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CREATING NEW NARRATIVES IN FAMILY THERAPY: AN APPLICATION OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

SHEILA MCNAMEE

This article examines a family therapy session¹ from a social constructionist perspective (Gergen, 1985). The purpose is epistemological and pragmatic. I will try to illustrate a way of thinking about how we act and how we think as researchers, clinicians, and people in the world and to show how emphasizing a way of *thinking* can be generative to families, researchers, and therapists. Recursively, the actions of the therapist and the family members in the therapy session, as well as the researcher's *active* interpretations, generate ways of knowing the world.

There is a purposeful shift here from explanation to description. Descriptions are less "fixed" in an objectified world because we recognize them as provided by *people*. People do their describing based on their lived experiences and the immediate situation they are trying to describe. This move from explanation to description is a complementary shift not a dichotomous one. We do not need to abandon explanation in favor of description. If we begin with description, we can generate explanations that are fluid and can change as the dynamics of acting in or observing a situation change.

A dialectical view of the relationship between explanation and description raises questions concerning how research is conducted. Fundamentally, we change the way we *think* about research, not necessarily the techniques or methods employed in research. As researchers, we make choices based on a series of historically and contextually relevant premises and experiences. We select methods that gain their coherence or acceptability through negotiation within a community of scholars. The struggle for the "best" research design or method of analysis is based upon a premise that there could be universal solutions to all problems. However, there is a growing consensus that this is no longer the case (Bochner, 1985). Social constructionism represents the shift in thinking:

Sheila McNamee is Associate Professor and Chairperson of the Department of Communication, University of New Hampshire.

Although the roots of constructionist thought can be traced to long-standing debates between empiricist and the rationalist schools of thought, constructionism attempts to move beyond the dualism to which both of these traditions are committed and to place knowledge within the process of social interchange. (Gergen, 1985, 266)

Thus, constructionism is a way of *thinking*. The strategies or techniques used in research become important only insofar as they remain coherent with the phenomena being investigated within the community that we are addressing. Comparison of methods simply becomes a window to new images and ideas—a way of continuing the conversation. In this way, the social, relational aspects of both acting in the world and examining our acting in the world are highlighted.

And yet, there are orienting premises that form the soul of a social constructionist perspective.² Unlike strategies or methods, they are ideas to hold on to—or to remember—when an observer recognizes the signs of his/her own attempt to be objective (see Cecchin, 1987). These include a focus on process, inclusion of the observer in the domain of the observed, and a celebration of the complexity of human life.

FOUNDATIONAL PREMISES OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM A FOCUS ON PROCESS

One basic aspect of constructionist research is a focus on process. This is a broad term. Most simply, an emphasis on process shifts attention from what is produced in interaction to the process of social production. Language (communication) is the means through which we bring forth our worlds. As Maturana and Varela point out,

Language was never invented by anyone only to take in an outside world. Therefore, it cannot be used as a tool to reveal that world. Rather, it is by languaging that the act of knowing, in the behavioral coordination which is language, brings forth a world. We work out our lives in a mutual linguistic coupling, not because language permits us to reveal ourselves but because we are constituted in language in a continuous becoming that we bring forth with others. (1987, pp. 234-5)

Emphasizing interactive process, what Maturana and Varela (1987) refer to as languaging, calls attention to the constructive qualities of everyday activities. In contrast, most research on human interaction is "outcome" or "evaluation" oriented. For example, researchers ask, "What are the effects of communication apprehension on interpersonal attraction?" (McCroskey, Richmond, Daly, and Cox, 1975); "What are the most effective models for treating couples in therapy?" (Nugent and Constantine, 1988); "What communicative

patterns produce effective family functioning?" (Sieburg, 1985; Beavers, 1985). These sorts of questions have become a major pursuit of scholars studying within an empiricist orientation. The shift introduced by a constructionist epistemology is a shift to studies of interactional process.

A focus on process is not unique to constructionism alone. In fact, Szuzki (1979) identified the major shift in family therapy as marked by a focus on process rather than product. Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) also emphasized process in their seminal work on communication. Despite this acknowledged focus, many contemporary models of family interaction develop around the idea of process, but end up privileging method, technique or pragmatic goals instead. For example, Minuchin's (1974) structural family therapy model was heavily influenced by Bateson's work and thus assumes a focus on process. However, the practice of structural family therapy emphasizes specific techniques and goals such as reorganizing dysfunctional family structures so that parents are in control. This is only one of the many examples of a shift in focus toward the technology of change rather than the interactional process of change.

