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Ch. 1 Theories of self and identity

P.10	For the time being it is sufficient to note that narrative psychology shares the social constructivist commitment to recognizing the central and constructive role played by language in the formation and structuring of self and identity. Narrative psychology is premised on the assumption that human experience and behaviour are meaningful and that, in order to understand ourselves and others, we need to explore the 'meaning systems' and the 'structures' of meaning that make up our minds and worlds (Polkinghorne 1988: 1).
	The basic principle of narrative psychology is that individuals understand themselves through the medium of language, through talking and writing, and it is through these processes that individuals are constantly engaged in the process of creating themselves.
	The human realm of meaning is different from that encountered in the natural sciences because it is not related to a 'thing' or a 'substance' but to an 'activity' (Polkinghorne 1988: 4). Everything experienced by human beings is made meaningful, understood and interpreted in relation to the primary dimension of 'activity': this incorporates both 'time' and 'sequence'. In order to define and interpret 'what' exactly has happened on any particular occasion, the sequence of events is of extreme importance. Hence, a valid portrayal of human selves and behaviour necessitates an understanding of the inextricable connection between time and identity.
P.11	Another feature of the 'order of meaning' characteristic of human consciousness is that of 'relationships' and 'connections' (Polkinghorne 1988: 4).
	Moreover, such meanings are not produced subjectively by isolated individuals; rather, they are formulated through cultural meaning systems such as language (and narratives) which reverberate with knowledge of connections and relationships across generations.

P.12	A great deal of emphasis is placed in Mead's account on the temporal 'nature of the 'me'. Whereas my T actively and unthinkingly throws itself forward into situations, those actions become 'me' only in the retrospective process of accounting for my past thoughts and behaviour. But the role of the 'me' part of myself is not just relegated to the past because it also plays a crucial role in planning, anticipating, imagining and reflecting on the future. My 'me', or perhaps it is more accurate to speak in the plural, my 'me's', are the images through which I imaginatively project myself into future events; through them, I invest in hopes, fears, dreams and ambitions (Crossley 1996a: 56). It is with regard to the interactive process between the T and 'me' that we can further highlight the connection between self and social relationships. At any particular point in time it is in relation to my consideration of the continuity or discontinuity between my 'I' and my 'me' that I can engage in dialogue about the kinds of actions I will perform and, relatedly, the kind of j person I have been in the past and want to become in the future.
P.13	What comes across from all of this is the idea that the construction of self is always a temporal process through which we have dialogue with different images of the self taken from the past and future, and mediated by the anticipated responses of significant and generalized others.
P.15	It is Taylor's contention that concepts of self and morality, what he sometimes calls 'the good', are inextricably intertwined. He argues that we are selves only in that certain issues matter for us. What I am as a self, my identity, is essentially defined by the way things have significance for me. To ask what I am in abstraction from self-interpretation makes no sense (Taylor 1989: 34). Moreover, my self-interpretation can be defined only in relation to other people, an 'interchange of speakers'. I cannot be a self on my own but only in relation to certain 'interlocutors' who are crucial to my language of self-understanding. In this sense, the self is constituted through 'webs of interlocution' in a
P.16	'defining community' (Taylor 1989: 39). This connection between our sense of morality and sense of self, according to Taylor, means that one of our basic aspirations is the need to feel connected with what we see as 'good' or of crucial importance to us and our community. We have certain fundamental values which lead us to basic questions such as 'what kind of life is worth living?' and 'what constitutes a rich, meaningful life, as against an 'empty, meaningless one?' (p. 42).
P.17	Charting the historical evolution of the modern concept of self right back to

	Plato, Taylor argues that our modern notion of self is constituted by a certain sense of inwardness (Taylor 1989: 111). In our contemporary language of self-understanding, the opposition between 'inside' and 'outside' plays an
P.18	important role. We tend to think of our 'ideas', 'thoughts' and 'feelings' as existing 'internally', 'within' us, and objects in the world as existing 'externally', on the 'outside'. We imagine ourselves as creatures with dark, unexplored interiors (p. 111). This conception of the self comes so naturally to us that it is difficult to imagine that things could be otherwise. But in fact this concept of the self is very specific to the modern Western world.
P.19	According to Taylor, the internalization characteristic of the modern self holds within it two different kinds of 'reflexivity' (turning inwards) which can similarly be charted back to our philosophical heritage. These two forms of reflexivity include 'self-control' on the one hand, and 'self-exploration' on the other. Today, we take for granted the idea that we can exercise control over ourselves, that is, over our bodies, thoughts and feelings.
P.20	The second form of reflexivity characteristic of contemporary 'inwardness' is that of 'self-exploration' (Taylor 1979: 177). This form of reflexivity is of particular interest to us because it is the aim of this book to critically engage us in this characteristically 'modern' enterprise. Researchers such as Cushman (1990) have drawn out the implications of Taylor's argument in terms of the visions of self most prevalent in contemporary Western societies. Cushman characterizes the kind of self that most of us live with today as an 'empty' self. This self is related, like Taylor argues,
P.21	to changing economic, political and moral circumstances, which have served to accelerate the emptiness of the self experienced after the Second World War. The loss of community, tradition and shared meaning characteristic of today's society means that we experience a sense of absence that we cannot quite put our finger on. This emptiness is experienced interiorly as a lack of personal conviction and worth. Our chronic need to be 'filled up', to get rid of the vague feeling of emptiness and loss, is manifest in the characteristic contemporary obsession with food, consumer products and celebrities. We have now got more idea of what narrative psychology is all about; it is an attempt to study the language, stories and narratives which constitute selves and the implications and permutations of those narratives for individuals and societies. The experience of self takes on meaning only through specific linguistic, historical and social structures.

