CHAPTER THREE
THE SHIFTING SANDS OF KNOWING

3.1   Introduction

In chapter one I briefly touched on my dissatisfaction with the general research designs on relocation during the preparatory phase of this study. The majority of papers dealt with conclusions based on quantitative methods which to my mind represented a one-sided, though not incorrect, picture of an extremely complex process.

For me to cover the journey through this complex maze, I realized that my discomfort had also to do with the difference in my understanding of man and his world, and the viewpoints of these quantitative, thus positivistic and reductionistic ways of looking at man and his world.

For these reasons I found myself on a journey of discovering and confirming my own ever shifting epistemology. Because for a reader not knowing a researcher or psychologist's epistemological stance seems to be akin to listening to a politician without knowing to which party he belongs. You may find that you are so busy trying to place the speaker into the right ideological box, that you miss the purport of the words. The psychologist starts making sense once he has been placed within a frame of reference. That is when it becomes possible to give meaning to his beliefs - his epistemology.

The term epistemology refers to those basic premises that inform actions and cognitions. The Collins dictionary defines epistemology as the study of the source, nature and limitations of knowledge (1994). Capra (1996) defines epistemology as "understanding of the process of knowing (p 39) and as "the method of questioning" (p 40).

The first step of a research process for a psychologist, is to define her epistemology. That is her way of thinking about theories of behaviour and about life in general and in particular. Keeney (1992) believes that our practical actions always embody formal ideas. The psychologist's orientation determine a "unique way of drawing distinctions that construct and organise therapy'. Furthermore if we are unaware of the basic premises underlying our work and cognition, we will be less effective as researchers, psychologists and therapists.

Ford and Lerner (1992) remind us that our assumptions influence the way we construe ourselves and the world; the selection of phenomena that is considered relevant; and the way in which we interpret phenomena.

Researchers are people in the first place, shaped by familial, personal, cultural, ethnic and geographical forces. The process, by which thinking is shaped, is as complex as life itself. The philosopher, Kant, believed that ideas are the creations of organisms that are the by-products of navigation through life (in Efrans, Lukens & Lukens, 1988). This implies a certain permeability between humans, our surroundings, the life forces that we are exposed to and the nature of thinking. But not only are ideas informed by our surroundings, we actively use and select information to construct our ideas. This is a dynamic interactive process. Keeney (1992) believes that what we observe about others says more about ourselves than about those who are being observed.

A psychologist who is involved in research during training is exposed to a plethora of theories about human behaviour. These theories take their place among those of all the teachers we encounter on the road of learning to think and reflect on the nature and behaviour of being human.

The practical implication of this learning process is that it evolves into a

process of thinking, a constant testing of theory against practice and life's experiences. It becomes a continuous process of revising theoretical assumptions in the light of practical realities, each informing and shaping the other. And so epistemology becomes a developing process; it cannot be a fixed set of assumptions since the evolving ideas may shift all the time.

Often the terminology that is adopted by various disciplines, theories and paradigms, serves to obscure older roots of concepts. Fifty years ago the term constructivism had not been coined nor was man contextually defined as an eco-systemic "being" . Yet Kant spoke of man being the creator of his thoughts more than a century ago (in Efran et al.,1988). And for the traditional African person there seems not to have been any other way of existing than as an eco-systemic being, though not conceptually defined as such (Mutwa, 1996). An eco-systemic person seems to be one who lives in harmony with himself, others, nature and the universe (Bragg, 1996).

To my mind, the relatively new field of study, called narrative, is really not new either. The formal study of narrative as a life shaping process seems quite divorced from the stories I heard as a child and the undefined effects they had on my life. And yet, the narrative notions of today and those childhood stories seem to be cut from the same cloth. Mankind has always told stories. What is new is the recognition that the stories we hear and the stories we tell ourselves, shape our lives.

The quest for understanding and seeking the answers to the riddles posed by life, will never stop, even if we sometimes rename old ideas.

3.1.1 Another way of understanding eclecticism

Many therapists worry about the school of therapy that is best or the most true, as if in search of a single and true religion (Truax & Carkhuff, 1967). It is more

My basic assumptions seem to be allied to the ideas of social constructionism, narrative and postmodernism. The narrative and social constructionist metaphors serve to organise perceptions and actions both in research and practice, from a postmodern worldview. The resultant findings have "no other reality than that bestowed on it by mutual consent" (Hoffman, 1990).

Narrative refers to an approach which considers people's lives as stories (Bruner, 1987, Gergen & Gergen, 1988). Social constructionism implies a consideration of the ways in which reality has been constructed through interaction with others. The influence of social realities on the meaning of people's lives, is also considered (Gergen, 1984 ; Howard, 1991).

These approaches lie towards the constructionist end of the realist-constructionist continuum. Keeney (1983) speaks of naive realism and naive solipsism as representing the two extremes in thinking along the objectivism - constructionist continuum.

Naive realism refers to the view that there is a real world out there which can be known through the senses. Naive solipsism is the view that the world out there is entirely a person's own construction.

Keeney (1983) believes that most therapists are probably in a state of transition between the two modes of thinking. This is fortunate as the extreme positions merely provide partial glimpses of the whole picture. At this point I consider my thinking to be closer to the constructionist end but not radically so. There are some things that seem to be more real than constructed, e.g. if I were to compare a table to a movie, I would consider the table to be part of an objective and somehow "real" world whereas the movie can be considered as a construction. Consensus is more likely among English speakers about the meaning and connotations of the word table than of a specific movie.

With the above as introduction, I shall describe my theoretical nest briefly,

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before attempting to provide a view or a definition of adjustment as a construct in a way that would be consonant with these approaches. In keeping with eco-systemic thinking, theoretical perspectives should be anchored in a general historical context that reflects the recent evolution that has taken place in the relationship between man and state; man and himself; and man and society (Sampson, 1989).

In the next sections attention is focussed on the development of pre-modernistic thinking to post-modernism, constructivism and the narrative perspective.

3.1.3   From pre-modernism to post-modernism

Theories of social behaviour are first and foremost reflections of current history (Sarbin, 1986). Sampson (1989) states that theories of psychology were developed during the era of modernism and hence best suited to describe that era's framework of understanding.

But we are now leaving the modern era behind and therefore need to look at the nature of the shift from pre-modernism to modernism and the currently evolving post-modernism in order to provide a context for current thinking. These ideas set the socio-historical context for the epistemology of the thesis.

The following section outlines the changes in thinking and in society from pre- to post-modernism.

