‘Counselling as a Social Process’: A Person-Centred Perspective on a Social Constructionist Approach

(*The Person-Centered Journal, 2000, 7(2): 114-124*)

Ivan Ellingham
Psychology Department,
Hertfordshire Partnership National Health Trust

Abstract: *This paper presents a critical examination from a person-centred perspective of an approach to counselling influenced by the social constructionist thought of Kenneth Gergen. The general postmodernist character of such social constructionism is considered and critiqued; as are certain implications for counsellor training and practice. Caution is urged on those who would introduce social constructionist ideas into the framework of person-centred thought: that it be done in a way that does not compromise the fundamental vision of Carl Rogers, its main architect.*

> *A conviction that **All is One** does not have to cancel out an appreciation of separateness and diversity.*
> (Bernie Neville, 1999, p. 72)

Thanks to burgeoning interest within the domain of psychology as a whole, a perspective on human experience known as ‘social constructionism’ is currently becoming increasingly influential within the field of counselling/psychotherapy[1]—not least amongst adherents of the person-centred approach (Gross, et. al., 1997; Ellingham, 1998, 1999b). Indicative of this interest and influence, John McLeod, a leading figure in counselling in the UK and sometime advocate of person-centred counselling (McLeod & Wheeler, 1995), recently published a paper entitled ‘Counselling as a social process’ (1999). McLeod’s stated aim in this paper is, he says, ‘to offer an alternative way of seeing counselling, as a social rather than a psychological process’ (p. 217). ‘This approach’, informs McLeod, ‘is influenced by the social constructionist philosophy of Kenneth Gergen and his colleagues’ and as such ‘carries with it a number of implications for training and practice’.

In the present article, I explore and critique the views that McLeod sets forth in ‘Counselling as a social process’, with respect not only to the general social constructionist position with which he associates himself, but also to his discussion of its implications for counselling training and practice. My purpose in so doing is to draw attention to problematic features of such a social process perspective, both in relation to c/p in general and to the person-centred approach in particular.

Social constructionism and postmodernism

In his construal of ‘counselling as a social process’, McLeod owns that a basic ingredient in this approach is the contribution of ‘[t]he new wave of feminist, narrative and social constructionist counsellors and psychotherapists’ who ‘have made efforts to

position themselves outside of the dominant discourse of therapy and define themselves in terms of their own version of a postmodern image of the person' (p. 221). Here it is important for McLeod that we do not confuse the postmodern character of this 'new wave', and by implication that of his social process approach, with an interpretation of postmodernism that sees it 'as promoting a somewhat bleak concept of the person, in which nothing is fixed and people reshape and redefine themselves almost at random' (ibid.). It is McLeod's claim that those he dubs 'postmodern counsellors and therapists', amongst whom he obviously includes himself, 'have not taken this tack' (ibid.).

But how does the evidence stack up in support of such a claim?

When one examines it more closely, it is highly debatable, in my view, whether McLeod does indeed manage to position his social process approach outside the bleaker interpretations of postmodernism, inclusive of 'a somewhat bleak concept of the person'.

Without doubt, it is clearly the case that an integral relationship exists between Gergen's social constructionism and the modern melange of thought known as postmodernism. So, for instance, Vivien Burr (1995) points up that 'postmodernism' constitutes '[t]he cultural and intellectual "backcloth" against which social constructionism has taken shape' (p. 12); with Gergen himself being, on the testimony of Gross, Humphreys and Petlova (1997), '[a] major figure in postmodern thought within psychology', someone who 'believes that social constructionist dialogues are essentially constituents of the broader, postmodern dialogues' (p. 18).

But to what interpretation of postmodernism do such statements refer?

Burr, to my mind, provides a relevant and fruitful definition in this regard. 'Postmodernism', she states, represents '[t]he rejection of "grand narratives" in theory and the replacement of a search for truth with a celebration of the multiplicity of (equally valid) perspectives'(p. 185).

