Constructing Realities: An Art of Lenses

LYNN HOFFMAN, M.S.W., a

a44 Summer St., North Amherst MA 01059.

In this essay I attempt to map the dimensions of my own move away from a cybernetic-biologic analogy for “family-systems” therapy. Central to this shift has been social construction theory augmented by two other lenses: a second-order view, and a sensitivity to gender. These conceptual tools have helped me to distance myself from my previous therapeutic stance and to envision a very different model, one that is less strategic and instrumental, and more collaborative and unconcealed.

Believing ... that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.

—Geertz [p. 5]

The terms in which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people. From the constructionist position the process of understanding is not automatically driven by the forces of nature, but is the result of an active, cooperative enterprise of persons in relationship.

—Gergen [p. 267]

I begin this essay by calling attention to a massive challenge to the mode of scientific reasoning that has dominated our century. This challenge has crystallized in the term "postmodern," which amounts to a proposal to replace objectivist ideals with a broad tradition of ongoing criticism in which all productions of the human mind are concerned. Theory and research in the human "sciences" fall into the category of written texts that can be analyzed for their often hidden political and social agendas rather than statements of objectifiable fact.

My own path to discovering this point of view was long and tortuous. Twenty-five years ago I picked up a lens called cybernetics that was lying on the floor of the universe. Cybernetics was the brainchild of Norbert Wiener (35) and was called by him "the science of communication and control." It described the activity of feedback cycles not only in machines but also in human affairs. From then on, I only saw circles, timeless circles. They seemed to invade every sphere. Influenced by this metaphor, I ascribed to a theory of family therapy in which a symptom was described as part of a homeostatic cycle that stabilized the family. A therapist was a person who had the skills to disrupt that cycle and help the family get back to an even keel. I never made the mistake of thinking such cycles were good, but I did think there were these hidden arrangements that the family couldn't see.

It has only been gradually and with great difficulty that I have become aware of this lens and what some alternatives are. Social construction theory, preceded by my interest in the related although quite different philosophy of constructivism, have both been crucial to my developing awareness. However, I have cast my lot with social construction theory for reasons that will become clear below.

Taking a historical view, in the mid-1980s a number of persons in the family field, myself included, fell in love with constructivism. During this time, reports of the work of biologist Humberto Maturana and his colleague, cognitive scientist Francisco Varela (25), cybernetician Heinz von Foerster (9), and linguist Ernst von Glasersfeld (14) began to filter into the consciousness of family therapists. This awareness was greatly aided by the publicizing efforts of family theorists Brad Keeney (21), Paul Watzlawick (33), and Paul Dell (7). Research into neural nets by von Foerster and experiments on the color vision of the frog by Maturana had indicated that the brain does not process images of the world the way a camera does but, rather, computes them like music on compact discs. It would be impossible, therefore, to know what the image was "really like" before it was transmuted by the brain. Maturana talked about placing objectivism in parentheses and, when lecturing, would put a schematic eye in the upper corner of his blackboard. Von Foerster had also emphasized the importance of the observer. It was he who contributed the term "observing systems."

Constructivism as a general view derives from the European tradition that includes Berkeley, Vico, Kant, Wittgenstein, and Piaget. Von Glasersfeld calls his version of it "radical constructivism." He believes that constructs are shaped as the organism evolves a fit with its environment, and that the construction of ideas about the world takes place in a nervous system that operates something like a blind person checking out a room. The walker in the dark who doesn't bump into a tree cannot say whether he is in a wood or a field, only that he has avoided bashing his head.

For a long time, I assumed that constructivism and social construction theory were synonymous. In both cases the idea of
an objectively knowable truth was banished. Then I read an overview of the social constructionist position by Kenneth Gergen (12). I realized that the social constructionists place far more emphasis on social interpretation and the intersubjective influence of language, family, and culture, and much less on the operations of the nervous system as it feels its way along. This view, an American product, has been known in the field of social psychology for a long time and is represented by the work of researchers like George Kelly (22) with his theory of personal constructs; Berger and Luckmann (3) with their book The Social Construction of Reality; Kenneth Gergen (12) with his emphasis on the "texts" that create identity; and Clifford Geertz (11) whose studies have forever banished the idea that knowledge is anything but local.

