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1

Introduction: Poststructuralist Ideas and Narrative Inquiry

I have struggled with writing this chapter more than any of the others. There have been many versions, most of them in different styles of academic prose/social science report writing. My tussles have been with the pros and cons of starting with an 'ideas' chapter. It seems important to 'set the scene' by embedding my work within its histories, cultures and contexts. The practice of research is akin to a series of conversations and it seems useful to locate this entry in relation to the ongoing dialogue. Nonetheless my experience of both therapy and research 'in process' is not that ideas and histories inform practices or vice versa, but rather that they sustain each other in a constant, fluid exchange as the work progresses. In many research texts where there is an 'ideas' section at the beginning, readers are invited to skip the first part and come back to it later, the implication being (or so it seems to me) that ideas are abstract and harder to absorb than the stories of 'what happened next' and also, perhaps, that if the text reflects some sense of chronological time then the ideas came first. So, there's the conundrum. How might I write a beginning chapter that destabilises certainties and clearly positions my work without preserving it in aspic? And how can I also write in engaging ways and in the spirit of my stated intention of moving without apology between different narrative genres and discourses such as fiction, autoethnographic narrative, re-presented conversations, and academic prose?

I routinely teach courses exploring these issues and my approach is likely to be similar to that advocated by White (1997a) in relation to supervision or consultation practices within psychotherapy, wherein he invites people to interview him and he then interviews them back. In teaching contexts I have often invited people to interview me, then each other, and then pool together our body of knowledge-in-context. In positioning ourselves, in these conversations, as curious 'ethnographers' I find that we become intrigued with the possibilities before us and tend to find ourselves excavating knowledge that we did not know

we had, or speaking in quite unexpected ways. I have often found myself re-interrogating my ideas rather than settling for the reproduction of that which has become familiar. This becomes a process of 'exoticising the domestic' (Bourdieu, 1988).

I thought of inviting someone to interview me, having very much enjoyed the sense of movement, and of entering into a dialogue as a reader, presented in Strong and Paré's (2004) series of unfinished conversations about discursive therapy. I also had quite a strong sense of the particular cross-section of territories that I currently inhabited and wanted to convey. Perhaps I could interview myself? I spent some time metaphorically interviewing the possible 'selves' who might apply for this job. They all seemed a bit too close to the bone, but then I remembered Mr Gingey. Mr Gingey was an 'imaginary friend' who had shared my life until I was about seven years old. Now long since forgotten, he had been invented by my brother Chris and had been a useful, but somewhat unpredictable, childhood ally and co-conspirator. In our time, we had been up to all sorts together. Perhaps we could rekindle our relationship and get up to some more?

Mr Gingey had clearly inhabited the same territories that I had for the last 50 years, whilst at the same time remaining a somewhat shadowy figure. The appeal of Mr Gingey's unexpected arrival as co-researcher in this chapter, for me at least, has been the highlighting of relationships between truths, make-believe, 'legitimate' research and the impact of the stories we tell ourselves about our lives. In inviting Mr Gingey into this text as my co-researcher (he appears again briefly in Chapter 8), I found myself 'writing against the grain' of the sorts of chapters that begin research texts.

The introduction of Mr Gingey as a character so early on in this book troubles the edges of research and practice and perhaps merges the territories mapped out as 'adult' and 'childhood' domains. To write about imaginary characters and have conversations with them is well within the conventions of therapy practice stories (especially play therapy, see Betterton and Epston, 1998; Freeman et al., 1997). It is the stuff of novels, wherein walls can dissolve, revealing different time zones (Lessing, 1974), where we are propelled into future worlds (Atwood, 1985), worlds inhabited by the occasional winged woman or bizarrely telepathic twins (Carter, 1984, 1992) or vividly portrayed ancestral spirits (Allende, 1986). In novels people float mysteriously from one part of the world to another, write and speak to each other after death and gradually talk and sing themselves into different futures (Shange, 1995; Walker, 1989, 1992).

In research texts, it is unusual for imaginary, fictional or winged characters to dwell alongside the author, whose role is more routinely to describe such characters and other people's relationships with them from a discreet distance. Exceptions from the world of counselling and counselling research are Michael White's (1997b) Mouse Stories, Miller Mair's poetics of experience (1989) and John McLeod's (1997) narrative case history of the fictional character 'Tubby' from David Lodge's (1995) novel *Therapy*.

Mr Gingey's arrival in this chapter presents me with some dangers as well as permissions as an author. Readers may mistake playfulness for lack of substance. They may also elide a stand against certainties and forms that authorise with a lack of rigour. This seems a risk worth taking, however, for Mr Gingey not only provides a useful foil who can present commonly asked questions about poststructuralism, feminism, queer studies and their relationships with the 'narrative turn', he also neatly introduces 'magical realism', itself a 'transgressive and subversive' fictional genre (Bowers, 2004: 67), very early on into this research text. The ideas presented in this section are complex and, I think, worth grappling with, but it is hard to present anything like a 'textbook' style account of them in ways that stay tentative, contingent and in the moment. Things explained in textbook style become very definite and suddenly we find 'postmodernism/poststructuralism' has become a fixed entity, rather than

> the code name for the crisis of confidence in western conceptual systems. (Lather, 1991: 159)

A conversation with Mr Gingey supports the lightness that I feel these ideas should be worn with. These ideas, and the practices that they sustain, are of their domains and of their moments in history. I have found them a useful companion in excavating people's practices of living in late twentieth-/early twenty-first-century Europe (indeed, this is where they come from), but I have no expectations of their continued endurance or universality.

No doubt from the vantage point of the future (or indeed the non-western/westernised present), 'narrative' formulations of therapy and research will look as arbitrary and lacking in complexity as most nineteenth-century treatments and theories do to me today. I am already aware that narrative configurations are anthropomorphic and privilege human understandings and constructions. I aspire to a more ecologically and globally connected way of constructing knowledge (more of

which, in the last chapter; see also Byrne, 1998), a new 'code name for the crisis of confidence in anthropomorphic conceptual systems', and hope this may prevail in the future.

