

# Limits and Possibilities of the Postmodern Narrative Self

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*The task of theorising the self has been of little interest historically in systemic therapy, yet becomes more interesting in the postmodern turn to the narrative metaphor and social constructionist ideas. Within this frame, the self is theorised as relational, fluid, and existing in narrative. The 'postmodern narrative self' counters modernist assumptions of self as an autonomous and fixed 'internal' entity, and brings with it theory and practice possibilities. However, any theory also brings limits, and this paper explores the limits of the central ideas of the postmodern narrative self. Through questioning and discussion, an argument is made for holding a dialectic in our thinking about the relational and autonomous self, for acknowledging very real boundaries on the fluidity of self, and for thinking of narrative as one way of knowing self, rather than exclusively constituting the 'being' of self.*

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## A FOREWORD

A thirteen year old boy, in his first year at a working class all-boys high school, was referred to me. He was being picked on—the referrer said that he was being called a 'sissy', but it was clear enough that this was a euphemism for 'fucking poofter'. He was the youngest in a family of four children—something of an afterthought, since the next sister was 20, then another sister 22, then a brother 25.

He came to the first session with his mother and father, and I went to get them from the waiting room. He was sitting between his parents, very much belonging to them. His parents were in their mid 50s, but somehow looked older, and they both gave the impression of being tired and kind and unassuming and ground down. The boy looked almost incongruously alive and beautiful. It was winter, and he was wearing a black coat and black jeans, and a long woollen scarf that was a deep and vivid blue. He looked pretty fabulous, but his aesthetic was not what you would call common in his peer group.

There had been, and were still, a number of tragedies in his family. His brother had been born with a serious disability, and was institutionalised from the age of three, when the mother had what she called 'a nervous breakdown' in the year after the next child was born. The pain and guilt the parents (and especially the mother) felt about his institutionalisation were still very present. His older sister, 22, was doing well in her last year at university. His younger sister, twenty, was sometimes living at home and

sometimes not—she had had problems since she was eighteen and had spent short periods hospitalised in a psychiatric unit. And the father three years before had been diagnosed as having a potentially fatal illness, but was now symptom-free.

There are many things I could write about my experience of work with this family. But I am giving this small description here because the boy's struggle to develop and claim a sense of himself was striking, and in this particular struggle, gender and sexuality were in the foreground. And the terrain he faced in coming to develop and know his sexual and gendered 'self' was complex, both within his family and in the wider social context.

This is not a clinical paper, and I am not wanting to analyse this practice situation, or use it to try to 'prove' any points of theory. But I would like this boy and his family to sit somewhere in the background of the discussion—though I won't be referring to them in the paper itself, I'll come back to them in a postscript.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is about the idea of 'self' and how it may be thought about. Though it has been heavily trawled as a concept in psychoanalysis and psychology, there has been little interest within systemic therapy in theorising the self until quite recently. The way in which the metaphor of systems was used in early family therapy largely precluded an interest in the self, as the idea of family system was in opposition to the idea of (individual) self. This polarity mirrored the historical circumstances of the initial development of family therapy as a discipline in opposition to individual therapies, and particularly psychoanalytic therapy.

There were some notable attempts to bridge the

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polarity by considering the topic of the self in the system (see, for example, Nichols, 1987). However, over the past fifteen years there has been a shift away from the original cybernetic and biological understandings of the systems metaphor, to a use of 'systemic' to betoken a therapy informed by a framework of, and commitment to, relational and contextual analysis. This shift has gone hand-in-hand with the interest in postmodernist and social constructionist ideas, in the metaphor of narrative, and in the way in which meaning has come to be a central practice focus of systemic therapy. It is in this new environment that we begin to see the re-emergence of an interest in self.