Basically, social construction theory holds that our beliefs about the world are social inventions. Gergen (12) says: "Social constructionism views discourse about the world not as a reflection or map of the world but as an artifact of communal interchange" (p. 266). As we move through the world, we build up our ideas about it in conversation with other people. Gergen traces the evolution of this approach to Kurt Lewin's cognitively oriented field theory, which took the idealist side in the European controversy between idealism (the view that knowledge derives from internal constructs) and positivism (the view that knowledge is a representation of facts and events in a "real" world). Departing from both positions, social construction theory sees the development of knowledge as a social phenomenon and holds that perception can only evolve within a cradle of communication.

I initially liked the constructivist position because it implied that all interaction takes place between what Maturana called "informationally closed" nervous systems that can only influence each other in indirect ways. The analogy that came to mind was the attempt to set up a dialogue between different species. This idea undermined the assumption that therapy was a matter of instruction or manipulation of one person by another, who was by definition some kind of expert on how the other person ought to be. But I did not like the idea that people were stuck in a biological isolation booth. If you took this view to an extreme, you could say that therapists and clients were like people in bathyspheres trying to communicate underwater.

In contrast, social construction theory posits an evolving set of meanings that emerge unendingly from the interactions between people. These meanings are not skull-bound and may not exist inside what we think of as an individual "mind." They are part of a general flow of constantly changing narratives. Thus, the theory bypasses the fixity of the model of biologically based cognition, claiming instead that the development of concepts is a fluid process, socially derived. I think it is particularly helpful for the therapist to think of problems as stories that people have agreed to tell themselves. Even the "self" may be a story. Janet Bavelas once remarked, "The big deception is the biological package; then people give you a name and you have to take responsibility for it." As Gergen (12) says, "The move is from an experiential to a social epistemology" (p. 268).

To say what I mean by my brand of construction theory, I usually quote comedian Steve Wright, who says: "I have a seashell collection. I keep it scattered on beaches all over the world." The collection exists not "in" the outside world, nor "in" the mind of the speaker, but "in" the exchange between the comedian and his audience.

In line with the social construction approach, family therapists like the Galveston group (1) are beginning to take an interest in postmodern semantics, narrative and linguistics. This attitude seems to mark a large-scale swing away from the biologic/cybernetic metaphor that compares a family to an organism or a machine. Terms like "homeostasis," "circularity," "autopoeisis," are all spatial metaphors that explain how entities remain the same. Temporal analogies like narratives, histories, and flows assume that entities are always in the process of change. In my metaphorical shorthand, this shift focuses us on rivers through time instead of on timeless circles. Although you can never say that one metaphor is more "true" than another, I currently prefer the findings of scientists like Prigogine and Stengers (27), with their idea of "order out of fluctuation," Thom's (30) catastrophe theory, which offers a mathematical description for discontinuous change, and Gleich's version of chaos theory (15), which depicts the order to be found in turbulence. I think these models propose a better analogue for describing the shifting trajectories of human groups than do the more static cycles of cybernetic theory.

Obviously, social construction theory is only part of the larger ideological shift that is heralding a new day in family therapy as well as in other human sciences. I could have chosen many other terms like "post-modern semantics," or "critical theory," or "deconstructionism" for the different frame that is now taking shape, but it seemed to me that social construction theory had a time-honored heritage and was also the most convenient umbrella. Many styles of doing therapy that would otherwise compete can crowd together under its broad rim, as long as their practitioners agree that all therapy takes the form of conversations between people and that the findings of these conversations have no other "reality" than that bestowed by mutual consent. A good analogy is found in the movie Peter Pan. An anguished and slowly disappearing Tinkerbell asks the audience to help her: "Clap your hands if you believe in me." Of course the audience—children and parents—respond as asked.

