Culture and Meaning: Expanding the Metaphorical Repertoire of Family Therapy.

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This essay proposes that a family therapy founded on a contemporary, postmodern perspective demands an expanded range of metaphors for the family and the work of therapy. It describes a perspective that emphasizes a view of the family as a culture, as opposed to a system. A cultural perspective naturally addresses issues of meaning and language, narrative, politics, and practices of power—critical contemporary concerns not adequately encompassed by traditional systemic formulations. The essay explores the relationship between theory and metaphor, and contrasts the views of persons and of the family offered by the metaphors of culture and system. Case illustrations demonstrate how a cultural view effectively fashions an expanded therapeutic discourse, shifting the focus of family therapy from normative prescriptions for family "functionality" to issues of intercultural harmony. This shift in emphasis also extends to individual work, where the therapeutic task is construed as a peace-making between conflicting stories that intersect in the client's life.

> *The study of culture necessarily entails the study of meaning.*
>
> ¾Basso and Selby
> *Meaning in Anthropology* (p. 2)

This essay is about culture and meaning. It is founded on the view shared by many contemporary anthropologists (Basso & Selby, 1976; Geertz, 1973, 1983; Ruby, 1982; Turner & Bruner, 1986) that one cannot be understood without consideration of the other. Tamasese and colleagues (1994) put it this way: "Culture is about the meaning that people give events."

My premise springs from these notions. In effect, it is the flip side of Basso and Selby's above quotation: that the meanings which families and individuals bring to therapy cannot be understood without attention to their cultural origins. At a time when family therapy is placing an increasing emphasis on the meaning-making dimension of experience, I believe it would do well to attend more deliberately to the multiple contexts in which experience occurs by adding a cultural metaphor to its repertoire. In the next few pages, I will invite the reader to consider the organic relationship between meaning and culture, to ponder the possibilities of a therapy that embraces the former by situating itself in the latter—a therapy that views families as cultures.

This essay is also about metaphor. It holds to the premise that all of our views of the family and of family therapy are inherently metaphorical (Rosenblatt, 1994), and that the metaphors we use to describe the world provide the foundation for the metaphysical positions or world hypotheses that guide our actions (Sarbin, 1986). As this discussion unfolds, I will propose that family therapy is currently undergoing an expansion of its metaphorical repertoire, and I will advocate for the deliberate adoption of a family-as-culture metaphor to promote a greater congruence between its theory and practice.

Meaning and Family Therapy

That family therapy now regards meaning as an important dimension of experience—and thus central to its purpose—is hardly a bold assertion. The field's earlier preoccupation with behavioral sequences and family structure is being replaced by an interest in beliefs and stories embedded in language (Hoffman, 1985; Paré, 1994, 1995; Real, 1990; Reiss, 1981; Simon, 1992). A wide range of emerging, postmodern approaches to family therapy (de Shazer, 1991, 1994; Epston & White, 1992; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Friedman, 1993; Gilligan & Price, 1993; Hoffman, 1993; McNamee & Gergen, 1992; O'Hanlon, 1994; Parry & Doan, 1994; White & Epston, 1990) depict the creative subjectivity of clients—their ability to reconstrue their worlds in accordance with their values and aspirations—as the central impetus of change. This shift in emphasis reflects an intellectual and aesthetic groundswell that attends to the interpretive, meaning-making aspect of experience. It is a transformation that naturally calls for a revised story, and the updating of our metaphors for the family.

In the pages to come, I will argue that these emerging approaches to family therapy already draw—to varying degrees and in their own manner—on the metaphor of the family as a culture. This essay does not purport to be introducing a novel

approach to a long-standing practice. Rather, my intention is to make more explicit the cultural metaphors that hover behind a wide range of postmodern psychotherapy—metaphors that shape therapeutic discourse and practice as significantly as the system metaphor has done over the past several decades.

Prior to introducing these cultural metaphors and the implications of their use, it is worth noting that this essay is not about replacing the "wrong" with the "right." The usefulness of systemic metaphors is well documented; they have an important place in the work of family therapy. However, this essay promotes further culturally oriented discourse in the field, so that the way we talk *about* and *with* families addresses a range of issues obscured (Rosenblatt, 1994) by traditional systemic metaphors. This is a discussion about values and utility—not truth and reality.

Postmodernism: Metaphor and Story

Because it concerns itself with the words and concepts used by family therapy to describe families and to depict their dynamics, this essay is, according to conventional usage, a discussion about family therapy *theory*. and yet, reference has already been made to *metaphor* and *story*. Before proceeding, then, it would be useful to consider a postmodern view of the relationship between metaphor, story, and theory. While metaphors and stories have traditionally been viewed as inhabiting a distinct territory from the rarefied domain of theory, the boundary between these areas is collapsing. Theories, as I shall later argue at more length, can be seen as historo-cultural creations situated at the intersection of time and place. Like metaphors and stories, they reflect their originators' values and idiosyncratic constructions of reality.

According to the usage of this discussion, the meanings of *metaphor* and *story* are interpenetrating. The device of *metaphor* allows us to understand one domain of experience in terms of another (Lakehoff & Johnson, 1980). It enriches meanings by connecting them to other meanings. Like story, the word *metaphor* suggests a construction of experience rather than a direct reflection of reality.

Story, or *narrative,*[1] is seen in terms of the temporal organization and meaning dimensions of experience (Mitchell, 1981; Polkinghorne, 1988). Narrative is now widely regarded as a prime organizing framework for experience, the means by which we construct our views of ourselves and our lives (Bruner, 1990; Carr, 1986; Friedman, 1993; Mair, 1988; Mitchell, 1981; Parry, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986). In the absence of a fixed and immutable reference point, stories are characterized by an inherent relativism. They relate experiences to each other—occasionally provoking breathtaking insight—but they do not pierce the skin of our lived experience to depict things as they *really* are in the absence of observing subjects. In that sense, stories are metaphorical social constructions.

I am most interested in the word *story* as it depicts the meanings that we negotiate intersubjectively, within a range of cultural contexts. In the sense I use it, the word implies a view of persons as interpretive beings, contextually situated, co-constructing a shared world primarily through language. In the field of family therapy, this intersubjective meaning-making is embodied in the stories shared between clients and therapists. The stories we tell ourselves and others, the stories we live, the stories we are "lived by" (Mair, 1988), constitute the organizational signposts by which we negotiate our way through the mundane tasks, the minor trials, and the grand tribulations of our lives. They also constitute the sweeping narratives of history, our myths and religious doctrines, our steadily accumulating body of scientific knowledge. In short, we can be seen as inhabiting a universe of stories rather than "truths" (Parry, 1991).

Theory as Metaphor

From this perspective, our scientific and psychological theories *themselves* can be seen as stories. They are social constructions, metaphorical in nature, and reflective of their historo-cultural origins (Cushman, 1990; Gergen, 1985, 1991; Howard, 1991). This conclusion is critical to this discussion, which is concerned with exploring the implications of a revised theoretical view of the family.