Beginning as it does by pointing up how postmodernism involves 'the rejection of "grand narratives" in theory', this definition concurs with a well-known declaration by Jean-Francois Lyotard in his book *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), the publication of which led to the term 'postmodern' coming into popular usage. 'Simplifying to the extreme', Lyotard there records, 'I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives' (p. xxiv). In Lyotard's usage, the term 'metanarrative', as with Burr's 'grand narrative', refers to global theories that attempt to provide a unitary and universal account of reality, a true explanation and representation of that which is actually there—in particular to the comprehensive frameworks of thought found in the natural sciences, the ideational vehicles that thanks to Thomas Kuhn (1970) have become known as 'paradigms'.

Postmodernists, amongst others, are very much impressed by Kuhn's finding that paradigms are schemes of ideas generated and agreed upon by a particular social group (a group of scientists) and as such social constructions. Powerfully influenced in particular

by the way socially constructed 20th century science has enabled supposedly civilised and superior cultures to perpetrate atrocities on a scale never seen before, a salient feature of the postmodernists' credo has become the repudiation of 'the modernist Enlightenment faith that science and reason can bring about increasing progress for humankind' (Ellingham, 1998, p. 111).

Swayed, too, by 'the linguistic philosophy of Wittgenstein…and Rorty…as well as the poststructuralist literary theory and philosophy of such writers as Foucault, Derrida and de Man' (Held, 1995, pp. 3-4), postmodernist thinkers like Lyotard have thus come to maintain that '"science" is just another discourse which is as "true" as many others' (Gross, et al, 1997, p. 43); indeed, that '[a]ll truths…are *merely* constructions in language by knowers situated in *particular* discursive contexts' (Held, 1995, pp. 7-8, 9).

It is just such an interpretation of postmodernism that seems to underlie Gergen's social constructionism. Witness the following joint statement of Gergen and Sheila McNamee in *Therapy as Social Construction* (1992). According to Gergen and McNamee,

> our formulations of what is the case are guided by and limited to the systems of language in which we live. What can be said about the world—including self and others—is an outgrowth of shared conventions of discourse. Thus, for example, one cannot describe the history of a country or oneself on the basis of 'what actually happened'; rather, one has available a repertoire of story-telling devices or narrative forms and these devices are imposed on the past….In effect, what we take to be 'the real and the good' are largely textual histories. (p. 4)

Rule-bound and 'caged' within our particular Wittgensteinian 'language-game', lodged in our personal language-laden world, postmodernist social constructionists of Gergen's ilk would thus have us believe that 'we can never get outside language to attain knowledge of an independent—extralinguistic—reality' (Held, 1995, p. 8). 'Each language system [on the 'postmodern epistemology'] has its own particular way of distorting, filtering, constructing experience' (Polkinghorne, 1992, pp. 149, 150). In consequence of which, 'the real is not an integrated system' (p. 149). We need to realize, McLeod avows in a 1994 work, that we are confined to dealing with 'local knowledges rather than universal truths' (1994, p. 191), a sentiment entirely congruent with the views he expresses in 'Counselling as a social process' apropos the status of counselling theories.

On McLeod's reckoning, the state of affairs regarding these theories is that 'there is an increasing appreciation that there are profound limitations to the psychological metanarratives around which counselling and psychotherapy have been built' (1999, p. 221). 'Theories of counselling', McLeod posits, 'are no longer regarded as maps or mirrors of reality, reflecting "objective" or "real" facts about human beings, but as language systems which exist to enable dialogue over problematic aspects of experience, and as narrative "templates" which offer alternative ways of telling the story of a life' (ibid.).