Thinking this way about the construction of meanings, one can say that even the choice of sensory modalities in psychotherapy is socially derived. A few decades ago, based on the interest in humanistic psychology, the key word was "feeling." The more recent cognitive models have given primacy to ways of "seeing." In the future, I suspect that the growing interest in the metaphor of "voice" will point to a different way of "listening."
Be that as it may, this essay was written as an aid to "seeing" differently. And to help me, I rely on three powerful new lenses. One is social construction theory. The second is what I call a second-order view. The third is gender. Social construction theory is really a lens about lenses. The other two are only handmaidens in that they dramatize and shake up world views in their respective areas. All three can be metaphorically applied to psychotherapy. All three represent sets of lenses that enforce an awareness that what you thought looked one way, immutably and forever, can be seen in another way. You don't realize that a "fact" is merely an "opinion" until you are shocked by the discovery of another "fact," equally persuasive and exactly contradictory to the first one. The pair of facts then presents you with a larger frame that allows you to alternate or choose. At the cost of giving up moral and scientific absolutes, your social constructionist does get an enlarged sense of choice. Let me now describe the two "handmaidens": the concept of a second-order view and an awareness of gender.

The Lens of a Second-Order View

This term comes from mathematics and merely means taking a position that is a step removed from the operation itself so that you can perceive the operation reflexively. These views are really views about views. They often make you more aware of how your own relationship to the operation influences it, or allow you to see that a particular interpretation is only one among many possible versions.

For example, when my youngest daughter was in ninth grade, she came home with some "new math" homework and asked for my help. I, who had never managed to master arithmetic, was totally baffled by the new math. I told my daughter that I could not be of use because new math didn't exist when I went to school. She went off muttering, "What a drag to have a mother who grew up in the past." I, however, was determined to bring myself up-to-date and asked a friend what new math was all about. She explained it to me, using the decimal system as an example. It seemed that you could use a system of numbering based on groups of ten, but that you could equally well use any other group: twelve or two would also do. I, who had always thought that the decimal system was engraved in stone, was astounded. I "saw" what new math was about. It was not about a way to do mathematics at all; it was about a new way for me to think about doing mathematics.

Another example of a second-order view was the way it came to be applied to cybernetics. The research that led to the science of cybernetics was connected with experiments (with guided missiles and rockets) that had begun during World War II. After the war, a series of cross-disciplinary meetings called Macy Conferences sprang up, attended by researchers from both the physical and the social sciences, and united in a common purpose: to explore the applications to various fields of the new and fascinating idea that both living and nonliving entities may be governed by error-activated feedback loops. At the same time, work on computers and artificial intelligence was offering what was known as a "systems" approach to mental processes and the brain.

During the late 1970s, the field of cybernetics underwent a schism. The engineers and robot builders were still in the majority, but a small band of dissidents stepped forward, including not only the late anthropologist Gregory Bateson, but also von Foerster, Maturana, Varela, and von Glasersfeld. Von Foerster proposed a second-order cybernetics as opposed to the first-order cybernetics of the "hard" scientists (see 21). According to this second-order cybernetics, living systems were seen not as objects that could be programmed from the outside, but as self-creating, independent entities. They might be machines, but they were, as von Foerster put it, non-trivial machines, meaning that they were not determined by history nor did they follow any predictive path.

I saw this distinction as a liberation from the models that treated family therapy as purely a matter of behavior change. A first-order view in family therapy would assume that it is possible to influence another person or family by using this or that technique: I program you; I teach you; I instruct you. A second-order view would mean that therapists include themselves as part of what must change; they do not stand outside. This view allows a whole new picture to appear. For one thing, the very notion of "fixing problems" can be seen to be part of the problem, as the "interactional school" in Palo Alto pointed out decades ago (34). Models of family therapy based on an idea of the "normal" family alienates parents who feel blamed by it. The technology of psychiatry (medication, labels) intensifies emotional illness. Attempts to prevent drug abuse only exacerbate it.

J.W. Forrester of MIT (10) has called this effect the "counter-intuitive principle." In computer simulations of economic systems, he found that commonsense solutions to complex problems often have the opposite effect to what was intended. He believes that this is the result of secondary and tertiary feedback loops that are out of sight of the experimenter. Just as it is widely conceded that we will never be able to predict a weather system accurately, due to its extraordinary complexity, so it seems that the behavior of human systems will never be predicted either.