The advent of Mr Gingey also seemed to scatter and muddle the pages and when I came to put them back together they were not of the same size or font. There were gaps and cracks and fragments of stories that seemed not entirely to fit, traces that may not even be part of this time–space dimension. They appear to have fallen through a grating from one world, or time, to another. This is the space that Mr Gingey seemed to be inviting us all to step into. It is a space that is very familiar within a more 'literary genre', as Pullman (2003: i) eloquently demonstrates in 'Lyra's story':

> This . . . contains a story and several other things. The other things might be connected with the story, or they might not; they might be connected to stories that haven't appeared yet. It's not easy to tell. It's easy to imagine how they might have turned up though. The world is full of things like that: old post cards, theatre programmes, leaflets about bomb-proofing your cellar . . . All these tattered old bits and pieces have a history and a meaning. A group of them together can seem like traces . . .

Literatures of the Imagination

This book is not a novel, but to pretend towards such imaginary texts as the novels of Philip Pullman, Doris Lessing and Margaret Atwood immediately contextualises my relationship with narrative theory and practice. The text became a layered account (Ronai, 1992) that included multifarious 'tattered old bits and pieces' that had histories and, when put together, seemed to construct a meaning.

My own interest in multi-storied texts originates in my passionate and continuing relationship with fiction and poetry. My thirst for multi-storied, overlapping, layered accounts was not inculcated by the (much later) rich narrative research texts emerging within other disciplines such as sociology (Langellier, 2001), anthropology (Behar, 1993) or psychology (Mishler, 2000), nor by the works of the new poststructuralist ethnographers like Ronai (1992, 1999), Davies (2000a, 2000b) and Lather (1991), and Lather and Smithies (1997) (of all of whom, more later). It was inspired by the multi-voiced plays and poems of Ntozake Shange, the conversations between spirit, present and future

worlds that are scattered throughout the works of Angela Carter and Isabel Allende, and the ambiguities that remain in the works of Milan Kundera and David Malouf. These are the narratives that I have lived alongside for the past thirty-plus years and through which I have made some sense of my life. My later interest in storied research was already resonant with these possibilities.

Traditionally, although there may be frequent traces of intertextuality with popular and other cultural markers, psychotherapy research and practice texts tend to cite each other and the literatures of mainstream psychological research and 'social science'. Intertextuality (the allusions and traces from one cultural reference point contained in another) within this genre is indicated via rigorously upheld traditions of academic referencing. There is considerable value in locating texts within bodies of knowledge, but this also gives a thin description of the antecedents of much therapeutic development and creativity. Despite evidence of the anthropological, theological, historical, political, literary- and arts-based backgrounds of many counsellors and psychotherapists within the UK at least (McLeod, 2001b, 2001c; Speedy, 2001), the literatures of the imagination are rarely cited. Perhaps counselling psychologists at work *really are* thinking about what stage within the framework or model they have reached and what level of intervention it would be useful to make. For myself, I am mostly listening out for 'talk that sings' (Bird, 2000: 1–47), and the literature that most commonly comes to mind as I work either as a therapist or a researcher tends to be poetry.

* * *

'Hello m' dear', I said. 'Haven't seen you for ages, what exactly are you up to these days?'

'Well, at the moment I'm just putting the finishing touches to my book,' she replied proudly.

'Are you indeed', I grinned, trying to look impressed, 'and what's it about, might I be so bold as to enquire?'

'You might,' she said, bowing graciously, 'It's about narrative inquiry and psychotherapy and it's all but finished.'

It was quite dark in the room. The sun was just coming up and the curtains were still half drawn. I had awoken early, my head full of memories and, armed with a mug of earl grey tea and a packet of 'ginger nut' biscuits, I had crept onto the end of the bed and begun

writing down the ideas that seemed to have taken shape whilst I was asleep. I did not notice Jane at first. We reached for the ginger nuts at the same time and I looked up, startled, to find her sitting up, silently watching me. She looked much older than I remembered although she seemed to be dressed in the same crumpled pair of pyjamas that she had worn forty years ago. I felt a bit overdressed in my green Harris tweed suit and red bow tie. Then I remembered her great love of sweet biscuits and realised that I was going to have to keep my wits about me if I was to get my hands on any of these ginger nuts. And so our conversations began . . .

* * *

Mr Gingey: Is narrative just a trendy word for story or something more?

Jane: Well, 'narrative' is a rather overarching term for the stories we tell ourselves, but it's not the same as 'story' or 'life story'. There are multifarious versions of what narrative means to people, ranging from the broad Aristotelian concept of a plot, taking place over time, including a beginning, a middle and an end; to Labov's (1982; Labov and Waletzky, 1967) very specific, linguistic structuralist understanding of stories within conversation, providing an abstract, orientating the listener, describing complicating action, evaluating the meaning, resolving the action and ending with a coda; and to Sarbin's (1986: 9) claim that narrative is 'the organising principle for human action'.

Narrative researchers position themselves differently across a huge range of understandings of what it means to be human as well as across versions of 'narrative'. Some writers, such as McAdams (1993), construct their research against a range of possible archetypal stories or plots (see Booker, 2004). Others, such as Riessman (1993), Riessman and Speedy (2006) and McLeod (1997) have a looser, broader definition of narrative in conversation as significant episodes of 'sequence and consequence' and 'plot-over-time'.

In positioning myself within a narrative frame, I find myself invited into particular ways of seeing and knowing. Narrative describes forms of discourse that offer a coherence over time, within space and context, so that: 'narrators make sense of themselves, social situations, and history' (Bamberg and McCabe, 1998: iii; see also Clandinin and Connolly, 2000).

This book is not about *whole* life histories, but about the moments and turning points in people's lives that they struggle to make sense of

– the episodes that bring them into contact with therapy and counselling, or indeed, the moments that turn them into therapists and counsellors. It is about the ways these moments are storied or made sense of in different contexts, over time. It is also about different kinds of time and the ways that autobiographical time, mythical time and narrative time, for instance, would all support different tellings of the same story (see Freeman, 1998).