3.1.4 Pre-modernism

According to Schrenk (1999) pre-modernism refers to the period up to and including 17th century Europe, and is known as the dark ages. It is punctuated as follows: In the pre-modern world, God ruled and man had no share or say in his own destiny. The precursor of modern man, who was seen as needing no reasoning ability and moreover "a mere pawn in the hands of

fate, church and state", provides the background to the paradigm shift from pre-modernism to modernism (Schrenk, 1999). Christian doctrine was the only truth and one's role on earth was accepted unquestioningly. Knowledge was regulated by the church which had the power to distinguish truth from falsehood. False ideas were equated with paganism (Durrheim, 1997). The ultimate goal of life was to earn a place in heaven and a life of suffering was virtually a guarantee of that goal. Problems were ascribed to sin, and penance was the solution.

In psychological terms one can say that the locus of control was situated in God. Individuals were not free to choose which path to follow; their task was to follow the path determined by God (Sampson, 1988).

Since the basis of one's beliefs was never questioned, superstition proliferated and was hard to disentangle from Christian beliefs. The notion of personal agency or power did not exist. People were not literate and priests were the "holders" and interpreters of knowledge (Shrenk, 1999).

A sense of personal identity would have been a rare thing in pre-modern times when everything was done in the name of God. Thus the notion of progress in a community or self-improvement could not exist.
People did not travel or migrate much. This meant they had little contact with different cultures which in turn created intra-community stability that lasted for centuries. Pre-modern man functioned as part of a community and his identity was vested within the community. Being outside a community was akin to being "nonexistent, a stranger or dead" (Sampson, 1989).

These basic premises were to change during the next era, the so-called "age of reason".

3.1.5   Modernism

The 15th and 16th centuries mark the dawning of the age of enlightenment and

reason. Original thinkers broke out of the mould of pre-modernism and started using their ability to reason (Jordaan & Jordaan, 1988). For instance, the development of the printing press led to an increase in literacy and enabled the dissemination of the knowledge of the day. Scientific findings resulted in an ongoing quest to discover the secrets of the natural world (Schrenk, 1999). The darker side of this quest represented a desire to conquer the natural world.

Man's relationship with God changed. Although the existence of God is not denied, humans were in charge of their own lives and destinies. God was no longer seen as intervening in the day-to-day running of the world. Man came to see himself as the centre and dominator of the universe.

The notion of a subjective self was born when a distinction was drawn between an objective outer reality and man as a subjective entity. Sampson (1988) refers to the "emergence of internally directed subjectivism" and equates it with a sense of personal agency. This is also the era in which the "self-contained individual emerged from embeddedness in various collectivities to become the free-standing, central unit of the new social order" (Sampson, 1989, p.914).

Smith (1994) puts forward the idea that the individualistic ideal of the modern era, the fading of a religion based moral code, and the notion of self-actualization place a higher burden on selfhood than it can sustain. He says "human lives are more meaningful and satisfying when devoted to projects and guided by values that transcend the self" (p.407).

Reality came to be seen as knowledge that could be discovered and proven and was unconnected to the observer. Knowledge resulted in progress and a rejection of all that went before. Such knowledge turned into power for the one who possessed it, since he was, and still is, seen as an expert. The person who behaves however has little voice or power - that power is vested in the hands of the professional (Schrenk, 1999).

The Cartesian idea of ordering the natural world in terms of universal laws in order to find grounds for certainty in the external world, worked when applied to the natural sciences. In the Cartesian paradigm, it was believed that scientific descriptions are objective, i.e. independent of the human observer and of the process of knowing (Capra, 1996). When modernist thinking and criteria of research were applied in human sciences, resistance occurred relatively quickly. Criteria of predictability of behaviour, universality and generalization of findings clashed with a burgeoning sense of man's uniqueness.

For modern man social convention determined the norms and values that he embraced. But as people continued learning to reason for themselves; to move about and compare cultures, social conventions were being challenged. (Sampson, 1989). Classical modernism does not allow for complexity or diversity.

Human beings were developing into individualists, thinking themselves experts on their own lives (Sampson 1989). It is my opinion that this was the real seed of post-modernism, which sprouted sometime in the middle of the modern age.

" Persons were free to establish their own framework of belief and value, to choose the goals and purposes that they desired " (Sampson, 1989, p.195).

But the stronger the individual thinks himself, the weaker his link to a community becomes and, over time, the state loses its power over people.

At the end of the dark ages, the development of medical science alone spelt the "end of disease", or so we thought, and brought us closer to greater control over our lives. The modernist's world is one in which he thinks that reality can be grasped and delineated. Logic, reductionism and linear

arguments are the tools used to discover the secrets of the universe. Thus a sense of individual freedom brought about individual power and an internal locus of control - but mainly for scientist, researcher and the elite (Sampson, 1989).

The downside of this freedom, coupled with the numerous and often bewildering choices that face us each day, can however engender a sense of insecurity. According to Gergen (1991), post-modernism is characterised by the stimulation of technological advances and the information explosion which carry in its wake sensory overload and insecurity.

It is understandable that few people are keen to reject the illusion of certainty that accompanies modernism to embrace the often diffuse ideas of post-modernism.   However it is equally clear that the very notion of individualism is more of a socio-historical event than a natural one. (Sampson, 1988).

As there was an overlap of a century or two between pre-modernism and modernism, modernist thinking may also prevail well into the next era. Shawver (2000) puts it quite aptly when she says that there are still pre-moderns who explain things literally; moderns who put all their beliefs in scientific sounding theories and now post-moderns who take a "non-literal, poetic approach" to express themselves.

3.2   Post-modernism

There is a definite lack of consensus among the various movements associated with postmodernism, as well as many differences and unresolved issues (Gergen, 1994).

Anderson (1997) calls post-modernism an "umbrella word" since its basic assumptions allow for freedom and possibilities. It has also been described as the "new philosophy for the sceptical" (Shawver, 2000). Hoffman (2000) says the movement uses this freedom to challenge the status quo. Postmodernism

supports eclecticism as no theory is regarded as "the true theory" (Bruner. 1990). Bearing this in mind I shall attempt to provide a brief overview of the general line of thinking and issues that arise from this emergent worldview.

Postmodernism is per definition undefinable. It merely defines itself as post and fails to specify an essence (Gergen, 1991). To specify an essence would be modernist and reductionist. Having said that, there is nevertheless agreement that the modernist assumption of representationalism, i.e. that there can be "a fixed or intrinsic relationship between words and world". has been jettisoned by postmodernists (Gergen, 1994).

