

Chapter 1

Social Construction As Practical Theory: Lessons for Practice and Reflection in Psychotherapy

Sheila McNamee

Theory constructs the world. One need only look as far as Karl Marx's analysis of class struggle or Adam Smith's ideas on free market economies to see how theory moves nations and shapes history. There clearly is much that is generative in theory and much that is destructive. Sheila McNamee is sensitized to the potential violence of ideas and also to the manner in which the meaning of an idea is coconstituted by speaker and listener, as she communicates about social constructionism. The apparently simple act of writing about theory is rendered far more complex, and potentially hazardous, when one considers that the meaning that emerges is a function of both writer and reader.

This chapter provides an alternative to well-established traditions of persuasion, defying the usual convention of laying out the boundaries of a theory. In effect, it is more an invitation than a "telling." McNamee seeks here not to convince readers of her point of view so much as provide an opportunity to glimpse and reflect on ideas associated with social constructionism. A central theme is the inescapable link between idea and practice. Social constructionism directs us not to "who we are," but rather encourages a mindfulness about the active, ongoing, relational process of meaning making.

Much has been written on social construction, relational realities, and the implications of these views in psychology and psychotherapeutic practice. And although many of us have devoted a good deal of time and effort to connecting theory and practice, there remains an overwhelming frustration about what we *do* differently

when we operate from a constructionist sensibility. That sensibility leads us to view social constructionism not so much as a theory that proposes particular techniques or methods for practice, but rather something more akin to a relational practice, a way of making sense of and engaging with the world that invites others into dialogue. This emphasis on the ongoing coconstruction of meaning renders incomplete any categorical statements about what social constructionist practice "is" or "is not" because it excludes the response of those with whom these statements are shared: calling specific therapeutic practices more relational than individualist is, itself, a situated, relational activity.

Central to this chapter is the intriguing dilemma of articulating theory and practice in a manner that is closer to an invitation to dialogue than a closed pronouncement of how things are. The dilemma hinges on the notion that becoming a proponent of certain theories and practices has less to do with achieving the proper skill and more to do with embracing a particular vocabulary for action. Our working vocabulary for action—the manner in which we engage with others in the production of meaning—speaks more to the tenor of our practice than do any specific techniques or methods. The vocabulary for action is the focus of this contribution.

We repeatedly hear that there is no constructionist method *per se*. Constructionism itself does not dictate specific techniques or methods. Yet, as a practical theory (Shotter, 1993; Gergen, 1999), constructionism informs us in our activities, both at the level of theoretical talk and at the level of professional and everyday practices. The challenge, then, is of articulating a constructionist sensibility—a sensibility intent on the relational aspects of meaning, including theoretical meaning—while avoiding the creation of a tightly scripted set of techniques or procedures. My hope is that in attempting to do this here I will help to illuminate what is distinctive about social constructionism. Rather than an explanatory narrative about therapeutic change or human nature, social constructionism is a theory about *meaning* and, more particularly, about meaning as a relational practice. Rather than prescribing certain specific therapeutic interventions, it encourages us to reflect upon what sorts of relationship practices various therapeutic theories invite us to employ. Social constructionism is, then, a theory *about* theories, and one that reminds us that theories ultimately are relational practices.

This poses some intriguing questions about presenting social constructionism. Is it possible to engage others *relationally* through sharing constructionist ideas without formally listing or prescribing how to "be" relational? Is there a way to passionately embrace constructionism without it becoming dogma or absolute truth? Do the discussions about it need to be formed in opposition to other, already well-developed orientations (e.g., individualism)? Is there a way to talk about social construction without alienating other discursive forms? These questions hinge on a central distinction between talk as rhetoric and persuasion versus talk as overture.

PERSUASION AS PERVASIVE

Persuasion, as a cultural resource, has a powerful history and a powerful effect on our everyday activities. The discussion of persuasion is traced to Aristotle. In Aristotle's *Rhetoric and Poetics*, he argues that rhetoric is the ability to find the available means of persuasion in a situation (1954, p. 24). He proceeds to articulate the most effective means of influencing others (i.e., persuading others), which hinge on notions of rationality or logic. His perspective was guided by his belief that truth is gained by opposition and the means by which to oppose another is via formal logic.

Obviously Aristotle's work has been influential. It remains a mainstay of cultural discussion and everyday practice. Debate, a common form of public discourse in our culture, is rooted in Aristotelian logic. Debate is centered on influencing others—winning an argument through influence or persuasion, that is, through logic or rationality. But the question is, *which* logic or rationality? And who gets to decide which logic or rationality? We are hard-pressed to find situations in which our conversations do not take the form of persuading another to accept or buy our argument.