Such an '*ex cathedra'* statement by McLeod on the ontological status counselling theories (or non-ontological, depending on your point of view) makes it abundantly clear in my view just how much McLeod's social constructionism, in close accord as it is with Gergen's thought, can be identified as postmodernist on Burr's definition—not only with respect to that definition's mention of 'the rejection of "grand narratives"', but also with respect to the proposition that postmodernism entails 'the replacement of a search for truth with a celebration of the multiplicity of (equally valid) perspectives' (Burr, 1995, p. 185). For in depicting the multiplicity of counselling theories as he does (i.e. as 'alternative ways of telling the story of a life' with no objective reality beyond them against which to evaluate whether this or that 'narrative "template"' is less or more true than any other), McLeod is patently participating in 'a celebration of the multiplicity of (equally valid) perspectives'.

Now what may not be apparent at this point is that in adopting a postmodernist position exactly in accord with Burr's definition McLeod (his earlier disclaimer notwithstanding) has effectively chosen to espouse an interpretation of postmodernism that far from being 'non-bleak' is very bleak indeed. For once one defines postmodernism as involving the 'celebration' of equally valid perspectives one becomes bogged down in the quagmire of 'relativism', relativism being, as Burr explicates, 'the view that there can be no ultimate truth, and that therefore all perspectives are equally valid' (1995, p. 185).

But, hey, is relativism such a bad thing?—especially when within the world of c/p it gives rise to a general sense of well-being and *bonhomie*. What's wrong in subscribing to a postmodernist credo of equal strokes for folks of all theoretical persuasion, when there is the positive pay-off that members of all schools of counselling get to feel OK?

Just why this means of fostering matey mutuality within the field of c/p is decidedly bleak is pointed out in trenchant terms by Ernest Gellner in his book *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (1992). What makes postmodernist relativism of the kind inherent in McLeod's views so bleak, Gellner elucidates, is that such 'Relativismus über alles' entails 'nihilism' (1992, pp. 49ff). Gergen, as M. Brewster Smith (1994) highlights, peddles 'an extreme form of antiscientific relativism' that is fittingly designated 'nihilistic relativism' (pp. 408 & 409); McLeod, it seems, dutifully follows suit.

With reference to the field of c/p, consider, in concrete terms, how such relativism leads to nihilism.

Estimates vary on the number of distinctively different theories of c/p that currently exist. Some have reported several hundred (cf. Karasu, 1986). With so many different 'narrative templates', what can transpire is that certain activities defined as c/p according to one such template are at odds with and completely the opposite of activities defined as c/p by another.

Take a state of affairs that I have personally encountered.

As a person-centred therapist working individually with clients in a residential care setting I allowed my clients to take the lead in discussing whatever personal experiences they wished to raise, whether those experiences were of a 'positive' or 'negative' nature. Such a person-centred *modus operandi*, however, was in direct opposition to the cognitive behavioural approach adopted by other individuals working 'therapeutically' with the same clients. In their approach the clients were directed only to speak of their positive experiences and could lose reward tokens through discussing negative experiences. From a postmodernist relativist perspective, each of these 'templates' is to be given equal respect despite the fact that they are mutually contradictory. In such a nihilistic state of affairs, no objective criteria exist for determining what is and what is not proper therapeutic practice.

Another nihilist outcome of such 'anything goes' relativism has been that members of the field of c/p confronted by numerous 'equally valid' narrative templates have adopted a policy of employing their own personally inspired local discourse to mix and match components from the diverse templates and so generate an individually tailored 'eclectic' theory or model of counselling. Under such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that Ray Woolfe (1996) records that one result of the influence of postmodernism on the field of counselling 'appears to be a gradual move towards greater eclecticism' (p. 35). So influenced, we are, it seems, moving closer to a chaotic condition in which c/p becomes whatever each individual practitioner says it is: of there being as many 'models' of c/p as there are counsellor/psychotherapists—particularly so where counsellor training courses encourage their students to develop their own personal eclectic 'model' of c/p.