INCLUSION OF THE OBSERVER

A constructionist analysis also includes the observer in the domain of the observed, providing a way of maintaining a processual orientation. The difference that makes a difference, as Bateson would say, is an understanding that interactive processes *always* include the observer.

But what an observer does is precisely this: he makes linguistic distinctions of linguistic distinctions . . . With language arises also the observer as a languaging entity; by operating in language with other observers, this entity generates the self and its circumstances as linguistic distinctions of its participation in a linguistic domain. In this way, meaning arises as a relationship of linguistic distinctions. And meaning becomes part of our domain of conservation of adaptation.

All this is what it is to be human. We make descriptions of the descriptions that we make (as this sentence is doing). Indeed, we are observers and exist in a semantic domain created by our operating in language where ontogenic adaptation is conserved. (Maturana and Varela, 1987, p. 211)

Including the observer strips the research context of its traditionally hierarchical nature. Researchers and subjects are viewed as cooperating in the construction of understandings about phenomena. Both engage in conversation whereby new narratives can be created. In this sense, researchers do not take a "metaposition". A researcher

simply is in a *different* position. Researchers bring news to subjects just as subjects bring news to researchers.

Including the observer also reminds us that a connection is an operation performed by an observer. Any connection tells about the researcher as well as about the subjects or the phenomena being studied (von Foerster, 1981). This suggests that we should attend to the questions we ask as much as (if not more than) to the responses we are given. Questions bring forth answers (Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson, 1967) and so an examination of the questions to which research is directed highlights assumptions and consequently, implied connections.

In addition, focusing on questions can help to identify the theoretical models that introduce constraints. We do not escape the constraint of our own "methodological cuts" (Ceruti, 1986). What we find as a result of our research is what we are looking for plus the results of the *process* of looking. However, these constraints are not limiting; they are the source of potential. The process of research allows us to return to our original premises with a different elaboration of these premises. Thus, the potential for new directions and new constructions is generated.

THE CELEBRATION OF COMPLEXITY

The social constructionist's relational orientation requires an acceptance of complexity. Unless phenomena are examined in isolation, we can not help but work *with* the complexity of interaction. Prigogine and Stengers (1984) refer to this as the "science of complexity" and illustrate the relationship between this "science" and the traditional science of "simple, elementary behavior."

In a certain sense, we have come back to the beginning of modern science. Now, as at Newton's time, two sciences come face to face—the science of gravitation, which describes an atemporal nature subject to laws, and the science of fire, chemistry. We now understand why it was impossible for the first synthesis produced by science, the Newtonian synthesis, to be complete; the forces of interaction described by dynamics cannot explain the complex and irreversible behavior of matter. *Ignis mutat res*. According to this ancient saying, chemical structures are the creators of fire, the results of irreversible processes. How can we bridge the gap between being and becoming—two concepts in conflict, yet both necessary to reach a coherent description of this strange world in which we live? (p. 209)

Acceptance of the constructionist focus on process, inclusion of the observer, and a celebration of the complexity of interaction can generate multiple methods for examining social interaction. What follows is one methodological example that is based on these premises.

rates (perturbs) the organization of the very logic (perspective) used to identify (construct) that act. Cronen, Johnson and Lannamaun (1982) call this a strange loop.

The intransitivity of a strange loop implies that context and content change the meaning or choices for action. For example, if a person sees himself as an alcoholic (life script), certain kinds of acts are entailed by this context (for example, refusing drinks). Yet, the act of refusing drinks disintegrates the context of "alcoholic" and constructs a new one, a self *not* having a drinking problem (not an alcoholic). This new context, in turn, entails new actions, one of which might be drinking. Thus, the act of refusing drinks which is logical within the frame of "self as alcoholic," constructs a new context implying different acts which, subsequently, disintegrates the new context of "self as not alcoholic" and reconstructs the context of "self as alcoholic" and so on.

However, not all examples of recursivity take this intransitive form. Fully transitive logics, "charmed loops," also serve as examples of recursive logics. The earlier example can be modeled as a fully transitive logic: John defines his relationship as close and committed and therefore feels it is appropriate to enact episodes where he demonstrates his commitment. The more he engages in these episodes, the more his perception of the relationship as close and committed is confirmed.