Mr Gingey: Aren't you prying? Why would I want to know about the stories that people tell you in therapy, isn't that their business?

Jane: Well this book isn't about the things people want to keep to themselves, but you've put your finger on one of the main reasons that I wanted to write it. This stark private/public divide comes, I think, from modern developments in western culture around what it means to be an 'individual' person. It frequently disguises the social and historical roots of what are considered to be 'personal' concerns. I have often criticised the 'personal problems industry' for making community and political issues into individual concerns (see Speedy, 2000a, 2001c). Riessman (2005) speaks of the 'social' causes of private troubles, and this book is about personal everyday accounts but also about their social and historical connotations and connections. Bird (2004b) speaks of a 'relational' practice of conversation and I have found that placing people's life stories in relation to others and in relation to situations and discourses allows people to gain a better grasp of what might be their individual 'business', as you call it, and what might lie beyond the realms of individual agency.

Mr Gingey: Okay hang on, can we just back up here? Why couldn't you have just called this book 'life stories'?

Jane: Well yes, I could have I suppose, but I also want to explore the conversations that take place at the crossroads where narrative therapy and narrative research meet. I'm interested in 'troubling the edges' between therapy and research practices. There are those that see narrative therapy as a branch of family therapy (Polkinghorne, 2004) and certainly many of its advocates come from that field. There are those who consider that narrative therapy has quite a lot to offer the whole domain of counselling and psychotherapy (Monk et al., 1997; Payne, 2006), but I also think that narrative therapy has much to offer the world of narrative inquiry and vice versa. Perhaps both these fields might gain from veering towards more arts-based 'ways of seeing'. The kinds of

narrative theories I am interested in (and there are many, I'll talk about some in just a second) are those connected with poststructuralist ideas and with what Foucault (1988a) described as the art (and/or) performance of the self. This is more of an invitation towards arts- and literary-based research methods than seems to have been taken up thus far.

Mr Gingey: Oh, so these are new ideas are they?

Jane: Well, maybe a new juxtaposition or constellation of ideas: all research is always part of a conversation, and ideas, like planets in a constellation, come from somewhere and are always fluid and on their way somewhere else. Narrative forms of inquiry have been emerging over the last thirty years or more. This book represents a contribution along the way and an introduction to a meeting place that I have found quite useful and hope that other people might.

There have been quite a lot of books about narrative research and narrative therapy practices, but very few are situated at the crossroads between them. Angus and McLeod's (2004a) handbook is a very comprehensive overview of existing narrative research and therapy traditions, but not so much concerned with the ways these traditions might merge with the other more arts-based research genres. A narrative turn invites our actual minds into other possible worlds (to paraphrase Bruner, 1986a) but also speaks to fictionalised, imagined and impossible worlds and perhaps hints at the languages of the unsaid and the unsayable (Rogers et al., 1999).

The crossover between research, fiction and other arts-based genres is becoming more of a consideration within educational and other applied 'social science' fields (Clough, 2002; Sparkes, 2002a) and is well established within anthropological, ethnographic traditions (Mathiessen, 1962; Harris, 1985; Van Maanen, 1988) but has not impinged very much upon psychotherapy research. This book contains some of what Van Maanen (1988) calls 'realist' tales of actual conversations (with Donald, for example, in Chapter 4, and Gina et al., in Chapter 6), as well as some poetically represented accounts of conversations that took place (as with Morag and Hyatt in Chapter 5) in both therapy and research. It also contains fictionalised accounts and even magical realist tales (as in Chapters 8, 9 and 10).

Narrative therapy practitioners are beginning to conceive of many of their practices as legitimate, non-traditional ways of co-researching their own therapy but they have not really begun to consider how ways of working such as definitional ceremony (more of which in Chapter 6) might sustain new developments in collaborative and participatory

research across a variety of domains. Poststructuralist and postcolonialist writers have produced, in combination with literary, feminist and queer studies, a whole gamut of transgressive, experimental and emancipatory research genres. As a narrative practitioner and researcher with a love of new kinds of writing I find myself stepping into a space that juxtaposes collective biographies with definitional ceremonies, auto-ethnographies with experimental poetics, and that my practices of both therapy and research are as much sustained and enriched by works of fiction and poetry as they are by more professional and academic treatises.

Mr Gingey (rubbing his forehead fiercely): Whoa!! Hang on dearie; I'll go and make us another nice cup of earl grey and then perhaps you can take me back to how you got started on all this. You have to bear in mind that the last time I had an extended conversation with you, you had just fallen off your trike and hurt yourself quite badly and the world wasn't post-anything, except post-war of course. I feel suddenly like a bit of a relic.

* * *

I went off to the kitchen, made a proper pot of tea and laid out a tray with cups, saucers and milk in a proper jug. The ginger nuts seemed to have mysteriously disappeared, leaving just a crumpled empty packet, but I found some nice shortbread fingers and took the tray out onto the deck in the back garden. It was one of those unusually warm and sunny autumn mornings with clear blue skies. Jane was sitting out on the deck, beneath the tree ferns. She had added a blue woollen robe and soft slippers to the pyjamas.

* * *

Mr Gingey: Let's get back to this book. How did you end up at this 'crossroads' in the first place?

Jane: Well, it was through an interest in narrative inquiry methods that I stumbled across narrative therapy practices (see Crockett, 2004, for a 'reverse' version of this story). I was a counsellor educator exploring and researching ways of undertaking research interviews. There seemed to be some information within the research literatures, particularly from anthropology and ethnography, about the curious, unknowing 'position' that a discovery-orientated (as opposed to interrogative

and hypothesis investigating) researcher might take up (Coffey 1999; Kvale, 1996; Mishler, 1986, 2000), but nothing about actually *conducting* research interviews (Chapter 4 discusses these circumstances more fully). I gained considerable amounts of information about narrative theory from literature searching, but almost the only interest in the *practice* of narrative interviewing came from the narrative therapies.