McNamee and Gergen (1992) point to the intellectual sea-change underlying this shift in outlook toward science: a shift away from the reification of scientific principles, a trend whereby the philosophy of science as a discipline is being replaced by the history and sociology of knowledge. These latter approaches trace the cultural and historical processes that privilege certain conceptions of nature, while suppressing others. In effect, they argue that "what we take to be accurate and objective accounts of nature and self are an outgrowth of social processes" (p. 4). Cushman (1990) makes a similar point, depicting the ever-changing conception of the Self as a cultural artifact, reflective of sweeping social trends intersecting at a time and place. And so our scientific theories—including our organizing frameworks for family therapy—derive from shared conventions of discourse, and may be seen as "refined' stories (or rich metaphors) meant to depict complex causal processes in the world" (Howard, 1991, p. 189).

Sarbin (1986) says that our scientific models are constrained by the underlying root metaphors around which they are organized. For example, he says that western science is primarily founded on mechanistic conceptions of the universe, which draw on the metaphors of a machine, or a clock, or, in Bateson's (1972/87) terms, a thermostat. We rely on these metaphors as our bulwarks against the chaos of unstructured experience; but it is critically important to remind ourselves of

the act of creation that the metaphor-making process represents. After a time, says Sarbin (1986), the sense of metaphor is lost, leaving in its wake the blind assumption that the model represents reality, and not merely an elegant and useful description of shared experience:

> Once a metaphor has done its job of sense making, the metaphoric quality tends to become submerged. Unless constantly reminded of the *as if* quality of the expression, users of the term may treat the figure as a literal expression. The once tentative poetic expression may then become reified, literalized. The reification provides the foundation for belief systems that guide action. [p. 5]

This reification is precisely the process that Berger and Luckmann (1967) describe as shaping the worlds we inhabit. Metaphorical "language makes the coordinates of my life in society and fills that life with meaningful objects" (p.22). White (1992) makes a similar point: "persons' lives are shaped by the meaning they ascribe to their experience, by their situation in social structures, and by the language practices and cultural practices of self and of relationship that these lives are recruited into" (p. 122).

In what phenomenologists call the "natural attitude" of daily life, much of this process is overlooked because our guiding metaphors and stories have become reified. So, too, for our theories: they do not merely *describe* structures and processes—they *constitute* them. Theories construct the world in their own image, including our theories of family therapy. And as Rosenblatt (1994) reminds us, the implicit nature of metaphor renders this process largely invisible.

Weaving a Web of Metaphor

One metaphor leads to another. Lakehoff & Johnson (1980) depict the way in which time is typically conceptualized as a commodity in western society, a view captured by the familiar maxim *time is money.* Time can be "spent, wasted, budgeted, invested wisely or poorly, saved, or squandered" (p. 8). But of course time may be experienced in many other ways, as is obvious to the western traveler in any culture that places less of a premium on the ticking of the clock.

Salman Rushdie writes that all stories are a form of censorship, in that the telling of one story necessarily excludes the telling of others (Sawatzky & Parry, 1993). The same can be said of metaphor. Like stories, metaphors "provide coherent structure, highlighting some things and hiding others" (Lakehoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 39). In the face of a boundless universe, we act as editors, selecting from our infinite experience. In so doing, we constrain discourse about the world. This is an inevitable process; I do not mean to depict it as "problem." However, our metaphors lose their resonance and utility when they do not readily accommodate issues of central concern to contemporary social discourse. My point here is that the traditional metaphor of the family as a system (and the web of metaphors that surrounds it) fails to encompass the current emphasis on the contextual and constitutive aspects of knowledge. "Systems" do not make meaning or construct experience—*cultures* do. It therefore makes sense that our metaphorical repertoire for families should be expanded accordingly.

Metaphor of the Family System

For roughly 40 years, the depiction of the family as a system has been the predominant overriding metaphor of family therapy. Following the tenor of this discussion, the system metaphor does not reflect the "reality" of the family the way a mirror reflects light. Instead, it can be seen as a social construction that points in a particular direction, determining the locus of attention when we consider families and other client groupings.

It is a construction that has been much criticized in recent years for its failure to adequately encompass issues of gender, class, race, and power (Erickson, 1988; Goldner, 1985, 1988; Hoffman, 1990; Luepnitz, 1988). These limitations can be traced to the juxtaposition of 1) a metaphor that arose from an era that strongly privileged science and technology, with 2) a range of contemporary concerns founded on hermeneutic and social constructionist perspectives that are decidedly un-technological in their orientation (Paré, 1995).

Applying one metaphor to another, the family system view can be seen as a lens constrained by its own limited focal length. It largely construes families in biological and mechanistic terms—as objective entities interacting in a complex relational world governed by the principles of circular causality. By guiding our vision in this way, the system metaphor excludes the process whereby we construct our realities in a social context—a process that transcends notions of causality altogether.[2]

Attempts have been made to address this myopia by introducing the confusing notion of "cybernetics of cybernetics" (Becvar & Becvar, 1988), while continuing to describe families around metaphors of feedback, homeostasis, circularity, and so forth. However, I favor an alternative approach, which gives flower to a cluster of metaphors more congruent with the themes of the social construction of meaning and historo-cultural context. As mentioned, these metaphors are already current in a range of psychotherapeutic contexts. However, they appear not to have been consolidated around a conceptual core in the manner that the "system" helps to cohere family systems metaphors.

The Family Culture Metaphor

Webster's (1977) defines *culture* as "the concepts, habits, skills, art, instruments, institutions, etc. of a given people in a given period" (p. 444). The sense in which I use the word points to the people themselves. Their concepts, habits, etc. are what help us to differentiate them as a distinct grouping of persons. A "culture" is therefore a group of persons who share particular interpretations of the world because of reasons of geography, gender, religion, and other contingencies that play a role in lending a degree of homogeneity to their perspectives. Thus, there is the culture of the Inuit, but also the culture of women, Sufi culture, gay culture, corporate culture, youth culture, etc.

Howard (1991) uses the term "subjective culture" to describe how we are raised in a "plurality of cultural subgroups, each exhibiting a multiplicity of influences upon us" (p. 192). He describes how we are molded by the subjective culture of these subgroups we inhabit. This view of culture, which transcends traditional distinctions of mere ethnicity or nationality, has become increasingly prevalent in cross-cultural or multicultural counseling (Speight, Meyers, Cox, & Highlen, 1991). Pedersen (1991) says that "each of us belongs to many different cultures at different times, in different environments and in different roles" (p. 4). We also inhabit these cultures *simultaneously*—they are the multiple contexts that give rise to the meanings we make of our worlds.