An analysis focusing on levels of meaning and the recursivity among these levels provides a means for discussing how peoples' logics connect to form interactional patterns. Research may be focused on hypothesizing how each family member makes connections among behaviors and meanings, how family members' logics connect with the logic of the clinician, and so on. The focus is on interactive processes or social production rather than on outcomes or products.

Curiosity

Curiosity helps an observer generate questions that playfully challenge the premises of those involved in a system (including the observer him/herself). A stance of curiosity encourages an observer to be less willing to accept information as an immutable exemplar of a person's belief system and instead encourages an observer to ask questions. Asking questions draws out connections among all of the "personal epistemologies" of those involved in a novel way thus allowing a system to find its own solution.

Curiosity underscores an emphasis on questions as opposed to answers, reminding us to question our own premises as researchers.

In his description of the systemic principle of neutrality, Cecchin (1987) suggests that by adopting a frame of curiosity an observer questions descriptions of interaction in such a way that explanations are not seen as true or false. Questions based on a curiosity about the patterns, relationships, beliefs and connections among ideas, people, events and behaviors construct a therapeutic stance that is different from one based on questions designed to "discover" an accurate explanation. A position of curiosity helps generate questions that, in turn, lead to new ways of looking at behaviors, events or people. For example,

When we assume that we have an explanation, we often give up looking for other descriptions. Thus, we give up a stance of curiosity because we believe we have 'discovered' a description that 'fits' . . . (p. 406)

In the following section, these principles are applied to the analysis of a family therapy session. The primary objective is to illustrate how a constructionist perspective guides a "sense making" endeavor such as the understanding of therapeutic decision points. In other words, how can descriptions be constructed that elaborate what the clinician is doing in a therapy session? Consistent with constructionist assumptions, the analysis is not presented as a set of truths but rather as a set of alternative conceptions about family interaction that emphasize complexity and inclusion of the observer.

CASE ANALYSIS

The family interviewed in this session was involved in family therapy while their 19 year old son, Frank, was hospitalized. Frank was diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic. The therapy session was conducted by a visiting consultant because the family's therapist felt "stuck" in his attempts to help them. The members involved in this session include Marcy the mother, a 42 year old housewife, Bob the father, a 43-year-old, self-employed businessman, Sally the 15-year old daughter and Frank, the 19-year old identified patient.

What follows is the presentation and analysis of several segments selected from the interview. These segments represent the kind of conversation the therapist and family constructed throughout the entire session. The segments provide an opportunity to illustrate how the therapist utilized the ideas of complexity, social production (process) and inclusion of the observer (therapist) to co-create with the family a new narrative. It is important to note that this was a new narrative not only for the family but also for the therapist.

- B21 TH: If you are out working (to father) and he (indicates Frank) is out doing his own things and the two of them . . .
- B22 Bob: Oh yea. When he's not at home, I mean, there may be problems but when he's at home you can cut the tension with a knife.
- B23 TH: But what about when you're at home and he's not at home, how do they get along, the two of them? (referring to mother and Sally)
- B24 Bob: I think they get along OK.
- B25 TH: Frank, what do you think?
- B26 Frank: I think mom's hard on her about school but someone has to be or she wouldn't do anything.
- B27 TH: She's pretty lazy.
- B28 Frank: Yea
- B29 TH: She needs to be pushed. Suppose you go home, you're quiet, you don't disturb anyone, what would happen?
- B30 Frank: I've never let myself find that out.
- B31 TH: You haven't tried it?
- B32 Marcy: Oh we have some peaceful days. I really need those . . .
- B33 Frank: . . . This is the longest, most important discussion we've had. We never talk like this.
- B34 TH: Because you do a lot of action, not talking, huh?
- B35 Frank: Yea
- B36 TH: That's it.
- B37 Marcy: That's the difference between Dad's style and mine. I would try to talk to you . . .
- B38 Frank: But that's like talking to a brick wall.
- B39 TH: So you feel that your mother, your sister they need to be stimulated somehow, they need to be kept alive or something. You have always to provoke them. Is it true? Looks like the way you describe the situation, if you disappear like that they would be very silent, very quiet. They would be there doing nothing perhaps. Is it possible?
- B40 Frank: Yea, it's possible.
- B41 TH: Is your father also having the same role you have with them? When he comes home, try to fight with them, try to stimulate them to do something?
- B42 Frank: No. He usually finds things out of the house. He has his boats.
- B43 TH: So, he comes home he's curious about you?