The literature so far is not all of a piece. A number of writers have addressed the specific theme of the self of the therapist (Hardham, 1996; Hildebrand and Speed, 1995; Paterson, 1996). There has also been an interest in the idea of culture, personhood and the self (Krause, 1995), and in the construction of the gendered self (Hart, 1996). In developing his particular version of narrative therapy, Michael White (1991, 1993) has been writing of practices of the self, and the centrality of lived experience, while Harlene Anderson (1997) writes of the 'narrative self' in her development of postmodern ideas and narrative therapy. And Robert Rosenbaum and John Dyckman (1995) have argued very strongly for a fluid and relational concept of self as consistent with constructionist and contextualist thinking.

My own interest in this paper is to consider some ideas about self which flow from social constructionist theory and the metaphor of narrative. In particular, I will consider the 'postmodern narrative self', with its ideas of self as relational, always fluid, and existing in narrative form. An argument will be made that in therapy we may need to allow for the dialectic of self as both relational and autonomous, that there are very real boundaries on the fluidity of self, and that narrative may perhaps more usefully be thought of as one form of *knowing* the self, rather than the total way of 'being' self. The discussion, then, will map both the possibilities and limits of narrative and social constructionism with respect to the self, and given the development of theory in this area, the paper is necessarily exploratory and tentative.

## THE SELF: RELATIONAL, FLUID AND EXISTING IN NARRATIVE

To give a flavour of the emerging ideas on self, I will begin with three statements:

to appreciate the possibility [of a new reality of self], two preliminary steps are useful: first to bid final adieu to the concrete entity of self, and then to trace the reconstruction of self as relationship (Gergen, 1991: 140).

the self is not an accrual of experience but an ongoing, ever-changing manifestation of potentiality (Rosenbaum and Dyckman, 1995: 28).

[postmodernism] invites a shift from a modernist logical understanding (verifiable reality) of self to a narrative social

understanding (constructed reality) of self ... the self becomes a narrative self ... (Anderson, 1997: 212).

This first section lays out the thinking reflected in these quotes. However, to locate this thinking requires an initial reference to the framework of postmodernism, and the way in which postmodernist ideas have come to be situated within systemic therapy. It is by now something of a ritual for discussions of narrative and constructionist ideas to begin by outlining the author's opposition to modernism and then the preference for embracing postmodernist ideas. The discourse of modernism, which dominated formal knowledges in the Western world well beyond the first half of the twentieth century and still shows itself strongly in the empirical sciences, relies on the foundational assumption that the physical and social world is able to be discovered and known for itself. It assumes that the object of knowledge has a reality which exists separate to the person seeking knowledge (i.e. it is 'objective'), and that pursuit of such 'objective' knowledge may ultimately lead to greater certainty about the nature of the world.

As its name suggests, 'post' modernism stands against and moves beyond these modernist assumptions, and abandons the modernist quest for objective knowledge (Flaskas, 1995). Given that postmodernism is in itself a 'counter' term to modernism, it is not surprising that many applications of 'postmodernist' ideas rest on the polarity of modernist-postmodernist. An example of this would be the way in which, in the emerging postmodernist conceptual definitions in the systemic arena, we are usually told what something is not, before we are told what it is.

In the plethora of very different (and not necessarily harmonious) theories which have emerged under the postmodernist umbrella in the humanities and social sciences, some have proved more attractive and more pertinent to the field of therapy, and this selective choice of postmodernist ideas reflects the needs of practice theory.<sup>1</sup> In systemic therapy, it has been narrative ideas and social constructionist theory which have in the main been used to construct the 'what it is' part of the new conceptions. And so in looking at the ideas emerging about self, we find narrative and social constructionist ideas 'embedded' in an oppositional framework to 'modernist' conceptions of self, and sometimes even a tendency to use the term 'postmodernist' interchangeably with 'narrative' and 'social constructionist'. Having made these initial remarks about the framing of narrative and social constructionist ideas within the oppositionality of postmodernism, I would like to move directly to the new ideas about self.

I will unfold these ideas within the pattern of their usual presentation by saying first what the self is not. The self which emerged within modernist discourse became an essential self, an interior self, capable of being thought about as a separate form. If our ideas become limited to this modernist conception which sees self as a thing to be discovered, then it can very easily become a thing which we can either have too

much of, or too little of—‘She’s full of herself’, ‘He doesn’t have a very strong self’. Rosenbaum and Dyckman (1995) argue that it is this thinking of self as a ‘thing’ which informs what they call the ‘deficit hypothesis’ of psychotherapies which aim to build and strengthen the self.