Cushman (1990) describes how cultural context determines what gets attended to in the "blooming, buzzing confusion" of experience. Ultimately, he argues, culture determines both how we construct our world, and how we are constructed by it. He says culture "infuses individuals, fundamentally shaping and forming them and how they conceive of themselves and the world, how they see others, how they engage in structures of mutual obligation, and how they make choices in the everyday world" (p. 601).

Although the term *culture* is not typically applied to families, it is equally useful for characterizing a group of genetically and/or legally united individuals who share a range of what Bruner (1987) calls "world-making" practices. Reiss's rigorous empirical study of families (1981) demonstrates this at a wide variety of levels. For all of their differences, family members look upon the world from highly overlapping vantage points. The meanings they bring to therapy emerge from similar places; their stories are rooted in shared soil.

Elizabeth Stone (1988) calls the family our "first culture," and describes the relentless reminders the family generates of its own cultural norms and mores. These are crystallized in "family stories which underscore, in a way invariably clear to its members, the essentials, like the unspoken and unadmitted family policy on marriage or illness. Or suicide. Or who the family saints and sinners are, or how much anger can be expressed and by whom" (p. 7).

This construal of families as historically situated, meaning-making collectives is a dramatic departure from the traditional systemic view, which typically downplays historo-cultural context in favor of analyzing the recursive, internal dynamics of the family (Goldner, 1985, 1988; Hoffman, 1985; Luepnitz, 1988). Whereas the system metaphor depicts *behavioral sequences* as embedded in a wider matrix, the culture metaphor contextualizes *meanings* by placing them in communities and in history. In some respects, this distinction can be seen as a widening of the metaphorical net, for behavioral sequences themselves can be understood as active forms of meaning-making.

For this reason, the culture metaphor resonates loudly with a wide range of contemporary concerns in family therapy. Primarily concerned with meaning and interpretation, it favors a nonobjectivist, nonfoundationalist, perspectival orientation more congruent with a range of post-modern tenets. It draws our attention in directions not suggested by the system metaphor. Indeed, in some respects it contrasts with the system view, which originated from a conception of observed, rather than observing systems—a view whose dominant metaphors depict structural and behavioral characteristics of families, rather than their interpretive and meaning-making practices, and those same practices of the therapists who work with them. (Becvar & Becvar, 1988; Golann, 1987; Hoffman, 1990).

I think it is very important to emphasize that the perspective engendered by cultural metaphors also contrasts in significant ways with *constructivist*—as opposed to *social constructionist*—thinking. More often than not, these terms are still used interchangeably in the literature, due to what appears be a confusion between them. Gergen (1985) has convincingly clarified the distin ction between social constructionism and constructivism, and others (Hoffman, 1990; Paré, 1995; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1994) have elaborated on the implications for family therapy.

Without delving into the origins and nuances of the terms, suffice it to say that *constructivism* attends to the way organisms create their realities on the basis of their unique structures, but fails to address the intersubjectivity of this process. For that reason, cultural metaphors are more congruent with *social constructionism,* because these metaphors locate meanings not merely in individuals, but in the communities from which they originate. In my mind, constructivist thinking leads to a view of persons "doing their own thing," whereas social constructionism promotes the notion that "we're all in this together." I make no pretense about my own bias toward the latter as a framework for family therapy; I agree with Cushman (1990) that individualism leads to isolation and, ultimately, emptiness. I also feel a purely constructivist stance is untenable: for example, it necessitates overlooking the critical role of language in the construction of reality, because the formation of language is inarguably a social endeavor.

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Besides directing attention to meaning and context, cultural metaphors address issues of power and hierarchy. Families, like women, gays, or other "interpretive communities" (Erickson, 1988) can be seen as subcultures of the wider society. In this respect, they have a greater or lesser voice as a function of the degree to which they are marginalized due to socioeconomics, race, religion, normative prescriptions, and so on. By locating persons and meanings in social contexts, a cultural metaphor imbues them with a valence the measure of their power and influence, their degree of self-determination.

Within postmodern discourse, the issue of power is ubiquitous (Gergen, 1991; Foucault, 1980; Kaschak, 1992; Kvale, 1992; Lather, 1991; Lowe, 1991; Lukes, 1986). Power is seen as playing a central role in privileging some voices or stories while silencing others. However, system metaphors are derived from a natural science tradition where "power" is a mechanical rather than a social construct, and so they fail to address this dynamic (Dell, 1989; Hoffman, 1990). Because of this constricted metaphorical reach, the system view does not encompass the contextual restraints (White, 1986) that curtail the scope for individuals or families to re-author their lives (White & Epston, 1990). So-called "mental health"—however it is culturally defined—is not equally accessible to all.

Although he advocates for the utility of the family-as-system metaphor, Rosenblatt (1994) makes a similar point: "[O]ne thing that is obscured in metaphorically defining certain family systems characteristics as healthy or unhealthy is how much the criteria of family system health are bound to culture and class" (p. 183). "Health" can be seen as a commodity that can be acquired if one has sufficient influence. A construal of the family-as-culture naturally confronts this inescapably political nature of families, of therapy, and indeed of living.

Besides situating families in a wider context, the cultural framework can be applied in ever-narrowing spheres to *family subcultures* as well. In Canada, the meeting of the Anglophone and Franco-phone cultures resulted in the hybrid culture which is Canadian society. In a family, two individuals with unique (though perhaps overlapping) cultural backgrounds come together to create the new culture of their family. Within the context of this family, these two individuals, the parents, can be seen as the dominant culture the principle conduits of the family's prevailing social constructions.

Parry and Doan (1994) depict what they describe as "cross-cultural differences" (p. 78) between children and their parents. In the terms of this discussion, those children (especially in their younger years) can be construed as a somewhat disenfranchised or less powerful subculture of the family. They are inheritors of a blend of social constructions from both founding nations, as it were. As they grow up, the children are exposed to an ever-widening sphere of cultural influences—new and contrasting meanings that not infrequently lead to increased conflict with their parents (Howard, 1991).

The metaphorical construal of the family as a culture within the wider culture of society is already implicit in a growing body of family therapy literature, including feminist work, various "dialogic" approaches (Waters, 1994), and perhaps most explicitly in what has come to be called "narrative family therapy," following White and Epston's (1990) seminal volume *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends.* I think the intrafamilial extension of this way of thinking—which depicts family subgroupings as subcultures—is less current, but emerging, as a growing emphasis is placed on accountability and the responsibility of family members to each other (Jenkins, 1990; White, 1992). The cultural metaphor also resonates with postmodern views of the *intrapersonal* domain, where individuals are characterized in terms of multiple selves (Gergen, 1991; Gergen & Kaye, 1992) or multiple internal voices (Penn & Franfurt, 1994). These ideas will be explored later in the discussion.