The links between narrative therapy and poststructuralism, feminism and literary metaphors for discerning the world, made sense to me and I really liked these 'practices' of identity as a social achievement. Narrative therapy practices of definitional ceremony, of re-membering conversations, of de-centred therapist positions, were all *social* practices of conversation. This was very different from the group therapy practices of the more traditional psychologies.

Initially, I began working in a style akin to 'narrative therapy' from my position as a research interviewer. Then, when it seemed to me that my research interviews were more effective and more therapeutic than my counselling sessions, these ideas began to seep into my therapeutic practice as well. I began to travel the globe, soaking up narrative approaches to therapy wherever I could.

It was the politics of narrative therapy practice that fitted, for me, the commitments to social justice and the stated intention to place therapeutic endeavours outside 'special relationships' with specialist people, and back within people's everyday lives and communities. At the same time, I was working in a leading international research university, which provided the ground to position narrative therapy alongside a whole collection of poststructuralist, discursive and 'critical' ideas. This included emerging narrative research practices like collective biography, the 'new' ethnographies, the collating of 'local' knowledges advocated by cultural anthropologists and sociologists, writing as inquiry, auto-ethnography and so on. These all seemed quite familiar literary genres and ways of working to me, as I had grown up amidst a world of collective action and on a diet of postcolonial and feminist fiction and poetry.

Poststructuralist experimental texts, when I came across them later, described a world I was already immersed in. What struck me as something of a gap in communication within all this was that although narrative therapists and some narrative inquirers were drawing on the same body of poststructuralist/critical ideas (including those from literary theory) to inform their work, neither of these groups seemed as much informed by each other as they might be, or by the fictional or arts-based genres that had in many instances preceded them.

Mr Gingey: Okay. I think I need to try and understand these crossings over one at a time, over many biscuits. First of all, are you the only person standing at this crossroads?

Standing at the Crossroads between the 'Narrative Turn' and 'Postmodern' Uncertainties

Jane: Not at all, this is a multidisciplinary and very busy crossroads in several dimensions. My overarching description of this crossroads would be the place where the 'narrative turn' (a turn towards 'story' as a metaphor for how human beings make sense of their lives and their world) meets the postmodern condition of uncertainties and incredulities towards universal truths. There are many people working at the interfaces between these intersections, and each brings a different (and shifting) emphasis and contribution.

From the work of Myerhoff (1980, 1986) onwards there has been a crossover between anthropology, the 'new' ethnographies, and narrative therapy practices. Gremillion (2003) and Epston (2001), for instance, are both situated at this interface, the former bringing understandings from narrative therapy practice into a feminist anthropological research domain and the latter advocating the use of ethnographic imagination and remaining attuned to anthropological writing in relation to the ethics and politics of representing 'others' within therapeutic domains.

Similarly, Drewery and Winslade (1997), Parker (1999) and Besley (2001) are amongst a group positioned within the space between 'the academy' and 'therapy'. This territory crosses the borders and extends the conversations between poststructuralist philosophies (the work of Foucault, Derrida and others) and the more discursive, narrative and socially constructed therapy practices that interrogate power relationships between counsellors and clients.

Some narrative therapists (Epston, 2004, and Bird, 2000, for instance) actually describe the work they do as 'co-research': a form of research alongside people, into matters that are of concern to them in their lives. Bird (2004a) speaks of researching the resources that people have or might have available in their lives. This lends itself to a blurring of research and therapy practices, as does the work of some social-sciences researchers who are beginning to realise the value of narrative practices such as reflecting team work and compassionate witnessing, which extends beyond therapeutic conversations and into wider research domains (see Gergen, 2004).

Mr Gingey: So you are wanting to show us what's transferable between these fields, and question the differences between them?

Jane: Well yes, that's part of it, but this is not just a one-dimensional crossroads between therapy and research. There is another dimension, not so much a crossroads, but rather a 'blurring of genres' (Geertz, 1980) between ways of thinking about and re-searching the world. This is the crossroads where arts-based methods meet 'the social sciences'. I was talking about fiction and poetry just a moment ago, but there are also people researching and describing their social world and those of others in experimental and creative ways, such as Richardson (2000a, 2001) and Clough (2002) in writerly and poetic ways, and Trinh (1999) and Ruby (2000) in terms of cinematic and visual narratives. Somehow, therapy researchers have embraced personal narrative as researcher reflexivity, and poetic stanza as transcription of their clients' words (Etherington, 2004; McLeod and Balamoutsou, 1996; Speedy, 2001), but have been more tentative in relation to experimental and fictionalised accounts of their work with others and of moving between fiction, imagery, fantasy and life story in ways that reflect the layers of meaning and genres that are often apparent in therapy sessions. These are borders Mair (1989) has long since transgressed. They are waiting to be crossed by others:

> To live in a world of personal vision
> Rather than conventional vision
> Is perhaps to live in a desert
> Or in a world of dwarfs
> Demons, pygmies and elves
> A place of fear with flashes and sparks
> Of love and beauty.
>
> (Mair, 1989: 132)

Mr Gingey (hanging upside down from the lowest branch of the old pear tree, yet somehow still remaining the consummate toff): Mmm, now you're talking. Miller Mair sounds like a man with an appropriate appreciation of the little people. Does he have any imaginary friends? Okay. So this is not so much a crossroads then, more like a multiple meeting place. Any more border crossings?

Jane: Well yes, for me there are. These literary spaces may have been opened up by the novelists and poets I talked about earlier but they are also inhabited by poststructuralists, particularly feminists (Lather and

Smithies, 1997, and Davies, 2000a, for instance) and those engaged in queer, feminist and postcolonial studies (such as Tierney, 1997; Chaudry, 1997; Ifegwunigwe, 1999).

Poststructuralism is not of itself a philosophy of the margins, but in drawing attention towards the discourses and discontinuities governing sexual norms (Foucault, 1981) or the many different readings of any text that might be available to readers from different positions (Derrida, 1978), poststructuralist ideas resonate particularly strongly with the life experiences of those outside contemporary 'regimes of truth' in society.