To return to the indefinable nature of post-modernism it may be worth noting that a modernist would be uncomfortable with a definition that is in a state of flux or becoming, because he believes he inhabits a world of clarity and unambiguity.

The rise of post-modernism can be seen to have taken place over the last decades of the twentieth century and accompanied the processes of technological development, globalisation and the popularisation of individualism (Gergen, 1991). The state's role changed to that of indifference to individuals and neutrality in its quest to supervise fairness in societies of divergent interests (Sampson, 1989).

Jordaan and Jordaan (1988)talk of a postmodern atmosphere of pervasive scepticism about rationality. Instead the world is experienced as irrational. unstable, illogical, and without structure or coherence. "Not knowing" is an integral aspect of human existence. The authors continue to state that a postmodernist knows no reality other than the "small life story" created by each individual; that any kind of order to this world is questionable; that everything is relative: and that the individual is not bound by any convention or limitation.

Post-modernism tries to be comprehensive and holistic in its approach and

endorses descriptions that

- recognise the complexity and diversity of systems;
- recognise the role of context (external as well as internal);
- display a lack of precision, clarity or coherence;
- question and reconstruct; and
- include paradoxes and contradictions (Schrenk, 1999).

If modernist science is criticised as not seeing the wood for trees, then post-modernism will probably err by placing too much focus on the wood at the expense of the single tree. At the same time this contextual emphasis can better serve the psychological aim of understanding human conduct (Sarbin, 1986).

A combination of ever-increasing individuality and individual locus of control for layman and expert alike, resulted in an illusion of control over one's life which would hold until forces beyond one's control took over. Then a person is rendered as helpless as pre-modern man who at least had his internalised spiritual beliefs to sustain him in times of trouble and hardship (Smith, 1994).

The post-modern world is one of flux and constant change. There are no transcendent truths, no solid foundations and neat resolutions (Schrenk, 1999).   Smith (1994) speaks of " a *fin de siècle* sense of drift and doom".

Post-modernism recognizes the complexity of life by rejecting the modernist notion of the search of one truth for all. The interdependency of all living systems is beginning to be grasped by the post-modern person and resulting in an eco-systemic approach to life on earth.

According to Sampson (1989) the "new organizing principle of postmodern society is away from the individual and towards a more globally conceptualized entity" (p.916) as we are members of a "large, linked society" (p.917).

The postmodern self is "decentralized, flexible and pluralistic" (Baumgardner & Rappoport, 1996). Today people are defining themselves with reference to a number of widely differing and changing social situations and become collective selves.

These descriptions raise serious questions for psychology. For instance how does a pluralistic self remain stable? And how flexible can one afford to be before starting to dissemble?   Sampson (1989) calls for a theory of the person that is no longer rooted in "the liberal individualist assumptions", but reframed to address the issues of a global era. According to Greenwald (1993), self confidence and resilience stem from the ability to make secure relationships; to have faith in one's own destiny; and to be emotionally intelligent.

The fragmented selves, families and societies of post-modernism need a comfort zone. Will materialism remain the binding value? After all, globalisation is largely about economic survival in the new world order often at the expense of family stability. The question facing the postmodern world is that of retaining sufficient stability along with mobility. If newly formed communities cannot be expected to be cohesive or loyal to a common cause then what will make them functional?

Sampson (1988) notes that although globalisation affects the entire world in one way of another, all nations are not construed in similar ways at the same time. For instance, from a sociohistoric perspective, it is possible to describe societies that function in a predominantly pre-modern way, modern or postmodern way. In some societies religion requires an unquestioning allegiance to God and a specific lifestyle. Often a communal lifestyle within a traditional family setup is favoured above the modern individualistic one. These are the countries where the effects of industrialisation, information technology and development are slow in taking off - these are premodern countries that are part of the globally interdependent world. Cross-cultural research provides many instances of a eco-systemic notion of self as being

the norm in many non-western countries (Sampson, 1988).

In the modern era these countries were considered as insignificant by the Westernised nations to the developed world's well-being, but from a postmodern perspective their alternative constructions are considered as valid and as having a definable impact on the way the world develops. Globalisation then has the implication of different cultural notions of being and of self that are meeting and forming - or not forming - new communities (Sampson, 1988). Asynchronicity must result.

A postmodern perspective is based on respect for divergence whereas the modernist perspective assumed superiority of his own group's values and set the terms of human understanding correspondingly (Sampson, 1993). The postmodern therapist is humble about her beliefs and treat them more like "hunches acting as points of departures for discussion" (Shawver, 2000).

So what is post-modernism? No, we do not know what we are heading toward yet and it has not been said (Hoffman, 2000).

The next section explores constructionism, a theoretical stance that is in keeping with the postmodern *zeitgeist*.

3.3   Constructionism

3.3.1   Introduction

In the field of personal psychology, George Kelly is generally credited with giving the first constructionist perspective to personality theory in his personal construct theory (Efran & al., 1988).

Constructionism, or constructivism as it is also called, is an epistemological position according to Mackay (1997). It assumes that all mental images are creations of people. A far reaching implication of this assumption, is that

reality is an invention of the human mind (Howard, 1991).

A constructionist acknowledges the role she plays in creating a view of the world and interpreting observations (Efran et al.,1988). A constructionist researcher is concerned with the utility of a model as criterion of validity as opposed to its supposed truth (Howard, 1991).

There are two branches of thinking in this epistemology, namely constructionism and social constructionism. Broadly speaking, the two theories make similar assumptions about the way we know the nature of reality, but differ in emphasis on a personal origin versus a collective origin of constructs of reality (Anderson, 1996). Constructionists have focused on the biological processes of perception and cognition. This has led to a view that information is changed by the process of perception itself and for this reason an external reality cannot be directly known. Social constructionism also posits that reality cannot be directly known but attributes this to the conception that our "beliefs about the world are social inventions" (Hoffman, 1990).

3.3.2 Social Constructionism

Social constructionists view life as an "interactional process of constructing, modifying and maintaining what society holds to be true, real and meaningful" (Freedman & Combs, 1996). This social process carries the momentum of "culturally transmitted fabrics of symbol and metaphor" (Smith, 1994). But we create the institutions whereby we live and often do so unwittingly, by unquestioningly accepting everything we are taught, as givens (Shawver, 2000).

And so "social constructionist inquiry is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live" (Gergen, 1985, p.266). In this way it reintegrates the power of culture in the way a

person is shaped. This specific effect of culture has been absent in individual psychology (Sampson, 1989).