As I looked back on my 25 years in family therapy, I realized that most of the models I had trained in or studied were first-order models, which were quite aware of the beauties of intentionality but showed little awareness of its dangers. The distinction between first-order and second-order views allowed me to consider what a therapy would look like that allowed for, counteracted even, the extremely instrumental tendencies of my earlier training. This idea, which I shared with Harlene Anderson, Harry Goolishian, and others of the Galveston Family Institute, pushed me away from the notion of "the system
creates the problem” to the equally valid view that “the problem creates the system.” Anderson and Goolishian (1) went even further in specifying that a problem system was always a linguistic system, and that problems do not have an objective existence in and of themselves, but only through conversation with others.

The Lens of Gender

I also became stunningly aware of gender bias in psychological research. Carol Gilligan’s (13) In A Different Voice impressed me enormously. Her research questioned the world view associated with male value systems, especially the emphasis on independence, autonomy, and control, and showed that women contrastingly tend to value relationship and connection. In our own field, recent books like Carter and McGoldrick’s (4) The Changing Family Life Cycle and Walters, Carter, Papp, and Silverstein’s (32) The Invisible Web challenge many foundational theories of modern psychology and psychotherapy: developmental schemes based on studies of male maturation but applied to all humans; biases built into the family life-cycle concept that take the heterosexual but patriarchal family as the norm; devaluation of qualities like dependency and caretaking that are usually associated with women. Family therapy theories have only just begun to be sifted for gender bias, and already terms like “overinvolved mother” or “enmeshed family” are coming under attack.

One particular school of family therapy that is being challenged by feminist family therapists is the Milan version of the systemic model (24). Feminists particularly object to terms like “circular causality” or “complementarity” to designate the reciprocity of elements in a relationship between a man and a woman. They say that, in the case of an unequal or abusive relationship, the use of these terms can mask both the responsibility of the man and the vulnerability of the woman. Luenepritz (24) singles out a quote from my Foundations of Family Therapy (19) in which I say something to the effect that, just as the individual must fit within the family, the family must fit within the community, and all must fit within the larger ecology. I wrote that in the mood of happy mysticism that too much reading of Bateson can induce. It sounds to me now like a particularly offensive kind of ecological fascism whereby the individual may be sacrificed to some greater good of the whole. Of course I repudiate it, as I imagine Bateson would.

I believe, however, that Bateson would agree with me that the early emphasis on power and control in family therapy can be seen as a case of gender bias (see 20). Bateson objected to Haley’s (17) use of the metaphor of power and to the central part it played in his theory (see 29). Bateson (2) used his own peculiar terminology to attack the power concept by calling it a myth or an "epistemological error." As a result, he has been accused of saying that power does not exist. I think he meant to say that he did not agree with a philosophy of therapy that recommended a power stance for the therapist, but wished to avoid moralizing because he saw that would be to take a power position in turn.

At this point I would like to turn around and include an argument against taking Bateson’s view too seriously. Social activists are apt to feel more comfortable with structural models of family therapy than systemic ones because they at least recognize power as a factor in human affairs. As in fighting fire with fire, it may be necessary at times to fight power with power. Dell’s (7) recent treatment of the issue of violence makes a distinction between the universe of scientific explanation, into which issues of personal responsibility and moral judgment do not enter, and the world of human experience—a world of description in which people feel and speak of being victimized. The weakness of Batesonian systemic views is that they offer no language in which to describe experiential events.

Dell (7) also points out a fact that the above controversy has obscured: that Bateson felt as strongly as Haley that the use of power to control other people was pathogenic, except that he preferred to describe this ugly practice as an error of thinking rather than an error of action. Clinicians more often agree with Haley. They are often brought face-to-face with the necessity to "do something" about a criminal or quasi-criminal situation in a family and, in that case, they often have no choice but to fall back on reformist linear models that have arisen in response to the recent focus on wife battering and child abuse. An exception is the attempt to use a low-key and nonpejorative systemic approach to domestic violence by teams like Peggy Penn and Marcia Sheinberg (26) at the Ackerman Institute for Family Therapy in New York, or Gerry Lane and Tom Russell (23) in Atlanta, Georgia. Both groups have reported successful outcomes, although not in all cases.