These ideas also place counselling very much within a political arena with its own regimes of truth, ways of describing itself and also ways of researching itself. It seems to me that most people seeking therapeutic support in their lives are doing so because they have found themselves, sometimes inexplicably, at the margins. Thus, the 'unassuming geeks', the group of young, mostly white, European men thinking about suicide whose account appears in Chapter 7, found the writings of Ntozake Shange, an African American woman, highly evocative. They were a predominantly heterosexual group, but also found Butler's (1993) explorations of 'critically queer' identities connected very closely to their own experiences.

There has been a growing critique of mainstream research methods from those at the postcolonial margins (see, for instance, Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999) and this often seems to bring us back full circle towards more 'storied' accounts of people's lives. Sarris's (1994: 5) conversation with Mabel McKay, the Native American Indian who was the subject of his research, illustrates some of these cultural tensions between people's stories and the research cultures and conventions that constrain and dissect the ways they might be told:

> *GS*: A theme is a point that connects all the dots, ties up all the stories.
> *MM*: That's funny. Tying up all the stories. Why would somebody want to do that?
> *GS*: When you write a book there has to be a story, or idea, a theme . . .
> *MM*: Well, theme. I don't know nothing about. That's somebody else's rule.

Mr Gingey: I'm with Mabel. She sounds a fine woman. Let's have that cup of tea now, seeing as how you've finished off all the biscuits . . .

Jane (sounding outraged): Excuse me!! I haven't had one . . . You just took them up into the pear tree and chomped your way through the lot.

Mr Gingey: Nothing's changed around here in fifty years I see. I still get the blame for what you get up to. Now getting back to this book, I'm a bit at sea. Is all this jargon really necessary? How is it going to help the rest of us make sense of our world? Or are you just trying to make yourself sound clever because you've got a job at a university?

Postmodern Times, Poststructuralist Ideas and Socially Constructed Worlds

Jane: Well 'new jargon' has a range of purposes that may not have anything to do with cleverness. I think that these ideas – poststructuralism, for example – are new and difficult to get an initial grasp of, but are worth struggling with, especially for counselling researchers. In the 'developed' world we have had such individualistically constructed notions of people's life spaces up until recently, often based on very structured (or structuralist) models of what it means to be a human being. I also think that therapists should have an interest in ways of interrogating that which is excluded, that which is outside the mainstream and that which is 'other' than dominant in society.

I lack clairvoyance and cannot tell you which of these notions is going to endure and which is passing contemporary jargon, but my sense is that in the future this period in the history of ideas will be looked upon as the postmodern era. Perhaps it will even be the space in between eras, but we do not know what it is in between yet. I can give you my take on this, although the distinctions between how some people use these words vary considerably and have also changed over time.

Mr Gingey: Well go ahead, dearie, go ahead.

Jane: **The postmodern era** or condition (Currie, 1998; Lyons, 1999) describes a growing sense within western societies following the Second World War and the end of empires in the traditional sense (although not of western imperialism), in academic disciplines, throughout popular culture and across political, religious and geographical borders, that there is less certainty and universality in the world. This worldview inculcates less sense of adherence to one overarching truth or belief

system, but rather, aspires to an acceptance of many possible truths, many ethics to live by, muliple cultures, various forms of social organisation and so forth.

This has become at the least an acceptance, and at best a celebration, of diversity and has led to an academic interest in 'local' rather than universal knowledge. People have also become less sure of the twentieth-century 'progress myth' in relation to economic expansion and technological development and are not only less certain that we know the answers, but are also perhaps more questioning that 'the right answers' (as opposed to several possible, contingent solutions-in-the moment) are out there waiting to be found. There are links here, too, with theories that expand beyond human experience and out into the complexities, chaos and interconnectedness of the world's ecologies (see Cilliers, 1998; Lewin, 1993).

Lyotard, who first coined the phrase, describes postmodernity as 'incredulity towards metanarratives' (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv) – hence an interest throughout this book in local, personal and culturally contingent stories. This is not to say that modernity has been replaced, any more than modernity, in its heyday, replaced traditional religious and folk accounts, or that they in their heyday replaced magical versions of how the world worked, but rather that whilst all these modes of thought and practice co-exist, postmodernity is enjoying a certain currency. Postmodernity refers (Lyons, 1999: 9) 'above all to the exhaustion – but not necessarily the demise – of modernity'.

Mr Gingey: Yes, okay, but what about all those other terms? Are postmodern, 'socially constructed' and poststructural absolutely necessary distinctions, or are these lots of ways of saying the same thing, again?

Jane: Well, 'social constructionism' (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1999) is a term used almost exclusively by psychologists as a way of positioning themselves outside the traditions of mainstream psychology. In a way, social constructionism represents 'psychology' acknowledging ways of knowing that are already familiar to sociologists and anthropologists and that are more routinely described by them as 'socio-cultural theory'. Social constructionism heralds a recognition that people construct their lives and identities socially and culturally, through language, discourse and communication.

Social constructionism also represents western, particularly post-cold-war North American, psychologists catching up with the work of Soviet theorists such as Bakhtin and Vygotsky, who described creativity

and meaning-making as collaborative activities and 'reality' as the space between people engaged in conversation. Bakhtin (1986) argued that there was always an invisible third party that conversations were addressed to, an imaginary 'super addressee'. Vygotsky was interested in learning and in how people's learning (particularly children's learning) took place within a 'zone' between them and the adults they were learning from. Adults (often parents) stretched or 'scaffolded' their explanations and conversations with children across what Vygotsky (1978) described as the 'zone of proximal development', between the child's grasp of ideas or meanings and their own, moving back across the zone towards what was meaningful to the child if their conversation had stretched too far. Vygotsky saw the shared meanings and ways of learning that parents and children generated as socio-cultural constructions, rather than (for example) innately developmental phenomena.

Mr Gingey: Well we seem to be zoning in on Gingey here. I'M GETTING QUITE A GRASP OF THIS. But you don't seem very keen on all this. In fact you are beginning to sound bored, a bit like a textbook. What's the problem?