Social constructionism acknowledges the notion that "our ideas about the world are social inventions" (Hoffman, 1990, p.2). Yet "anything we choose to characterise as human nature occurs in a setting and under the thrall of a way of knowing and is a product of that setting and that thrall" (Bruner, 1990, p.344).

We are not only seen as products of our specific cultures but also as belonging and identifying within cultural groups. Freedman and Combs (1996) stress the vital importance of being *connected* to those around us, living or dead. However current feminist theory and research suggest that many women experience the world in terms of connections and relationships in any case, rather than in terms of the boundaries and separations that characterise self-contained individualism (Sampson, 1988).

3.3.3   The notion of reality and of several realities.

Our reality is what we can take hold of, at first literally and in maturity metaphorically. Through interacting with our surroundings, we give them form and meaning, creating the understandable, generalizable patterns that make it possible for us to look ahead, to manipulate and to cope with our challenges (Parks & Stevenson-Hinde, 1982).

The implication is that people actively participate in constructing their reality and thus the notion of reality is replaced by that of a construction. There is "nothing behind and beyond the construction; the construction is what reality is" (Sampson, 1993, p.1226).

For a social constructionist knowledge is not determined by the structure and processes of the world, but is constructed, in part voluntarily, by the person (Mackay, 1996). Basically *we find what we look for* even when we think we are

observing what is there (Cecchin, 1999). Nor does knowledge reflect true reality, but is seen as a process of fitting behaviour and thoughts to experience and observations (Keeney, 1983). This does not mean that there is no real world out there, just that we cannot know it other than through our constructions.

Gergen (1985) goes further and describes our knowledge of the world as not reflecting the world but as "an artifact of communal interchange" (p. 266). As such, knowledge does not reside in someone's head, but becomes "a shared activity" that exists in language. It follows that all construction is done in language:

    a) internally, by the observer to himself

    b) externally, in communication to others and both verbally and non-verbally (Efran et al.,1988).

Knowledge arises within "a community of knowers". So the focus becomes the intersubjective domain where interpretation takes place in community with others (Freedman & Combs, 1996). According to Hoffman (2000) social constructionism is essentially a theory about how we weave relationships.

A constructivist acknowledges his or her active role in creating a view of the world and interpreting observations in terms of it (Efran et al., 1988). This implies that hypotheses about the world are not directly provable.

This view of reality has important implications for therapy. The therapist is no longer searching for the "truth" of what really happened in the past, but focuses on history as a key to the unfolding narrative that gives contemporary events their meaning (Efran et al., 1988). In terms of therapy, the goal becomes that of helping the client understand not only how he has constructed his reality, but what price he is paying for his construction and to generate alternative constructions.

If reality is a social construction, then it follows that there are multiple

potential realities. And it would be a fair deduction that the greater the difference between people or among cultures, the more difficult it would be to find common ground for a shared view of reality (David, 1971).

It is as important to be clear about our notions of reality as it is to move on to the next stage. Keeney (1994) cautions against getting fixated on a discussion of what is really real instead of creating what should become realized.

3.3.4   The Process of understanding and meaning

It is difficult to speak of meaning without understanding, or of understanding without taking context or relationship into account. Ultimately the results of the meaning-making process is called knowledge.

This process is the result of an active, cooperative undertaking of people in relationship (Gergen, 1985). Understanding is culturally and consensually determined. It is possible that what is regarded as a true and valid explanation of behaviour in one culture may be seen as completely unacceptable and incomprehensible in another. Varela (in Efran et al, 1988) says that cultural traditions determine what we say and that what is said can only have meaning within that particular tradition. This consideration is relatively new in psychology but necessary to consider when looking at adjustment in a foreign country where conflicting cultural values are sharply accentuated.

The constructivist seeks the patterns that connect: past to present, persons, objects, interactions, beliefs in recurrent interactive loops (Keeney, 1992).

3.3.5   Meaning and the nature of knowledge

As we have seen, meaning and knowledge are intertwined with each other, with the individual and the context he lives in.

We have developed diagnostic systems to help us classify our knowledge, but

a diagnostic classification system is something to orientate a therapist and does not refer to something a client has or owns (Cecchin, 1999).

If context partly determines meaning then Bruner (1987) says there can be no universal standards for establishing meanings *in context* . We can only understand the human condition if we understand what things mean to those persons we are studying.

Hoffman (in Anderson, p xiv, 1997) considers the relational aspect of knowledge: "Knowledge is not a product of the individual nervous system but evolves from the living, changing web of meanings in which all our doings are embedded" and earlier "The development of knowledge is a social phenomenon ....and perception can only evolve within a cradle of communication" (Hoffman, p. 3, 1990).

Constructivism examines the structures of knowledge and their role in the determination of action and states that all knowledge is indirect (Mackay, 1997). Knowledge is also complex, multi-levelled and indeterminate. An increase in knowledge is a deepening and greater understanding of complexity as the true nature of things cannot be known.

As Capra (1996, p 4) puts it when considering connections as a means of discovering complete understandings: "Science can never provide any complete and definitive understanding" and "No matter how many connections we take into account into our scientific descriptions of a phenomenon, we will always be forced to leave others out. Therefore, scientists can never deal with truth...in science we always deal with limited and approximate descriptions of reality".

Moreover meanings fluctuate and change across contexts. Since there is no final truth to lend meanings to our constructs, meaning making is an endless and reflexive process.

3.3.6 Who is the expert?

Neither post-modernism nor constructivist thinking allows for the notion of an objective observer or the so-called expert in human sciences. The observer is a participant in constructing what he observes (Efran & al., 1988). All descriptions of events and processes, provide more information about the observer than about the events or processes observed (Keeney, 1992).

As far as expertise is concerned, if the notion of a "neutral observation of reality" is rejected, and replaced by the notion of constructivism (Efran & al., 1988) then one construct is not necessarily more valid than another. The social constructionist approach to science incorporates the interplay between the lay person and the academic's understanding of reality (Bragg, 1996).
The relation of the subject to the known is constructive (MacKay, 1997). In the same way the relation of researcher to interviewee is constructive. Perceptions are guided by the way in which we draw distinctions (Keeney, 1992). The implication is that neither can be an expert as both contribute to the creation of a perception.

3.3.7   Social constructionism and the concept of the self:

The concept of the self refers to the way in which a person defines or categorises himself or herself (Gergen, 1985). A constructionist "idea of the self is just that, a constructed idea, an image in the mind of the beholder - and even in the beholdee" (Ornstein, 1986, p. 149).