The construal of families, individuals, and the practice of psychotherapy in cultural terms has considerable generative potential. Just as the deliberate application of the system metaphor to the family has spawned a wide range of theoretical and clinical expressions, so does the cultural view provide fertile soil for related metaphors. In Lakehoff and Johnson's (1980) terms, one metaphor "entails" another, opening up whole new vistas worthy of further exploration.

Entailments of the Family Culture Metaphor

Lakehoff and Johnson (1980) show how the metaphors we use betray the concepts that underlie them. For example, the concept of *love* is exemplified in a range of metaphors of everyday speech, including *love is magic* and *love is a physical force.* The former is found in expressions like "She cast her *spell* over me. The magic is gone.... She is *bewitching*" (p. 49). Examples of the latter are "I could feel the *electricity* between us. There were sparks. I was *magnetically drawn* to her" (p. 49). Each metaphor entails a vast constellation of assumptions tied to the concept embedded in the metaphor itself. If love is magic, then it likely operates in mystifying ways beyond the comprehension of mere mortals, and is probably better left to magicians. Thus the metaphor *love is magic,* in effect, constructs one version of the "reality" of love and, in this case, it encourages a fanciful and fatalistic approach to affairs of the heart. In contrast to this, the alternative metaphor "Love is a collaborative work of art" (p. 139) entails an entirely different range of assumptions, including "Love is work. Love is active. Love requires cooperation" (p. 140). In other words, what love "is" for us is reflected in how we construct love through language; and those constructions limit our experience of love and direct our related behaviors in specific ways.

In a similar manner, metaphors for the family—that is, the family as a system, the family as a culture—entail a range of

assumptions. They establish frames for the way we conceptualize families, which, in turn, has implications for what we look for when we research families, how we teach family therapy, and how we approach clinical practice. When the family is viewed as a *system,* family members are regarded as *components* of the system. And so we are likely to assume their behavior is best understood in terms of their roles or functions within that system. We are also likely to construe conflict or "problems" relative to issues of systemic balance. And so on: these and dozens of other assumptions are current in an assortment of systemically inspired approaches to family therapy. They are the conceptual outgrowth—the entailments—of the family-as-system metaphor.

What follows, in no particular order, are some entailments that similarly arise when persons are viewed in cultural terms. "Persons" here includes individuals, families, *and therapists.* Just as a systemic metaphor calls for the inclusion of the clinician in the systemic interaction, so does a cultural metaphor demand attention to the therapist's cultural context. It is important to note that these are not seen as the *inevitable* assumptions that follow from a cultural metaphor; metaphors breed metaphors according to each individual's subjectivity. It should also be emphasized that metaphors both expand and constrain our views; this is *not* an argument for the abandonment of all other modes of construing families and family therapy. However, I do believe that this alternative metaphor gives rise to a group of related conceptualizations that resonate loudly with postmodern, social constructionist thinking, and that hold considerable utility for clinical practice.

Each of the entailments is followed by a case illustration, and a discussion of the therapeutic implications of the entailment. These clinical examples are intended to suggest a *way of viewing/constructing* families and individuals while emphasizing cultural, rather than traditional, systemic metaphors. While they touch on some clinical interplay, more detailed descriptions of the processes of culturally informed therapy should be sought elsewhere. Many of the assumptions to follow are already prevalent in the work of a range of family practitioners. Others are perhaps more novel, and as yet relatively unexplored.

Finally, all of the entailments are overlapping. One speaks to another—which accounts for what might appear as a somewhat arbitrary location of a discussion in one section versus another. Perhaps another way of putting this is to say that the entailments entail *each other*—at least in my construction of things.

1. *Actions and statements of persons can be seen as expressions of cultural meanings:*

Carol is a 35-year-old sole parent who has come to therapy with her 14-year-old daughter Tamson because of her concerns about Tamson's "fighting" at school. Tamson has been in a few altercations, and has twice been charged with assault. She says she doesn't have a problem, and clearly indicates she doesn't want to see a therapist. Carol says the legal bills are "killing her"; she wants to get "at the root of the problem" before there is another charge.

As discussed throughout this essay, a cultural metaphor emphasizes meaning, whereas a systemic view attends more to behavioral sequences. Following a cultural thread, the therapist focuses not on statements and actions as responses to systemic feedback, but rather views these expressions as cultural artifacts emerging from multiple contexts.

As a family, Carol and Tamson operate according to what Reiss (1981) would call a family paradigm, which includes a wide range of beliefs, emotional responses, and so on—ways of constructing their world and responding to it—that reflect their cultural context. It is a context that differs from mine. I share parenting with my partner, while theirs is a sole-parent household. I am regarded as middle class, while they are regarded as working class. Carol and Tamson—both female share a range of social constructions related to gender, which differ from my own. And so on: I can therefore expect their cultural artifacts to be distinct from my own in various ways.

But we inhabit many overlapping contexts. In some respects, Carol and I share certain cultural meanings more closely than Tamson and her mother. Carol and I are roughly the same age. We are both parents. Our age class and our status as parents can be viewed as overlapping interpretive frames, which give rise to certain meanings likely to contrast (and perhaps conflict) with Tamson's.

This breakdown of multiple, overlapping contexts can continue indefinitely. Just which ones are attended to, and at which time, will be a function of the issues that arise. In my initial work with Carol and Tamson, I think I inadvertently privileged—gave special status to—some meanings I shared with Carol. These understandings emanated from our age class and our role as parents, from what might be called the "culture of responsible adults." It is a culture that construes fighting at school as evidence of a "problem" with a "root." Carol and I were held in the sway of this social construction surrounding schoolyard fights that lead to assault charges. Despite the myriad possible interpretations of Tamson's behavior and the context in which it was embedded, Carol and I etched one roughly similar meaning into the foreground of her story—we construed Tamson's fights as a misdirected expression of anger, a sign of emotional distress.

This view was sharply out of line with Tamson's, whose meaning-making was happening in a different cultural context. From her vantage point as a member of the "culture of junior-high girls," the fights were a survival tactic. In an environment where slander and confrontation are rampant, the schoolyard is an arena of dominance and submission. Tamson, unusually

large for her age, was a natural target for those striving to dominate. Details of the incidents suggested that Tamson did not provoke the confrontations, and that the filing of charges may have been more of a return salvo than a reflection of the extent of the damage done. When Carol and I were able to accommodate Tamson's construal of her plight, a picture of an awkward teenager caught in a subculture of vindictive infighting, our energy shifted to securing a new school placement for Tamson. Tamson's successful adjustment to a new school was then seen as a victory: we collectively viewed her as *escaping from fighting* rather than as *running from her problem.* While preserving the integrity of her own meaning, Tamson was able to make changes, which ended an activity with negative connotations for the adult culture—including the culture of the courts.