Jane: Not a problem, exactly. I find collaborative constructs of creativity and dialogic understandings of meaning-making extraordinary contributions. I do, however, sometimes detect a certain determinism from social constructionism, almost as if socio-cultural factors, albeit contextual and contingent, have become the new structuralism or the latest 'grand narrative'. Our socio-cultural saturation of 'selves' (Gergen, 1992) may have become a new certainty, leaving little space for different, local knowledges or personal agencies.

Perhaps it is sometimes to do with my arts-based, literary tendencies, or my feminist experience of 'resistance from the margins', that draws me more towards poststructuralism. Poststructuralism, quite simply a move away from structuralism or essentialism 'concerning the relationship between human beings, the world, and the practices of making or reproducing meanings' (Belsey, 2002: 5), maintains that, as words have no absolute meaning, any text (body of work, group of ideas or conversation, for instance) is open to an unlimited range of local interpretations. This opens up the space for Geertz's (1983) emphasis on the legitimacy of local, partial knowledge and local, contingent stories. This sense of the infinite possibilities in conversations, stories and other texts and Derrida's (1976) invitation to regard this muliplicity of possible meanings as a 'chora' (the Greek word for 'womb') or fruitful, liminal space seem to stand on the side of hope and in a place of agency.

Deconstruction has frequently been regarded as a somewhat nihilistic contribution, so perhaps I should unpack my sense of hope and excitement (particularly in relation to the talking therapies) a little more. Derrida's (1976) emphasis was not only on 'difference': the way the meaning of the words we use refers (and defers) to their dualistic opposite (e.g. transparency's dependence on opacity for its meaning). He was also interested in intertextuality: in the many traces of other words and other meanings in the space in-between these words ('see-through', 'frosted', etc.) and in the trail of other meanings, from other contexts, that might become available ('see-through', 'leading towards', 'sham', and so on). For Derrida, and subsequently for narrative therapists, the language people used became an archaeological site, with conversations open to an infinite variety of possible meanings and histories that might engage therapists and clients (and/or co-researchers).

Mr Gingey: So deconstructing what people say is like *taking apart their meanings*?

Jane: Well, yes, putting what people take for granted as the story of things 'under erasure', having a look at the assumptions behind it and the possible other meanings contained therein. Michael White (1997a) described this process as searching for the 'absent but implicit'. Take the phrase 'imaginary friend' for instance. This is a particular category of friend, but is 'imaginary' more or less 'real' than other kinds of friend. If you have an imaginary friend, does that mean your friend doesn't 'exist'?

Mr Gingey: Well you tell me: do you think I exist? Am I real?

Jane: Well, there have been times when I've thought I made you up, and other times when you've surprised me, or even appeared out of nowhere . . . and then you seem to exist in a very real way, but I'm not so interested in whether you exist or not in any absolute, universal sense, as I am in the meaning and significance of an imaginary friend to me. Bird (2004a) describes in some detail her ways of 'escaping from the binaries', which is a poststructuralist conversational practice that I have become very interested in, both as a therapist and as a researcher. Let's take the binary opposites of real and imagined friends, for instance. Bird (2004a) would be interested in what she calls the space in-between these opposites, not in whether you were real or imagined perhaps, but in what holding to the idea of an imaginary friend means

to me now and perhaps what it might have meant to me as a child, and what the differences are (if any) between having conversations out loud with an imaginary friend and with a real friend and whether this difference speaks in similar ways to senior lecturers at leading universities and to little girls. I could go on . . .

Mr Gingey: Please don't. So there's no truth any more? Sounds like anything goes . . .

Jane: Well it sounds to me like there are multiple truths and that deconstructing meanings by putting what people say about themselves under close scrutiny, either as a therapy or as a research process, or both, might lead to greater verisimilitude (truthfulness) and a sense of undermining the dominant discourses that can overshadow marginal versions of life.

Mr Gingey: Mmm. So is this Derrida the main 'ideas man' behind poststructuralism?

Jane: There's a whole bunch: Derrida, Bourdieu, Barthes, Deleuze, the 'French feminists': Kristeva, Iragaray and Cixous, many that came later and are applying these ideas in various ways, like Butler in terms of queer theory, Spivak in terms of postcolonialism and feminism. I'll tell you more about the work of some of these people as this book progresses. Another big 'ideas man' would be Michel Foucault. Foucault's (1980a, 1980b) early work on dominant and other discourses within cultures puts forward the contention that all regimes of truth or dominant discourses also open up the space for acts of resistance. (The term 'discourse' is used by poststructuralist writers to describe the 'language in action' – the ideas and practices with which we shape, and are shaped by, our world and that allow us to both see and make sense of things. Danaher, *et al.* (2000) is a clear introduction.)

Thus, as Foucault showed in tracing the genealogies of sexuality, the construction of homosexuality through its categorisation and condemnation, for example, also opened up the space for a gay-rights movement. There could be no 'rights movement' for gay people before this category of people had been so specifically established and condemned. Thus, between the historically relatively new 'dominant' discourses and violent exclusions of heterosexuality and its opposite 'homosexuality', the space emerges and grows for queer theorists like Butler (1993) to speculate about the instability of clear cut categories of gender and sexuality. Just as queer theory moves from the commonly held view of

heterosexuality as the 'original' category and other categories as differences from this, poststructuralist feminists move from views of women's differences, to excavations of the way genders have been constructed (see Weedon, 1997, and McNay, 2000, for the dance between poststructuralism and feminism). Postcolonial and critical race theories (such as Gunaratnam, 2003; J. McLeod, 2004a) also move towards viewing all such categories (like race and class) as overlapping discourses and identities, and as ongoing sites of power and knowledge in relation to each other. Thus 'whiteness' becomes not just the original, unexamined racial opposite of 'blackness' in society, but the (dominant) product of complex distorting discourses of race and ethnicity that often prevent people from seeing their 'scattered' and contingent postcolonial sense of belonging as a contribution to a diverse society (see Ifegwunigwe, 1999; Richards, 2006). All of these ideas have in common a move away from the binaries of either/or thinking, towards explorations of the 'space in between' and to explorations (and perhaps celebrations) of difference.