Experiments like these question the belief, central to structural models like Haley’s, that the therapist must always take a hierarchically superior stance. Many women, and men too, feel uncomfortable with this position and do better with a style that is less authoritarian. Many schools of therapy, both individual and family, carefully avoid a power-based stance and seem to have equal success. In fact, the “resistance” that power-based therapies seem to encounter often disappears when gentler tactics are used. As a result, practitioners of these gentler therapies have begun to claim that resistance is an artifact of the way therapists present themselves rather than a trait of a mule-like family.

There is another problem with structural models. Since they derive in part from organization theory, they tend to uphold a normative bias in favor of status lines, which are by definition unequal. A family is said to be dysfunctional if the generation line is not enforced. But families are not necessarily structured like the Army or the Church, any more than a therapist need be a general or a pope. Here again, one finds an implicitly patriarchal value system at work. As feminist critics of family therapy have pointed out (16), looking only at the generation line can easily obscure the gulf of inequality between the domestic roles of husband and wife.
For me, the main importance of a gender lens is that it exposes established assumptions and mores in psychological theory that have come to be taken for granted, and which are detrimental not only to women but also to men. Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (13) has been much criticized for taking what Rachel Hare-Mustin (18) has christened a "alpha" view. This view is said to support female "differentness," like the separate sphere of domesticity for women idealized by Victorian writers. Hare-Mustin contrasts this position with an "beta" view: the belief that men and women should be treated alike. An "beta" view seeks to abolish the power differential between men and women and comes out strongly in favor of women's rights.

It seems to me that Gilligan may be putting forward a third view, which is that *both* men and women need to be able to choose the "different voice" that has been derogatorily assigned to women. She is talking about a more balanced cultural repertoire for both genders. For that reason, I prefer to call her position "gender-sensitive" rather than "feminist." In my own therapy, I find that this distinction has helped me to avoid imposing my own definition of "the problem" on a family while still remaining faithful to an ideal of justice. I also have another worry. In seeking to declare war on gender-linked ideas or structures in families, feminists may create another set of labels for mental pathology to add to the ones we already have, and a new kind of "expert" to tell families how they ought to be.

Let me end this section by saying that I feel particularly uncomfortable with the message that family therapists who do not use their skills to fight against the oppression of women are not politically "correct." Having been brought up in a world of Marxist artists, I am particularly allergic to this kind of idealism. Another problem is effectiveness. I sometimes despair that a feminist family therapist can do very much to change sexist family attitudes by working at the micro-level of the particular family. These attitudes will probably yield only to social policy enforced by political action. However, the feminist position is invaluable as a kind of consciousness-raising beamed at other therapists, and it has certainly made me take another look at hitherto sacred texts in family theory and challenge the hidden injustices they often perpetuate.

### The Rosetta Stone Fallacy

As a way to illustrate some of the ideas I have dealt with in this essay, let me include an anecdote that describes a gestalt shift of my own. This particular case concerns my dawning awareness of the implications of a postmodern view for systemic therapy. My story begins not with family therapy but with literary criticism. Recently I discovered deconstruction theory, a school of literary criticism that has busied itself with dismantling an earlier school called the "New Criticism." I used to be a "New Critic" in my college days. That meant that I believed that a poem or a novel possessed a hidden structure of meaning—a kind of symbolic architecture—that only the critic had the skills to discern. The author's social and political beliefs, the genre he or she chose to write in, and his or her culture, history, and gender, were unimportant compared to the Graal to be found within the text. It was agreed that the author was less able to know what that symbolic structure consisted of than the critic. And, of course, the ordinary reader had no notion of it at all.

I was thrilled when I stumbled on the family research the Mental Research Institute was doing in the 1960s because I saw that I could use the New-Criticism template that I knew so well. The idea of a "cybernetic system" in which a symptom was embedded was heaven-sent because it offered a metaphor that exactly fit my idea of a hidden structure of meanings. I used the analogy of the Rosetta Stone for the work of the pioneers at the Mental Research Institute. They were decoding the Rosetta Stone of pathological communication, and I was going to help them do this.