Alongside this modernist understanding of self as a concrete entity is the idea of the self as the property of the individual—herself, myself, himself. And the self is a core self, capable of being described in terms of fixed qualities. We can see this operating in everyday discourse: ‘He’s always been a very jealous type, even as a little boy’, ‘She’s a prickly type, but very generous deep down’. We also see it operating powerfully in the formal elaboration of the knowledges of psychology, psychiatry and earlier forms of psychoanalysis, for example in the details of personality tests and the categorisation of personality ‘types’, in Freud’s topographic model of self as id-ego-superego, and in the construction of the psychiatric categories of abnormality.

It is this modernist picture of the self as autonomous, fixed, and ‘owned’ by the individual which becomes the oppositional pole to the postmodernist framings of self which have begun to be articulated within systemic therapy. Rather than the self being autonomous, the self becomes a relational self; rather than the self being fixed, the self is a self-in-action, always fluid, always being created and re-created in relationship with others; rather than existing as the internal property of the individual, the self becomes a narrative self, ‘storied’ and constructed in language with others.

Harlene Anderson, one of the foremost North American narrative therapy theorists, gives an excellent elaboration of ‘the wonderment of the postmodern narrative self’ (1997: 212). Extending her earlier work with Harry Goolishian (1988, 1992), Anderson locates the narrative self as ‘always engaged in conversational becoming, constructed and reconstructed through continuous interactions, through relationships’ (1997: 216). She argues against the modernist notion of a core self, pointing to the way in which self is made up of many narratives across time and across experiences. The self becomes a story teller, and self-identity is created in a continuing process of narrative which creates and changes the experience of self. Language is central in this, because narratives are constructed in language and in dialogue with others, and so:

... self (and other) is a created concept, a created narrative, linguistically constructed and existing in dialogue and in relationship ... In this view, *the self is a dialogical-narrative self* ... (italics in original; Anderson, 1997: 220).

The ideas Anderson brings together here reflect a particular mix of postmodernist thinking. She draws on philosophical discussions of narrative (for example, Gadamer, 1975; Kerby, 1991; Madison, 1988), on the narrative turn within psychoanalysis (for example, Schafer, 1992; Spence, 1982), as well as on the social constructionist intersection with narrative. The latter body of knowledge is the most commonly referenced

‘base’ of much of the systemic narrative theorising, and remains the core influence in Anderson’s portrayal of the postmodernist self. This knowledge base includes the work of social psychologists Jerome Bruner (1990), Kenneth Gergen (1991, 1994) and Donald Polkinghorne (1988).

Of these, Gergen’s work has been the most influential, and this is perhaps not surprising given that the systemic interest in Gergen’s work interchanges with his own interest in the developing applications of narrative ideas in the systemic field (MacNamee and Gergen, 1992; Gergen, 1994). It is worthwhile noting here that Gergen’s work emphasises the communal structuring of the social world through language, and the centrality of the relational context of *language*d narratives in the structuring and transforming of self. This privileging of language in narrative and the process of social construction is strongly present in Anderson’s work, and in her earlier joint work with Goolishian. It is also very strongly present in most of the North American (systemic) narrative therapies.<sup>2</sup>

Though the last two paragraphs may have seemed a rather finicky digression, I have been wanting to identify the knowledge milieu of this version of the narrative self, because it becomes quite important in the next section when we consider the question of the role of language in narrative and in the experience of self. But I have perhaps skipped ahead of myself here, for it remains in this section to underline the usefulness—indeed, the creative potential—of the emerging ideas on the self in both systemic theory and practice.