No-one is born with some "real" self awaiting discovery. We construct our ideas of ourselves from the different kinds of information that is available to us. Gergen (1991) proposes that as the concepts of truth, objectivity and knowledge change, the idea of an individual self - possessing mental qualities - is questioned.   In fact, he goes as far as to say that the self is under siege!

We now realise that people'... d are social constructions that have implications for the way personality is formed (Smith, 1994). As the self cannot be divorced from the social context in which it is formed, it is assumed that our identities are situation dependent and will therefore change with different situations and circumstances (Ornstein, 1986).

A massive increase in social stimulation, brought about by the technological advances of this century, has resulted in radical changes in our experience of ourselves and others. Everything we believe in, which is based on consensus among homogeneous groups of affiliation, becomes questioned in the process of being continually exposed to multiple points of views or multiple realities. This bombardment of information, new social encounters and new role models, is tantamount to an overwhelming overload that serves to destabilise the self . The process is that of social saturation (Gergen, 1991).

The self cannot be divorced from the social context in which it is formed. Thus culture reflects a "collective self of society" (Baumgardner & Rappoport, 1996, p.116). Social context provides a shared language, perspectives, norms and goals for negotiating the world. At the same time it is possible for the self to distance itself from society (Kroger, 1993).

Sampson's (1988) term "ensembled individualism" acknowledges the cultural character of a person and the interdependence within groups who are striving towards larger goals.

A more radical view of self proposes that people are merely "expressors of cultural affiliation", aping the words and ideas they have assimilated in order to have specific effects (Terre Blanche, 1999). Lin Yutang (1937), a Chinese philosopher, said that "consciously or unconsciously, we are all actors in this life playing to the audience in a part and style approved by them" (p.103).

Thus social constructionists view the self as a part of a wider system : a social and cultural system "with energy and information flowing across fluid

boundaries" (Bragg, 1996
opens new horizons for the self (Gergen, 1994).

There is no longer the notion of the self as unified and enduring unchanged over time. Being oneself today implies being several selves. That self is elastic and has no firm boundaries. Identities are constantly in a state of flux and it follows that there can be no single self to which a person can be true (Gergen, 1991). This view of the "self in process" is seen as an adaptive response to our rapidly changing world (Baumgardner & Rappoport, 1996; Freedman & Combs, 1996). The risk is that the individual self can become erased by the process of social saturation, as described by Gergen (1991), when one begins to experience the "vertigo of unlimited multiplicity". Sampson (1985) refers to the self as a "decentralized nonequilibrium structure". According to Baumgardner and Rappoport (1996), this multiplicity of the postmodern self can be experienced in three ways:

> 1. Sequentially, through shifting involvements with people, ideas and activities over time.
> 2. Simultaneously, as a plurality of self-images which may be contradicting.
> 3. Socially, through different environments.

As far as maladjustment is concerned, one can say that it is not the "real" social world but a person's *construction* of his social world that plays a definitive role in the development of maladaptive behaviour.

In retrospect, the modernist notion of a self-contained individual is now seen as "a sociohistorical rather than a natural event" (Sampson, 1988), while more collectivist orientations remained the norm elsewhere (Smith, 1994). Both perspectives are constructions that are taken for granted by their respective adherents.

In short, it seems as if the end of modernism implies that the notion of self is

being redefined. As in pr
oint of reference has become society again. However in a global world, with all the changes that are taking place in our society, the postmodern self reflects the characteristics of the emergent society, with its new values and uncertainties.

The self's relational world extends beyond his cultural group and community to include his physical surroundings. A postmodernist constructionist view includes the physical environment in this self system (Gergen, 1991). This consideration has resulted in studies that examined the environment's effect on a person's self-concept (Bragg, 1996; Baumgardner & Rappoport, 1996). They found that one's environment can either facilitate or hinder self-concept relevant behaviour. When there is a harmonious relationship between the self and the environment, the self-concept can remain stable. But a disturbance in this relationship, such as relocation, is expected to result in self-concept change.

Environmental psychologists even speak of a *place identity* (Kaplan, 1983; Proshansky,1983). Hence place becomes important in understanding identity (Bragg, 1996; Berlin,1996).

3.3.8 Change and adjustment

Cecchin (1999) reminds us that change is normal and that we are all in a permanent state of change. Systems *need* to be able to change and *adapt* to the changing requirements of life on this planet in order to survive. Therapy is needed when ideas about problems result in maladaptive behaviour. Dysfunctional systems are created when fixed ideas and the ineffective behavioural patterns are pursued in response to new requirements.

Change takes place in the interpersonal domain. Gergen (1985) points out that interpretations change over time and are negotiated within relationships. As we have seen self-definitions change over time as social circumstances

are changed. Now "the self" is no longer situated in the head, but in social discourse.

If one accepts that the possibility of change lies in the social domain then it is important to consider the characteristics of that domain (Sampson, 1989). Individual adjustment becomes a function of the adjustment of the group that he belongs to. We will need to consider the nature of the interaction between the individual and his or her group to gain a greater understanding of adjustment. If one's place of living changes constantly and the community outside is a foreign and unaccommodating one, it is adaptive to become more attached to the only "constant" in one's life, the family system.

One result of post-modernism is that the traditional rites of passage that used to enable transitions, have fallen away. In its place is a different self who has to connect personal and social change through a continuous self-referential process, but often with the help of "experts", such as psychotherapists (Smith,1994). The author believes that psychology has to use its competencies to cope with humanity's challenges as best it can, and not surrender to a nihilistic view of post-modernism.

Change and stability are two sides of the same coin. This has implications for research. A more balanced understanding of adjustment is only possible if both poles of this dynamic are considered when interpreting data.

In the adjustment process we search for and construct meanings that will result in a sense of security and continuity; and serve our goals (Berlin, 1996). Keeney (1992) stresses the need to provide a therapeutic context for change that allows a family to change in the way that *they* change without forfeiting their stable organisation. Stability cannot be separated from change in the cybernetic view of a family system.

From the point of adjustment, the question becomes how a family changes in order to remain stable? Relocating to a new country will require change that

respects stability before adaptation can take place. Adaptation results in a new relationship between change and stability.

3.3.9   Research

Given that we are essentially cultural products, both Gergen (1985) and Auerswald (1966) question the validity of a psychological inquiry in which cultural meanings are not taken into account when trying to achieve understanding of people.