Twenty-five years later, I was beginning to alter my ideas and to feel that it was time to leave "systems," in particular "family systems," behind. It has only been recently, however, on reading an article attacking the systemic view by Gerald Erickson called "Against the Grain: Decentering Family Therapy" (8), that I realized my Rosetta Stone analogy was a myth that only the critic had the skills to discern. The author's social and political beliefs, gender, and a new kind of "expert" to tell families how they ought to be.

The Rosetta Stone Fallacy

Whereas previous linguistic theory had emphasized the lengthwise historical development of language, de Saussure's concept of "system" added the idea of an organization of rules for grammar in a timeless now.

De Saussure's use of the term "system" became part of a contagion of ideas. Many other social and psychological theorists either used this term or alternated it interchangeably with "structure." Freud, an early structuralist, had already contributed a psychic version in his theory of the ego, superego, and id. Psychologist Jean Piaget had posited "structures" in the cognitive development of the child. Anthropologist Lévi-Strauss, whose name is virtually identified with the structuralist movement, had applied this idea to anthropology, finding "structures" in kinship terminology and in the myths of primitive societies. Noam Chomsky uncovered the "deep structure" of what he called "transformational grammar."
Talcott Parsons built a theory of normative role structure for the contemporary family. And the New Critics founded an entire culture of literary criticism in analyzing the "structure" of a novel, poem, or play.

Erickson, using the same arguments that the deconstructionists have used against structuralism, suggests that it is time to dethrone family therapy. More exactly, he is questioning Batesonian systemic concepts. And I think he is right. When the general system theorists and the cybernetic theorists came along in the 1950s, they found the systems paradigm ready to hand. All the cybernetic people had to do was to match up general system theory with the concept of the servo-mechanism, and it was ready to go. That has been the analogy informing family theory for several decades. It has been the "metaphor we live by" in our field.

However, as Erickson points out, in some ways it is a limiting metaphor. It gives the therapist, as the one who analyzes the hidden system of communication, enormous power. Primitive peoples cannot be aware of the complex system of grammar that informs their utterances; neither can the family be aware of the system of rules that governs their "pathological" communications. The imputation of ignorance to the family and all-knowingness to the therapist is inevitable. The therapist becomes a kind of Master Interpreter that leaves him or her in charge of the field by definition.

As a result, a style of therapy has come about that is founded on a necessity for distance that only compounds the professional distance already bequeathed to psychotherapists by the medical model. The therapist, under these circumstances, is operating from an alien set of assumptions. Since most of these assumptions (both in family therapy and in individual therapy—let's be fair) are blaming and judgmental, they have to be disguised. So you get the growth of a language to describe emotional or behavioral "pathology," which hides the unflattering nature of the description: "symbiotic" mother; "passive-aggressive" father. In family therapy, the same kind of descriptive phrases abound: "dysfunctional family," or "psychotic games." In addition, family therapy has often presented itself as an adversarial model. Thus, you get terms like strategies, or moves in a game of chess, or maneuvers and countermaneuvers. This position seems to increase the morale of the therapist or the team, even though the family may be totally unaware that they are being considered in such a pejorative light. The result is a hiatus in the connection between therapist and family that has been enormously limiting for the field. It has certainly scandalized individual therapists and added to the difficulty individual practitioners and family-systems practitioners have had in trying to evolve any kind of common language, let alone rapprochement.

Another disadvantage of the systemic model has been the banishment of politics. The New Critics outlawed the emphasis of a previous generation of critics on the historical, social, and political context of the literary work. In the same way, cybernetic thinking has tended to distance family therapy from such concerns. Social issues are felt to be external to the work of therapy, which focuses mainly on the family as a "system." Systemic therapists include the therapist in their assessment, and sometimes a Milan-style team puts itself in as part of a final message; but, for the most part, the team stays behind the screen in a God-like position, intervening from time to time to rescue the hapless interviewer from being "inducted" into the family, and handing out opinions to which the family has no chance to reply. Other professionals may be included in the therapeutic hypothesis, but they tend to be grouped with the family as potentially harmful to the therapy if they are not handled with care. Issues of race, class, and gender have been nearly invisible to the systemic therapist, as latter-day activists are strongly pointing out.