If what I am saying seems alarmist and extreme, consider the experience in the United States of the former client of a female psychiatrist. Interviewed on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, the client related how as a hospital inmate she received 'therapeutic treatment' from the psychiatrist in relation to childhood sexual abuse suffered at the hands of her mother. The client's narrative was that the psychiatrist regularly visited her in her private hospital room and sexually abused her; the psychiatrist's, that as a 'transference figure' for the client's mother she was 'systematically desensitizing' the client to the sexual abuse perpetrated by the mother.

Some therapeutic narrative template! Equally valid?

Now likely McLeod would dispute that he is a postmodern relativistic nihilist. But with his view that counselling theories are merely alternative stories that 'are no longer regarded as maps or mirrors of reality, reflecting "objective" or "real" facts about human beings', it is difficult to see on what basis he is able to judge whether any activity whatsoever perpetrated in the name of a particular local counselling discourse is *really* c/p or not. If he wishes to judge a particular activity as therapeutically legitimate on the basis of the activity's compatibility with his social process approach, fair enough. But for him to do so on such a basis means that he is no longer viewing his social process

approach as just another theoretical story, but conferring upon it the status of a dreaded metanarrative.

'Counselling as a social process' and the person-centred approach

In order to clarify the problematic features of McLeod's social process approach in relation to person-centred c/p, I first briefly overview key theoretical elements of the person-centred approach, as formulated essentially by Carl Rogers.

Central to the person-centred approach's explication of c/p is Rogers' conceptual 'foundation block' of the 'actualizing tendency', 'a directional tendency inherent in the human organism—a tendency to grow, to develop, to realize its full potential', 'a natural tendency toward a more complex and complete development' (1980, p. 118). To use the words of leading person-centred authorities Jerrold Bozarth and Barbara Brodley, the actualizing tendency is '*individual and universal*', 'unique to the individual' while at the same time 'a motivating tendency for all organisms' (1991, p. 48).

As for the counselling client, he or she, in Rogers' view, is someone in whom the actualizing tendency has been 'thwarted or warped' due to the past introjection of values alien to his or her intrinsic 'organismic valuing process' (1980, p. 118; 1959, p. 210). As a result, such an individual has proved deficient in actualizing the '"real"… organic self' that they truly are, been unable to construct an 'organized, consistent conceptual gestalt' of self congruent with this inner valuing resource (1951, p. 532; 1961, chpt. 8). So alienated, they are not 'a congruent, genuine, integrated person' (1957, pp. 223-4). Effective c/p, however, enables the client to undergo a change process involving 'a shift from incongruence to congruence' (1961, p. 157), whereby the individual 'moves in the direction of greater independence or self-responsibility….in the direction of increasing self-government, self-regulation and autonomy, and away from heteronymous control, or control by external forces'—towards, that is, the hypothetical end point of 'complete congruence', of being fully functioning (1951, p. 488; 1959, p. 235). At this 'end point', contends Rogers, the person enjoys 'a reflexive awareness' of themselves as 'an integrated process of changingness' (1961, pp. 155, 158). C/p, for Rogers, is thus 'a matter of freeing…the client for normal growth and development', of facilitating that rational process by which the individual moves 'with subtle and ordered complexity toward the goals his [sic.] organism is endeavouring to achieve' (1942, p. 29; 1961, pp. 194-5).

Conceived in this way, '[t]he fundamental notion of Client-Centered [i.e. person-centred] Therapy is that the therapist can trust the tendency of the client and the only role of the therapist is to create an interpersonal climate that promotes the actualizing tendency' (Bozarth & Brodley, 1991, p. 51) The climate so created has been taken to 'constitute love in the highest sense, or *agape*, to use the Greek term' (Patterson, 1985, p. 91), being crucially composed of the therapist attitudinal conditions of empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence. On this basis Mearns and Thorne (1999) affirm that '[e]ssentially person-centred counselling endeavours to create….those

"special moments" when the client will feel able to change….by *freeing the natural healing process within the client*' (p. 146). Referring to his own experience in this regard, Rogers describes such moments as occurring in relation to a client 'when I am closest to my inner intuitive self,….close to the transcendental core of me' (1980, p. 129). At such times, he avers, 'it seems my inner spirit has reached out and touched the inner spirit of the other. Our relationship transcends itself and becomes part of something larger' (ibid.).

