Chapter

2

ACCEPTING THE INVITATION

This chapter introduces you to my position as researcher, my externalising conversations [4] with Megan, Social Constructionism, Power and Knowledge, and a deconstruction of my relationship with Knowledge.

I would like to welcome you, the reader, to the meeting point between psychology and orthotics and prosthetics. I would also like to take the opportunity to introduce you to some friends of mine, who will join us at this meeting point and whom I have chosen to take along with me on my personal journey. Throughout the chapter I will try to introduce you to my understanding of these new relationships, how the process of establishing these friendships took place and what impact these relationships have had on my understanding of my world. I invite you to become familiar with my position so that the meaning that is constructed while reading the text might be even richer.

Circle of Friends

I met Megan[5] three years ago, whilst she was doing her psychology internship under my supervision. Our relationship started out as a supervisor-supervisee relationship. My role

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[4] Externalising conversations are "ways of speaking that separate problems from people" (Morgan, 2000, p.17). Externalisation provides a foundation on which narrative conversations are built and requires a shift (in attitude, orientation and skill) in the use of language (Morgan, 2000).

[5] Pseudonym for purpose of confidentiality

as supervisor reflected a hierarchical relationship in which my knowledge was assigned a 'super'-vision status (White, 1997). I recognised and acknowledged my uneasiness with this power relation and Megan's reaction sparkled the beginning of an alternative story of supervision in my life. She helped me to reposition myself in a 'non-expert' position. Our relationship has grown and developed into a deep friendship. I carry Megan's voice with me even now that she has broadened her career horizons. Her voice reminds me of the creative part within me and I often phone her when I need a sounding board for my thoughts. Megan also played a very significant role in my life because she introduced me to a friend of hers, Social Constructionism. In the past two years I have come to realise that my meeting with Social Constructionism symbolises a sparkling event in my life. The term *sparkling event* refers to an exceptional event that is inconsistent with a problem-saturated story and which creates doorways to the creation of a preferred story in a person's life (White & Epston, 1990). Also known as unique outcomes, sparkling events "are like events that shine or stand out in contrast to the dominant story" (Morgan, 2000, p.52).

My first impression of Social Constructionism was that it was a strange character, it must be a foreigner; I felt confused. However, there was a mystery surrounding Social Constructionism that made me curious to know more about it. Social Constructionism spoke a language that was unfamiliar to me and which challenged my set ideas about life and psychology, which I experienced as threatening and confusing.   Social Constructionism challenged my modernistic belief that psychology's purpose is to understand how the individual psyche works in order to understand human phenomena. It argues that "the only way of properly understanding human beings is to study them as part of and integral with the fabric of social life" (Burr, 1997, p.1). There are thus no 'essences' inside people or things that make them what they are; our realities are rather a product of our own construction and arise through our social interaction with one another (Burr, 1998; Freedman & Combs, 1996). When we interact with one another, we are offering definitions of ourselves and responding to other's definitions of us and of them. Our definitions of reality are thus embodied, and individuals and groups of individuals serve as definers of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1985). Perhaps this is what attracted me to Social Constructionism: the realisation that I can shift my focus from

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how I as an individual construct a model of reality from my individual experience, to how my interaction with others influences the construction and maintenance of what our society holds to be true, real, and meaningful (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

For realities to be socially constructed a form of negotiation needs to take place. Through this negotiation process we decide how to do things, how to believe, how to relate to one another, our customs, habits – our reality that we have chosen to create through social interaction over time. Berger and Luckmann (1966) describe these processes of negotiation as typification, institutionalisation and legitimation. Reification is the combination of these three processes.

Typification involves the process of labelling: it refers to how we create categories into which we put our experiences. We tend to accept the categories that we learn from our families, teachers and so forth as real. By accepting certain labels as reality we close ourselves off to other possible labels and therefore other experiences. When these typifications are put together, they become an institution: "the reality of everyday life maintains itself by being embodied in routines, which is the essence of institutionalisation" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p.149). Once these institutions become legitimised through media, authority, and those with power, they are accepted as the truth and can blind us to other possibilities. Berger and Luckmann (1966) believe that when established typifications are passed down through generations, the objectivity of the institutional world 'thickens' into a social world or given reality that confronts the individual as an external and coercive fact.