At the level of theory, the very idea of the relational self cuts completely across the previous polarised dichotomy of the cybernetic metaphor in which the self becomes the opposite pole to the system. Rather than the self being assumed in its (modernist) non-relational form, the self becomes a radically relational concept. Moreover, rather than ‘the system’ assuming the static and arbitrary boundary of ‘the family’, the parameters of narrative and constructionist thinking allow a multi-levelled engagement with the social context of personal life. The experience of self is inextricably linked with the many sources of narrative understandings. These include the self narratives formed in the most intimate context of family relationships, the social narratives we come to have of ourselves in terms of gender, sexuality, culture and class, and the narratives which are forged in the powerful institutional realities of the welfare and health systems, schools and workplaces, justice and prison systems.

At the level of practice, meaning becomes central in ideas about the narrative self, and it is meaning which has come to be the practice focus of the relational and contextual understandings of the ‘new’ systems metaphor. In keeping with the shifts in theory, ideas about the relational and narrative self make it possible to attend in practice to the experience of self in relationships, both in the intimacy of interpersonal relationships and in the complexity of social relationships. Thus, there is no longer an ‘either/or’ facing therapists—

should they pay attention to 'self' or to 'system'? Exploring the experience of self in therapy *is* exploring the relational system. This practice shift allows a freedom for a more intimate and personal engagement in therapy, while the idea of the fluidity of self in the constancy of the narrative process seems to give some space for the hopefulness which underpins all therapeutic activity. Therapeutic change, then, does not need to rest on strategising behavioural shifts, but rather, therapeutic change can align itself with the continual narrative process of the changing meanings we give to our lives and to ourselves in relation to others.

Clearly what I have just written is a very general sketch of the usefulness and potential of these new concepts of self, and one needs to turn to the detail of the ideas of narrative therapists in order to see the way they fit theory to the 'how to' of practice (Anderson, 1997; Epston and White, 1989, 1992; Freedman and Combs, 1996; Gilligan and Price, 1993; Hoffman, 1990, 1993; McNamee and Gergen, 1992; Parry and Doan, 1994; White, 1989, 1991, 1995; Zimmerman and Dickerson, 1994). However, at this stage in the paper, I would like to move to exploring the limits of these ideas.

### THE LIMITS OF THE POSTMODERN NARRATIVE SELF

There was a clumsy verb much used in the English-speaking literature which popularised French postmodernist thinking in the 1980s—the verb was 'to problematise', [and it attempted to describe a method of thinking about a particular idea] which placed the idea in a problematic frame in order to spark a different kind of thinking about it. A more extreme verb which was also common was 'to interrogate'—and this meant to promote thinking about an idea by asking questions of it (we can only hope that the French word for 'interrogate' has more freeing associations than its English equivalent, and that something was lost in the translation!) In the 1990s, 'to problematise' and 'to interrogate' have become replaced by the increasingly generic use of 'to deconstruct'.

Often, of course, 'to deconstruct' has come to mean not too much more than the rather unglamorous 'Let's try to have a bit of a think about this', and I do want to try to have a think about the postmodern narrative self. I am not so much interested in the deconstructive method of taking ideas apart, but I am interested in using the method of thinking around and about something by asking questions of it, and by stepping outside an acceptance of the idea by bringing other issues to bear on it—'problematise' would be a better description of this method, if we could bear to use the word! The specific questions I will be asking are: Must the relational self be always oppositionally positioned to the autonomous self? How fluid is self? and, In what sense is the self narrative?

### The First Question

In tackling the question of the oppositional positioning of the autonomous and the relational selves, one faces nothing less than the whole polarity between postmodernism and modernism. Thus we are bumping into one of the paradoxes of postmodernist theorising—for though the momentum of postmodernism is to allow multiple possibilities against the foundational limits of modernism, it is itself embedded in an oppositional dualism that leads to a dynamic of censorship of 'modernist' conceptions.

