When Relationships Generate Realities: Therapeutic Communication Reconsidered

Kenneth J. Gergen

Effective therapy often seems magical. A life shattering problem is described in the quiet recesses of a chamber far removed from the site of turmoil. Questions and answers, stories good and bad, emotional outbursts, a little silence and perhaps some tears - all may be present. And then, almost by miraculous intervention, there is change. The problem is transformed, seems less severe, or is possibly dissolved. Yet, we ponder, how was the result achieved? What is it about this particular configuration of events that brought about change? At least one central candidate for answering this particular form of "miracle question" is therapeutic communication. There is something about the nature of communicative interchange that engenders change. Yet, to answer in this way is scarcely sufficient. What precisely is it about such communication that precipitates transformation? What forms of communication are invited, which are proscribed; how might we be more effective?

It is this range of questions I wish to treat in the present offering. The issues are scarcely new. They have been focal from the time Freud laid out the logic of interpreting the unconscious, to the groundbreaking work of Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967). Nor is the challenge posed by these questions simply one of theoretical nicety - an academic exercise in generating an arbitrary and misleading clarity in a world that will inevitably remain complex, ambiguous and chaotic. Rather, conceptions of therapeutic communication lie somewhere toward the center of practice. Whether rudimentary and pre-analytic or conceptually rich and fully nuanced, they inform and insinuate themselves into the most subtle actions. Consider the client who complains of his lack of sexual desire. If you are a marital counselor, you are likely to treat these words as an accurate representation of reality, and thus set out to offer a program of amelioration. In contrast, if you are a psychoanalyst you are likely to disregard the representational capacity of the words, and to explore them as manifestations of a world off-stage, namely the domain of the unconscious. For the constructivist therapist, however, the same words are neither descriptors of the real world nor manifestations of repressed desires, but indicators of the world from the client's perspective. The therapist thus launches inquiry into the logic of this perspective, its possible distortions, and the like. And, for the structuralist family therapist, the client's words may be understood in none of these ways, but as indications of the configuration of family relations. In this case questions may be addressed to the ways this expressed lack of desire is related to the actions of other family members. Each presumption about the nature of language and the process of communication yield a different therapeutic posture.

In what follows I wish first to consider several major assumptions that underlie most

therapeutic practices developed to date. Although there is much to be said on behalf of these assumptions, in each case I wish to single out major shortcomings. While our conceptual heritage is richly elaborated, our traditional assumptions about therapeutic communication build walls from behind which we are unable to see; they erect barriers beyond which our practices cannot proceed. I shall then turn to more recent developments in therapeutic theory and development, namely those which I would view as social constructionist. For if we examine the implications of this work carefully we find a dramatic disjunction with the past. We confront significant refigurations in our assumptions about communication. After briefly setting out some of the rudiments of this refigured view, I want finally to consider the new agenda of questions which it presents. With transformations in understanding we confront new and significant challenges for the therapeutic endeavor.

Traditions in Trouble

The therapeutic community inherits an estimable tradition of thought regarding the nature of communication. At the same time, this tradition has been found increasingly problematic - both by therapists attempting to place it in action and scholars exploring its conceptual structure. Let us briefly consider several traditional assumptions and the critical problems they create:

The Realist Assumption. One of the most broadly shared views of language is based on the assumption that words are (or can be) reflectors of the real. That is, language can (and should) operate to furnish accurate accounts of what is the case. This is the view inherited by most of the sciences, as they set out to replace misleading, fallacious or superstitious beliefs with true and accurate accounts of the world. In the therapeutic world, it is also the view that undergirds the diagnostic movement, the attempt to develop diagnostic categories that accurately classify the existing forms of illness. And in daily life it is a view which lends support to our demand that people "tell the truth."

There is much to be said about the importance of this tradition both to scientific and cultural life, and the reasons for its seeming obviousness. However, it has also become increasingly apparent over the years that in its untutored form the assumption is naive and problematic. For many scholars, Wittgenstein's' Philosophical Investigations furnished one of the chief sources of critique. Through a series of linguistic demonstrations, the problems of matching word and world were dramatically illustrated. Quine's later work, Word and Object, added conceptual weight to these demonstrations, and yielded the conclusion that scientific descriptions were "radically underdetermined" by the nature of facts. Semiotic theorists were simultaneously showing that the relationship between language and the world is ultimately arbitrary, and that words do not in any case function as mirrors or maps of an independent reality.