Reification is the combined process of the three. This implies that we accept concepts as they are and do not question their origin; it implies that we take the reality we live as an external reality, and one that is beyond control. We forget that it is a negotiated construction that helps us to refer efficiently to a certain aspect of experience (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Freedman & Combs, 1996).

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Through my conversations with Social Constructionism, I realised that I have passively received pre-negotiated realities without questioning their origin. Social Constructionism taught me to take a critical stance towards my taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world and myself (Burr, 1998). Burr (1998) postulates: "we construct our own versions of reality (as a culture or society) between us" (p.6).

Social Constructionism was even so bold as to question the meaning of my language! Modernism (as a language) served as my reliable and accurate link between the 'real world' (external reality) and my subjective world. In other words, modernism informed the meaning of my subjective world: as Burr (1998, p.7) puts it, "most of traditional psychology at least holds the tacit assumption that language is a more or less straightforward expression of thought, rather than a precondition of it". Social Constructionism believes that the only worlds we can know are the worlds we share in language. Meaning and understanding are thus constructed in conversation, rather than existing prior to the utterances of language (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988).

Social Constructionism believes that it is essential for me to understand language in order to understand the reality of everyday life (Freedman & Combs, 1996). In other words, my way of talking lends form and structure to what I know about the world; and what I know about the world is rooted in my way of talking (Souza, 2003). Because we constitute ourselves and our world through conversational activity, stories play an important part in how Social Constructionism knows people and their realities (Shotter, 1993).

Morgan (2000) states that

> The stories we have about our lives are created through linking certain events together in a particular sequence across a time period, and finding a way of explaining or making sense of them. This meaning forms the plot of the story. We give meaning to our experiences constantly as we live our lives. A narrative is like a thread that weaves the events together, forming a story (p.5).

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Social Constructionism believes that the success of storying experience provides people with a sense of continuity and meaning in their lives. The meanings we give to these stories are not neutral in their effects on our lives – they will constitute and shape our lives in the future (White & Epston, 1990). As a therapist, I have listened to people's stories from within a modernist worldview, in terms of 'making an assessment' or 'taking a history of the illness' or even 'offering an interpretation' of their stories (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Social Constructionism challenged my approach and warned me that I might risk missing the whole point. It argues that there are no prior meanings hiding in stories or texts and invites me to engage in conversations with clients where the conversation becomes the author of the narrative and not the therapist (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

Our lives are multi-storied: "there are many stories occurring at the same time and different stories can be told about the same events" (Morgan, 2000, p.8). There are also many different sorts of stories - stories about the past, the present and the future, and stories that belong to individuals or to communities. It is important to attend to cultural and contextual stories as well as to individual stories (Freedman & Combs, 1996). A friend of Social Constructionism, Michael White (1991), infers that cultural stories determine the shapes of our individual life narratives. Within a culture, certain narratives become dominant over others. When a system develops from statements, practices and institutional structures that share common values, it becomes the preferred way of believing and behaving in a certain culture and is known as a discourse (Hare-Mustin, 1994). Meta- or grand narratives operate on the same level as discourses and describe master theories or preferred practices that maintain the power of institutions (Parker, 1990; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Within the context of meta-narratives, individual self-narratives develop that are viewed as significant and meaningful in a person's life. These narratives are known as dominant narratives because of their constitutive or shaping power. People story some events, while other events are not storied due to the imposition of the meta-narratives of the dominant cultures (Gergen, 2001). If an individual narrative is experienced differently from the meta-narrative, then the experience becomes marginalised. This marginalised narrative becomes rediscovered and relived through the re-telling of it (Bruner, 1990). These new constructions and reconstructions need to be

experienced and lived in order for people to become 'unstuck' from the dominant narrative.