As an illustration, I recently had an interesting conversation with a colleague. He teaches courses in argumentation informed by classical rhetoric. I teach courses in dialogue processes informed by social construction. The meeting evolved into a discussion of some longstanding issues in our department, and the challenge we faced was to proceed in a manner that promoted constructive mutual dialogue on the topic. My colleague, the expert in argumentation, claimed that

when we discuss things as a department we need to start with the *facts* and from there our job is to persuade one another by bringing evidence to the fore. Whichever argument succeeds dictates how we go on together. I questioned his claim by asking, "But whose facts? Facts by what standards? And what would count as evidence?" The answer: "*The facts. The evidence.*" Well, I wondered out loud, isn't it the case that what counts as a fact is what is constructed in activity (language) with others? Thus, when any subgroup in the department gathers "evidence" on an issue, it is in the process of *creating* a fact, *creating* evidence, and thus *creating* what will count as good, as bad, as right, and as wrong. Incommensurate beliefs emerge within one small academic department. If we consider that everyone is potentially creating a different rationality, could we use this recognition to *begin* our conversations from a stance of curiosity or interested inquiry? Might we not come to the table with genuine questions about what counts as a fact or as evidence to each person? If we did that, how might our "deliberations" be different?

Frustrated, my colleague informed me that the world operates within an argumentative model. We persuade. It is the judgment made by the group concerning the quality and validity of the argument (based on the facts and the evidence) that determines the course of action. To him, discussion of what will count as a fact would detract from efficiency and prevent us from moving forward as a group. (As someone who consults to organizations, I hear this critique of dialogue quite often.) In the spirit of multivocality, of embracing multiple viewpoints, I chose not to attempt to refute my colleague's assessment. I did, however, invite him to consider the potential efficiency of spending a good chunk of time every once in a while clarifying the various beliefs, meanings, values, and so forth of group members because the time taken to do this might help to establish relationships that recognize and value difference rather than relationships that either deny or exaggerate difference. Once appreciative relationships are established, members have additional resources available for connecting with one another, for understanding how others might respond or operate in a particular moment. The mutual exploration of values, commitments, moralities—as well as the relational communities which give the values, commitments, and moralities sustenance—can offer provocations for future engagement. In effect, my response

was an overture to dialogue, to a mode of meaning making, founded on a mutual going forward, a collaboration rather than a rivalry.

PROVIDING A CONVERSATIONAL ARENA

It is by now probably obvious that persuading the reader to "buy" my argument for social construction and relational practices is a job I do not wish to take on here—a job not in keeping with the constructionist premises that inform my work and this chapter. The main premise of social construction is that meaning is not an individual phenomenon. It is not located in the private mind of a person, nor is it unilaterally determined by one person. Meaning (and thus reality), to the constructionist, is an achievement of people coordinating their activities together. I believe my colleagues and I might have more success "going on together" if we approach issues as challenges in co-construction rather than as facts to be contested and countered. We might not always agree on the meaning of an action, a situation, or a relationship, but whatever meaning we construct is always an emergent by-product of what we do together. Thus, one person alone cannot control the outcome of any conversation, relationship, or situation—and therein lies the intriguing challenge of this chapter. To convey theory is to make meaning, and I cannot make meaning alone. How you take in my words is as critical to what this conversation produces as the words I commit to paper. I cannot prevent you from reading this chapter as propaganda or persuasive rhetoric designed to convert you to social constructionism. All I can do is attempt to provide a *conversational arena* where multiple logics, coherences, realities can be coordinated.

From the story about my conversation with my colleague, I think you may appreciate how institutional life, and indeed the wider society, tends to operate on the principle that "good arguments" begin with "good facts" and "good evidence." But whose definition of "good" are we using? This is the question that often, when handled in an adversarial manner or when posed as a debate, can fracture and divide relationships. This is not to suggest debate and argument are "wrong"; it is only to say that there are always limits to the utility of any way of acting. Not only is it difficult to be sensitive to the multiplicity of moralities and beliefs in any community, but it is difficult to forge new ways of relating that value such multiplicity. At this mo-

ment, you and I are confronted with the same limitations. How can text, which once published remains unaltered, invite many voices and possibilities and not be read as the “truth” or the “facts” or the “evidence”? My hope is that by sharing the conversations within which many of these issues arise for me, by writing in a mode that might be viewed more as an invitation into conversation than as an authoritative voice, we might together approach an ongoing conversation in which multiple possibilities can emerge. Toward that end, I invite you to view this offering, and others like it, as openings, invitations, challenges, or proposals into new ways of relating together.

I will therefore refrain from saying that social construction is the answer to the world’s problems or telling you that a certain set of practices illustrates social construction in action and others do not. I will instead try to address the question of what we mean by the term *social construction*, why many refer to social construction as a generative or practical theory, and what difference this might make in our day-to-day lives.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

When someone asks me what I mean by using the term *social construction* I feel a rush of anxiety. I wonder how to describe social construction without having my conversational partner either glaze over in a sea of abstraction or nod enthusiastically saying, “Oh yes, that’s just common sense. You mean being open-minded.”

It is precisely this problem of meaning that is the central issue of social construction. For the social constructionist, meaning does not reside within individuals, requiring competent or accurate communication to convey one’s meanings to another. I am not holding the correct interpretation of social construction and using my words here to convey my meaning to you. Rather, I am attempting to use terms that invite us all to generate new resources for action, new ways of making sense that will support us in our actions. My hope is that my words serve as openings to new understandings, to confirmation of understandings we might already carry, to provocations, to questions, to a wider range of possibilities. Meaning is created in the coordination of activities among people. To that end, the meaning of social construction is *actively* coordinated by *us* in our ongoing activities—including the writing and reading of this chapter. At this very mo-

ment, you and I are engaged in an active process of coordination. Later, as you converse with others who have read these words, the meaning of those very words has the potential to change and shift all the more. Meaning is never fixed. It is not stable and unchanging. There is, then, no way for me, *once and for all*, to tell you what I mean. My colleague, John Shotter, captures the indeterminacy of meaning whenever someone asks him what he means. He responds, “I don’t know. We haven’t finished talking yet!” No meaning is fixed for all time. We often operate on the principle that we have “settled the issue once and for all,” but new conversations, new relationships, new situations will continue to transform meaning.