A cultural view of families gives rise to enhanced attention to family expressions—to the symbols, stories, and ceremonies (Combs and Freedman, 1990) that are the cultural artifacts of the family community. Family symbols might range from grandfather's Bible collecting dust on the study shelf to junior's motorcycle parked out front. For Tamson, a black eye might be the symbol of defiant pride, while Carol may view it as the emblem of her own failure as a mother. Like societies themselves, family members rally around or protest against their symbols as an expression of the ongoing negotiation over reality that is inherent to any dynamic culture.

Stories—in the conventional sense of anecdotes about family members—are the mythology of families. Stone (1988) says that stories set out family ground rules and definitions, as well as reminding members of the family pecking order, and reinforcing (or diminishing) their sense of self-worth. "People grow up and walk around with their stories under their skin," she writes, "sometimes as weightless pleasures but sometimes painfully tatooed with them" (p. 6). Hovering between Carol and Tamson is the story of Carol's lifelong struggles with abuse, which she has successfully escaped by virtue of the same gritty and defiant anger that her daughter is now displaying.

Turner (1986) says cultures are best understood through their ceremonies or rituals: conventionalized and repeated expressions of meaning. Whether it is the purchase of a car for each child who graduates, or candlelit dinners without the kids after the mending of marital tiffs, rituals are eloquent statements of values, and thus speak richly of the interpretive worlds families inhabit.

When therapists encounter individuals and families, they bring their own sets of cultural artifacts while being introduced to an array of others, both novel and familiar. This metaphorical turn thus gives rise to a view of therapy as the meeting of cultures.

2. *Family therapy involves the meeting of cultures:*

Norma, age 38, has two major diseases, a psychiatric diagnosis of manic-depression, and a history of childhood sexual abuse as well as adult physical abuse at the hands of her former husband. Her biological mother was admitted to a mental hospital shortly after her birth and battled with alcoholism until Norma was an adult. Norma is currently grieving the recent loss of her maternal grandmother, who raised her until the age of 6 and who she describes as her "real mother." She comes to therapy with her fiancé Rudy, who has been having unexplained seizures and is living on disability insurance while tests are done to identify his medical condition. Norma and Rudy share strong religious convictions. They believe their ailments are being cured through their prayer and the prayer of three pastors at the church they attend. They agree that Norma's illnesses were precipitated by a "death wish" placed upon her at birth by her paternal grandmother, whom they describe as a witch.

Although Norma, Rudy, and I share roughly similar ethnic backgrounds, we inhabit a range of fairly different cultures. First, gender lends one kind of cross-cultural context to my encounter with Norma. The meanings of her grandmother-granddaughter and mother-daughter relationships, and the abuse she has suffered at the hands of men, will be understood by me from my male vantage point. and there are other, equally dramatic distinctions between the contexts, or cultures, in which Norma, Rudy, and I are situated.

Norma and (it now appears) Rudy inhabit the culture of the chronically ill. For them, health is ephemeral. Facing a future without the assurances I take for granted, they draw strength from their deep religious convictions. With a foundation of good physical health and firm family support, I gravitate towards secular, humanistic beliefs. I also share with my family of origin a skepticism about what might be called occult phenomena. My father's stridently rational debates at the dinner table clearly established our family's cultural norms regarding the paranormal.

Norma and Rudy put greater stock in magic, both good and bad. It was never excluded from consideration at their own dinner-table, cultural councils. Besides, they have experienced magic firsthand: despite the constraints on their lives, they are buoyant and hopeful, reveling in the youthful optimism of their budding relationship. Touched by life-altering circumstances apparently beyond their control, Norma and Rudy have no difficulty believing that divine and occult forces are at play in their lives.

When informed by the metaphor of a meeting of cultures, I am inclined in my clinical work to take heed of the practices that have been seen to lead to the devastation of indigenous cultures. The metaphor itself entails the hegemonic risks

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associated with the practice of therapy: the therapist as colonial power (Kearney, Byrne, & McCarthy, 1989), the therapeutic model as the dogma of a foreign culture, the therapy room as the mission school where religious conversion and cultural assimilation are the undergirding agendas.

This is not to imply that any sharing of meanings on my part represents some form of imperialist oppression. But when therapy is not seen as the meeting of stories, it leads to "the slow but inevitable replacement of the client's story with the therapist's" (Gergen & Kaye, 1992, p. 169). A therapy founded on a view of therapeutic mastery as deft clinical intervention overlays one culture's meanings with another's, thereby suppressing indigenous resources.

When Samoan therapist Kiwi Tamasese says "culture knowledge is at least as important as social science knowledge," (Tamasese, Tuhaka, & Waldegrave, 1994), she is speaking of more than merely ethnic culture. She could be talking about the constellation of cultures Rudy and Norma bring to their relationship, or the culture they are fashioning together as a married couple. For the most part, their meanings are "working" for them; to "correct" them by replacing them with a set of meanings founded on social scientific knowledge would be to rob them of a powerful resource in their lives. My inclination to dismiss their attribution of outright power to external forces is akin to the missionary's quest to purge the locals of their heresy. By failing to attend to the discrepancies in our interpretive frames, I run the risk of indoctrinating them with my cultural assumptions about self-determination—a set of beliefs that are dissonant with the cherished meanings which now sustain them. Tamasese *et al.* (1994) put it more bluntly: "therapy that does not address cultural meaning is racist."

"All counseling is cross-cultural or multi-cultural," say Speight *et al.* (1991), "because all humans differ in terms of cultural backgrounds, values, or life-style" (p. 29). When therapy is seen as the meeting of cultures, the modernist conception of a neutral observer collecting objective data from clients disintegrates entirely. Instead, the theories guiding therapists are seen as "ideologies invented at a moment in time for practical reasons" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988, p. 373), and therapy itself is seen as a political encounter calling for acute responsibility and openness on the part of therapists (Amundson, Stewart, & Valentine, 1993; Cross, 1994; McLean, 1994; White, 1994).

As in the case of Tamson, struggling in a hostile school environment, my work with Norma and Rudy is focused on bringing forward their cultural views, and helping them to explore the ways in which these views are serving them in terms of their current concerns. Those concerns themselves may be viewed as cultural artifacts deserving of respect as well as a certain curiosity and "not-knowingness" (Goolishian & Anderson, 1992) congruent with my outsider's perspective.

This is far more than mere "joining," which in systemic terms is not infrequently characterized as making an emotional connection with clients in order to facilitate the application of an intervention. A cultural view places less emphasis on intervention, and more on the negotiation of meanings in a manner congruent with the more auspicious aspects of cultural cross-fertilization. Rather than imposing a solution—for example, in the form of a paradoxical intervention or a behavioral prescription—a culturally informed therapist is inclined to collaborate with families and individuals in co-constructing alternate meanings or stories for their lives (Friedman, 1993; Gilligan & Price, 1993; Hoyt, 1994; Parry & Doan, 1994; White & Epston, 1990; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1994).