This paradox becomes a limit for theorising in the field of therapy, for we have a primary allegiance to practice experience in our relationship to theory, and we may want to retain and move between dualities in our work with clients, rather than accept the restrictions of an oppositional framing. To become more specific here, one of the difficulties of completely abandoning any idea of the autonomous self is that we may be moving away from the lived experience of self. For all the consciousness we may have of changes in our 'selves' over time, and for all the hope we may have for those changes to be a continuous process, most of us retain an image of ourselves as held across time and place and relationships—a sense of core self, a sense of a physical and emotional being, an 'embodied' self, an experience of the autonomous self. At the risk of sounding old-fashioned and pathologising, I'd like to comment that it does not generally bode well for relationships with either our 'selves' or others if we are not able to have this experience.

Therapy practice gives us the possibility of moving between 'experience-near' and 'experience-distant' levels of understanding. It is interesting that in the systemic literature, there is very little discussion of the extent to which new theory is 'experience-near' in meeting lived experience. Indeed, of all the systemic narrative writing, Michael White's work stands out for his attempts in his theory and practice discussions to create a space for, and commitment to, lived experience. That this leads him into hot water on the theory front has been noted by Vincent Fish (1993), who points out that White's commitment to Foucault's ideas, for all their value, does not sit comfortably with his interest in lived experience. But then, Foucault was not a therapist (and would probably roll in his grave at the very thought!), whereas Michael White is. Perhaps allowing some contradictions to sit side-by-side in therapy may be all right as long as they are acknowledged, and as long as we do not make too many grand claims, modernist-style, that the resulting concoction of knowledge will meet all practice and theory needs.

Paterson (1996) notes that traditionally in systemic theory there have been ideas about both the autonomous relational aspects of a system. He parallels this with the dual psychoanalytic ideas of the autonomous self and the relational self, the autonomous self describing the core of an individual's personhood that retains a stability of form across time and relationships, and the

relational self describing the intersubjective nature of the sense of self and personhood. Paterson argues that the autonomous self and the relational self are different levels of description of the self, rather than different ideas about the self, and that as such they are both useful in therapy practice.

With Paterson, I would make a plea for this kind of flexibility. Holding some idea of the autonomous self *alongside* the idea of the relational self may meet the complexities of the lived experience of self more fully than accepting the embedded censorship of the post-modernist metaphor. The issue of lived experience will come up again in this consideration of the limits of the narrative postmodern self, but at this point it is time to move to the second question: How fluid is self?

## The Second Question

The limits of the modernist idea of a fixed self scarcely need noting, for the activity of therapy intrinsically holds some hope for change, and in this sense any belief in (only) a fixed self is antithetical to therapy. However, despite this, to swing to an unqualified idea of a fluid self risks flying in the face of the specificity and ‘realness’ of personal histories, and the complexities and power of social and interpersonal contexts.

This point needs expansion. Though in the narrative metaphor the ‘I’ becomes a storyteller, some care is needed. To say that we do not have limitless possibilities in storying our lives is to acknowledge that we come to exist in very particular landscapes of events and people and ideas and histories. In the same way that we do not have limitless stories about our lives, we do not have limitless possibilities in our *experience* of our selves. In the therapeutic attempt to cultivate the capacities for different understandings of our lives and our selves, it might be important to re-emphasise that capacities go alongside limits, and that both the capacities and limits are forged in real experience. The idea of the fluidity of self emphasises the capacities, but that fluidity is bounded and not free-floating. Following this train of thought, we can revisit the quote from Rosenbaum and Dyckman:

The self is not an accrual of experience but an ongoing, ever-changing manifestation of potentiality (Rosenbaum and Dyckman, 1995: 28).

In reading it again, we may ask the question: why can’t the self be thought of as *both* an accrual of experience *and* an ongoing ever-changing manifestation of potentiality? And surely allowing this duality gives us more leeway in thinking about our clients and their involvement in the process of therapy?

I am aware that in making these points about limits on the fluidity of self, I have been talking about the ‘realness’ of the landscapes in which our selves emerge and exist, and the ‘realness’ of the social and interpersonal contexts in which we live. The concern that some post-modernist thinking potentially negates emotional and social realities has been a central theme in the sympathetic critiques within systemic therapy (Flaskas, 1995 and

1997; Frosh, 1995 and 1997; Harari, 1995; Launer, 1996; Pocock, 1995; Speed, 1991), and also features in critiques which are not so sympathetic (Held, 1995; Minuchin, 1991).