Within therapeutic circles, similar misgivings were expressed in Gregory Bateson's declaration that "the map is not the territory." Constructivists later went on to argue

that we each live in a world of our own private experience, and that the words we use are in this sense expressions of different worlds of experience. And, more recently, social constructionists have pointed to the function of language in creating the sense we make of the world. On this latter account, we do not listen to language in order to find out what is the case, but how the world is given meaning within particular traditions, communities or relationships. As we find, the realist assumption in traditional form is ill suited to understanding therapeutic communication.

The Subjectivist Assumption. Often coupled with the realist assumption (but not necessarily demanded by it) is a second assumption of long-standing. As it is typically said, we each exist in our own private worlds of experience, a mind set apart from, and reflecting upon nature, a state of subjectivity that variously reflects conditions of the objective world. On this account, the words we speak are held to be outer expressions of the inner world, subjectivity made manifest. This view has played a major role in science, as we count the scientist's words to be reflections of his or her experience of the world, and proceed to replicate research in order to insure agreement among subjectivities (virtually the only way to ensure that "objectivity" has been obtained). The assumption is critical to most all therapy of this century, save perhaps to the radical behaviorist methods of the 1950-60s. In almost all cases we listen to a client's language as an outer expression of private experience (or, as in the Freudian case, that which lies beneath conscious experience to give it shape). And, the assumption is a common feature in daily relations, as we speak of the difficulties in knowing what others mean by their words, or contrarily, how we can "feel with another," knowing exactly what it is like being in his/her shoes. Intimacy, we believe, is a reflection of the closeness of two otherwise independent subjectivities.

Again, I can only make scant reference to the major problems inherent in the subjectivist assumption.(1) For the present, let me touch on only two of these difficulties, the first conceptual and the second ideological. On the conceptual level consider the state of two disciplines centrally concerned with human understanding, with how a listener or reader gains access to the subjectivity of the listener or writer. Hermeneutic theorists have worried about the problem of "inner access" for over three centuries now, since their early concern with how it is we, today, can understand the intentions behind the words in early Biblical texts or holy writs. A satisfactory answer to this question has never been forthcoming. In Hans Georg Gadamer's (1960) pivotal work of the present century the major emphasis shifts to the "horizon of understanding" which the reader inevitably bring to the text. As Gadamer reasons, all readings must necessarily draw from this forestructure of understanding - what it is the reader presumes about the world, the writing, the author, and so on. And reading must inevitably take place from this horizon. Much the same conclusion is reached by a host of reader response theorists in literary studies. As Stanley Fish (1980) has put the case, every reader is a member of some interpretive community, a network of people who understand the world in certain ways. And whatever interpretation of the text is made, must fall back on these understandings. In effect, the reader never makes authentic connection with the subjectivity of the writer; there

is no escape from the standpoint one brings to the interpretation.

The dismal conclusion of this line of criticism is that we never gain access to the other's subjectivity; passage is forever occluded by the very resources available for interpretation. We shall return to this problem shortly. However, there is a second line of attack on the subjectivity assumption - in this case of a more political or ethical variety. Here it is variously argued that the valorization of individual subjectivity lies at the heart of individualist ideology, and this ideology is detrimental to our cultural future. In holding individual subjectivity as the essential ingredient of humanity, we simultaneously construct a world of fundamentally isolated individuals, each locked within their own private world. All we have to count on, ultimately, is ourselves. Others are by nature alien, and because self-seeking is the obvious choice under such conditions, others may indeed be seen as potential enemies. All forms of relationship - marriage, friendship, family, community, and indeed with humanity more generally - are necessarily artificial and must play a secondary role when the quality of individual subjectivity is paramount.(2) If this form of ideology retains its pervasive grip on cultural life, the future seems grim. In effect, this orientation to therapeutic communication has unfortunate political and social ramifications.

The Strategic Assumption. There is a third problematic assumption regarding communication, one often made by therapists in particular, and often about themselves as well as their clients. It is that communication operates as the major means by which individuals influence each other's actions. More specifically, it is reasoned, each of us possesses certain goals, motives, desires or the like, and within the realm of social affairs, language is the chief vehicle through which we achieve our goals, satisfy our desires, etc. However, not any language at any time will suffice, so that we must rationally consider what we can say, when, where and to whom. Language typically functions, then, as a strategic implement through which people obtain satisfaction from each other. It is in this sense, as well, that the therapist who wishes to induce change, may select his/her words carefully, insert them into the conversation at the proper juncture, and insure their content is understood and absorbed.