An implication of the cultural metaphor rarely emphasized in the literature is that these alternate accounts are not created in a vacuum. Like the "old" stories that have fallen into disfavor, the new ones can be traced to cultural contexts. This point will be developed further in conjunction with the next entailment, which moves the culture metaphor into the intrapersonal domain. While the discussion to this point has centered on groups of persons, or individuals, the metaphor also has some useful applications for characterizing the meanings that inhabit our internal worlds.

3. *Individuals may be considered in pluralistic, cultural terms:*

Elizabeth would like to cultivate a relationship with her widower father, but finds her sense of self-esteem is crushed in his presence. She describes him as a deeply lonely man with poor social skills, but says she feels reduced to a misbehaving child when with him. Speaking of the hurt she experiences around his criticism, her voice is thin, and tears come readily. At these times, her need for reassurance and nurturance overwhelm her and constrain her range of experience. At other times, Elizabeth assumes a magnanimous posture reminscent of her description of her mother. When this version of Elizabeth dominates, she seems calmer, more focused; her attention is turned to the ways in which she might help to alleviate her father's isolation.

The Arabic poet Samie Ma'ari has a forceful way of proclaiming the multiplicity of individual experience: "Identities are highly complex, tension filled, contradictory, and inconsistent entities. Only the one who claims to have a simple, definite, and clear-cut identity has an identity problem" (quoted in Gergen, 1991, p. 155). So too for Elizabeth, who displays what I take to be a typical range of social constructions around herself and others. And they are changeable constructions: while our meanings can be traced to history and place, they are not static. Life in the intrapersonal world, like life on the outside, is filled with a constant negotiation and transmutation of meaning.

Clients rarely bring a unitary story of themselves or of their worlds to therapy. Elizabeth says she is "becoming her own woman"; but she also experiences a recurring feeling of childlike vulnerability and a yearning for a nurturing parent. Rudy

is a gentle caretaker in his role as Norma's husband—a characteristic quite in contrast to the sarcastic and embittered tone that dominated in a previous marriage gone sour. At times, Tamson angrily defies Carol's curfew guidelines and toys with the thought of leaving home. At other times, she is drawn to the safety and security of life with her mother. The tough, independent teen and the nurturance-hungry young girl are two versions of the Tamson experienced by herself and others.

The experience of choosing between alternate stories (White & Epston, 1990), of sounding out contrasting voices (Penn & Frankfurt, 1994), of reconciling conflicting discourses (Kinman, 1994), of entertaining a multiplicity of self-accounts (Gergen & Kaye, 1992) is probably familiar to most persons. In a universe of stories, we experience our identities and those of others as collections of social constructions—assemblies of cultural meanings with myriad origins.

The notion of a pluralistic identity is congruent with a postmodern view that eschews essentialistic formulations of selfhood. It is also a view that resonates with cultural metaphors. Each individual inhabits many cultures—the cultures of family, gender, race, politics, and so on. A person's self-story differs each of these. Gergen (1991) argues that self is identified in relationship, and that "for the personality, there is no self outside of that which can be constructed within a social context" (p. 154). Schwartz (1988, 1995) depicts individual personalities as composed of internal families of subpersonalities; Mair (1977) writes of the "community of self"; White (1994) speaks of each of us as having "many wills."

The view of the person that follows this metaphorical stream blends almost seamlessly with the culturally oriented view of the family explored here. Like family work, culturally informed individual work also shuns normative prescriptions for mental or emotional health, focusing instead on relationship—in this case the relationship between the individual's pluralistic stories. Viewed in this way, therapy is devoted to creating space for multiple meanings, and to helping clients identify which meanings are currently favored.

Elizabeth and I invented two names—"Little Lizzie" and "Mrs. Elizabeth Blumer"—for the two aspects of self described above. Therapy was focused on helping her to identify the relationship she sought with each of these. When it was clear that she most often preferred to inhabit the skin of Mrs. Blumer, as it were, we looked at ways that "Little Lizzie" could be accommodated so that Mrs. Blumer might be allowed to predominate.

In most respects, this description resonates with the tenor of approaches to family therapy that seek to build up preferred meanings, or solutions, rather than to correct dysfunctions or uncover essential cores. But narrative and solution-focused family therapy sometimes vie for the *replacement* of problem-saturated stories with preferred stories, or problems with solutions. A cultural perspective leads to a view of this as a kind of cultural assimilation, where a range of meanings are effectively eliminated from the individual's repertoire in favor of a kind of heroic success story. Gergen and Kaye (1992) call this "narrative replacement," warning that it threatens to limit persons to a fixed (albeit preferred) narrative that cannot help but limit flexibility in a world of multiple contexts.

Borrowing more deliberately from cultural metaphors, my own concern has less to do with flexibility and more do with the eradication of cultural artifacts, as it were. While the term *wholeness* is not current within social constructionist discourse, I believe it speaks to the fullness of culture—both interpersonal and intrapersonal. Waters (1994) makes a plea for wholeness when he argues that to dwell only in solutions "can sometimes lead to ignoring the landscape that already exists—the fullest version of who the person is" (p. 75).

"Fullness" need not imply an essential Self. Although they may be traced to outside sources, *all* of our stow threads—the ones we favor and the ones we do not—make up the ever-undulating tapestry of who we are, the culture of the self. Seen in this way, personal peace and flexibility are most likely to result from advocating a sort of "tolerant inner society" that entertains a variety of stories, rather than substituting one for another. Thus, an individual therapy informed by a self-as-culture metaphor makes space for multiple meanings, even while it privileges those currently favored by clients.

Whether the cultural metaphor is applied to the family, the individual, or the intrapsychic domain, it nevertheless entails an alternative description of the very task of therapy. Gone are the more traditional, corrective implications—the view of therapy as treatment of dysfunction, normalization of aberrant behavior, or restoration of health.[3] Instead, the focus turns to the negotiation of meaning, to moving to an (ever-shifting) point of balance among myriad constructions. In cultural terms, this is much like the global effort for peaceful cohabitation. It suggests a therapy focused on intercultural harmony.

4. *The task of family therapy is to facilitate cultural harmony:*

Kira and Tom, married for a year and a half, have reached an emotional stalemate in their relationship. Kira is disinterested, even repelled, by sexual intimacy—a situation that prompts her to wonder if she harbors repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse. Although they have taken a break from making love, Kira reports feeling smothered by Tom's constant attempts to be close, by his need to talk everything through, by his requests for hugs and his repeated solicitations of her pledge of love. Tom feels shut out. He says that Kira is withdrawn and distant, and that she is unable to express her feelings. He likes to talk, and he cannot understand Kira's retreats to silence, or her frequent disinterest in sharing the details of her day or the status of her feelings.