Against the backdrop of this brief summary of key features of person-centred theory, consider the extent of their incompatibility with implications that McLeod identifies as arising from his social process approach in relation to the following topics.

- *The image of the person*

In terms of the way in which a person associates personal identity with having a unique 'self', McLeod's social constructionist position is that the persons we are, our sense of self, is a fundamental product of our culture, our society. A classic example of this referred to by social constructionists is the case of Dorinne Kondo, a born and raised American of Japanese parents. Complete with her socially discursively produced US 'self', Kondo, an anthropologist, went to Japan and 'immersed' herself in the life of a Japanese family, assuming a 'Japanese daughter's role' (Kondo, in Stevens, 1995, p. 268). One day while out shopping Kondo caught sight of her own reflection and noticed to her consternation 'a woman walking with characteristically Japanese bend to the knees and a sliding of the feet' (p. 270). By being embedded in Japanese culture, Kondo, on her own account, had started developing a Japanese sense of 'self'. Such a jarring awareness of this new sense of 'self' vis-à-vis its US equivalent, Kondo denotes as 'the fragmentation of the self' (p. 269). Kondo's experience, that is to say, provides us with an example of the way '[o]ur Western models of self, with their emphases on autonomy, independence and separation from others will be at odds with the much more relational and collective notions about the self in Japan, and may even appear "wrong" and "abnormal"' (Gross, et al., p. 40).

Thanks, though, to modern technologies such as the Internet, the postmodern world is seen as exposing us more and more to different notions about subjective identity, 'more and more to the opinions, values, and life-styles of others' (Gergen, 1991, p. 49). For social constructionists like Gergen, and seemingly for McLeod, such 'social saturation brings with it a general loss in our assumption of true and knowable selves' (ibid., p. 16). In McLeod's words, '"self"…is a matter of cultural convention. The notion of 'self' is not foundational' (McLeod, p. 221). What we have as a result, according to Gergen, is 'a saturated self', a condition of 'multiphrenia', 'a new pattern of self-consciousness involving the splitting of the individual into a multiplicity of self-investments' (1991, pp. 73-4). All of us are like Kondo, for we all 'absorb multiple voices', each 'truth' becoming 'relativized by our simultaneous consciousness of compelling alternatives', such that 'each truth about ourselves is a construction of the moment, true only for a given time and within certain relationships' (p. 16). 'With the spread of the postmodern consciousness', declares Gergen, 'we see the demise of personal identity…the sense of authenticity, sincerity' (p. 228). 'In their stead,' he

proclaims, ‘an open slate emerges on which persons may inscribe, erase, and rewrite identities as the ever-shifting, ever-expanding, and incoherent network of relationships invites or permits’ (ibid.).

I think it hardly needs to be pointed out that such an image of the person as possessor of a flickering multiplicity of non-foundational ‘ever-shifting’ selves is far removed from Rogers’ conception of the individual who in ‘becoming a person’ becomes more and more their true and real self, more and more an autonomous individual free ‘from heterononymous control or control by external forces’ (1951, p. 488). Indeed, given that the social constructionist image is of a person who seems to possess as many ‘selves’ as there are social forces, from a person-centred perspective such an individual could be said to be exhibiting a multiplicity of facades and extremely incongruent—in psychiatric terms, to be displaying symptoms of marked ‘psychopathology’.

If, though, social constructionists would grant the existence of an implicit coherent ‘self’, of which Gergen’s saturated selves are diverse expressions, then in person-centred terms what Gergen appears to be describing is the fully functioning person, someone who enjoys ‘a reflexive awareness’ of themselves as ‘an integrated process of changingness’ (Rogers, 1961, pp. 155, 158).