Film director Arthur Penn recently offered me a beautiful illustration of this point. He was talking about his film, *Little Big Man* (1970) starring Dustin Hoffman. In the story, Dustin Hoffman’s character is accepted, as a white man, into a Native American tribe. In fact, he is allowed to marry into the tribe. After a bloody battle leaving the tribe depleted of its males, Hoffman’s pregnant wife—a member of the tribe—asks him to engage in sexual encounters with her sisters in hope of impregnating them and thereby ensuring the continuation of the tribe. An action that would otherwise be considered immoral and certainly inappropriate to this community is now transformed into a positive and necessary action. As Penn describes it, “As conditions change through (in this case) tragedy, we see that values, language, and morality change as well. It is the elasticity of meaning that is important to recognize and this, to me, is what social construction is about” (personal communication, May 2001). I think that Arthur Penn has beautifully captured this relational appreciation for meaning. It shifts not willy-nilly to suit one’s needs but rather cautiously and curiously to address the complexities of life.

Reorienting ourselves away from a view that meaning is in our heads requires a significant shift, and it is a difficult shift to make. The next section discusses this issue, phrasing it in terms that invite some new conversations to take place among us.

MEANING AS RELATIONAL

It seems only natural to us to accept the idea that meaning is an individual’s possession. After all, when I look around, I see bodies that

are separate from my own and from others. I see eyes that are yours, hands that are yours, gestures that belong to you, and even peculiar phrasings, intonations, and quirky movements that *are* you. Who would want to question whether you have private thoughts, ideas, motivations, intentions, aspirations, emotions, and more? Is it not the wide variation among our private motivations, intentions, ideas, and so forth that makes living so difficult? Are not all the problems of the world, of social life, linked to the problem of meaning? Poor performance in school is a sign of a student's inability to grasp the correct meaning of the material. Social injustices, such as prejudice, are easily explained as the by-products of those who do not "understand" what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong. Genocide, economic instability, religious oppression would cease to exist if we could control meaning.

The problem is that we cannot control meaning. By locating meaning within individual minds, we contribute to the complexity of the problem. If only we could design the *right* therapeutic technique, we could eradicate depression. If we could create pedagogical practices that work for particular topics or types of people, we could educate the masses. These hopes are heavily layered with that sense of rationality and logic which we inherit from the influence of science in our culture. There is a simple method that will lead us to truth—not only to truth but to truth with assurance.

Just as the portrayal here of meaning as relational represents a discourse that invites certain ways of thinking and acting, so does the portrayal of meaning as residing within individuals. This latter discourse has a very long history, and is exceedingly pervasive within the institution of psychology. It is manifest in the belief that professionals know what it means to be psychologically healthy and are able to recognize signs of mental instability through the actions of clients. It proposes that years of experience on the part of professionals yield effective therapeutic practices and correct diagnoses.

When we entertain a relational view of meaning, these premises take on a very different light. If we talk about meaning as a by-product of our coordinations—our joint actions—with others, then what is the job of the therapist? More generally, what does the field of psychology, from this relational orientation, offer? Social construction, with its relational focus, presents a challenge to traditional notions of expert knowledge and professional neutrality.

If meaning is constructed in the joint activities of persons in relation, then any theory or model is not a truth telling but a very *local* way of understanding. It is local in that it is produced in relation to others in the immediate circumstances (even if they are only virtually connected). The "telling" that this chapter represents is an example of just this: in the local junction between you as reader and me as writer, meaning is constructed, to be taken forward to other encounters with other persons at other times and in other places. That meaning is inevitably a function of the cultural traditions, local conventions, historical canons, and so forth that speak through our tongues and hear through our ears. This view leads us away from the mutual trumping that accompanies a competitive quest for the truth. Instead, we are faced with the question of how to live together in a complex world inhabited by so many differing beliefs, truths, values, and so forth. The task at hand is one of coordination, and our curiosity is drawn to therapy as a site of coordinated meaning making.