Social Constructionism also challenged what I believe to be the 'truth'. For Social Constructionism "the interesting question is not how to recognise the truth about human beings, but why some accounts of human beings rather than others are currently bestowed with the status of 'fact' or 'truth'" (Burr, 1997, p.2). I found this attitude to be extremely presumptuous! Its radical doubt about the possibility of establishing any facts or truths about human nature cuts right to the heart of psychology as a science: "psychology as a discipline fashioned itself upon the model of natural sciences, and has at its very heart the search for truth through the ideals of objectivity and impartiality" (Burr, 1997, p.2). I started to question the power claims of truth in psychology. For example, I recalled that homosexuality was classified as an abnormality in the DSM III-R, but not in the DSM IV. Social Constructionism explained to me that, from its perspective, "the theories and explanations of psychology become time- and culture-bound and cannot be taken as once-and-for-all descriptions of human nature" (Burr, 1998, p.6). What I regard as 'truth' is a product of the social processes and interactions in which I am constantly engaged with others: "from a constructionist perspective, truth and falsehoods exist only within traditions of talk" (Gergen, 2001, p.7).

I slowly started to realise that knowledge and social interactions go together and that it is through the daily interactions between people that our versions of knowledge become fabricated. However, I also realised that my own version of knowledge, which I recognise as my friend, becomes muddled by 'power games'. I invited Social Constructionism over for tea and a conversation about Power's impact on our circle of friends and on my relationship with my friend, Knowledge. Social Constructionism asked me if it could bring along one of its friends, Michel Foucault. Foucault is a French intellectual who studied, among other things, the various ways that people in Western society have been categorised as 'normal' or 'abnormal'. He seems to understand the political games that Power loves to play.

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Foucault elucidates that in order for me to understand how discourses are maintained through power I need to look at the relationship between knowledge and power. A discourse is a system of statements that constructs an object (Parker, 1999b). I told Foucault that I was under the impression that Knowledge and Power were my friends and that my own knowledge increased my power. What I call *knowledge* refers then to the particular construction or version of a phenomenon that has received the stamp of 'truth' in my society (Burr, 1998).

Foucault (1982) believes that knowledge and power are inseparable and that what counts as 'the truth' is a product of discourse and power, in other words, a displacement of the will-to-truth (the way in which knowledge is put to work and distributed) by the will-to-power. Foucault sees language as an instrument of power. People have power in a society in direct proportion to their ability to participate in the various discourses that shape that society (Freedman & Combs, 1996). He argues that there is an inseparable link between knowledge and power: "the discourses of a society determine what knowledge is held to be true, right, or proper in that society, so those who control the discourse control knowledge" (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p.38).

Knowledge is the power over others, the power to define others (Burr, 1998). I wanted to know from Foucault how I could stand for it if I knew that more power was attributed to those with more voice than others, thus making their constructions or knowledge truthful. Foucault sees this hidden aspect of power as the essence which keeps it in place. We tolerate power only on condition that it hides a substantial part of itself. Its success is its ability to mask its own mechanisms. As Burr (1998, p.71) sums it up:

> Discourses offer a framework to people against which they may understand their own experience and behaviour and that of others, and can be seen to be tied to the social structures and practices in a way, which masks the power relations operating in society.

Foucault (cited in Hook, 2001) concludes that power is entangled in discourse, but in his conceptualisation, resistance is a feature of every power relationship; there can

be no relation of power without resistance. Foucault (cited in Hook, 2001) suggests that "one should approach discourse not so much as a language, or as textuality, but as an active 'occurring', as something that implements power and action, and also *is* power and action" (p.532). The following strategy is proposed:

> It is more of a question of increasing the *combative power* of potentially subversive forms of knowledge than of simply attempting to amplify their 'truth-value'; more a tactic of sabotage and disruption than a straightforward head-to-head measuring up of 'supposed truth' with a 'truer' counter-example (Foucault cited in Hook, 2001, p.536).

To critically engage with discourse one does not need implicitly interpretative approaches; one needs, by contrast, to map discourse, and to trace its outline and its relations of force across a variety of discursive forms and objects (Hook, 2001).