Dorrine Kondo, on my interpretation, possessed a reflexive awareness, a foundational ‘I’, by which she knew herself as a Japanese ‘self’ in one cultural context and an American ‘self’ in another. Kondo had a sense of self that transcended the two cultural frameworks, a self common to both contexts that provided her with a link of identity. True fragmentation, I would argue, would have existed if this self that transcended and linked the two cultural selves had not existed, such that the person possessed the ‘divided self’ (Laing, 1960) of the psychotic individual.

That multiphrenia is drastically different from schizophrenia is made plain by James Glass in his book *Shattered Selves* (1993). In this work Glass examines the postmodern celebration of fragmented selves comparing it to the first-person narratives of women diagnosed with serious psychiatric ‘illnesses’. In an indictment of the postmodern view of self, Glass concludes that ‘to see the schizophrenic or the multiple personality as culture heroes, as carriers of a new “postmodern” synthesis, as symbols of a nihilistic awakening, is to mystify and distort what they and the circumstances of their respective tragedies speak’ (p. 161).

By contrast, to be fully functioning, according to Rogers, involves an ability to deeply and empathically immerse oneself in a multiplicity of worlds even as one retains a sense of one’s own unique identity—a sense of oneness in diversity that religious psychologies associate with mystical experience. ‘The mystic’, explains Joseph Campbell (1972), ‘enters the waters and finds he can swim; whereas the schizophrenic…has fallen or has intentionally plunged and is drowning’ (p. 209).

- *The counselling process*

In line with his assumption of the cultural relativity of the 'self', that it is a 'cultural convention' and 'not foundational', it is wrong, according to McLeod, to say apropos the counselling client that there is 'something "wrong" with the person' (1999, p. 221); just as it would be wrong from to Japanese perspective to talk in terms of there being something wrong with the autonomous American self, or vice versa. The corollary of this postmodernist promulgation of equally valid perspectives is that it is 'reinforcing a language of deficit (Gergen, 1990)', says McLeod (ibid.), to speak of the client's discursively produced, post-counselling self as better or worse than the pre-counselling one. These are just alternative 'self' stories. To speak of 'cure' is thus invalid; as is the notion that 'structures within the person' are being modified. The 'reality' is the story.

Again McLeod, in my view, posits ideas that are in radical opposition to person-centred theory. From McLeod's perspective, Rogers is telling a fairy story when he refers to successful counselling as 'a shift from incongruence to congruence' that involves a constructive change and growth of self-structure. Having suffered its 'demise', the notion of authenticity and congruence has no 'real' meaning; no 'real' change can be said to have taken place in the client. It is not a matter of being better or worse, not a matter of growth, of a 'healing process'. Rogers' concept of an actualizing tendency motivating self-growth is best understood as a romantic yarn spawned by the sunny demeanour of a mid-West American mind.

Here, I don't intend to dwell on the paradox of McLeod on the one hand validating alternative counselling theories/narrative templates, and on the other privileging his own template of clients telling themselves 'alternative stories' over and above the person-centred account of clients becoming better integrated and congruent.

Instead what I would like to inquire of him is what kind of fable he himself thinks he is fabricating when despite deploring 'the language of deficit' he writes approvingly of the person-centred emphasis on the importance of 'congruence or authenticity on the part of the counsellor' (1999, p. 218). According to McLeod, the congruent or authentic counsellor is able to transcend social norms and 'act as a bridge' for the socially alienated client by congruently indwelling in the client's world and in the wider social world (ibid.). That is to say, McLeod describes the counsellor as an individual able to indwell in **two** worlds in contrast to the client who is only able to indwell in **one**. If this is not the 'language of deficit' as far as the client is concerned, I don't know what is—a point connected in my eyes to the general issue of whether congruence or authenticity can ever be meaningful concepts without positing a contrasting deficit condition of incongruence or inauthenticity.