In light of the preceding discussion, the problems of the strategic assumption require but brief attention. The position borrows heavily from the subjectivist tradition (and is typically allied with the realist orientation). In this sense, it suffers from the same conceptual enigmas and the ideological shortcomings just discussed. In fact, the ideological implications of the strategic view represent perhaps an extreme version of the evils of individualism. For, we must ask, what kind of portrait does it thus paint of individual action, of human relationships, and the society more generally? If we take seriously this conception, what kinds of activities are subtly endorsed? Here we find reason for recoil. Do we wish to see human action primarily as manipulative, inauthentic and self-serving? If we were to adopt this stance, wouldn't acts of trust seem naive, commitment a sign of weakness, and the pursuit of human rights a political ploy? Even the therapist undermines his/her credibility, as the motive behind all communication becomes suspect (along with the therapist's attempts to explain

what he/she is really doing.) If, then, we have multiple theories of communication available, the strategic view is among the poorest options.

The Emergence of Relational Communication

As evidenced from the present volume, there is a significant transformation taking place in many sectors of the therapeutic community. There is broad discontent with traditions that presume the existence of an unconscious, of mental illness, of specifically individual problems, or of value neutral professional knowledge, and many are dismayed by the instigation of standardized therapeutic techniques, diagnostic manuals, mechanistic models of individual or family functioning. These are also therapists who are quite willing to abandon the realist and the strategic orientations toward communication, and who entertain doubts in the subjectivity assumption. There is an abiding concern within this group with the significance of communal meaning making, the constructed nature of reality, co-constructive processes in therapy, and the cultural and political character of therapeutic practice. Issues of narrative, metaphor, problem definition and dissolution, and multiple realities are topics of lively discussion. Although there are many ways of characterizing this transformation, in order to underscore its alliance with sweeping changes elsewhere in the humanities and sciences I would view it as social constructionist.(3)

The question that must now be asked is whether there is implied or extant within this movement an alternative conception of human communication. Further, would such a conception avoid replicating the problems inherent in the long standing traditions? My belief is that a new view of human communication can indeed be drawn from the constructionist dialogues, not only as they are taking place within therapeutic circles but as they have developed in the neighboring domains of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), the history of science (Kuhn, 1970), the sociology of knowledge (Latour, 1987), discourse analysis (Edwards and Potter, 1994), literary theory (Fish, 1980) and communication theory (Shotter, 1993). In each of these cases there is a strong (though not exclusive) tendency to place the locus of meaning within the process of interaction itself. That is, individual subjectivity is abandoned as the primary site on which meaning is originated or understanding takes place; attention moves from the within to the between.

Although recognition of the jointly constructed character of meaning has become increasingly apparent, there is as yet no comprehensive account of how such a process occurs. If we accept such an orientation, what follows in implication; what new conceptual resources can be mobilized, what new questions are raised? In the interests of furthering the dialogue, in what follows I shall make a preliminary incursion into these domains. I offer, then, a series of rudimentary propositions and explications concerning the relational character of communication: (4)

An individual's utterances in themselves possess no meaning. Let me first propose that the single utterance of an individual itself fails to possess meaning. This is most

obvious in the case of uttering any selected morpheme (e.g. the, ed, to). Standing alone, the morpheme fails to be anything but itself. It is opaque and indeterminate. One may generate a variety of apparent exceptions to this initial assumption - e.g. a shout of "help" on a dark night; or more extended word sequences, such as "Eat at Joe's." However, the communicative value of such exceptions will inevitably prove to depend on a prior history of relationships - in which, for example, shouts and billboards play a role in coordinating human affairs.

The potential for meaning is realized through supplementary action. Lone utterances begin to acquire meaning when another (or others) coordinate themselves to the utterance, that is, when they add some form of supplementary action (whether linguistic or otherwise). The supplement may be as simple as an affirmation (e.g. "yes," "right") that indeed the initial utterance has succeeded in communicating. It may take the form of an action, e.g. shifting the line of gaze upon hearing the word, "look!" Or it may extend the utterance in some way, e.g. when "the" uttered by one interlocutor is followed by "end!" uttered by a second.