When persons are viewed in cultural terms, cultural diversity is (ironically) the "norm." The quest for the homogeneous family or individual who "like a fashion plate. ... serves as the guiding model for the therapeutic outcome" (Gergen & Kaye, p. 172) is viewed with suspicion. In a postmodern context, this model, buttressed by words like "healthy" and "functional" which are intended to characterize the status of clients' lives and lifestyles, loses its currency. Healthy and functional compared to what and according to whom?

A postmodern family therapy informed by a cultural metaphor views the peoples of the world as a richly diverse assembly, and divergence from the norm is *celebrated* rather than construed as cause for corrective action. Further still, such a perspective may depict the ubiquitous pressure to conform to the parameters of social institutions as a primary *source of distress* in peoples' lives (Epston & White, 1992; White & Epston, 1990).

Just as a cultural metaphor ties the notion of family "health" to the family's unique context, so does it eschew normative definitions of "the problem." Reaping further the offshoots of this metaphorical view, the "problem" that a family presents is construed as a problem only insofar as the family describes it as such (de Shazer, 1991). When an objectivist orientation is abandoned, problems are regarded not as the reality of an observed system, but as social constructions emerging from particular discourse communities and reflective of those communities' values, beliefs, and historo-cultural origins.[4]

The metaphors threaded through this essay represent therapy as an effort to move to a place where the various cultures and subcultures of families and individuals are in a dynamic balance—a kind of intercultural harmony. The "harmony" to which I am referring—like the harmony between global cultures—is more like an ongoing negotiation than a static cohabitation. And while it suggests a place where discord does not dominate, I do not mean to imply some form of fuzzy "togetherness" accompanied by unwavering emotional and physical closeness.

Kira and Tom are struggling in their young relationship, caught in an elaborate dance of intimacy. Their problem, as they construct it, is a function of relationship. They wish to shift to a position where the relationship is dominated more by peace than conflict. But it is not yet clear whether this will imply greater proximity. In my work with Tom and Kira, I see myself as collaborating with them in the pursuit of cultural harmony, while openly acknowledging that the point of harmony or dynamic balance might mean greater intimacy, or it might lead to a parting of ways.

From this vantage point, therapy is not based on a prescriptive template. It does not focus on determining who exhibits "healthier" levels of intimacy, or "more appropriate" boundaries according to some normative standard. Each partner clearly has distinct interpretations of these, which originate in their unique cultural contexts, including their families of origin. To trace these is not to uncover the etiology of a pathology, but rather to unravel the historical origins of cultural artifacts. Kira and Tom's "problem" concerns a clash of these meanings. It is not a question of divergence from the norm, but rather the emotional dissatisfaction they experience as a result of currently mismatched approaches to intimacy and boundaries—the experience of being "smothered" and "shut out," respectively.

If it is indeed discovered that Kira has repressed memories of sexual abuse, this will *not* lead to the conclusion that she is "dysfunctional"; it will simply expand the historical account of her meanings around sexuality, adding potentially (but not necessarily) helpful information regarding the emotional dissatisfaction both partners report. My task in working with Kira and Tom is to assist them in arriving at a mutual mode of responding to each other, which will lead to what *for them* is an emotionally rewarding relationship. That relationship may be the close partnership of husband and wife, or it may be a casual connection between ex-spouses.

Harmony and Relationship

When individuals (including therapists) and families are viewed from a cultural perspective, therapy focuses on relationship: 1) the therapist-client relationship; 2) the relationship between the family culture and other cultures; 3) the relationships between members of the family culture; and 4) the relationship between intrapersonal cultures. It would be useful here to discuss further these relationships in order to understand how they might be viewed in a family therapy informed by cultural metaphors.

Therapist-Client

At the level of therapist and client, this approach entails a nonhierarchical and collaborative relationship (Friedman, 1993). Therapist transparency (Freeman & Lobovits, 1993; McLean, 1994) involves the open sharing of therapist biases and a discussion of the uniquely personal origins of therapist questions (Madigan, 1993). These are attempts to address the inescapable power differential built into the relationship. With Tom and Kira, I do not conceal my wish that they might be able to "work it out" without splitting up, but this personal bias does not become the therapeutic agenda. The agenda is focused on their aspirations. My relationship with them is characterized by a dynamic balance, a mutual meaning-making. The modernist conception of the therapist as having power *over* is replaced with a postmodern view of power as the means to produce a consensus (Lukes, 1986).

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Family Culture/Other Cultures

When it is focused on the relationship between families and wider cultures, a culturally informed family therapy assists clients in attaining some degree of "harmony," as the word is here used, with extended family, friends, and workmates, as well as social institutions such as child welfare agencies and school systems. With Rudy and Norma, this entailed assisting the couple in negotiating its meanings with those of Rudy's ex-wife and custodian of their two children. Issues of power are invariably at play in these interchanges—perhaps most evidently when the "outside culture" is an institution such as the legal system with the means to exercise considerable influence on family life. In my work with Tamson and Carol, this dynamic was clearly played out: their presence in therapy was motivated in part by their desire to demonstrate self-initiated remediation prior to an upcoming court hearing. In effect, their goals include some degree of "harmony" with the courts as well as harmony with the school system, and in the culture of their nuclear family. This work may therefore entail attention to issues of social justice (Tamasese *et al.*, 1994), for the relationship of the family culture with the wider culture may be hampered by hierarchical concerns, including racism or material inequities.

Members of the Family Culture

A cultural view gives rise to the notion of responsibility in intercultural relationships. This applies to therapists and clients, but is also strongly suggested in the relationships between family subcultures. In contrast to a systemic view, which focuses on the function of family members in the system, a cultural perspective entails a project of harmonious coexistence. Family therapy is seen as a kind of intercultural give and take—a respectful exchange of meanings, a negotiation toward harmony, a quest for justice.

Power inevitably plays a role in any negotiation (Deutsch, 1973). It is inextricably woven into metaphors that lead to a view of persons laboring to have their voices heard, their stories told. Whether the family subcultures include a mother and daughter like Carol and Tamson, or abusive men, their spouses, and children (Jenkins, 1990; McLean, 1994; White, 1992), a cultural view construes relationships as demanding responsibility and accountability (Tamasese & Waldegrave, 1993). I believe this attendance to the impact of practices of power *within* the family is currently one of the growing edges for a culturally informed family therapy. White's (McLean, 1994; White, 1992) work is a case in point. Although family members are not identified with problems—a separation facilitated by "ex-ternalizing conversations"—they are construed as having been "recruited" into the problem stories they bring to therapy. Although they are not held to *blame*, their role as the life support system of the problem (White & Epston, 1990) is acknowledged. In this sense, they are seen as the occasional agents of oppression *within* their own family cultures.

Physical abuse clearly lends itself to this perspective; it might be construed as a violation of one culture by another. But violence is just one form of violation. In those instances when harmony within the family is impaired by one member's subjugation of other members' stories, it may be insufficient to join with the family in escaping oppression from outside cultures, as it were. If certain family members experience a silencing of their voices, a curtailment of their rights from parents, children, or siblings, it presents an obstacle to harmony within the family culture.