If we say that all human undertakings are value-laden, we need to acknowledge the cultural, traditional and experiential origins of these values. Thus psychology, in its quest to understand human behaviour, needs to work within an interpretative, hermeneutic framework (Smith,1994).

For the constructionist, the aim of research becomes that of trying to understand the world from the perspective of another person, rather than establishing objective truths. Thus the researcher is interested in the perceptions of his subject, which are seen as determining his actions.

Psychology should have as its aim the meaningful nature of human behaviour (Durrheim, 1997). It should aim to explain how certain views of the world become fixed and then believed to be the truth. We are encouraged to look at issues and topics as "socially shared constructions" rather than "essences which we strive to know".

The utility of the researcher's findings is the criterion of a successful model (Howard, 1991), rather than their replicability. Ultimately the utility of our constructions has more value than their accuracy or truth (Efran et al., 1988).

The following section introduces the narrative way of thinking as the third egg in the theoretical nest.

3.4   Narrative

Psychologists who study life from a narrative perspective, try to understand the meaning of life as it is related in stories (Widdershoven, 1993). We tell stories to make meaning of our experiences as we interact in a reciprocal meaning-making process (Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1994). Narrative theory implies that human experiences only become understandable by being storied (Anderson, 1997).

3.4.1   Life as storytelling or story as knowing

At its most basic, a narrative is an account or a story (Collins dictionary, 1992). A story is a symbolised version of human actions, which has a temporal dimension. Stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end. A story is generally held together by a plot that represents human problems and attempts at resolving them. This readiness to make use of a plot to give meaning to stories, is the narrative principle (Sarbin, 1986).

There is no single notion of narrative that encapsulates its many facets. Thus narrative, or story, is all of the following and more.

Narratives are functional. Neal (1996) describes a narrative as a frame of intelligibility that persons use to interpret reality. It is also the way in which we *make* ourselves intelligible in this world (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). Narrative provides a solution to the problem of translating knowing into telling (White, 1980) and of making meaning of life (Widdershoven, 1993).

Narratives are not neutral. In fact, they are saturated by dominant cultural beliefs. Narratives do not speak for themselves but gain significance through subjective and inter-subjective interpretation (Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1993).

Narratives are also political, they can empower some persons or groups at the

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expense of others; legitimize some ways of being whilst making others illegitimate; they can support certain practices of power whilst invalidating others (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999; White, 1996) .

Narrative is described as having power. It can form, and deform, the lives of the teller. Researchers who use narrative as a tool, do so for its power (Gergen, 1992).

A narrative orders events and interrelationships among events along a temporal dimension, and unifies these events around a meaningful plot. Time enters a narrative in more than one way. One example is that the teller incorporates the future and the past into a narrative using imagination for the future and memory for the past (Sarbin, 1986).

Narratives have a gendered nature. The qualitative differences between male and female stories have gone largely unnoticed in our culture. For instance, women seem to place a higher premium on affiliative aspects in their stories than men do. Male stories seem generally career oriented and reflect a single-minded focus on achieving goals, whereas female stories are more likely to be relationship oriented, digressive and complex (Gergen,M.,1992). And male plots are clearly defined whereas women construct plots along multiple dimensions (Lieblich, 1998). These differences need to be taken into account by the interpreter of data.

Differences are important not only when interpreting stories from different sexes, but also from different cultures and from minority groups. Different cultures and different groups have differing narratives. In each culture some narratives will endure over others and come to specify the *preferred* ways of believing and behaving. These dominant narratives are often imposed on minority groups (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

Narrative is a way of organising experience; and humans like to impose structure on the flow of experience (Anderson, 1997: Sarbin, 1986). A good

story has a coherent plot which has implications for identity: in the telling of a story I make a claim about the coherence of my life. (Rosenwald, 1992).

Stories account for presumed causes of behaviour.

"Narratives allow for the inclusion of actors' reasons for their actions, as well as the causes of happening" (Sarbin, 1986, p.9).

Narratives differ from the cybernetic metaphor of Keeney in that it uses experience, instead of information, as a primary variable. A second difference involves a shift away from relationships as the object of therapy to the *stories* people tell *about* relationships (Zimmerman & Dickenson, 1993).

3.4.2 Narrative and social constructionism

If constructionism describes the way in which we come to know things as post-modernists, then narrative says something about the form and content of our knowledge. Thus constructionism represents the "how" and Narrative the "what".   If human meaning making originates in socially shared constructions, then these constructions become the proper object of psychological focus and research (Durrheim, 1997).

"Using the metaphor of social constructionism, leads us to consider the ways in which every person's social, interpersonal reality has been constructed through interaction with other human beings and human institutions and to focus on the influence of social realities on the meaning of people's lives " (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p.1)

This definition allows for a focus that includes the flow of ideas in a larger culture, unlike the family systems metaphor in which mind is limited to an interpersonal phenomenon (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

Bruner (1986) holds the view that "world making " is a principal function of mind, both in science and in art. Stories are constructed in people's heads,

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they do not happen in th
onventional thinking upside down, Howard (1991) puts forward the idea that thinking is an instance of story elaboration. Gergen and Gergen (1988) continue this line of thinking when saying that narratives are not products of life but constructions of life and could be rendered in a variety of ways. These social constructions change continuously to reflect changing interactions.

The link between narrative and culture is strong: Culture speaks through the actor, using the actor to reproduce itself. Sarbin (1986) even speaks of social behaviour as role enactment.

3.4.3 Narrative and post-modernism

Narrative therapists like Epston (1996) and Anderson (1997) adopt a post-modernist stance when they centre therapeutic interventions around client knowledge, thereby acknowledging the client as expert of his own life as opposed to the therapist-professional as expert. A narrative is only a window on the truth and a socially constructed one at that (Gergen & Gergen, 1988).

The constructional aspect of life stories has relevance for both successful stories and stories of failures. The implication of this statement is that the client as a person is divorced from his problem and the solution is sought in a different type of story, one with a better outcome (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

The positivist distinction between the professional observer and the observed other is rejected and replaced by a relationship of equality in which the person is seen as separate from the problem he/she experiences. Epston's (1996) dictum can be quoted here:

The person is not the problem, the problem is the problem.

The vehicle of therapeutic change becomes that of externalising previously internalised problem discourses. The client becomes a partner, a co-

constructor of the language of his own change (Epston, 1996). The therapist brings forth "an awareness of either assumptions that narratives are built on or gaps and ambiguities in people's narratives (so that) space opens for stories to shift as they are being told (Freedman & Combs, p. 56. 1996).

