time?” and “If you continue in this way, would you expect to stage a prison breakout at some point in the future? If so, would you tunnel under the wall gradually, or climb over it in a sudden dramatic escape?”, the counsellor both solidifies the initial signs of change, and sketches future possibilities. Overall, the goal of such counselling is to help the client win freedom from the dominant problem narrative, and achieve genuine authorship of his life.

Despite the extent to which the narrative model is imbued with postmodern concepts of self-as-story and therapy as narrative revision, a still greater integration with discursive principles might enhance its utility in the counselling context. Specifically, the largely intuitive practice of therapy might be enriched and systematized by the incorporation of strategies borrowed from the domain of discourse analysis, which is extensively concerned with the rhetorical construction of motives and identities in various versions of events (Edwards & Potter, 1992). A beginning taxonomy of such methods for incorporation into counselling conversations has been provided by Freedman & Combs (1996), who describe and illustrate such techniques as deconstructive listening, relative influence questioning, and exposing the role of subjugating discourses.

Rhetoric and reflexivity

Like successful therapy itself, the importation of social constructionist ideas into the counselling context can generate both discomfort and excitement for those who take it seriously. On the one hand, it shares with effective therapy the uncomfortable tendency to call into question those basic assumptions that support our customary patterns of action. In the case of SC, this involves calling into question the realism entailed in our usual linguistic practices, to the point that even our most ‘objective’ diagnoses of clients are seen as socially constructed discourses that often carry destructive implications (Raskin & Epting, 1993). Likewise, it undermines the naive hope that we can achieve a position of neutrality with respect to those we help, and instead sensitizes us to the ways that we as helping professionals may both construct and conceal our own power in relation to clients through our discursive practices as a profession (Keen, 1997). Finally, and perhaps most basically, it undermines our taken-for-granted belief in stable, singular, and sustainable identities, instead conjuring an image of selves that subtly or dramatically shift with alternations in the conversational context. In combination, these challenges perturb our view of coun-
selling as a value-free process of correcting real personal problems through either the application of proven technical interventions or the humane facilitation of a client’s self-actualization.

On the other hand, an affirmative reading of SC partially compensates for this loss of security by offering fresh images of social life and its possible transformation in psychotherapy. With the demise of an essentialized self, persons are freed (and challenged) to negotiate with others more fluid identities, striving to use the narrative resources of their cultures to script more satisfying lives. Any of several forms of constructivist psychotherapy can make a contribution to this effort, particularly if enriched by the discursive concepts and rhetorical procedures that selected forms of social constructionism offer. I hope that this brief paper will prompt other counsellors to explore these contributions further, and that the resulting examination of psychotherapy as a language-based and socially constructed practice will enhance our reflexivity and creativity as helping professionals.

References