Cultural harmony is not meant to imply acquiescence. Carol and Tamson are jocular when they describe their "good weeks," but they do not maintain that differences evaporate during these periods. When they are getting along and enjoying each other, Tamson is not adhering to each of her mother's limits, nor is Carol forfeiting her vision of what her daughter needs to be safe and healthy at this stage in her life. They are both winning a little, losing a little: "harmony" between the family sub-cultures is a state of compromise. In a systemically informed approach to family interactions, this notion of compromise among diverse meanings is frequently obscured by appeals to patterns, boundaries, feedback loops, and so on. The overall family unit is treated more like faulty circuitry than an assembly of unique and creatively constructive persons.

Intrapersonal Cultures

Most readers will be familiar with the experience of "working on their relationship with themselves." The notion of reconciling diverse meanings is not novel. In the context of this discussion, it derives its postmodern flavor from the depiction of those meanings as the collection of social constructions or stories that constitute the ever-changing "self." The question is not whether Elizabeth is "Little Lizzie" or "Mrs. Blumer." Instead, attention is turned to clarifying the preferred relationship between these aspects of Elizabeth's character (these *multiple selves*, if you like), and determining which, if either, is to be granted preferential treatment. Here, as in the other intercultural contexts described, the "harmony" that is sought is not a fixed state so much as a shifting balance between meanings. As mentioned earlier, this differs from a strictly narrative description in that the outcome sought is more like a harmony between diverse stories than the vindication of one story over the others. Put differently, therapy moves toward a renegotiated relationship between the "selves," rather than the replacement of one "self"with another.

TOWARD A POSTMODERN VIEW

In this essay, I have proposed that as family therapy increasingly focuses on meaning and interpretation in the

construction of the intersubjective realities we inhabit, it would do well to incorporate cultural metaphors more explicitly into its conceptual framework. A view of persons that encompasses their historo-cultural context inevitably accommodates a wide range of concerns that are central to the postmodern debate. These include issues of hierarchy and power, gender and other cultural specifications, responsibility and accountability.

The theoretical and clinical outgrowth of a cultural perspective of the family is already evident in a wide range of existing work—particularly approaches identified with feminist and narrative family therapy. However, while the analogy of the system has clearly served a useful role as an organizing metaphor for family therapy for several decades, it seems that postmodern, social constructionist approaches have not yet been consolidated in the same way. Cultural concerns are increasingly being given greater attention (Markowitz, 1994), but "culture" has not been explicitly embraced as a vital, referential metaphor.

Metaphors do not mirror reality, but they help to structure our experience and guide our actions (Lakehoff & Johnson, 1980). Good metaphors help us to better understand what is in front of us by relating it to some other reference point (Rosenblatt, 1994). But they should do more than that. Good metaphors keep us *honest:* they direct our attention to those issues we deem most important; they insure that the work we do is congruent with the values we hold. Consistent with the tenor of this discussion, to advocate for a metaphor is to take a stand. Lowe (1991) puts it this way:

> [T]he result of fashioning a new therapeutic discourse from alternative metaphors is not seen as the *discovery* of new objective knowledge, or the *revelation* of fundamental realities, but as the *constitution* of new experience for both clients and therapists. [p. 48, emphasis in the original]

Or, as Cushman (1990) writes, to describe is to *prescribe.* The culture metaphor prescribes the elevation of persons' individual and collective meanings. It advocates for a collaborative, respectful stance to the work of therapy. And, in much the same way as the system metaphor counsels against consideration of behaviors in isolation of the wider systemic context, the culture metaphor calls for the location of persons *in communities* with histories and geographies.

To overlook cultural meaning in one's preoccupation with "adjusting the family system" is to objectify families, to work *on* them rather than *with* them. To downplay cultural context runs the risk of encouraging more of the same—of duplicating the cultural practices that have given rise to the family's distress (Maisel, 1994). The result is a subversion of a genuine striving for an equitable resolution, a lasting peace. It is no longer tenable to isolate meaning and language from their cultures of origin, nor to separate knowledge from the practices of power that grant some knowledge supremacy over others.

The metaphor of the family culture elevates these critical concerns to the important place they deserve. But while it addresses some of the concerns engendered by a modernistic stance, postmodernism raises some new ones of its own (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1994). The dilemma of war-ravaged Bosnia is a case in point. Does cultural sensitivity always call for nonintervention? Is there *ever* a place for the imposition of one's stow over another's?

At the level of the family, the answers come relatively more easily under the influence of systemic and structural metaphors. Therapists may benevolently prescribe "what is best" for clients; moms and dads may maintain appropriate "parental hierarchies." In many respects, therapy is less simple when informed by cultural metaphors, just as life is arguably less straightforward in the 'nineties than it was in the 'fifties.

Despite the occasional urgency of the rhetoric, this essay does not suggest an either/or choice of therapeutic metaphors. To do so would be to promulgate more exclusion, to reject a dazzling array of cultural artifacts accumulated after several decades of systemically informed family practice. Instead, I advocate an expanded view that entertains both systemic dynamics and cultural meanings, a move toward embracing the breadth of our stories as families and individuals.

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[1]Researchers Clandinin & Connelly (1994) use *story* for the phenomenon and *narrative* for their method of inquiry. Likewise, *narrative* has come to be the term applied to a "school" of family therapy that attends to the *stories* lived by individuals and families (White & Epston, 1990). The word *narrative* often suggests a more rigidly conceived academic construct. I use the more conversational word *story* to depict a context-bound social construction—an interpretation, as opposed to a "truth." I am less concerned with what *structure* stories may embody: I like cultural anthropologist Victor Turner's (1986) wide reference to our "expressions"—words, gestures, rituals, and so forth, which he calls the crystallized secretions of human experience. In some ways, George Howard (1993) sidesteps this operationalizing of definitions by characterizing our species as *Homo Fabulans*—Man, the storyteller. In the sense it is used here, we are always telling stories—whether we are living our daily lives, doing research, practicing therapy, or writing essays like this one. This essay can be seen as a story about storytelling beings.

[2]If we "construct" event A, and your construction of the event is different from my own, then it is confusing to suggest that A *caused* a second event, B. Which "A" does this refer to: your version or mine? I may see a causal connection between *my* A and B. while you do not. In effect, causality itself may be viewed as a social construction as well.

[3]The metaphor of the pursuit of systemic balance comes closer, perhaps; but, as discussed, it fails to frame the process in terms of meaning and historo-cultural context.

[4]More correctly, the problem can also be seen as the construction of an ever-widening constellation of interpretive communities or cultures, including ethnic, religious, gender, and political communities of which the family and its members form subcultures. I do not mean to depict the family as a single unitary culture, so much as the crossroads for a wide range of cultural influences (Parry & Doan, 1994).