The notion of therapists acting in accordance with given or enduring truths is rejected on the grounds that there is more than one version of reality. The modernist belief that a professional person is the holder of the one and only reality can and has resulted in a misuse of power:

> "Unfortunately, these "truths" acted to conceal and support our monopolistic ambitions to control information on what constitutes wrong and right, normal and abnormal" (Epston, 1996, p.128).

3.4.4   Narrative and language

Our world is fundamentally constituted in language (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Language does nor reflect, mirror or describe reality. It *constructs* our experiential reality. It is in language that societies construct their views of reality. Every time we speak, a reality is expressed and legitimised by the distinctions that are made through the words we use (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

Language acquires its meaning through its use in social practices (Wittgenstein in Gergen, 1994). The accurate use of a world, represents adherence to the rules of "culturally specific language games". And so it is not the world as such that determines our word choices, but our relationships within that world (Gergen, 1994).

The basic unit of therapy too is language (Andersen, 1999). Psychologists try to understand the world of their clients through the medium of communication. Meaning is found through talking, as expression precedes thoughts. Meaning resides *in* words and not behind them or underneath them. Andersen (1999)

advocates listening to t UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA ple rather than imputing other meanings, invariably our own, to their words.

Language is seen as having a formative aspect. If what we see are our own creations then it follows that errors in objectivity arise in and out of language (Hoffman, 1992).

Gergen and Gergen (1988) conclude that using language is engaging in an inherently social act. Language is relational (Gergen, 1994). All social exchange is mediated through language (Hoffman, 1992) and change involves a change in language.

Language, including body language, may be the most common medium of communication but it is not the only one, as art and music also communicate (Funkenstein, 1993).

Language is generative, giving order and meaning to our lives and our world (Anderson, 1997). The form of theoretical description is largely determined by the conventions of narrative (Gergen & Gergen, 1986).

Lastly, language is important because of its practical implications. In the postmodern world, where visual media are overtaking the written world, a psychologist should be fully functional in a multimedia sense (Gergen, 1994).

3.4.5   Narrative and self

The self is socially constructed in language and maintained in narrative (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Similarly a narrative serves to uncover and construct a personal identity (Gergen 1988). Scheibe (1986) speaks of "identity as narrative". Narrative provides a way for the various aspects of the self to be woven into a coherent story, one that provides unity and purpose. This individually constructed and reconstructed narrative provides an answer to the existential question of who I am (Grotevant, 1993). And so we reveal

ourselves in the stories w

> "Acting in the world involves and construes my identity continuously, and my identity is a narrative, my narrative" (Funkenstein,1993, p.22).

Freedman and Combs (1996) draw a distinction between a true self and a preferred self. They say no self can be truer than another, but it is true that specific presentations of self are preferred by a person - almost as a habit. However, the preferred self is different from a true self. Our choices of how to be, are based on the sociocultural narratives at our disposal.

But the self, as narrator and protagonist, is not inclined to doubt the good intentions behind her actions (Zimmerman & Dickenson, 1993). A personal tale is woven to fit my self-image, as I would like to appear before others (Wyatt, 1986).

There is a reflexive relationship between narrative and life: If narrative imitates life, then life imitates narrative (Bruner, 1986). Widdershoven (1993) also describes the mutual relationship between experience and life as follows: Stories are based on life, and life is expressed and modified in stories. But experience does not automatically assume narrative form. It is in reflecting on experience that we construct stories (Robertson & Hawpe, 1986).

Tom Andersen (1999) says we do not do kind deeds because we are kind. Rather, we do kind deeds and become kind. This belief militates against pathologizing people by way of giving them psychiatric labels. The experience of the self exists in an ongoing interchange with others (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

In this reflexive manner the self is shaped and created by narratives (Bruner, 1986) and the development of identity becomes an issue of life-story construction (Howard, 1991), since stories tell us who we are (Widdershoven,1993).

In keeping with post-modecore personality with stable and enduring characteristics falls away (Andersen, 1999) and the individual self only exists in the world of relationships (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). The self-narrative is characterised by its social embeddedness as the individual mind is a social composition (Anderson, 1997). A personal story is merely a version of a more general story of how life is lived in a specific culture (Keen, 1986).

Conversely, when the ability to narrate is taken away, identity is lost and human comprehension is at risk (Josselson & Liebich, 1993). The person who cannot recollect himself out of the past, is a nonentity. The painful search for roots is an example of the unease we feel when we do not have a coherent story of a personal past (Crites, 1986):

> "In more stable times and for people who live out their lives in a clearly defined ethnic community, a sense of self is unproblematic because a life story is powerfully supported by the ethos and mythos of the community" (p. 162).

What is the effect of a new community or culture on the self? It violates my expectations, forcing me to change the plots whereby I live. This refiguring of plots gives life its growth and movement. It is the essence of being a conscious human being. Without an openness to this task, my consciousness becomes less adaptive and less human. The "new" gives my life fuel for growth (Keen, 1986).

3.4.6   Narrative understanding and interpretation

Our capacity to construct a narrative, invests life with meaning (Funkenstein, 1993). Psychology is hermeneutic and tries to understand the story of life. This focus becomes the arena of therapeutic change. Problems are seen as stories which allow for possibilities (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

As narrative understanding implies an act of collaboration between therapist and client, with the client as expert on his own life story (Anderson, 1997), meaning remains somewhat indeterminate and is negotiated between speakers or between a text and a reader (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Therapy becomes a co-creational conversation whereby solutions are arrived at jointly. The client is seen as having resources and as needing to reactivate them in a novel way.

> "Narrative meaning is a cognitive process, organizing human experience into temporally meaningful episodes "(Polkinghorne, 1988, p.1).

When Polkinghorne (1988) uses the term narrative, he is referring to both a process and its results. He points out that the context of a narrative should clarify which meaning is intended. Narrative meaning is not a thing or a substance but an activity. The connections and relationships (the context) between events constitute meaning in the narrative. Thus narrative takes place in the non-material realm of thoughts and meanings.

The realm of meaning making is not static as it grows in response to new experiences that are continually processed and by its own reconstruction that takes place through reflection and recollection (Polkinghorne, 1988). The researcher is most interested in the individual's meaning making of the experience of discontinuity of physical context.

Sarbin (1986, p.11) expresses the post-modern world-view that places an emphasis on the context of behaviour as a metaphor of scientific and historic understanding:

> " Survival in a world of meaning is problematic without the talent to make up and to interpret stories about interweaving selves".