This issue of ‘realness’, and its acknowledgment, has also troubled some narrative theorists. Michael Freeman, who from psychology has contributed very significant ideas around narrative and the self, has this to say as a ‘rider’ in his work:

What I have found in recent years, however—and I realize that this may sound entirely too ‘personal’ for some—is that many of the claims we have been considering do not do justice to the life I live: even if the furniture of the world doesn’t exist apart from the words I use to speak it, I still bump into it all the time (Freeman, 1993: 13).

He goes on to say with respect to the self:

More to the point, even if my ‘self’, fleeting as it is, doesn’t exist apart from my consciousness of it, from my own narrative imagination, indeed from my own *belief* in its very existence, it is nonetheless eminently real and—within limits—eminently knowable (*italics in original*; Freeman, 1993: 13).

The vexing issue in the concern for ‘realness’ is the role of language and its role in the realness of self. This relates to the third and final question to be considered in this section: in what sense is the self narrative?

## The Third Question

Language is, of course, central in all narrative theory, for storying is a linguistic activity. Yet it is one thing to say that we can only ever know the social world and ourselves through language, and it is another thing to say that the social world and we exist only within the confines of language. The first position sees knowledge of the world being always mediated, constructed and expressed in language; the second position, which is the more radical social constructionist stance, sees language itself as providing the boundaries of the social world.

Gergen’s work is an example of the second position, and it was noted earlier in this paper that his work is the core influence in much of the systemic narrative theorising, including the theorising of the postmodern narrative self. To revisit a quote from Anderson, ‘the self is a dialogical-narrative self’ (Anderson, 1997: 220), and as such, ‘self’ exists entirely within the bounds of language. Yet though this radical constructionist version is currently the primary influence in systemic discussions, there is a controversy within the constructionist and narrative field about the position of language in narrative—the relationship between ‘word and world’. Kerby, a philosopher, writes of the continuum in narrative theory between a position which sees language as expressing and constructing experience, and a position which sees language as the definitive limits of what we call experience. He quotes Louis Mink, who is at one extreme position of this continuum, as saying:

Stories are not lived but told. Life has no beginnings, middles, or ends ... We do not dream or remember in narra-

tive ... but tell stories which weave together the separate images of recollection ... (Mink, quoted in Kerby, 1991: 41).

Amongst others, Gergen stands at the other end of the continuum, and the painting of the postmodern narrative self reflects the view that life exists within language, as opposed to language within life.

If we accept with Gergen that 'theories of the self are, after all, nothing less than definitions of what it is to be human' (Gergen, 1994: 211), and if we are interested in lived experience and the context of therapeutic practice, then there are many invitations to take a more qualified view of the role of language than the one which is dominant in much of the systemic narrative theorising. In wanting to hold out for a more complex relationship between world and word, I am not making a novel plea. Within narrative theory itself there is a struggle to meet this issue. Freeman wants to embrace the primacy of word 'without losing world in the process' (1994: 16). Kerby tries to deepen narrative possibilities by allowing for implicit and well as explicit narratives, and writes of 'prenarrative experience', of 'quasi-narratives', and of the conditions of possibility of stories of the self.

In many ways, both Freeman and Kerby are pushing narrative to allow some space for prelanguage and unlanguage experience, and in therapy practice I think one is hard-pressed not to acknowledge unlanguage experience. Early patterns of attachment and separation are experienced outside words, and in contemporary attachment theory there are discussions of the way in which prelanguage relational interactions become 'prototypes' of narratives of attachment (Stern, 1995).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, if for a moment we step outside the narrative interest in language as a social process, and think of language as also an emotional process, then we can think of the way in which developmentally there needs to be some early sense of 'I' in order for us to embark on the path of trying to symbolise experience through language.