We thus find that an individual alone can never "mean;" another is required to supplement the action, and thus give it a function within the relationship. To communicate is thus to be granted by others a privilege of meaning. If others do not treat one's utterances as communication, if they fail to coordinate themselves around the offering, one's utterances are reduced to nonsense.
Supplements act both to create and constrain meaning.

The initial action (utterance, gesture, etc.) of the individual does not, in the hypothetical space developed thus far, demand any particular form of supplementation.

Standing alone it possesses no implication for what is to follow. The act of supplementation thus operates postfiguratively in two opposing ways. First, it grants a specific potential to the meaning of the utterance. It treats it as meaning this and not that, as inviting one form of action as opposed to another, as having a particular implication as opposed to some other. Thus, if you ask me, "Do you have a light," I can react by staring at you in puzzlement (thus negating what you have said as meaningful action). Or, conversely, I can react in a variety of different ways, each bestowing a different meaning on the utterance. For example, I can busily search through my pockets and answer "no", I can answer "yes" and walk away, I can tell you "I am not serving beer," I can ask you what it is you really want, or I can even shriek and fall into a fetal crouch.

At the same time, as I create your meaning in one of these various ways I simultaneously act to curtail its potential in many others. Because I have created it as meaning this, it cannot mean that. In this sense, while I invite you into being, I also act so as to negate your potential. From the enormous array of possibilities, I thus create direction and temporarily narrow the possibilities of your identity as a

meaningful agent.

But this curtailment must not be viewed as uni-directional, with the supplement both creating and delimiting that which has preceded. In the roughly ordered state of ordinary cultural life, action-supplement coordinations are already in place. Actions already embedded within relationships thus have a prefigurative function. The invite or suggest certain supplements as opposed to others - because only these supplements are considered sensible or meaningful. Thus, while falling into a fetal position is possible in principle, it risks abrogating the very possibilities of meaning within the relationship. In this way, the action-supplement relationship is more properly viewed as reciprocal: supplements operate to determine the meaning of actions, while actions create and constrain the possibilities for supplementation.

Meanings are subject to continuous reconstitution via the expanding sea of supplementation. In light of the above considerations we find that whether meaningful communication occurs, and what is communicated among persons, is inherently undecidable. That is, "the fact of meaning" stands as a temporary achievement, subject to the continuous accretion and alteration through supplementary significations. All that is fixed and settled in one instance, may be cast into ambiguity or undone in the next. Sarah and Steve may find themselves frequently laughing together, until Steve announces that Sarah's laughter is "unnatural and forced," just her attempt to present herself as an "easy going person" (in which case the definition of the previous actions would be altered). Or Sarah announces, "you are so superficial, Steve, that we really don't communicate," (thus negating the interchange altogether as a form of meaningful activity). At the same time, these latter moves within the ongoing sequence are subject to negation ("Steve, that's a crazy statement."), and alteration ("You are only saying that, Sarah, because you find Bill so attractive.") Such instances of negation and alteration may be far removed temporally from the interchange itself (e.g. consider a divorcing pair who retrospectively redefine their entire marital trajectory), and are subject to continuous change through interaction with and among others (e.g. friends, relatives, therapists, the media etc.).

At this point, however, we find the exclusive focus on face-to-face relationships is far too narrow. For whether "I make sense" is not under my control, neither is it determined by you, or the dyadic process in which meaning struggles toward realization. At the outset, we largely derive our potential for meaning in the dyad from our previous immersion in a range of other relationships. We arrive in the relationship as extensions of previous patterns of meaning making. And, as we move outward from our relationship to communicate with others, they also serve as supplements to our relational pattern, thus altering the meanings we have generated. And these interchanges may be supplemented and transformed in their meaning by still others. In effect, meaningful communication in any given interchange ultimately depends on a protracted array of relationships, not only "right here, right now," but how it is that you and I are related to a variety of other persons, and they to still others - and ultimately, one may say, to the relational conditions of society as a

whole. We are all in this way interdependently interlinked - without the capacity to mean anything, to possess an "I" - after all, a position within a relationship - except for the existence of a potentially assenting world of relationships - which can simultaneously function to rob the both of us of meaning altogether.