Mr Gingey: So poststructuralism, or at least this business of having a careful look at the discourses that prevail, sort of gets underneath the surface and exposes what is really going on, right?

Jane: Well actually it's a bit of a move away from the idea that if you get to the bottom of things and figure out how they work (or are structured) you will find out what is really going on. It's a bit of a move away from saying 'everything is socially constructed' or that 'everything is in the hands of the gods and the ancestors'. It's more a group of ideas that would sustain the practice of continually noticing that there's a lot really going on (to quote Harraway, 2004), but that some of what's going on has more current power and meaning attached to it. Poststructuralism is a move away from the metaphor of 'depth' (and underlying causes and structures of how things are), towards what Geertz (1973b) would describe as 'thick description' – excavations of meanings (in relation to each other) and power relations and the deconstruction of competing and possible stories we might tell ourselves and have been told about ourselves.

Poststructuralist writers have responded to these invitations with regard to the way they represent their research. They have experimented with transgressive and rhizomatic texts: texts that have moved away from linear report-writing genres, texts that disappear under the surface and then burst up in unexpected, yet connected, ways, to 'frame

narratives that work against the terrain of controllable knowledge' (Lather, 2000: 221)

Mr Gingey: Blimey. I can't believe that you just came out with that lot off the top of your head. Do you need a little lie down, or can we just zig-zag back for a moment.

Jane: No, I'm fine thanks. I might just have another half a cup of tea . . . Where do you want to zig-zag?

Mr Gingey: Well, I wondered where we were going with all this in relation to narrative inquiries about people's lives? Can you connect this all up a bit more for me with counselling research, now I've got a bit of a handle on the terminology (not to mention feeling somewhat reinstated as one of the infinite possibilities in the conversation)?

Researching People's Life Stories

Jane: Well, maybe only up to a point. I think that that part of this process of 'messy text' production is a move away from neatly connected and completed work that has had inconsistencies and contradictions and non-commensurate stories 'smoothed' away. There are some connections. The poststructuralism illustrated by Derrida's experimental texts, the 'revolutionary poetics' of poststructuralist feminist writers (such as Kristeva, Iragary and Cixous, see Chapter 5) and the sense of caring for ourselves in everyday living by creating and performing our selves as 'works of art', described in Foucault's later work (Foucault, 1988a, 1988b, Linnell, 2004), are all possible connections and interplays between these ideas and more literary and arts-based research practices.

The kinds of rhizomatic research practices that Lather describes are similar to the practices of 'doubly listening' (White, 2003, more of which in Chapters 4 and 5) developed by narrative therapists – practices of listening to the 'talk that sings', the unsaid, the unsayable and the absent but implicit meanings in conversations. The open or liminal space in people's talk suggests possible entry points towards alternative meanings or traces of forgotten, or unacknowledged, stories. These stories, too, have been running sideways under the surface like interconnected rhizomes, just needing the space to burst forth into somebody's life. But people don't routinely tell the stories of their lives to themselves . . .

Mr Gingey: Well they might if they were an imaginary person that no one had bothered to communicate with for years . . .

Jane: They might indeed, and the particularities of everybody's lives, local circumstances and 'everyday epiphanies' (to quote James Joyce) are different, but if we were to consider meaning-making relational, and identity a social achievement, then that would invite us to consider 'talking to ourselves' and/or to others as a social activity. Who are you talking to, when you tell yourself the stories of your life?

Mr Gingey: Well you, of course, and your brother and other people, sort of shadowy figures in the background, sort of . . . So you are looking to explore the stories of people's lives are you, in relation to the other people that make up their context?

Jane: Yes, the people, the context and the histories and social and other circumstances they find themselves in . . .

Mr Gingey: And you think this kind of research and therapy is better than other traditions?

Jane: Well I don't necessarily find this kind of research or therapy is better, but rather, that it is of the moment and fits with my values. I am well placed to conduct and facilitate it and it describes and theorises different aspects of life in different ways. As I was finishing writing this book the British government was publishing statistics on the lowest suicide rates for 20 years and claiming the withdrawal of large packs of painkillers and related pharmaceuticals from 'over the counter' sales as the cause (Dept of Health, 2003, 2005), and linked this to the current 'suicide prevention strategy'. This is significant information. The collective biographies produced by the 'unassuming geeks' group (a group of young men who have contemplated suicide) in Chapter 6 tell a different story. These are stories written poetically and metaphorically, without cause and effect, that give a different kind of insight into suicide. I am interested in encouraging people to create more of these kinds of texts. When these are placed alongside the statistics of suicide, huge gaps and cracks appear. None of these young men did, or would, consider suicide by taking painkillers. They had all envisaged other versions. Another story emerges.

Mr Gingey: And you prefer that other story?

Jane: No, but I like the fact that this way of working allows those other stories to emerge. Some therapeutic and research conversations create

the space for people to rehearse the stories they already know. This way of working is about moving towards the spaces where untold stories lurk, and that interests me more. Also, in this book, I have deliberately described the chapters as different kinds of stories, rather in the slightly 'folksy' way that Sparkes (2002a, after Van Maanen, 1988) has described his sections as tales. This language is quite deliberate. The world of research, like the lives it is describing, is full of incomplete, non-commensurate stories, some based on themes and categories, some on statistics, some on the narratives people construct that shape and are shaped by their lives. Narrative inquiry attempts to describe the stories of people's lives and how they change over time, according to the spaces and contexts they inhabit.

Mr Gingey: So, why not just write a novel? Make it all up, isn't that what Charles Dickens did? He wasn't a poststructuralist was he. I bet he hadn't heard of half of these ideas, but his books really made a difference didn't they?

Jane: There are many genres of narrative inquiry, and I suppose that Charles Dickens might be described as one of Britain's earliest and most influential ethnographers, but he was also a popular writer selling his stories to national newspapers, and a product of his times. Perhaps, if he were alive today, he might tell those stories with more ambiguity. As a matter of fact I have made some of these research studies up, in the sense that this book does include some 'fictionalised' accounts.

Mr Gingey: So, why make everything so hard and complicated? Why not just tell us a few good stories?