- B44 Frank: Yes.
- B45 TH: Do you have an idea what happens when you are not around? He goes to his boats, comes home, what do they do together the three of them?
- B46 Frank: I don't know. You'll have to ask them. When I went away to college I started wondering what's going on back there. So I started calling and said things that weren't very nice.
- B47 Marcy: You said you didn't think he was your father.
- B48 Frank: I told my mother . . . that was when I started getting psychotic or whatever you want to term it.
- B49 TH: How do you have this idea?
- B50 Frank: Don't know. That was part of my mental illness, I guess.
- B51 Marcy: It was interesting because right before that we'd looked at slides . . .
- B52 TH: When you said this . . . you meant that he's not your father or not her husband?
- B53 Frank: Don't know. I think I realized I was his biological son.
- B54 TH: So you made a statement about the marriage. For example, you said, "You are not married to him." That's what you meant?
- B55 Frank: I wasn't thinking that at the time but it makes a little more sense now.
- B56 TH: Do you think they're married? Do you have any doubts?
- B57 Frank: I believe they are married.
- B58 TH: Because you all say he's out of the house, eh? What do you think Sally? Do you think they are married?
- B59 Sally: Yes.

In this segment many themes are discussed and developed, but the one that the therapist consistently keeps alive is the idea that the son is very skilled at exciting everyone in the family (see lines B16, B29-35, B39).

Levels of meaning. In this interaction, we see the therapist introducing the idea that the son's behavior in some way brings life into the family (disruptive episodes create the context). He also connects father and son by suggesting that they both add something to the mother-daughter relationship (the relationship level is a context for other behaviors). Several contextual shifts can be identified here. These shifts illustrate the therapist's focus on process and on the complexity of the interaction.

First, episodes identified by family members as problematic, cha-

- C20 Frank: You know that's not true.
 C21 Bob: That is true. You know it. All you have to do is treat her like shit and she and I start fighting. And then we don't push you. You do whatever you want.
 C22 T11: I don't understand. When he treats her like shit you and she start fighting?
 C23 Bob: Because she comes to me. She can't control him.
 C24 T11: You feel your mother needs to be protected by you sometimes?
 C25 Frank: I think I just jump to her defense.
 C26 T11: (to father) Are you aware that he's defending her?
 C27 Bob: Sure.
 C28 T11: So, she complains about him being too aggressive and then he defends her.
 C29 Bob: I don't see him defending her around the house.
 C30 T11: (to Frank) You feel she can't defend herself?
 C31 Frank: No. She . . . he ignores her.
 C32 Marcy: The problem is that we got married young . . . What will we do when the kids are gone?
 C33 T11: Frank, do you agree that your father doesn't like your mother so much?
 C34 Frank: No, I think he does. He just doesn't know how to show her that he loves her. He bought her a diamond. I think he has a hard time showing but he has his ways.
 C35 T11: If the kids weren't there . . .
 C36 Frank: If we weren't there, they'd do more together.
 C37 T11: Do you think they'd stay together? Why does he have such a hard time with your mother?
 C38 Sally: I think he doesn't know what to say.
 C39 T11: What does your mother do to make it so difficult for your father?
 C40 Frank: If she was interested in boats they'd spend more time together but she's not like that. Her hobby is her garden.
 C41 T11: So, how come she doesn't make an effort to be close to him? You say your father can't express his love. Father goes to the bar when he can't take it. What does your mother do to keep her distance?
 C42 Sally: Don't know.
 C43 T11: She said because she resents a lot of things. Does she show her resentment?
 C44 Sally: Sometimes . . . she's tired of Dad being away so much.

- C45 T11: She complains about that?
 C46 Sally: Yea, she complains about everything. I think that drives him further and further away.
 C47 T11: So, we can say both of them, when it's a little difficult, they give up very easily. They're not fighters.
 C48 Marcy: We don't resolve anything.
 C49 T11: Are the kids like that or are they fighters?
 C50 Bob: They've learned the opposite. They've learned if they stick to it, they can do what they want.

Levels of meaning. In this segment, the therapist questions the relationship between son and mother. This discussion quickly moves into a description of mother's and father's different parenting styles. Father gives examples of his frustration with his son and offers these as legitimation of his current position (C14).