Over a cup of tea with Social Constructionism and Michel Foucault I have come to realise that there are no 'essential truths', that objective reality does not exist, only our own perception of reality. Since we cannot objectively know reality, all we can do is interpret experience as our constructions of reality (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

 As my relationship with Social Constructionism developed, I discovered that it has a gentle side to it, of which I had previously been unaware. Although Social Constructionism challenged me at times, it always did this in a very respectful way and never expected me to disregard my own beliefs; but perhaps just look at my beliefs from a different perspective. Social Constructionism motivated me to allow my own voice to become stronger. It also taught me to be humble, not to think that I am better than others or think that I know more than them. Gergen (1992) postulates "the postmodern argument is not against the various schools of therapy, only against their postures of authoritative truth" (p.57).

My relationship with Social Constructionism developed into a friendship. It is no longer a challenge to me; it has become a companion whom I love to invite with on

my journeys through life. I have expanded my vocabulary (including phrases such as externalising language, discourses, and the 'not-knowing-position') and understand Social Constructionism much better, although I have adopted my own dialect when I have conversations with it.   My dialect is a mix between my mother tongue (modernism) and post-structuralism[6].

Along my journey through life, I have encountered some people who have misunderstood Social Constructionism's intentions.   They misinterpreted its statements about 'truth' as "theoretically parasitic and politically paralysing" (Soper cited in Edley, 2001, p.434). Edley (2001) claims that the mistake that critics make is to assume that when Derrida (1978, p.158) states that "there is nothing outside of the text", he is making an ontological rather than an epistemological pronouncement; in other words, a claim about what the world is actually about. Misreadings such as these can easily be taken to imply that the world is purely textual. However, from an epistemic point of view language is seen as "the operating medium through which we come to understand or know the world" (Edley, 2001, p.437). Reality is thus the product of discourse; epistemologically speaking, it cannot exist outside of discourse. Social Constructionism's intention is therefore not to propose that there is no reality to discursive objects. Language is also not seen as the only reality. Edley (2001) believes that when the ontological and epistemological sense of social constructionism is kept apart it does not look as contentious as when they are mixed up together.

Meeting a Different Kind of Knowledge: An Alternative Story

I have known Knowledge all my life. I was introduced to Knowledge through my parents, teachers, lecturers, the media and many more agents of knowledge. Knowledge was, and still is, my friend. My friendship with Knowledge gave me a sense of security and a

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[6] Burr (1998) defines post-structuralism as "the rejection of structuralism's search for explanatory structures underlying social phenomena. In linguistics, also the view that the meanings of signs (e.g. words) are not fixed, but shifting and contestable" (p.185).

hunger to know more about psychology and life in general. Knowledge is a driving force and a motivator in my life.

However, Knowledge sometimes made me feel that I was inferior, especially in situations where I encountered other people who knew more about a specific topic than I did. Knowledge tried to convince me of pre-existing truths, that there are 'right' and 'wrong' answers. The voice of Knowledge was very critical at times. It tried to convince me that I did not know enough about post-structuralism, orthotics and prosthetics or qualitative research to be a good supervisor, psychologist, facilitator or researcher. It even affected my courage to write this thesis by wanting to let the experts' voices become louder than my own voice.

Knowledge had very specific ideas on what constituted being the expert. It thought that I should know almost everything about a specific topic to be able to be an expert. It tried to convince me that only certain information is valid and true. Knowledge tried to remind me of my responsibility as supervisor to be 'superior', to give solutions to problems. In the higher education teaching and learning environment, it tried to convince me that it is my responsibility, as facilitator, to transmit knowledge to less knowledgeable others (students). The authority for knowing, teaching and learning rested solely on my shoulders as educator.

The effect of Knowledge's ideas on my life was very unhelpful. I often felt incompetent, agitated, and as though I could never measure up to those who had more knowledge than I did. In the process of writing this thesis, it sabotaged my own thoughts, disqualifying them as less important or knowledgeable in comparison with what I read in books or journals. I ascribed a superior status to tertiary educational institutions as acknowledged centres of knowledge producers and also to the people who represent these institutions, such as my supervisors. An awareness and respect of the power hierarchy in knowledge institutions taught me never to challenge processes of knowledge production and teaching and learning.