Jane: Well, you know what, Mr Gingey? I do think that we live in a complex and multi-storied world that is sometimes quite hard to unravel and make sense of. At the same time I also hope that I've told you a few good stories here. If you want more of my take on those kinds of questions, you are going to have to get down out of that pear tree and read some of this book, because it just won't all fit into one conversation. All I can do for now is introduce some of these ideas – set the scene, as it were. I think that the literatures of poststructuralism and their applications within postcolonialism and queer studies and feminism (each of them big projects in their own right) should be lightly worn in relation to the arts and crafts of counselling and research, sustaining rather than constraining, you might say . . .

They also have a great deal to offer psychotherapy research because

they are each exploring identities and identity claims being made at the margins and in new ways, and people seeking help from counsellors, regardless of gender or sexual preference or of their relationship with colonisation, tend to find themselves at the margins of their own lives. Narrative inquiries that are cognisant of the dominant discourses within society and the habitual well-rehearsed stories we tell ourselves and ways of telling them, but do not focus on or end with these thin descriptions of our lives, seem to be at the richer and more troublesome end of the spectrum. Irigaray urges us to 'analyse very rigorously the forms that authorise' (1993: 172) and to challenge the so-called neutrality of certain forms of speech. She argues that those not privileged within these authorised discourses will not even be seen, and that the other widely available, but invisible and illegible languages, need to be listened to 'with another ear' and represented subjectively, poetically, experimentally and tentatively since:

> If we go on speaking the same language together we are going to reproduce the same history. (1985: 205)

Counselling practitioners and researchers are also in the 'invisible and illegible languages' business and interested in ways of listening with another ear. These ways of knowing can enrich psychotherapy research conversations. All of this has a bearing on the position of the researcher and people being 'researched' in the text and in relation to different forms of narrative integrity, but the next two chapters have a great deal more to say about that. If this has really captured your attention you might like to engage in some further reading – not just my book, I mean, but some of the texts that take these ideas much further than I can in the space we've got here . . .

Mr Gingey: Oh, homework. Hmm, well, maybe you've forgotten about me and homework, but I was always a little careless around homework. I was the one who tended to drop it on the way home, that kind of thing. I'm not so great with homework as I am at climbing trees.

Jane: Well, yes, but its just that these are complex ideas, especially as most of us around these parts have been brought up with a much more structuralist and certain view of the way human beings work. I'm not speaking for or against tree climbing or homework as a resource here. I certainly wouldn't be keen to decide which of these practices informed my current skills as a therapist or as a researcher more. Predicting the

load-bearing qualities of a branch seems to me to be very much part of my day-to-day repertoire. A strange capacity for hanging upside down from branches has informed both a resilience to 'hang in there' with people's life stories and an eye for an interesting angle on the world. All the ideas and histories I have spoken of here, alongside my life experiences, are part of the archive that informs my work. I bring them alongside me into the conversational space I negotiate with people. They do not sit between us, but they are there by my side to draw on.

Mr Gingey: Well it's always good to spend part of your day hanging upside down, just to keep your brains and your toenails apart from each other. I'm not sure I want to read any really hard books though. I think I left school when you were about seven.

Jane: Mmm. I'll just make you a little reading list, no pressure, and then . . .

Mr Gingey: My Goodness, are we out of biscuits again? How did that happen? I tell you what, I'll just hop over the roof and across the park to the post office on Derby Road and . . . I'll be right back . . .

* * *

And with that, I was gone. I flew straight on up and right out of town without even pausing for biscuits. I left her happily composing her 'no pressure' booklist and of course I never went back. I felt a little mean about that, but I've always had a bit of a mean streak. I dare say she wasted a bit of time and energy out there in her garden, trying to 'imagine' me back into existence when it suited her, but I also felt I needed to challenge the dominant version of just who imagines who around here. I am not here just to be 'constructed' when it pleases those in authority. Power relations cut at least two ways. Besides which, it seemed to me that it was time that she stopped obsessing with all this 'women's literature' and remembered her William Blake:

> He who binds to himself a joy,
> Does the winged life destroy;
> But he who kisses the joy as it flies
> Lives in eternity's sun-rise.
> (Blake, in Stevenson (ed.), 1989)

A 'no pressure' booklist for Mr Gingey

Narrative approaches to research and therapy
Much of the rest of this book explores the relationship between narrative therapy and narrative research in more detail. Further readings about both these are suggested in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. For overviews of narrative, discursive and postmodern takes on therapy practice and research, I would recommend:

Parker, I. (ed.) (1999) *Deconstructing Psychotherapy* (London: Sage).

And, the rather expensive and expansive, but very comprehensive:

Angus, L. and McLeod, J. (eds) (2004) *The Handbook of Narrative and Psychotherapy Practice, Theory and Research* (London: Sage).

Also:

Strong, T. and Paré, D. (eds) (2004) *Furthering Talk: Advances in the Discursive Therapies* (New York: KA/PP).

Poststructuralism
The 'original' texts of poststructuralism are quite difficult for people who are not steeped in the traditions of European philosophy. Some good starting points are:

Belsey, C. (2002) *Post-Structuralism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
Danaher, G., Schirato, T. and Webb, J. (2000) *Understanding Foucault* (London: Sage).

Social construction
Burr, V. (2003) *Social Constructionism*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge). (This is a really clear introduction to social construction and socio-cultural theory.)

See also:

Gergen, K. (1999) *An Invitation to Social Construction* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage).

Feminism, queer studies, postcolonial studies
For clear introductions, I would go to:

hooks, B. (2000) *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press).
Young, R. (2003) *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

And:

Filax, G., Sumara, D., Davis, B. and Shogan, D. (2005) ‘Queer Theory/Lesbian and Gay Approaches’, in Somekh, B. and Lewin, C. (eds) *Research Methods in the Social Sciences* (London: Sage).

Putting these ideas together, some examples

Weedon, C. (1987) *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell).

Bloom, L. (2001) *Under the Sign of Hope: Feminist Methodology and Narrative Interpretation* (New York: State University of New York Press).

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