FROM METHOD TO DAILY ENGAGEMENTS (PERFORMANCES)

On a broader scale, the discourse of science as the privileged and trustworthy approach to *discovering* knowledge, truth, and (perhaps most important) solutions still permeates the culture at large. We need only go to our local bookstores and glance at the recent best-sellers. Titles promising simple steps to remedy families, marriages, businesses, neighborhoods, and organizations are profuse. Add to this the bind many of us confront when we attempt to argue for the "legitimacy" of our work within the boundaries of traditional scientific discourse. If we dismiss (i.e., refuse to acknowledge) the criteria of scientific discourse—of modernism—as the ultimate and pure form of legitimation, we are very quickly disregarded. It is worth noting that many graduate students and young professionals interested in postmodern discourse feel frustrated by the oppressive demands placed upon them by those championing the individualist tradition. I believe the frustration and failure to open generative dialogue with those who are more traditional in their orientation has little to do with the traditionalists' lack of interest in or respect for such dialogue. Rather, I believe the frustration and failure that emerges from these

conversations is couched in the confrontational and accusatory approach that often accompanies such dialogues. The very same approach that those of us attracted to postmodern discourse (and social construction) find limiting (i.e., the debate format in which one truth oppresses another—all couched in that old tradition of persuasion) is unfortunately used to argue in favor of postmodernism. In the language of Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch (1974), postmodernists attempting to champion the case for postmodernism by arguing *against* modernism as a first-order change—simply substituting one action with another similar action thereby maintaining the pattern rather than changing it. Now, instead of modernism with its focus on individualism being “true,” postmodernism with its focus on the relational construction of meaning is true. The actual point of postmodernism is that neither is true in the traditional sense. Both are *discursive options* and to put it this way is to achieve, I think, second-order change (change of the argument entirely).

It may appear that I am proposing we give up the dominant individualist (scientific, modernist) discourse. I am not. Instead, I propose we augment the individualist discourse with an alternative discourse—in this case, the relational discourse proposed within a constructionist sensibility. Would not a conversation be inviting if it were not claiming that individualism is inherently wrong or bad? The job we have as social constructionists is to invite ourselves and others into conversations that allow all voices to be heard. To remain open to a multiplicity of views on practice is not to offer a blanket endorsement, and it also is not to selectively dismiss. By not being dismissive, we continue to construct meaning together, making it possible to keep the conversation going.

When we refigure meaning as relational, we regard it as a practice, a *performance* that inevitably involves more than one participant. This draws our attention to the *process* of meaning making as well as the *relationship* within which meaning is constructed. We are less focused on the “proper” or “best” way to be professionals or provide information. Our focus, instead, is centered on the multiple ways in which social transformation can take place. Further, our focus is centered on the participants engaged in the immediate moment and the wide array of both common and diverse voices, relations, communities, and experiences that each brings to the current context.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AS PRACTICAL THEORY

As theorists and practitioners we have choices about how to use the theories that inform our work. We can approach theories and perspectives, be they individualist or relational, as telling us the “truth” about the way the social world operates. On the other hand, we can ask ourselves when it might be useful to draw on resources offered by one theory or approach as opposed to another. To ask this question requires a sensitivity to the interactive moment, to the historical and cultural conditions that construct our worlds, and to the multiple voices that participate in shaping who we are and what we are doing. Social constructionism encourages us to consider how any particular idea or discourse converts to practice in the performance of a *specific moment* in relationship with another—rather than turning to a canonical truth that prescribes Theory A or Model B.

I hope that this very brief description of social construction is not read as yet another truth telling. Social construction, like any other theory, is a form of coordinated activity among persons in relation. To that end, every theory is about practice. We need to spend more time, I think, asking what sorts of practices are invited by the different stories each theory tells. I have tried to sketch the ways in which social construction could offer a set of fluid resources for action that do not eliminate or demonize other traditions. Those of us who adopt social construction are not attempting to claim a preferred mode of life or to discover the best way for a person, a relationship, an organization, or a community to develop. Social construction, instead, urges us to attend to the traditions, the communities, the situated practices of the participants at hand (i.e., to local understandings) in identifying what becomes real, true, and good. To attend to traditions, communities, and situated practices requires a constant flexibility on the part of those involved. Where the purpose of modernist theory and practice is to solve problems, cure illness, and achieve social, environmental, and scientific advancement, the purpose of social construction, as a discursive option, is to explore what sorts of social life become possible when one way of talking and acting is employed versus another. The alternative that social construction offers is a relational discourse—one that views meaningful action as always emerging within relationship (whether those relationships are “real,” imagined, or vir-

tual). The purpose is not to determine whether the modernist focus on individualism or the postmodern focus on the relational should dominate.

The metaphor of meaning as performance is useful because it makes a ritualized practice familiar. It cuts meaning from a focus on methods for conveying knowledge to a process which is attentive to the ways in which participants create meaning together. As we engage with one another in therapy we create not only a sense of who we are but also a sense of what is valued. We create—perform *together*—a world, a lived reality.

The metaphor of performance provides the opportunity for us to engage in self-reflexive inquiry about our own resources for action which are not being utilized but which might aid in creating ways of going on together (see McNamee and Gergen, 1998). If meaning is a by-product of relational engagement (conversation, performance), then we are free to pause and ask ourselves what other ways might we talk about this topic, this issue, this problem. Performance as a metaphor enhances self-reflexivity by legitimizing it. In so doing, we open ourselves to listening, reading, talking, and writing in more “generous” modes—remaining open to the relational coherence of diverse ways of acting. We thereby avoid speaking with a sense of certainty that the world is or should be one way. In so doing we open possibilities for the coordination of multiple ways of being human and of, as Wittgenstein (1953) says, “going on together.”