Another objection to the systemic view has particularly focused on the Milan model's stance of "neutrality." Feminist family therapists point to situations in which there is violence or abuse, accusing the systemic therapist of taking a hands-off position. The Milan group defends its position by saying that handling violence is the job of a "social control agent" and not that of a therapist. Nevertheless, this criticism has highlighted the blind spot of a systemic view. This view, as I have said, asserts that everyone participates in a mutual-causal pattern of behavior that eventuates in the violent episode, and therefore it suffers from a blind spot in that it cannot assign responsibility in cases of violence.

In writing this essay, I am not trying to resolve the above dilemma. For me it defies easy answers. My main interest is to call attention to the tacit assumptions about psychology or psychotherapy that are grounded in our training or in the less conscious ideas that can be placed under the heading of "folk psychology." Anthropologist Steven Tyler (31) says that ethnographers go into the field with their eyes "bandaged with texts." Therapists also have their eyes bandaged with texts, although it is easy to be totally unaware that this is the case. I have found my three concepts—social constructionism, second-order views, and gender—invaluable in helping me become more aware of my own texts. As a result, I have widened my old view of systemic therapy to include a stance that emphasizes equity as well as connectedness, and subjective experience as well as neutrality. I now work very differently from the way I did 5 years ago. And I expect to work differently in another 5 years.

What intrigues me most right now is the idea that the cybernetic-systems metaphor can be fruitfully replaced by a postmodern, anthropological one. The consequences of using this model is to make us all what researcher Judy Davis (5) calls "accidental ethnographers." This role is the opposite of the visiting expert who, using informants and private schemas and observations, puts together a structural analysis of the 'ethos' of the tribe. The postmodern therapist comes into the family without any definition of pathology, without any idea about what dysfunctional structures to look for, and without any
set idea about what should or should not change. Together, while talking, interviewer and family may come up with some understandings or ideas for action that are different from those the family may originally have had in mind, and also different from those the therapist may originally have had in mind. (Despite my wish to believe that the new-style therapist must come from a position of "not knowing," I cannot believe that a therapist can go into a session with no ideas in mind, and I strongly feel that it is better to be aware of these ideas than not.)

Another effect of being an accidental ethnographer is that there may be no final message or prescription but merely another date to meet. And when the group does meet again, if it does, something is different or is not different. Obviously, this issue is peculiarly vital to a therapy group, since the therapy conversation organizes around a complaint and the ethnographic conversation does not. But the two kinds of conversation resemble each other in the sense that there is no assumption of a hidden pathological structure in the subject that can be assessed according to "objective" standards. The therapeutic interview is a performative text, as the post-modern jargon has it. This text will take its shape according to the emergent qualities of the conversation that have inspired it, and will hopefully create an emancipatory dialogue rather than reinforce the oppressive or monolithic one that so often comes in the door.

Acknowledging the influence of Anderson and Goolishian (1), whose ideas have been a bellwether for my own, I propose using a postmodern interpretive framework as a banner under which our experiments in co-constructing therapeutic "texts" might take place. In therapy, we listen to a story and then we collaborate with the persons we are seeing to invent other stories or other meanings for the stories that are told. "Family Therapy: Part 1" seems to have found a temporary ending in that the cybernetic paradigm may have run its course. What would "Family Therapy: Part 2" look like? Would it be called "family"? Would it continue to include the word "system"? What would happen to the term "therapy"? I am joining several other people in using the phrase "systemic practice," but other possibilities will undoubtedly present themselves.

Just as several decades ago a nascent family systems theory had the good fortune to profit by the excitement eddying about the study of circular feedback loops or cybernetics, it now has the chance to profit by another revolution, this one in the humanities and human sciences. The post-modern interpretive view proposes metaphors for our work that are derived mainly from criticism and the language arts. Since therapy is an art of conversation, these metaphors are closer to home than the biological and machine metaphors we have been using. Their particular strength comes from the fact that they are non-objectivist and, at the same time, socially and politically sensitive. In the context of this shift, I am asking you to imagine what a new and different story about "Family Therapy" might be.

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