

Preface

The present volume grows out of more than three decades of dialogue with therapists from around the world. I have entered these dialogues as a scholar with a deep concern for the consequences of intellectual work for societal practices. It has been most gratifying to me that therapists have found my inquiries into social construction valuable in deliberating about their efforts. More importantly, because they have invited me into their dialogues, my understanding has increased manifold and the ideas both sharpened and enriched. I must say as well, that my appreciation for the challenge of therapeutic work has similarly increased. My work as a scholar seems far easier by comparison. I arrange words on the page and return the next day to find them just as I left them. Each day I can re-shape, and never is there decomposition in my absence. In contrast, the therapist works with an ever-shifting subject; change may be mercurial and multiplicative. I deeply admire therapeutic accomplishments.

My scholarly work has chiefly been dedicated to exploring the relational origins of meaning, how it is that we come to understand the world and ourselves in the way we do, why such understandings are so often intractable, and how it is possible to bring about change. Such work not only bears on the philosophical problem of knowledge, along with the political problem of individualism. It is also central to anyone concerned with personal or social change. As a philosophic inquiry, my work joins hands with significant developments in both the sociology of knowledge and the history of science that question the longstanding assumptions of objectivity, rationality, and empirical truth. If our accounts of the world are generated within human relationships, then these accounts are not so much mirrors or pictures of the world, but means by which human beings appropriate the world for their purposes. In this respect, claims to objectivity, rationality and truth can be established and legitimated only within

communities. For those standing outside such communities, such claims may not only be misguided but actively oppressive.

As a political endeavor my work is first set against the longstanding tradition of Western individualism. If all meaning is brought forth within relational process, as I propose, then the very concept of an individual mind is essentially derivative of relationship. Politically this line of argument not only lends itself to contemporary critiques of individualist ideology, but invites as well the development of alternative realities. More pointedly, our attention is directed to the significance of relationship in giving birth to the individual, sustaining our ways of life, and as a fulcrum to personal change.

Moving from issues of politics and ideology to practices of therapy, my thinking has benefited especially from major moves in the therapeutic world. The first of these is the constructivist movement, inspired initially by George Kelly, but enriched and expanded significantly through the works of Umberto Maturana, Ernst von Glasersfeld, Michael Mahoney, Robert Neimeyer, and many others. In challenging the realist assumptions so central to the therapeutic tradition, constructivist writings opened the door to considering multiple constructions of the world. While the individualist roots of constructivism contrast sharply with the social constructionist ideas so central to my writings, a rich and gratifying dialogue has ensued.

The second important development in the therapeutic world was in its shift from an individual to a systemic understanding of human problems. This movement, from the early writings of Gregory Bateson, through the work of the Milan School, and both first and second order cybernetics, illuminated the possibilities of a relational orientation to therapy. Again, such work also opened the door to dialogues with social construction, and the attempt to move beyond individualist ontology. In this case, constructionist ideas invited a shift in systemic thinking toward the relational genesis of meaning and the pivotal place of language within this process.

The constructionist concern with language also lent itself to a third domain of dialogue, namely with therapists who had become engaged with various strands of postmodern, post-foundational and post-structural thought. In many respects, my constructionist ideas have come to fruition in precisely this milieu. Thus, I was invited into highly congenial dialogues with narrative therapists, brief therapists, postmodern therapists and others of related persuasion. It is the fruits of these three lines of dialogue—with constructivists, systemicists, and the discursively oriented—that will largely be shared within the present volume.

The chapters in this work are largely based on contributions I have made to various books and journals over the past decade. In each case, however, I have reworked the material, elaborating and editing so as to reflect current deliberations, and orchestrating the chapters to form a coherent whole. In Part I of the volume I include attempts at understanding therapeutic process and practice from a social constructionist perspective. The initial chapter, on therapeutic communication, was written especially for this book. It first introduces several major components of social constructionist thought, and then provides what, for most readers, will be a novel account of therapeutic communication. This account is an important cornerstone of the book, in that it enables us to move beyond traditional conceptions of inter-subjectivity to a radical relationalism.