P.24	It will be argued that, on a philosophical level, the
P.25	narrative psychological approach developed in this book shares the 'realist' assumptions associated with more traditional social psychological approaches. On the other hand, these approaches are commonly limited in their study of self and identity by their over-reliance on quantitative, experimental methods. In order to achieve greater depth, it is argued that qualitative methods and analysis are required. These are associated more with the newer 'social constructivist' paradigm.
P.26	One of the most influential proponents of postmodernism in psychology is Kenneth Gergen (1991) who characterizes postmodernity as the era of the 'saturated self'. This vision of the contemporary self, unlike Cushman's 'empty' self discussed in the last chapter, is full of optimism and potentiality. Gergen argues that the increasing complexity of society and new technologies for communication and travel results in a self saturated with the 'voices of humankind'.
P.27	Parker defines discourses as 'coherent systems of meaning'. Alternative discourses compete with one another so that their specific vision of self, world and morality will be accepted and incorporated into dominant institutional and political structures through and by which power and influence are reproduced. It is in this sense that Parker argues that discourses have a material and almost 'physical' presence because once created they proliferate within society.
P.28	Potter and Wetherell's central idea is that people use language to 'do things' and to achieve certain ends. Words are not just abstract tools used to describe things. Rather, they are used to construct the self and the world and thus to make things happen. Thus, people use language to excuse, blame, justify, persuade and present themselves in certain ways. In other words, language is functional. Potter and Wetherell's interest is therefore in how people use language to understand and make sense of everyday life. Hence, in terms of the study of self and identity, Potter and Wetherell argue that we need to '. . . displace attention from the self-as-entity and focus it on the methods of constructing the self. That is, the question becomes not what is the true nature of the self, but how is the self talked about, how is it theorised in discourse?' (Potter and Wetherell 1987: 102).
P.29	Another influential social constructivist approach in psychology is John Shotter's 'rhetorical-responsive' approach (see Shotter 1993, 1997). Drawing on the work of the philosopher Wittgenstein (1953, 1980), the literary theorist Bakhtin (1984) and the social psychologist Billig (1987), Shotter argues that

	this approach throws light on what we call our 'inner' lives and selves (Shotter 1997). Shotter argues that 'everything of importance to our studies should be seen as happening' in the 'momentary relational encounters occurring between people in their dialogic exchanges' (p. 9). It is in the 'brief interactive moments between people, in which speakers and listeners must continually react to each other spontaneously and practically, with an active, responsive understanding, that we must focus our studies'. Our conversational activities are not just one of our activities in the world. Rather, they are foundational in that they provide the living basis for everything we do (Shotter 1997: 9).
P.30	Parker argues that the capacity to be reflexive (to think about oneself, to reflect inwardly) is at the core of human agency and understanding and it is this capacity to be reflexive which is 'the
P.31	point of connection between the individual and the social' (Parker 1991: 105). Unfortunately, it is this ability to be reflexive that both postmodernist and discourse analytic approaches tend to omit from their accounts of human subjectivity.
P.39	We have argued that although postmodernism and discourse analysis are
P.40	important in terms of their ability to extrapolate and highlight the linguistic, social and practical nature of selfhood, they fail to adequately address the experiential and personal dimensions of human experience. In order to achieve this, it has been suggested that the 'realist' epistemology associated with traditional social psychology and Smith's IPA approach may be more appropriate. Having said that, however, we have also expressed a concern with the potential for phenomenologically inspired approaches (and some radical feminist approaches) to perpetuate a 'romanticist' image of self and experience which potentiates the uncritical acceptance and perpetuation of relations of power and domination. The aim of narrative psychology is therefore to study the language, stories and narratives which constitute selves and the implications and permutations of those narratives for individuals and societies. In this sense, the narrative psychology approach is entirely consistent with social constructivist approaches such as post-[1] modernism, discourse, rhetorical and critical feminist analysis. What I mean by this is that narrative psychological approaches tend to be very much grounded in the attempt to understand the specific experiences undergone by individuals. This is in contrast to the postmodern approach