3.4.7   The application of narrative

Epston (1988) uses a client's story to restory a life. He says Erickson believed we have the ability to re-author our lives, actively and continually. Change involves a change in language (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Epston (1988) integrates all aspects, and reframes negatives into meaningful and necessary aspects of a whole, in an attempt to shift the focus from negative and self-defeating thought patterns to positive and self-confirming ways of thinking that facilitate the integration of difficult experiences and seemingly unacceptable facets of the self.

What about the therapist? The therapist's skill lies in weaving a story that is born of the person's own story but differs in its offer of new and possible avenues of thinking and action with better outcomes. Such stories do not support or sustain problems (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

Zimmerman (1993) does not actively restory a life, but creates a space for a client to notice difference by herself. And therapy is defined as:

> "A language system and a linguistic event in which people are engaged in a collaborative relationship and conversation - a mutual endeavour towards possibility" (Anderson, 1997, p.2).

3.4.8   Narrative and research

By learning about people through their narratives, we return to studying people rather than variables (Josselson & Lieblich, 1993). The narrative form contributes to psychological knowledge by increasing our collective knowledge of human experience, and by indicating its possibilities (Bakan, 1994).

Since there can be no standard set of procedures in narrative research, subject matter is approached from a diversity of disciplines and theoretical orientations. The behavioural scientist must continuously make interpretive judgments for which the criteria are conventional rather than objective

(Gergen & Gergen, 1986).

A researcher offers insight into a topic by drawing on his own ideas/constructions of how the narrative/interview bears on the teller, the phenomena described and the experiences that are related.

It is understood that all personal stories are selective. Selectiveness is explained as due to narrative strategy and repression of ego-alien memories. It is important to keep in mind that the items that are omitted in terms of narrative strategy can be as meaningful as the items that are included. Emphases and minimisations are equally meaningful.

Interpretations are presented comprehensively for others to assess in terms of plausibility, credibility and trustworthiness, whilst bearing in mind the possibility of other interpretations (Rosenwald & Ochsberg, 1992).

Research findings invite reaction and are open to being contradicted, confirmed or ignored. The publication of findings introduces change and novelty. It is this reaction that deepens the understanding of human behaviour Sarbin, 1986).

There *is* a place for empirical research in postmodernist psychology provided research findings are seen
- to be applicable to a circumscribed community and only generalizable to communities that speak in similar ways;
- to invite consideration of the limitations of the local language and
- of the potentials inherent in alternative perspectives (Gergen, 1994).

Psychology is currently evolving its own approach to narrative research (Riessman, 1993). Mary and Kenneth Gergen (1986) propose an analytical design for narrative research in which stories are classified according to the change the protagonist undergoes in relation to a goal. There are three types of stories in this design. An individual life story typically incorporates all three

forms of story:

- the *stability narrative*: the protagonist remains relatively unchanged with respect to the goal
- the *progressive narrative*: advancement towards the goal takes place
- the *regressive narrative*: the protagonist ends up further removed from the goal.

There are several other models, many of which were developed by analysts of literature or historical narratives (Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993). Strategies borrowed from literary analysis are based on a consideration of narrative typology, progression of the narrative and cohesiveness of the narrative to determine its value.

Polkinghorne (1988) describes the changing directions and goals of human action as the special subject matter of narrative. But he cautions against using a typology of plots as a researcher then runs the risk of extreme abstraction of the individual features of a story. However Scheibe (1986) believes that all life stories include a series of progressive and regressive periods repeating over time. This would suggest that Gergen's design may be more universal than Polkinghorne would have it. Nevertheless, Polkinghorne suggests the use of type as a first level attempt to describe the operational story.

3.4.8.1   Narrative and organizations

It is now recognized that organizations too, have narratives that function to help members interpret the purpose of the organization and the role of its individual members. Polkinghorne (1988) speaks of typical organizational stories - also called myths or legends.

The first is a story that deals with the question of how much help an organization will give its members when they have to move often and the next

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story deals with how the organization deals with obstacles. These stories have both positive and negative versions and express the tensions that arise between the organization's needs and the values of the individual employees. The tensions are due to equality versus inequality within the organization, security versus insecurity, and control versus lack of control. Organizational narratives provide continuity and are difficult to change. But the life story of an individual is open to editing and revision therefore to change (Polkinghorne, 1988).

A researcher has to be open to the functioning of underlying operational stories behind fragmented information so that the operative primary story informing practices and attitudes can be uncovered. Narrative analysis is a skill that requires patience and dedication. Lieblich et al (1998) describe the process involved in reaching a final way to go about a chosen procedure as a complex process involving many changes and even compromises. There seems to be nothing straightforward about narrative analysis.

3.4.9   Summary and synthesis of theoretical basis of research

In keeping with postmodernist ideas, research needs to be comprehensive and holistic in its approach. Descriptions should

- recognise the complexity and diversity of systems
- recognise the role of context, external and internal
- display a lack of precision, clarity and coherence
- question and reconstruct
- include paradoxes and contradictions (Schrenk, 1999)

Moreover the independency of systems should be honoured. Research findings are seen as representations and remain open to other interpretations.

In order to understand a phenomenon we need to understand what things mean to the people we are studying (Bruner, 1987). As people actively construct their realities, knowledge too is a construction. The constructivist seeks the patterns that connect the past to the present, persons, objects,

interactions and beliefs in recurrent interactive loops (Keeney, 1992). The researcher as observer is a participant in constructing what he observes and perceptions are guided by the way in which distinctions are drawn. The aim of research is to understand the world from the perspective of another person and the usefulness of findings has more value than their accuracy or truth (Efran et al., 1988).

Important new ideas about the relational nature of the self lead to an awareness of the relevance of the social context and the physical environment in which the self is formed. Our choices of how to be are based on sociocultural narratives at our disposal. A personal story is an instance of a more general story of how life is lived in a specific culture.

Studying life from a narrative perspective, involves understanding the meaning of life as it is related in stories. When we reflect on experience, we construct narratives. A narrative is a frame of intelligibility that people use to interpret reality (Neal, 1996). It is a frame that is saturated by dominant cultural beliefs (Gergen, 1992). Thus narrative, as a representation of human meaning making, becomes the object of research.

The client remains the expert on his own life, whilst problems, such as maladjustment, are stories which allow for possibilities (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

I would like to end this chapter by quoting Gergen in saying: "required are accounts that generate the reality of relatedness" (1994, p.415) and Kenrick and Funder who propose that science best advances through "multiple and mutually critical attempts to understand the same problem" (1988).