Recursivity. The therapist, building on the frames he has already introduced in the session, continues to illustrate how the behaviors of both father and son actually construct an image of a very close relationship (a recursive process), though not free of disappointment (C18).

Curiosity. The conversation moves into a discussion of the parental relationship and how the children fit within that relationship. By questioning how the parents would get along if the children were not present, the therapist illustrates his curiosity about how the marital relationship is, in fact, defined (rather than assume he "knows"). Previously, the discussion has focused on how father is uncooperative around the house, etc. Here, the therapist asks questions that offer a new interpretation of the parental relationship (C35-50).

In this sequence of questions, the therapist becomes curious about the parent's relationship, refusing to focus only on the frame that the son is the problem (i.e., the frame that the family presents). By introducing a new focus, the therapist is able to suggest that the behaviors of both mother and father serve to distance them from each other. Thus, it is not only father who distances from mother; mother also distances from father. In addition, it is not necessarily the son who creates a schism between the parents; they do it very well themselves. Again, we can see how routinized behaviors of these family members are offered as implying very different descriptions of relationships and episodes as well as very different logics entailing action (recursivity). For example, a new logic is suggested by the therapist indicating that perhaps the son is not the "cause" of the parents' difficulties (though he may be one "cause"). A new logic is also introduced suggesting that it is the mutual distancing of mother and father that contributes to their current family problems.

portray but a family that may, in fact, suffer from the absence of both children (particularly the son—D11-25).

Additionally, the therapist continues to create a new meaning for the father-son relationship in contrast to the one that has been painted in such a negative light by family members. He emphasizes the uncanny similarities between both father and son (D15).

Finally, in these ending comments, the therapist suggests two new meanings for simple behaviors. First, leaving home does not necessarily mean that relationships are destroyed (disconnected). Second, he alludes to the possibility that family members can have different ways of seeing things and still remain very committed to each other; that is, a different interpretation of a simple behavior does not necessarily imply that the relationship among/between people is conflicted or negative.

Summary

The issues presented here are offered as a brief illustration of how the notion of multiple levels of meaning (e.g., relationship, episode, life script, and action) can help in the analysis of a family's logic. The complexity of interaction is emphasized.

Curiosity is the term used to describe how an observer utilizes the constructionist principle of including the observer in the domain of the observed. By remaining curious about statements or "facts" introduced by family members, as well as about his own beliefs or conclusions about the situation, the therapist ensures his continual questioning of his own and others' premises. In questioning his own assumptions, he is able to construct questions and comments that have the potential to generate questioning in the family members themselves. The therapist and family members construct a conversation in which they all become observers who question each other's assumptions. This kind of questioning de-emphasizes the tendency to objectify and rely meanings. Acting upon his curiosity about family members' logics, the therapist generates questions and comments that emphasize the ability to create new meanings for relationships, episodes, life scripts and actions.

There is also a recursive dimension. Family members often find themselves trapped in their own logics. Behaviors that are interpreted in a particular manner construct specific meanings at different contextual levels. These contexts then serve to confirm and legitimate not only the performance of particular behaviors but the interpretations of behaviors (of self and others). Problems can occur when constructed logics become reified. At this point, it is often useful to suggest how the same old behaviors can be seen as actually implying very different relationships, episodes, life scripts, and so forth.

The clinician in this case included himself in his on-going analysis of this family by continually questioning his own acceptance or rejection of the logics being presented to him. It is this frame of curiosity that helped him offer "news of a difference."

The theoretical tools applied to this case are done so in the spirit of social constructionism. This means that levels of meaning, recursivity and a stance of curiosity become the metaphors chosen by the observer. A focus on process is achieved by attending less to any possible or actual "outcomes" of this therapy and more to the on-going narrative that is constructed between therapist, family, and researcher.

NOTES

1. The therapist in this session was Dr. Gianfranco Cecchin. He is one of the creators of the Milan Systemic Model of Family Therapy (see Selvini, Boscolo, Cecchin, and Prata, 1978; Selvini et al., 1980; Boscolo, Cecchin, Hoffman and Penn, 1987; and Cecchin, 1987).

2. I will not attempt in these pages to introduce the social constructionist orientation. The reader is referred to Gergen (1985) and Harre (1986) for more detailed elaborations.

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