	which tends to be pitched at a more abstract, theoretical level, and the discourse and rhetorical analytic approaches which have a more methodological focus. We have argued that these approaches tend to 'lose' the experience of the subject by operating at these levels. By contrast, narrative psychology, like IPA and some feminist psychological approaches, is concerned to retrieve that subjectivity j by specifically focusing on the lived experience of the individual.
P.41	This book demonstrates that experiential struggle, the fight between a sense of self (unity) and non-self (disunity, fragmentation), remains a central feature of human existence.
P.46	In this chapter, our aim is to examine some of the predominant theories which explore the relationship between human experience and narrative, and thus to emphasize the centrality of narrative in human experience and existence. Of particular importance in this discussion is our everyday experience and orientation towards time. In support of this theory, Sarbin argues that if you present two or three pictures or descriptive phrases to a person, they automatically connect them together to form a 'story', an account that relates the pictures or the meaning of the phrases in some patterned way. On reflection, we discover that the pictures or the meaning of the phrases are held together by an implicit use of *plot*. If the pictures or phrases presented depict people, the story will reflect human sentiments, goals, purposes, valuations and judgements. The plot will influence the flow of action of the narrative figures in the story (Sarbin 1986: 9).
P.47	Sarbin treats narrative as the 'organizing principle for human action'. By this, he means that the concept of narrative can be used to help account for the observation that human beings always seek to impose structure on the flow of experience. The narrative principle, however, presents a very different portrait of the human individual to those encountered in traditional psy-chology which routinely promote abstract images or 'dead metaphors' of individuals processing information in a machine or computer-like way. Instead, the narrative principle invokes a more humanistic image of the self as a teller of stories; of heroes and villains, plots and images of actors performing and engaging in dialogue with other actors. According to Sarbin, to seriously entertain the proposal that the narrative principle guides human thought and action, we can reflect on any slice of life.
P.49	According to Ricoeur there are two sorts of time in every story told: on the

	one hand a discrete succession that is open and theoretically indefinite, for example, a series of incidents for which we can always pose the question, 'and then? and then?', much like a chronicle of events. The other sort of time is characterized by integration, culmination and closure owing to which the story receives a particular configuration. In this sense, composing a story involves drawing together a series of events in order that they make sense in relation to one another (Ricoeur 1991: 121). We tend to experience activities, both short and long term, in relation to this latter mode, sometimes referred to by Ricoeur as the process of emplotment.
P.50	If we can talk of narrative structure in connection with individual passive and active experiences, then the notion of a 'life story' requires yet a further, more comprehensive grasp which brings separate 'stories' together, takes them all as 'mine' and establishes connections among them (Carr 1986: 75). Although we have argued that there is a past-present-future temporal configuration (a narrative structure) at the level of passive and active experience, it is not difficult to see that at this more complex level (life as a whole) something special is required in the way of a reflexive (looking back) temporal grasp, to hold together the phases of these longer-term phenomena and preserve their coherence. This, of course, is the classic process of autobiography in which there is an attempt to envisage the coherence of a life through selection, organization and presentation of its component parts.
P.51	When Carr refers to narration here, he is not just referring to the fact that a great deal of our everyday conversations are devoted to telling stories (although this is true). His point about narrative is more to do with its role in constituting the sense of the actions we engage in and the events we live through, its role in organizing temporally and giving shape and coherence to the sequence of experiences we have as we are in the process of having them (p. 62). Hence, the notion of narrative structure or the act of narrative structuring does not necessarily take on the form of explicit verbalization. It refers more to the fact that, as the agent or subject of experience, I am constantly attempting to 'surmount time in exactly the way the storyteller does'. I constantly 'attempt to dominate the flow of events by gathering them together in the forward-backward grasp of the narrative act. . .' (p. 62). Carr further argues that our constant attempt to achieve a sense of structure and order in the course of our everyday activities and lives is firmly based on our practical orientation in the world. In order to get on in everyday life we need things to hang together, to make sense, to have some sense of

	connection.
P.53	Hence, through the interrelated processes of story plotting and story telling we partially determine the stories of our lives. The word 'partial' is important here, however, because we should not take this point - the self as a teller of her own story - too far. The critical arguments of theorists who dispute the analogy between 'life' and 'narrative' are important insofar as they emphasize the fact that, unlike the author of fiction, we do not totally create the materials we are to form. To a certain degree, we are stuck with what we have in the way of characters, capacities and circumstances. In addition to our inability to control the beginnings of our stories, it is also important to note that we are not, unlike the author of fiction, describing events that are already completed. Instead, we are in the middle of our stories and we cannot be sure how they will end.
P.54	The second level at which to address the adequacy of the concept of narrative configuration as a characterization of human life is that of the socio-cultural.
P.58	From a narrative perspective of psychotherapy, the 'plot' brought by the client tends to 'lack the dynamic necessary to create a sequence, or design, that integrates and explains' (Polkinghorne 1988: 179). The general aim of therapeutic work is therefore to create a 'fuller plot' that will ideally lead to a 'more dynamic and thus more useful plot which serves as a more powerful and connective force' (Polkinghorne 1988: 179).
P.59	It is important to note that this conception of the individual as constructing and creating the meaning of his/her own life through the use of language, narratives and stories, is one which, as we saw in Chapter 1, connects him/her inextricably to the interpersonal, social and moral context in which his/her life is lived. Meaning and stories do not just 'emerge' from 'within' the isolated individual; rather, they develop in the context of specific interactive episodes and contexts. This point is particularly important when we consider the way in which meaning is constructed in the therapeutic encounter.