To say that language remains throughout life a primary way of symbolising our experience, and a primary way in which we 'hold' our knowledge and consciousness of the world, is not the same as saying there is no experience outside language. Many of us in therapy retain an interest in thinking about what psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas (1987) calls 'the unthought known', the awareness we hold, outside consciousness, of attachment patterns, and the awareness of unconscious narratives. Existential crises and life-threatening times also entail emotional experience which, far from being only brought into existence by words, exist outside words, and is often shared outside words with others even though we may also try to use words to symbolise those moments.

Anita Morawetz wrote very movingly in this journal of her own experience in this territory during the course of the illness of which she died (Morawetz, 1987). Among others, Neil Adams (1995) has recently

raised the domain of spirituality in family therapy. It may be no coincidence that Adams has incorporated this interest in his work with people with head injuries and their families. Mortality, tragedy and absolute physical limits are often not well met by words. And at one level, it is perhaps the very finiteness of our bodies and their capacities which speaks of an existence of self that does not reside solely within the territory of language.

But what does all this mean with respect to the question: in what sense is the self narrative? The consideration of language, its role in narrative, and its relation to the realness of our lived experience, challenges the position of a postmodern narrative self in which the self only exists within narrative dialogue. Some narrative theorists try to meet the issue of unlanguage experience by extending the very concept of narrative to include forms of narrative outside language narrative. To allow for unlanguage and prelanguage experience requires at the very least that we add a limit to the narrative self. The limit is this: rather than thinking of narrative as the sole source of creating and defining self, it may be more helpful (in therapy at least) for us to think of narrative as being one way in which we come to know self.

To think of narrative as a way of *knowing* self rather than the exclusive way of *being* self is not to retreat to a modernist idea of essential self, for we can continue to think of knowledge as a powerful social process which in itself comes to construct experience, but which is also constructed *by* experience. To allow for a recursiveness of narrative knowing and experience gives much greater space for the lived experience of the 'realness' of being human in all its complexity, fragility and finiteness.

## CONCLUSION

We come then to the end of the discussion prompted by questions of the postmodern narrative self, and this may be summarised fairly swiftly.

Must the relational self be always positioned oppositionally to the autonomous self? No, not if we treat the autonomous and relational self as different kinds of descriptions of self which each meet something about the complexity of lived experience.

How fluid is self? The self is not boundlessly fluid, but our stories of ourselves, and our experience of ourselves, are both created and limited by the very real and very particular landscapes of people and events and social practices and ideas in which we live. The self is fluid, but is also bound by what Kerby (1991) calls the 'historicity and connectedness' of human experience.

In what sense is the self narrative? A lot of systemic narrative theorising has followed Gergen in taking a position which privileges language narrative, and which locates the existence of the social world and self within language. If in therapy we decide we want to allow for the domain of prelanguage and unlanguage experience, then there needs to be some qualification. Perhaps we could think of narrative as being one way in which

we come to know self, rather than languaged narrative coming to define the total way of 'being' self.

But let me take the opportunity to comment in a broader way on the project of theorising self and the use of the postmodern narrative metaphor in systemic therapy. The postmodern narrative self as a set of ideas about theory is very interesting to consider, precisely because it meets and transforms some of the limits of the earlier cybernetic systems metaphor with respect to both theory and practice. My questioning of the limits of the narrative self does not detract from the importance of this contribution. Yet to consider theory as always having both capacities and limits does break with much of the current framing of narrative ideas, perhaps because in this period of popularisation, the emphasis has been so firmly on the capacities of the narrative frame.

Though postmodernism prides itself on abandoning foundational attachment to theory, there still seems to be an oppositional momentum, in which ideas become censored, and recursive dualities become lost. Dare I say that this momentum may show that theory is itself always embedded in knowledge as a powerful social process, and the fact that we are aware of this (as postmodernists or in any other way) does not mean that we are still not part of this process.