If these various suppositions provide a preliminary intelligibility, there is one derivative of profound implication. Rather than viewing language in traditional terms - where its capacities to reflect reality, express subjectivity, or serve personal strategies are all focal - we find that language is constitutive of relationships. That is, it forms an integral part of the relationship itself, in the same way as smiles, frowns, hugs, and caresses, or gifts at a birthday or the paycheck presented at the end of the month. To be sure we may treat language as if it describes reality, but such a treatment is itself a relational performance, a "game" in which we agree (explicitly or implicitly) to use certain callings on certain occasions. From this use-based conception of meaning, the central focus shifts to the social ramifications of language use. What follows in a relationship when self or world is framed in just this way; what dances am I invited into when you use these phrases as opposed to others? We become concerned, then, with the consequences of language as a form of action, but we see these consequences as under the control of neither the actor nor the recipient.

Therapeutic Communication: Toward a New Agenda

We have here but the beginnings of a new view of human communication; by its own standards its full contours will only emerge with further interchange and its completion shall forever be postponed. However, as the implications of such a view are set in motion we find that many of the difficult questions with which the therapeutic community has long wrestled are transformed. The enigmas change their form, old answers are abandoned and new ones take their place. In important respects a revisioning is required; for many, the conversations are already under way. In the remaining pages I wish to isolate four areas in which deliberation is especially invited.

The Psyche: From the Reified to the Relational

Traditional theories of communication, with their strong emphasis on human subjectivity, have been closely allied with a more general individualist orientation to therapy itself. That is, therapists have by and large placed their major interest in the states or conditions of individual minds. As we move from Freudian theory of repression, to neo-analytic accounts of object relations, Rogerian concerns with self-regard, and into present day disquisitions on cognitive schemas, the central concern with the individual psyche remains fixed. Even within family systems theory, individual mental conditions have sustained a robust existence (consider radical constructivism). Yet, as we shift our conception of human communication to the between, this long-standing tradition is called into question. Our attention is soon drawn to the fact that the enormously rich language we have for depicting inner states is itself not a product of such states but of relational coordination. The language does

not thus "depict," so much as it constructs what we take to be the character of subjectivity. Contemporary discourse on mental states - the taken for granted vocabulary of reason, emotion, intention, motives and the like - constitutes an ethnopsychology, a set of culturally and historically situated ways of talking, writing, and acting. In principle, such a language is dispensable.

Such conclusions are of substantial consequence for the process of therapy. At the outset, they undermine the long-standing practice of mental exploration - at least in the forms we inherit. What is the purpose of exploring the unconscious if there is no such domain; must suppressed emotions be released if the very idea of a suppressed emotion is a cultural myth; must we be concerned with tapping the individual's private construals or cognitions of the world if the presumption of an inner origin of language is politically pernicious? In effect the entire rationale for exploring the client's subjectivity is eroded. But does the relational view of communication mean the death of psychological language; should we now consider abandoning such forms of description and explanation, avoiding all talk of the client's "feelings," "thoughts," or "desires."?

In my view such a conclusion is neither intellectually nor practically warranted. The argument for the constructed character of psychological language does not lead to the baleful conclusion that such language should be abandoned. In the same way, we should little wish to abandon our conceptions of good and evil simply because we recognized that they were culturally and historically contingent. To be apprised of one's cultural meanings is not to step out of culture. Thus there is no reason for therapists to abandon deliberation on the client's mental conditions. On the contrary, the enlightened practitioner will see in constructionism a rationale for expanding the presently preferred discourses of the therapeutic community. Therapeutic schools which limit the range of discourse - focusing exclusively, for example, on unconscious motives, self-acceptance, or cognitions - impose arbitrary limits on therapeutic conversations. Further, we might open the door to many other discourses common within the society, but often eschewed by therapists by virtue of their "unscientific" basis. Here I am thinking of a range of otherwise marginalized discourses - of spiritual life, of the deities, and of the mystical and mysterious.

I am not hereby advocating the ultimate reification of these discourses - psychological or otherwise. All therapeutic conversation will necessary operate to objectify its subject matter during the interactive moment; such temporary effects are scarcely avoidable. However, I am proposing that by expanding the range of what can count as the real in therapy, the range of intelligible and potentially useful moves is also augmented. Each new form of "saying" is simultaneously a new form of relating, and with potentially different consequences.