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Chapter 2

Therapy Theory After the Postmodern Turn

Lois Shawver

There is a certain comfort that accompanies an expert stance, a reassurance that comes with adopting a position of certainty. The notion that we have unlocked the code of human nature, or the therapeutic change process, helps to justify interventions and mutes the nagging voice of self-doubt. In this chapter, Lois Shawver describes the disenchantment experienced by many within psychology in the wake of the so-called Dodo Bird Verdict, the conclusion of research indicating that all therapies seem to be about equally helpful. For many, this was the end of a modern hope for therapy designed around the scientist practitioner model. If we cannot speak definitively about which approaches work for which complaints, how do we legitimize ourselves, why should anyone consult us, and how should we proceed? Shawver's response to the Dodo Bird Verdict is an alternate vision of the work. Paralogy—a term initially coined by Jean-François Lyotard—embraces dialogue, and a form of talk oriented more to listening than talking.

For a long time, therapists pinned their hopes for a better therapy on the dream that one day therapy practice would be grounded in scientific research. When that day came, so everyone hoped, the therapist could decide what to do in therapy simply by looking at the data and seeing what worked, or even what correct beliefs could be passed on to clients in the form of advice (e.g., Glover, 1926; Harms, 1970; Karpman, 1947; Ornstein, 1968; Maultsby, 1968; Thorne, 1953). Only then, so the dream told them, would therapists be able to escape superstition and bias and become “scientific-practitioners” (Raimy, 1950).

I have come to think of this scientific practitioner model of therapy as the *modern hope* and to contrast it with the *postmodern hope* that now inspires me. Although the modern hope is still very much alive in academic circles (O'Sullivan and Quevillon, 1992; Peterson, 2000), therapists in the field today are often disillusioned with it (Klein, 1995; Martin, 1995; Rennie, 1994; Stiles, 1995; Lionell, 2000; Young and Heller, 2000; Robinson, 2000; Schwartz, 2000).

There is a story behind this disillusionment. When the modern hope was still an untarnished dream, research projects were launched far and wide in order to ground psychotherapy in science. At first these studies seemed mildly encouraging, but then researchers began taking a closer look. On this closer look it seemed to be simply impossible to decide which kind of therapy, or which technique or advice, was most supported by research. In fact, all therapies seemed to be about equally effective, and some research even suggested that all therapies were about equally effective as no therapy at all (Eysenck 1952, 1966; Lambert and Bergin, 1994). This hit at the heart of the modern dream for therapists to someday become scientific practitioners.

These discouraging findings were first announced in a publication by Luborsky, Singer, and Luborsky (1975). They announced their conclusion by calling it the "Dodo Bird Verdict." It's a catchy metaphor. The dodo bird in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1946) declared that all the competitors in a foot race were winners because each had run in a different direction. The analogy was that therapy researchers, much like the racers in Wonderland, defined their individual goals so differently that there was no way to compare therapies. Research was not able to decide which kind of therapy worked better, or which kind of therapy to use with which client (Luborsky, 1995; Wampold et al., 1997), and this kind of differential seemed essential for the modern hope of therapists becoming scientific practitioners.

As Martin Seligman (1995) wrote, the Dodo Bird Verdict came "as a rude shock to efficacy researchers [studying therapy], since the main theme of efficacy studies [had] been the demonstration of the usefulness of specific techniques for specific disorders" (p. 969). This Seligman article was published in *American Psychologist*. In writing this article, Seligman, I feel, had his finger on the pulse of the clinician who was growing increasingly impatient with research that

felt irrelevant and empty. It is noteworthy that three years after this publication, Martin Seligman was elected president of the American Psychological Association.

For many of us, the Dodo Bird Verdict simply burst our balloons. Next, we stopped identifying with one school or another (since none could be proven better by research) and began calling ourselves eclectic (Jensen, Bergin, and Greaves, 1990). It was then that the disappointed therapists began to ask: What should we do? Many thought: We can no longer justify acting like experts in therapy process and in human affairs. What do we do now?

Hynan (1981) suggested we do whatever we want to do, since it did not seem to matter much what we did. But many of us were not ready to say that "anything goes" (Chessick, 1995; Phillips, 1998; Smith, 1991; Shawver, 1983; Shotter, 1992; Strenger and Omer, 1992). After all, if one says "anything goes" then this would seem to open the door to exploitation and abuse.

But if not "anything goes," then how *should* we do therapy? Without a scientific grounding, how could we be anything more than advocates for our personal belief systems or biases? It was quite a dilemma.

Then, thank goodness, came the postmodern literature with its new *postmodern hope* for assisting with this sticky problem by providing a kind of therapy less dependent on a scientific foundation. The emergence of this postmodern eclecticism did not go unnoticed (Larsen, 1999).

OUR POSTMODERN TURN

Still, I do admit that it can take an experienced therapist a moment to recognize the promise of a postmodern therapy. All postmodern philosophy is not equally hopeful. In fact, much postmodern thinking seems nihilistic and despairing.

But do not let that confuse you. Even when "postmodern" was an embryonic concept in a few obscure books, it had already polarized into two main types, one negative and skeptical and one affirmative and hopeful. Thus, early on, Rosenberg and White (1957) said postmodernism was something to celebrate, and Irving Howe (1959) and Harry Levin (1960) called it as something to deplore. Later, when

Ihab Hassan (1970) applauded postmodernism, Leslie Fiedler (1971, pp. 379-400) energetically denounced it.