My arguments about the postmodern narrative self have been a plea to allow ourselves the freedom to stray from the purity of one particular set of ideas and its embedded oppositionality. Specifically, I have argued that we might allow ourselves to move between the dualities of the autonomous and relational self, to live with the messiness of 'limited fluidity', and to step outside a total privileging of language in thinking about the relationship of narrative and self. As a kind of case example, this discussion of the postmodern narrative self may be reflected onto the wider discussion about the way in which we are engaging with postmodernist ideas in systemic therapy. To use it this way becomes an argument for conditionality in our relationship with postmodernism: a conditionality about knowledge which hopefully may be embedded in our commitment to practice and lived experience.

## A POSTSCRIPT

*Let me now add a postscript to this theory paper, if only because theory papers have a tendency to float away from the 'lived experience' of therapy! At this point, I would like to remember the thirteen year old boy, his struggle with coming to claim and know himself in a hostile peer environment, and his parents' struggle with their unconditional desire for him to be happy, and their bewilderment about what they should or could do for him.*

*In the year I met with the family, a number of gay men were murdered. In fact, in that year in Sydney, in the category of 'murder by strangers' gay men outnumbered women as victims of murder. In some of the murders, the men were brutally killed by groups*

*of teenage boys, from different schools (public and private), and the killings were planned and took the form of a night out on the town. There was something extremely disturbing about all this when it emerged in the press, and some of the boys were finally charged and convicted. One of the boys was himself secretly gay, and this was reported from the trial.*

*What am I saying as a family therapist? I am wanting to say that there was a very real and a very complex landscape in my young client's life at the point at which he was coming to develop and know his own sexuality, and himself as a young man. The family landscape was real and complex. If he were to come to know himself as homosexual, would this come to be felt (/constructed) as another burdening tragedy within the family? And what might it mean for him to claim a joyful and alive sexuality, given that his brother was in an institution and his father still under threat of death? Who would it be disloyal to, and who might it be loyal to, in a family with very close and very loving connections? And in this family in which difference has been experienced and marked as tragedy, what might his own forms of masculinity and creativity come to mean?*

*The wider social landscape was also real and complex. How dangerous was the violence in the boy's harassment at school, and how did it restrict and intimidate his capacity to develop and know himself? How damaging could that homophobia be to his private knowledge of self? And how was he going to have the space to find and claim whatever form of sexuality was emerging in an environment of harassment by peers and reports of brutal murders of gay men by schoolboys?*

*Was the boy's self relational? Well, yes of course, but he was also struggling to claim and hold onto a sense of individuality in a complex relational field—am I pushing it too much here to say that he may need some space to develop a sense of his autonomous self?*

*Was the boy's self fluid? Well yes, but not endlessly fluid! He did not have limitless stories here, but rather a task of coming to have a good story for himself in a very particular context. Contexts are not determining, but they shape the form and possibilities of stories, and dangers and possibilities have to be navigated.*

*Does the self only reside in dialogue and narrative? Please, can we just take the 'only' out of this question! Disability and mortality do not only reside in dialogue and narrative, murder does not only reside in dialogue and narrative. And am I just being an incurable (modernist) romantic in thinking that human connectedness and love, and sexual desire and creativity and joy, do not only reside in dialogue and narrative?*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>That some postmodernist ideas and momentums may be antithetical to the commitments of therapy is an argument made by Stephen Frosh (1995).

<sup>2</sup>I have specified 'North American' here, because I think Michael White's work has a much stronger relationship to narrative theory than it has to social constructionist theory. This is hard to tease out, partly

because the two sets of theory are often used interchangeably in the literature, and partly because at this comparatively early stage in their development there has been a tendency to homogenise the different versions of narrative therapies. It should be noted, I think, that Foucault's ideas (which have a strong if complicated presence in White's work) are not particularly harmonious with North American social constructionist theory—Foucault stresses that concrete social practices create the possibility of certain language ideas (see Flaskas and Humphreys, 1993), whereas the emphasis is the reverse in social constructionist theory. It is the presence of Foucault's ideas that leads White (1991, 1993) to write of 'practices of the self', rather than ideas of the self.

<sup>3</sup>John Byng-Hall's work (1995) makes very strong and interesting connections between attachment as a process and conscious and unconscious family scripts, and work with families' stories.

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