- *The training and preparation of counsellors*

With respect to the training and preparation of counsellors, of interest to me in McLeod's discussion of the implications of his social process approach is his assertion that

'[t]raining and education prepares counsellors to engage in conversations that go beyond the psychological, and to encompass important areas of human experience such as the spiritual, political, environmental and moral' (pp. 222-3).

An immediate problem I have with such a viewpoint is whether conversations can ever go beyond the psychological, given that a generally accepted definition of psychology is 'the science of human behaviour and experience'. From such a perspective, spiritual experience, political experience, environmental experience and moral experience all fall within the domain of psychology, i.e. they are all psychological.

Aside from which, as is most apparent with aesthetic experience, I regard it as a basic given that human experience transcends the experiential domain mediated by conversations, i.e. of discursive symbolization (cf. Langer, 1953). A pertinent case of such transcendence vis-a-vis the field of c/p is that enshrined in the interaction between mother and infant, that mode of interpersonal experiencing that ordinary discourse terms 'love', and which psychoanalytic thinkers Erik Erikson and Donald Winnicott term 'basic trust'. To these authors and others, such a mode of experiencing forms the original magma out of which eventually emerges our discursive self-identity and our discursive knowing of the world and others (Giddens, 1991, p. 38), a magma that becomes revisited in any fundamental reconstruction of the self as occurs in c/p (Stern, 1985). On such scenario, to provide the kind of relationship whereby a client might reconstruct their socially discursively produced self-identity requires more than conversation. Fundamentally, it requires us to re-create the condition of love in which self-development is rooted.

Person-centred c/p is itself an approach that considers a vital requisite for constructive self-change to be the receiving by the client of that pristine and self-giving mode of love known as *agape* (Rogers, 1962, p. 422; Patterson, 1985, p. 91). 'Profound healing and growth' take place for the client, Rogers (1980) attests, when the counsellor conveys such a cognitive-affective, non-verbal, transcendent and spiritual loving/knowing of the client (p. 129). It is such a mode of being and knowing that spiritual traditions of diverse cultures see as the wellspring of oneness from which all diversity flows; the communal font that makes us one with another whether our discursive mind knows it or not. According to this gospel, as far as counsellor expertise and training are concerned polishing up one's ability to love takes precedence over polishing up one's 'capacity to appreciate the intricacies of language' (McLeod, 1999, p. 221). To paraphrase St. Paul, I may have as great a command of language as Brian Thorne, but if I am without love I am not an authentic counsellor.

A Final Word

Among person-centred thinkers, Maureen O'Hara stands out as the most erudite and engaged commentator on the challenges that social constructionist and postmodern thought pose for the person-centred approach. O'Hara is fully aware of the dangers intrinsic to the kind of social constructionist position advocated by John McLeod—of, as she terms it, the 'strong-form constructivism' advocated by those who 'take the position that there is no reality either beneath or beyond linguistic constructions' (1995, p. 295).

Away from the bleak postmodernist interpretation of McLeod, O'Hara directs our attention to social constructionism of a less nihilist kind, to the postmodern dialogues of 'weak-form constructivists'. These individuals, O'Hara attests, 'acknowledge that consciousness consists of constructions, but see these constructions as surface clues to deeper, more essential experience'. 'As Polanyi (1969) pointed up', informs O'Hara, 'the willingness to have faith in some greater coherence is the sine qua non of both the scientific and psychotherapeutic enterprises' (ibid, p. 296).

While owning that social constructionist thought possesses the potential to shed further light on the nature of the psychotherapeutic process, let us not allow the dazzle of its multiple facets to blind us to its shortcomings. In seeking to further develop the person-centred approach through taking account of the contributions of social constructionist thinkers, may we stay true to the mystical vision of Carl Rogers: that '[h]idden in all of the personal communications which I really hear there seem to be orderly psychological laws, aspects of the same order we find in the universe as a whole' (Rogers, 1980, p. 8).