It was Pauline Rosenau (1992) who put it all in perspective when she said that the two poles of postmodernism were so different that we could really speak of two postmodernisms. She labeled these "skeptical" and "affirmative," and here is how she distinguished them:

The skeptical post-modernism (or merely skeptics), offering a pessimistic, negative, gloomy assessment, argue that the post-modern age is one of fragmentation, disintegration, malaise, meaninglessness, a vagueness or even absence of moral parameters and social chaos. (p. 15)

In contrast, she explained, "affirmative postmodernism" is

a more hopeful, optimistic view of the post-modern age . . . Most affirmative postmoderns seek a philosophical and ontological intellectual practice that is nondogmatic, tentative, and nonideological . . . (pp. 15-16)

Defined in this way, skeptical postmoderns today might include Baudrillard (1983), Cushman (1990), Cushman and Gilford (1999), and Glass (1993) while affirmative postmoderns would include Lyotard (1979, 1984), Rorty (1979), Gergen (1995), McNamee and Gergen (1992), Anderson (1997), Newman and Holzman (1996, 1997), Shotter (1992), Hoffman (2001), Andersen (1991), and, I would argue, most important, a certain reading of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1963).

Let me be more specific. Along with Lynn Hoffman (2001), as well as John Walter and Jane Peller (2000, p. 15), I am inclined to think of Michael White and Steve de Shazer as more poststructuralist rather than postmodern. There are different ways to define postmodernism, but this is the classification scheme that I believe causes the least confusion: Poststructuralists in therapy theory tend to be more inspired by Foucault's writing and the hope of revising historical accounts or narratives (i.e., "genealogies") that are more true than the traditional and popular accounts. The affirmative postmoderns, however, tend to be inspired by later Wittgenstein and/or Lyotard, and their postmodern approaches are relatively open textured. They may advocate ways of creating more generative conversation but they do not do much to control the content of the emerging

conversation. Postmodern approaches look for new ways to talk that create new conversational paths and new solutions to particular, and typically situational, problems.

Back to my story. When the Dodo Bird Verdict came down, many therapists became skeptical that science could really help them become scientific practitioners. This meant that these disillusioned therapists, often without realizing it, became skeptical postmoderns. But as time went on a new promise emerged. It was a new affirmative postmodernism. Some of the skeptical postmoderns feel the inspiration. As Lyotard (1984, p. 81) writes, there is a group of us talking today who are no longer nostalgic about the lost modern hope because something new and exciting is opening up before us.

THE NEW VISION OF AFFIRMATIVE POSTMODERNISM

What is this new affirmative postmodern promise? To my way of thinking, it is a new kind of conversation. My favorite word for it is *paralogy*, after the famous postmodern philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1984). It is a special kind of conversation happening in postmodern circles and it is, I believe, a good answer to therapy theory's Dodo Bird Verdict, at least for now.

But before I explain what paralogy is, let me ask you to keep your ear tuned to hearing the word *modern* as something other than "up to date." In the postmodern literature, modern has come to mean something more like "pretends to be more scientific than it really is." *Modern* conversation tends toward "dispute" because the facts are not empirically established but each side's claims are right. Postmodern conversation tends toward paralogy.

So what is paralogy? Paralogy is a kind of conversation in which people rethink things, partly by rearranging what they already know (Wittgenstein, 1963, p. 109), and partly by fostering more creative imagination (Lyotard, 1984, p. 52) for solving specific and often local problems.

Perhaps a few sample illustrations will be helpful. Let us look first at a model of *modern conversation*. In its simplest form a modern conversation might go like this:

PAT: The central thing everybody needs to be happy is self-esteem.
 KIM: Not so. The central thing everybody needs is love.
 PAT: I have read X and he says that it is self-esteem we need.
 KIM: Well, X is wrong. Look here. Y says it is love that is required.

Kim could also be modern by endorsing Pat's claim so that there was no revision of the initial theories, no creative theorizing. But in either case, the underlying modern (or scientific) idea is that if one theory wins, the other loses.

In contrast, here is an illustration of postmodern conversation, or paralogy. Notice how the different theories evolve in collaboration as long as the conversation continues:

PAT: The central thing everybody needs to be happy is self-esteem.
 KIM: Well, yes, but love is important, too.
 PAT: I think self-esteem must come first. People won't love you if you don't love yourself first.
 KIM: For me, love comes first. If I have that, then my self-esteem is sky high.
 PAT: I can remember a romantic relationship that made me feel that way, sent my self-esteem to the sky.
 KIM: So, love comes first for you, too?
 PAT: Maybe not. I think the self-esteem was really false and made me vulnerable when he left me.

Both Pat and Kim are postmodern and paralogical in their conversation. Can you see how Pat's story changed without her mimicking Kim's story? And how Kim listened and was able to present a different point of view without claiming that her view told the whole story? It is this change and evolution in the story that marks paralogy.

Now, I want to contrast modern and postmodern conversation as they might be enacted in therapy sessions. In a *modern* session, we might hear the therapist telling the client what the problem is, and perhaps disputing with the client about it:

CLIENT: My problem is I need more self-esteem.
 THERAPIST: What you really need is to speak up for yourself.
 CLIENT: If I had more self-esteem, maybe I could.