The second chapter grows from the soil of an earlier book, Therapy as Social Construction (Sage, 1992), edited with Sheila McNamee. This volume, now appearing in six languages, made initial inroads into linking constructionist thought with specific therapeutic practices. It was this book that led to my joining Lisa Warhus, a clinical psychologist then residing in Denmark, to carry out a full-scale analysis of emerging therapeutic practices from a constructionist standpoint. Our work was subsequently published in Sistemas Familiares in 2001. The present chapter is an updating and reworking of that material.

As noted above, there is a strong affinity between constructionist ideas and the narrative movement in therapy. Chapter 3 explores this connection in some detail. Importantly, however, the attempt here is to press beyond current understanding of the significance of narrative. The initial drafting of this material was enriched greatly by John Kaye, a therapist/scholar from Adelaide, Australia, and was published in my earlier book, Realities and Relationships (Harvard University Press, 1994)

In Part II I include two chapters that treat what I see as enormously oppressive and injurious aspects of the current mental health establishment. Chapter 4, on deficit discourse, furnishes a critical analysis of the diagnostic movement in mental health. From a constructionist standpoint, the consequences of psychodiagnostic categorization are deeply injurious to the culture, offering myriad means by which common problems are reconstituted as mental illness. Again, an earlier draft of this work appeared in Realities and Relationships. Chapter 5 continues in this critical vein by considering more recent moves to define mental illness in terms of neurological deficits. Here I try to illuminate the illusory character of such reductionism, and to trace the inimical effects of the neuro/biological construction on human society. This chapter was written especially for this volume.

In Part III of the book, I include four chapters treating more specialized topics in relational process. Chapter 6 explores the poetic dimension of therapeutic communication. Here it is argued that by viewing language as poetry, we gain insight into the use of language in bringing about change. An earlier version of this chapter appeared in a volume edited by Klaus Deissler and Sheila McNamee, Phil und Sopia auf der Couch, Die sociale Poesie therapeutischer Gespräche (Carl-Auer, 2000). Chapter 7, on reflexive cooperation, is the result of a recent collaboration with Eugene Epstein, a friend and colleague since our meeting in Heidelberg some 15 years ago. The case material Eugene provides, places much needed flesh on the theoretical bones of social construction. An earlier draft of this paper appears in German, in Familien-dynamik (2005).

In the final chapters of the volume, I include interview discussions with two internationally prominent therapists, therapists for whom I have the deepest respect. The first discussion is with Momy Elkaim, a leader in the development of family therapy in Europe. The interview addresses important issues in constructionist applications to therapy, and makes useful links to significant lines of European thought. An earlier draft of the interview appeared in Resonances, April, 1996. In the final chapter, Michael Hoyt, a prominent figure in the development of constructive therapies, addresses a range of specific issues in constructionist thought and application. This chapter is also important because it opens discussion on metaphysical implications of a constructionist orientation. The chapter is an excerpt from Hoyt's interview in Interviews with brief therapy experts. (Brunner-Routledge, 2001).

For whatever insight and wisdom one may find within these pages I am indebted to countless therapist/scholars with whom I have been engaged over the past 30 years. I have been graced by the insights of Sheila McNamee, John Kaye, Lynn Hoffman, Lisa Warhus, Eugene Epstein, and Roberta Iversen, all of whom have joined with me in various publishing efforts. At the same time, my understanding of the therapeutic process has been enriched manifold from conversations over the years with countless colleagues and friends within the profession. I shall certainly not recall all these at one sitting, but the following are memorable and significant:

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Yet, there are five individuals to whom I owe a special debt of gratitude. Earlier in my career, by invitation of Claus Bahnson, I served for a number of years on the staff of the Eastern Pennsylvania Psychiatric Institute. Claus was wonderfully helpful in introducing me to research and practice in family therapy. However, it was Harry Goolishian of the Houston-Galveston Institute who invited me to participate most fully in exploring therapy as a process social construction. I gained enormously from this relationship, and his premature death remains a tragedy for me. Most fortunately, however, Harry left to me a rich legacy in the form of his colleague, Harlene Anderson. Harlene has been a catalytic presence in the development of my thinking ever since. Finally, I must single out Mony Elkaim for his enormous contribution to my development. His keen intelligence and warm friendship provided the necessary inspiration to undertake the present work.

At last, I must add my deep gratitude to Mary Gergen, who has been an inspiring interlocutor throughout. Traces of her bright conversation may be found on every page.

Kenneth J. Gergen