There remains an additional challenge for the field. Few in the western tradition would wish to part with the language of the self, of subjective states and conditions. Yet, how are we to reconcile this investment with the intellectual and ideological arguments to the contrary? At least one central solution to this dilemma is by

refiguring the language. That is, we may reconstruct our conceptions of the self so that mental terminology loses its moorings in the ideology of the self-contained individual, and acquires a more fully social or systemic character. In this sense we may come to use the language in different ways and for different purposes. Movement toward such reconceptualization is already in motion. Relying on the earlier work of Vygotsky and Bakhtin, many developmentalists have begun to reconceptualize thought as internalized language. On this account, cognitive processes are not the possessions of single individuals so much as their relationships speaking through them (see for example, Wertsch, 1991). As I have also tried to demonstrate (Gergen, 1994) we may conceptualize emotions as elements within relational scenarios, actions that gain their intelligibility and necessity from patterns of interchange. Here it is possible to view anger or depression not as a personal event, but as a constituent of a particular relational dance. Ways in which these re-visioned concepts of self can be cashed out in therapeutic practice is nicely demonstrated by Penn and Frankfurt (1994).

Therapeutic Effects: The Transportability Problem

What is actually changed through therapy? Consistent with its individualist base, this question is typically answered in terms of the individual psyche. It is through the removal or repression, a process of catharsis, a gain in insight, the enhancement of self-acceptance, or the alteration in cognitive schemas, as it is variously reasoned, that long term change is effected. Most important for present purposes, the therapist presumes an automatic transportability in effect. That is, once the individual psyche is altered within the therapeutic encounter, the effects are transported into the world. Or, using the common mechanistic metaphor, once the machine has been repaired (by the master mechanic), it is readied for use outside the shop. However, if we de-reify the psyche, as reasoned above, this traditional logic ceases to be compelling.

Yet, if we cannot fall back on the assumption that "a change of mind" produces far-reaching changes in individual conduct, how are we to understand therapeutic efficacy? How are the effects of a therapeutic conversation transported into the life world outside?

This is no small question, and I can here do little more than render support for a conversation essential to future practices. If we follow the constructionist logic, therapy represents a conversation in which participants borrow heavily from their relations outside, but also a relationship which wends its way toward a unique reality (discourse patterns shared distinctively by the participants themselves.) Under these conditions it might be possible for therapist and client to locate a wonderfully functional mode of relating - using discourses that generated a sense of harmony and fulfillment within the encounter. However, this same set of discourses might also be wholly contained within the relationship. That is, it may have little or no "street value," little transportability into other relations. Given the use-based view of communication generated above, the major question is whether the client can "walk the talk," whether the metaphors, narratives, deconstructions, reframings, multiple

selves, expressive skills and so on developed within the therapeutic encounter can be carried into other relations in such a way that these relations are usefully transformed.

At one level, I have little doubt that such effects do occur. However, more effective demonstrations of the ways in which the therapeutic conversations or discourses actually insinuate themselves into the life worlds of clients would be very useful. Further, more concerted attention is needed to how the two contexts - therapy and life world - can be made to converge. The most obvious means, and one very congenial to the family therapy movement, is to work with relationships rather than single individuals. In this way new discursive forms and practices are set directly in motion. However, this does not fully solve the problem, as the group reality of the therapeutic hour may not be transportable; group members are also embedded within multiple relationships. I am drawn at this point to a variety of practices that various therapists have developed to move practices into life settings. I am struck by the use made of letter writing, both to and by clients, in the work of White and Epston (1990) and Penn and Frankfurt (1994). In Buenos Aires, Christina Ravazolla has developed means of having client families view relevant videos together. Other therapists have sent therapy tapes home with their clients for discussion in the home. Further and more concerted sharing of ideas and practices now seems invited within the therapeutic community.

The Politics of Therapy

How are we to regard the relationship between values (ethics, political ideals) and the therapeutic process? Or more specifically, in what ways should the therapist's own values color the process and shape the outcomes? There have been two major phases in thinking on this problem over the decades. In the first phase, governed largely by the traditional conceptions of value free science, and therapy as an applied science, issues of political and ideological value were simply declared irrelevant. As it was reasoned, the task of therapy is not to legislate on values or politics, but simply to "cure" individuals (or families) of the manifest illnesses. From the staunch critiques of the anti-psychiatry movement of the 1960s to present-day feminist critiques of the androcentric basis of traditional therapy, this view has been substantially undermined. Even a posture of non-engagement is viewed as ethical and political in its consequences. Whether mindful or not, therapeutic work is necessarily a form of social activism - for good or ill.