THERAPIST: Just learn to speak up for yourself. That must come first. Self-esteem comes later.

Can you see how a modern therapist would need research to lend legitimacy to such an authoritative stance? It is possible, however, for the conversation to sound far less authoritarian and still be modern in my view, so let me give you a sample of that. I consider the following to be modern because there is no ongoing rearrangement of the information, no restructuring in improvisational process.

CLIENT: My problem is I need more self-esteem.
 THERAPIST: Would that help you?
 CLIENT: If I had more self-esteem, I'd be a lot more successful.
 THERAPIST: Why don't you have more self-esteem?

Here the therapist is not a collaborator in the creation of new meaning with new twists and paths in the accounts of things. Instead, the therapist stays entirely within the client's frame.

In contrast, paralogy is a way of conversing that allows new ideas to emerge (Lyotard, 1984, p. 61). Everything in the previous conversation takes place within the same point of view. Still, the conversation at least avoids the authoritarian stance that is so inappropriate in our postmodern era, and it is even possible that the conversation will take a postmodern turn. For example, imagine the dialogue taking the following turn:

PATIENT: [laughing] I don't have enough self-esteem to say.
 THERAPIST: Do you have enough courage to guess?

Here I would say the therapist becomes more postmodern by introducing the new concept (i.e., "courage") without disputing the old one (i.e., "self-esteem").

Let me give you an example of what I would consider therapeutic paralogy. Here both therapist and client contribute ideas and associations to the conversation yet neither defends a position and there is some real paralogical rearrangement of ideas between them. Neither comes away with the same old story. Notice also how the dialogue stays close to specifics. I believe specifics help bring out the paralogy.

CLIENT: I just need more self-esteem.

THERAPIST: Why do you say that?

CLIENT: Well, like at work. Others go to lunch but I just work right through it even though I'm really way ahead of all the rest.

THERAPIST: You sound industrious.

CLIENT: Yes, I guess so—but at the same time I'm envious of the others having fun. I wish I could be lazy like that, too.

THERAPIST: Lazy? Yesterday you said your dad was lazy. Is that how you want to be?

CLIENT: I don't want to be that lazy!

THERAPIST: Just a little more lazy, just at lunch time?

CLIENT: Just thinking of Dad makes me want to work through lunch [laughs].

THERAPIST: Which would be OK, but you also said you felt envious that the guys were going out.

CLIENT: Well, there's that, too.

At this point, the therapist has already introduced ideas and associations, but notice, as the conversation continues, how the therapist introduces still another idea that inspires the client's imagination and in turn sparks another idea in the client, different from the one that the therapist had. Now, picture the following as a conversation continuing from the previous excerpt.

THERAPIST: You know, when I think about it, you don't reject *everything* about your dad. You admire his way of making friends.

CLIENT: I do admire that, but maybe I'm afraid if I tried to copy that I'd turn out to be a bum like him.

See how it was agreed that the client admired his dad? But in the process of agreeing, the client generated still a different idea, the idea of the client being afraid of turning out to be a bum. Agreement exists at times in the conversation but only as states in the conversational process (Lyotard, 1984, p. 65). Similarly, disagreement is also just a stage and does not become dispute. In paralogy, agreement is not particularly valued in and of itself. The point is to generate interesting ideas that make sense in the conversational quest of paralogy (Lyotard, 1984, p. 60).

At least as I see it, in such a paralogical therapy the therapist contributes substantively to the dialogue, introducing new words and metaphors that can reframe things without demeaning alternate frames. The old model of therapist as expert gives way to the model of therapist who fosters new conversational paths without insisting on any of them. Each frame opens new conversational paths that were not foreseen by client or therapist.

If therapy works paralogically, then for a postmodern mind there seems no reason for one form of therapy to trump another with definitive research. The therapy *is* the research—research that never knows the answer for sure and forever, but finds workable solutions for presenting problems. Each solution succeeds or fails on its own terms in its own context, not in a competitive race against others. As Lyotard put it, paralogy is not a zero-sum game (Lyotard, 1984, p. 67). To return to the disillusioning Dodo Bird Verdict, all kinds of therapies can be winners (or losers). We must feel our way through somewhat unknown paths in hopes of finding success for each problem or each client. And although the final results are never certain, something is valuable, at least, in the client pooling intelligence with another human (the therapist) to do what seems best in the moment.

Although paralogy is a word that I prefer for this kind of conversation, others seem to call the same thing something else. It seems to me, for example, that Tom Andersen's (1991) reflecting teams work paralogically, as does Harlene Anderson's (1997) style of therapeutic conversation. It is what Sheila McNamee (in Chapter 1, p. 11) calls providing a "*conversational arena* where multiple logics, coherences, realities can be coordinated." Lynn Hoffman (2001) seems to be looking for paralogical ways for us to collaborate conversationally with our clients, as are Sheila McNamee and Ken Gergen (1992) and many others. I believe such conversation is at the heart of new affirmative postmodernism in psychotherapy theory and the possibility that we can do this kind of therapy without waiting for research to ground our practice represents a postmodern hope—the postmodern hope, in fact, that inspires me.