Note

1. My terminology follows person-centred tradition in considering that 'counselling' and 'psychotherapy', and related terms, refer the same interpersonal activity. To emphasize this point I make use of the combined term 'counselling/psychotherapy' ('c/p' for short).

References

Bozarth, J. D. & Brodley, B. T. (1991) 'Actualization'. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 6(5), 45-59.

Burr, V. (1995) *An Introduction to Social Constructionism.* London: Routledge.

Campbell, J. (1972) *Myths to Live By*, New York: Bantam.

Ellingham, I. H. (1998) 'Person-centred porridge'. *Person-Centred Practice*, 6(2), 110-112.

Ellingham, I. H. (1999a) 'Carl Rogers' "congruence" as an organismic, not a Freudian concept'. *The Person-Centred Journal,* 6 (2), 121-140.

Ellingham, I. H. (1999b) 'On transcending person-centred postmodernist porridge'. *Person-Centred practice,* 7(2), 62-78.

Gergen, K. J. (1991) *The Saturated Self.* New York: Basic Books.

Gellner, E. (1992) *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion.* London: Routledge.

Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Glass, J. M. (1993) *Shattered Selves: Multiple Personality in a Postmodern World.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Gross, R., Humphreys, P. & Petkova, B. (1997) *Challenges in Psychology.* London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Held, B. S. (1995) *Back to Reality: A Critique of Postmodern Theory in Psychotherapy.* New York: W. W. Norton.

Karasu, T. B. 'The specificity against nonspecificity dilemma'. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 143, 687-95.

Kuhn, T. (1970) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd edn.* Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Laing, R. D. (1960) *The Divided Self.* London: Tavistock.

Langer, S. K. (1953) *Philosophy in a New Key.* Harvard: Harvard University Press.
Lyotard, J-F. (1984) *The Postmodern Condition.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.
McLeod, J. (1994) *Doing Counselling Research.* London: Sage.
McLeod, J. (1999) 'Counselling as a social process'. *Counselling,* 10 (3), 217-222.
McLeod, J. & Wheeler, S. (1995) 'Person-centred and psychodynamic counselling'. 6(4), 283-7.
McNamee, S. & Gergen, K. J. (eds.) (1992) *Therapy as Social Construction.*London: Sage.
Mearns, B. & Thorne, B. (1999) *Person-Centred Counselling in Action.* (2nd edn.). London: Sage.
Neville, B. (1999) 'The Client-Centered Ecopsychologist'. *The Person-Centered Journal.* 6(1), 59-74.
O'Hara, M. (1995) 'Is it time for clinical psychology to deconstruct constructivism?' *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 8(4): 293-303.
Patterson, C. H. (1985) *The Therapeutic Relationship*. Monterey: Brooks/Cole.
Polanyi, M. (1969) *Knowing and Being.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Polkinghorne, D. E. (1992) 'Postmodern epistemology of practice'. In S. Kvale (ed.) *Psychology and Postmodernism.* London: Sage.
Rogers, C. R. (1942) *Counseling and Psychotherapy.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
Rogers, C. R. (1951) *Client-Centered Therapy.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
Rogers, C. R. (1957) 'The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change'. *Journal of Consulting Psychology.* 21(2), 95-103.
Rogers, C. R. (1959) 'A theory of therapy, personality, and interpersonal relationships, as developed in the client-centered framework'. In S. Koch (ed.) *Psychology: a study of a science, Vol. 3.* New York: McGraw Hill.
Rogers, C. R. (1961) *On Becoming a Person.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
Rogers, C. R. (1962) 'The interpersonal relationship'. *Harvard Educational Review.* 32(4), 416-429.
Rogers, C. R. (1980) *A Way of Being.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
Stern, D. N. (1985) *The Interpersonal World of the Infant.* New York: Basic Books.
Stevens, R. (ed.) (1995) *Understanding the Self.* London: Sage.
Woolfe, R. (1995). 'What do you think is the most significant trend or issue in counselling today?' *Counselling*, 6(1), 34-40.