With this emerging realization, a second phase begins. In this case many therapists have begun to explore the implications of ethically and politically committed therapy. Rather than eschewing value considerations, they form a raison d'etre. We have, then, the development of therapies that are specifically committed, for example, to a feminist or a gay politics, or in which ethnic issues are focal. With the rapid expansion in identity politics, there is every reason to anticipate an expansion in such investments.

In a certain sense, constructionist conceptions of therapy are highly congenial to

these investments, and indeed, in their deconstruction of traditional warrants for the status quo are often used in support of value invested work. However, with valuational commitment now on the agenda, can we rest secure? I think not. I am particularly concerned with the possibility of an anguished fragmentation - the development of multiple therapeutic enclaves each claiming a moral high ground, each isolated and righteously indignant by the virtue of its claims. Not only would the fruits of more globally shared conversation be denied, but we would approach a bellicose state in the therapeutic world of all-against-all. In my view we should be able to see within a relational view of communication the potential for moving beyond our present condition.

I think there are such possibilities inherent in a relational account. At the outset we find that there are no foundations - no final justifications - for any ethical or political claim. That is, the same deconstructive efforts previously used to undermine the authority of science can also be turned reflexively on those who would wish to replace (or augment) science with a particular system of values. This does not mean we should avoid value positions; as in the above, we can scarcely step out of culture. However, constructionism does remove the ultimate authority of such statements - just the kind of authority that, in my view, is most frequently used to silence or obliterate those whose voices differ from one's own. In addition, in its emphasis on the ultimate interdependence of all meaning, the relational account of communication also suggests a new and different role for therapists. Rather than either avoiding or occupying specific political positions, we may fruitfully explore the possibilities of bringing disparate groups into coordination, rendering alienated languages more permeable, enabling people to speak in multiple voices, reducing the potential for lethal action.

Excellent examples of this kind of work are furnished by the Public Conversations Project at the Family Institute of Cambridge. Here therapists work with diverse and conflict-ridden political and work groups to generate change oriented dialogues. For example, Pro Choice and Pro-Life advocates, defense analysts and peace activists, and delegates from nations in conflict are brought together for workshops or facilitated conversations. Under closely monitored conditions, such interchange proves enormously productive in terms of generating mutual understanding and reducing hostility (see, for example, Chasin and Herzig, 1994; Roth, 1993). As therapists move into mediation work and organizational consulting, I see these potentials for working at the boundaries of meaning significantly expanding. And in a world where group differences are increasingly accentuated, the need for such work will only increase.

Transcending Narrative: Toward a Relational Sublime

The concept of narrative plays two significant roles in contemporary thinking about therapy. The first is inherited from the past and concerns the therapist's self-understanding. This is the narrative of progress, wherein the client moves, with the therapist's help, to an enhanced state of well-being. In the second role, narrative

comes into play as a vehicle for understanding the client. Here the client's life narratives are typically viewed as forms of meaning which themselves either constitute or contribute to the manifest problem. In keeping with the narrative of progress, the therapeutic challenge is to alter (dissolve, deconstruct, reframe, enrich, or multiply) the client's narrative as given. The hope is that with the development of the altered narrative, the individual will be freshly empowered. We have already discussed the challenge of narrative transportability. Yet in light of a relational orientation to communication, there is a more subtle problem that must now be confronted. I am particularly concerned here with narrative approaches to therapy in the context of the continuous renegotiation of meaning.

My concerns here are several in number. The first is with the tendency to view the newly developed narrative as a personal possession of the client. As reasoned above, meaning is jointly negotiated. Thus, while the client may transport the new narrative into the life world, he/she does not control its meaning. Its meaning and implications are open to continuous reshaping as relationships proceed. Second, I am concerned with the capacity of the newly fashioned narrative to remain effective across a wide range of relationships. As reasoned elsewhere (Gergen, 1994), it's not clear that a fixed view of oneself or one's conditions can remain functional across a wide range of ever-emergent relationships.