CREATING PARALOGY

This takes us to the question of how to create paralogy, how to keep therapy conversation from deteriorating into a modern dispute. As a

paralogist, I will not give you a final formula, but I will tell you about a few ideas that I have found productive in the therapy sessions I have conducted. I hope you will improve them in your new production (Lyotard, 1984, p. 4), in a kind of creative outgrowth of what I have presented. If you like these ideas, you might also look at others in some of my recent writings (Shawver, 1996, 1998a,b, 2000, 2001) as well, of course, as in the chapters by other authors in this book.

The three concepts I will highlight here are *tiotoling*, *generous listening*, and *positional fluidity*. Please think of these names as mere placeholders for concepts that could be variously named and/or conceptualized, and no doubt will be. I imagine affirmative postmodern therapists doing things such as this in therapy instead of giving advice or authoritarian interpretation that would require research proving one therapy paradigm more effective than another.

Tiotoling

In a passage that much impressed me, Lyotard (1979, pp. 71-72) wrote, "For us, a language is first and foremost someone talking. But there are [forms of language] in which the important thing is to listen, in which the rule deals with audition." Some of my friends and I have come to think of this as "tiotoling" (which is an acronym for Talking In Order To Listen that rhymes with "yodeling"). The person who tiotols asks questions or paraphrases, makes associative comments or even contrasting comments, and gives reminders or makes requests, all in order to invite the other to continue rearranging ideas until something seems to work in the situation at hand.

As you can see, tiotoling is not passive listening. It often involves reminding a speaker of what has been said and rearranging what has been said in order to better observe unnoticed connections.

Generous Listening

Generous listening also fosters paralogy. Because our words have multiple meanings, it is often possible to understand a remark in a variety of ways. When this is the case, it seems to promote paralogy if one assumes that the speaker intended the most coherent and reasonable meaning imaginable. Before I give you an example of generous listening, let me provide an example of *critical listening*:

CLIENT: I think I know how to win him back.

THERAPIST: What do you mean you "think you know"? Either you know or you don't know.

Next is a therapist who is listening more generously to this client:

CLIENT: I think I know how to win him back.

THERAPIST: You have an idea but you're uncertain about it?

This generous therapist simply assumed the most coherent interpretation of the client's remarks, but added an association (i.e., "but you're uncertain about it?"). This concept of generous listening seems similar to Davidson's (1984, p. 197) "Principle of Charity." According to Davidson, we listen with the principle of charity when we make the most of what the speakers are saying, giving the speakers the benefit of all doubt and trying to understand their ideas within the meaning of their terms. Anything less seems to frustrate the paralogy. (Although Davidson's concept of the principle of charity seems identical to generous listening, I have relabeled it because "the principle of charity" sounds demeaning to my ear.)

Positional Fluidity

In a modernist dispute each speaker assumes a position and is loyal to a school of thought, often resisting opposing argument. There is no natural shuffling of ideas. In a postmodern conversation, on the other hand, the positions and goals are much more subtle and fluid. Such fluidity allows people to express doubt, yield to different views (McNamee and Gergen, 1999), and also to rearrange the elements of theory by tailoring them to the varying situations. Positional fluidity is the contrast of role rigidity (Harre and van Langenhove, 1999), exemplified by the teacher who is a teacher to everyone, or the flirt who flirts with everyone—even those who feel romantically unappealing. Participants in paralogy tend to abandon role rigidity for increased positional fluidity.

Positional fluidity, seen only in theory, might lead you to wonder if there are goals in a paralogical form of therapy conversation. Indeed there can be goals, but they emerge in the course of the paralogy and, of course, remain available for redefinition. For example, rather than

committing to a specific goal of therapy beforehand, such as "losing weight," it might be decided in the course of the paralogy that the degree of weight loss wanted was not desirable or realistic. In paralogy, goals are often revised and improved.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The past thirty years has been a long, difficult road for psychotherapy outcome research. In retrospect, it almost seems that in those first, heady days therapists were performing therapy on a flying trapeze without the security net of scientific findings to tell them they were doing OK, thinking always that the research would come along and prop up their approaches, saying their preferred therapy styles were the very best. But the Dodo Bird Verdict shattered that hope and primed our field for the production of more than a handful of skeptical postmodern clinicians, people who called themselves "eclectic." There was a period of disappointment, but the crisis passed and something new and hopeful began to emerge, something I have called here the "postmodern hope". (Sometimes I call it "paralogy," and you might call it something else.)

Whatever it is called, it is a new way of talking together, both among colleagues and between therapists and clients. It allows us to do the best we can by pooling our intelligence and learning to cope with our lack of an empirical base for what we do.

Affirmative postmodernism is beginning to blossom in the margins of our field. It is like a new field of flowers taking root in the barren soil of the dream we lost, the dream that we therapists would one day become scientific practitioners. We probably will never be that, in any rigorous sense of the word, but now there is a new model of therapist as paralogical conversationalist, and the need for proving one kind of therapy over another is beginning to fade.

In place of that search for the very best therapy is a new kind of conversation that represents for me the postmodern hope. It is a new dream that is not deflated by the profound wisdom of the Dodo Bird in Alice's Wonderland.

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