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My meeting and ensuing relationship with my circle of friends (Megan, Social Constructionism, Foucault, Power and Knowledge) opened up a narrative space in my life that allowed me to discover an alternative relationship with Knowledge. Narrative space refers to "the space that opens up in our lives when we realize that there are many new options and possibilities available to us" (Nooney, 2002a, no page number). By discovering this narrative space, I entered into what Michael White (1997) refers to as 're-membering practices'. Nooney (2002b, no page number) defines re-membering as

> … a re-engagement of history [that] involves remembering events of my history that I may not have considered important. It involves re-engaging with those memories in an active way, so that the details are known and the connections between those details and various aspects of myself, my motives, my hopes, my principles, etc. can be made.

I joined an action learning and teaching group in my working environment. Through a process of telling and sharing our stories of action learning and teaching, and listening to others re-telling their stories in ways which acknowledge and support us, I was able to thicken the plot of my alternative story – a story in which I became aware of a different kind of relationship that I shared with Knowledge: an empowering relationship and narrative. I remembered the times when I engaged with Knowledge in an experiential learning setting, which repositioned me as a facilitator (and not in my traditional definition as teacher) and allowed me to be comfortable in the 'non-expert' position. What was amazing about this memory is the fact that I realised that I did this even before I knew Megan or Social Constructionism! I also remembered teachers and lecturers in my life whose teaching style encouraged me to construct my own personal meaning of knowledge in comparison with a parrot-like recall of knowledge. Kecskemeti and Epston (1995) refer to this re-membering mission as "appreciation practices" (p.3). Through the process of re-membering, I was able to resurrect my own forgotten knowledge and share my indigenous knowledge (Foucault, 1980) with the group. I shared the success of applying reflective teaching and learning practices in the health professions, as well as the learners' appreciation and stories of their experiences of these practices. Foucault (cited in White & Epston, 1990) offers a description of the story of my experience:

> Through the recovery of the details of these autonomous and disqualified knowledges (in the "union of erudite knowledge and local memories"), we can rediscover the history of struggle and conflict. And, in the provision of an adequate space in which these knowledges can be performed, we can develop an effective criticism of the dominant knowledges, a criticism "whose validity is not dependent on the approval of the established regimes of thought" (p.26).

The narrative space opened up an opportunity to redefine the process of knowledge creation as a social process that is situated in a specific cultural and historical context, rather than as the production of knowledge as single truth. Furthermore, it allowed me to invite learners to collaborate with me in the co-construction of knowledge in the classroom.

In my journey through this narrative space and the richness of my experiences, I am able to redefine my own identity and my relationship with Knowledge. I embrace this redefined relationship and celebrate our friendship. I continue to live this alternative story through my own teaching practices and by introducing my circle of friends to learners, colleagues and to you, the reader. Writing this thesis is another way to formally record my indigenous knowledge and invite my co-researchers to collaborate in the construction of meaning. Sharing this thesis with you, the reader, is not with the intention that this 'knowledge' should be used as expert guidance. Instead, by reading this story, the intention is to encourage you to add to your own experiences and ideas or even write your own book by telling your story in a different way: "the helpfulness of handbooks lies just as much in the reading of them as in the writing of them" (Morgan, 2000, p.95).

Reflections

Reflecting on this chapter, I have introduced you to my own position and to my understanding of the process and meaning of being part of a particular circle of friends. I have also invited you, the reader, to become a part of the friendship circle. The impact

and meaning of these relationships on my understanding of my world and on myself, allowed me to re-describe myself and re-author my life in ways that I never envisaged was possible. I have found writing this chapter extremely empowering and therapeutic. Through my externalising conversations with Megan, Social Constructionism, Power and Knowledge, I have allowed my own voice and the story of my experiences to be heard. Every time I read and re-read the texts, I was able to construct new meaning in terms of understanding my own position. Through sharing the story of my own re-membering conversations, I have linked my life with the lives of Social Constructionism, Knowledge and many others, and created avenues by which insider-knowledges could be shared. I trust that accepting the invitation will be an enriching experience for all of you as you read on.

To Follow

In the chapter to follow, I introduce you to the research narrative that guides this study. Personal experience methods and narrative analysis are the tools that I use to explore and describe the stories of the participants' experiences in the process of co-constructing knowledge.