Finally, I am concerned with the presumption of the progressive narrative of therapy itself. As new narratives are placed in action, they have the potential for altering the character of relationships. Indeed, much of the hope for constructionist therapy depends on this view. However, as any given relationship is changed, so are other relationships in which participants are engaged. As proposed, local meaning is always dependent on a broad spectrum; as local meanings change, so do they reverberate elsewhere in the cultural world. The upshot of this process is that where a positive therapeutic outcome (progress) may be immediately discernible in the local sphere of relationship, there is no reason to suspect either that the effects will be of long duration, or that they will be positive for all who are affected. With reverberated meanings, other relationships may be upset, and this upheaval may subsequently impact the local relationships. (Consider the beleaguered wife who through therapy develops a new narrative of strength and independence; she opts for a divorce and soon is harassed by her children, relatives and friends of the couple, the clergy, and the divorce lawyers.)

Such concerns suggest that we must ultimately move beyond narrative as the center of our interest to the relational matrix from which narrative understandings emerge. We may wish to construct these processes in a variety of ways, and with different possible outcomes. Surely this would be a useful endeavor. However, I wish to close this piece in a more speculative way. Can we envision, I ask, a condition of pure relatedness, a condition in which - like the ocean - all the individual waves are given form by each other, and we must recognize with awe the potential of a singular movement of the entirety. I shall call this condition a relational sublime. We cannot articulate the character of the sublime, for our languages are themselves only local

manifestations of the whole; they cannot account for origins which supersede them in profundity. However, we may with consciousness of the relational sublime perhaps move more comfortably in the world - with less anguish and more tolerance. Rather than charting a singular course for our swim through life - feeling buffeted by the waves, frustrated by our incapacity to make headway, irritated by the squalls that send us helter-skelter - we might, with consciousness of the relational sublime, more properly see ourselves as at one with our surrounds, our bodies moving in multiple directions as we harmonize with the undulations of the grander force. The term sacred When our beings conjoin with a relational sublime, perhaps these are moments in which we most fully approach the sacred.

Footnotes

1. For a more detailed account of the problems in both realism and inter-subjectivity, see my book, Realities and relationships.
2. For a more extended account of these problems see, for example, Bellah et al. (1985), Lasch (1979), and
3. Exemplary of this work in therapy are volumes by White and Epston (1990), McNamee and Gergen (1992), Andersen (1991), and Hoyt (1994).
4. For a more detailed account see Gergen (1994).

References

- Andersen, T. (l99l) The reflecting team: Dialogues and dialogues about the dialogues. New York: Norton.
- Bellah, R.N. et. al. (l985) Habits of the heart. Berkeley: University of California.
- Chasin, R. and Herzig, M. (1994) Creating systemic interventions for the sociopolitical arena. In B. Gould and D. Demuth (Eds.) The global family therapist. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Edwards, D. and N. Mercer (l987) Common knowledge: The development of understanding in the classroom. London: Methuen.
- Edwards, D. and Potter, J. (l992) Discursive psychology. London: Sage.
- Fish, S. (l980) Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Gadamer, H.G.(l960) Truth and method. New York: Seabury.
- Garfinkel, H. (l967) Studies in ethnomethodology. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Gergen, K.J. (1994) Realities and relationships. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hoyt, M. (Ed.)(l993) Constructive therapies. New York: Guilford Press.
- Kuhn, T.S. (l962) The structure of scientific revolution. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lasch, C. (l979) The culture of narcissism. New York: Norton.
- Latour, B. (l987) Science in action. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Middleton, D. and Edwards, D. (l990) Conversational remembering: A social

psychological approach. In D. Middleton and D.Edwards (eds), Collective remembering. London: Sage.

- Penn P. and Frankfurt, M. (1994) Creating a participant text: Writing, multiple voices, narrative multiplicity. Family Process, 33, 217-232.
- Quine, W.V.O. (l960) Word and object. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Roth, S. (1993) Speaking the unspoken: a work-group consultation to reopen dialogue. In E. Imber-Black (Ed.) Secrets in families and family therapy. New York: Norton.
- Shotter, J. (1993b) Conversational realities. London: Sage.
- Watzlawick,P.,Beavin, J. and Jackson, D. (l967) Pragmatics of human communication. New York: Norton.
- Wertsch, J.V. (l99l) Voices of the mind. Harvard University Press.
- White, M. and Epston, D. (l990) Narrative means to therapeutic ends. New York: Norton.