

DECONSTRUCTING DOMINANT STEPFAMILY NARRATIVES:
FREEING SILENT VOICES.

by

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submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

in the

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

at the

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

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DECEMBER 1997

I declare that "Deconstructing Dominant Stepfamily Narratives: Freeing Silent Voices" is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or have quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

Signed

Neil John Amore

December 1997

306.874 AM00

1998-09-11



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Acknowledgements

Were it not for the support and understanding of a number of people this study would not have been completed. To my wife Caron whose patience and support was unstinting; to my supervisor Dian for her ideas, comments and commitment; to Claudette who went through it with a fine-tooth comb; to my late mother who made this all possible; Natascia whose ideas inspired me and finally, and most importantly, to my stepson Christopher who has taught more in a few short years than a career at university and who I watch each day with wonder.

Abstract

Stepfamilies are shown by existing research as having multiple problems unique to this type of family, some of which include role ambiguity, role strain, role captivity, increased stress and adjustment problems in children.

Stepparents are portrayed as evil, abusive and wicked in the media, literature or film, while stepchildren are variously portrayed as victims, naughty and manipulative.

These popular perceptions of stepfamilies appear to be shaped by myths or dominant narratives which serve to shape stepfamily member's experience of and roles in the reconstituted family.

Drawing on the work of postmodernism, social constructionism and the narrative theorists this study will expose those dominant narrative or myths which shape the experience of two stepfamilies.

Using an emergent design, the experiences of these two families is described in an attempt to highlight some of the implications such an approach holds for both further research and psychotherapy.

Key words:

Narrative, social constructionism, deconstruction, dominant narratives, discourse, postmodernism, role, story, stepfamily, stepfather, stepmother, stepchildren, myth.

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CHAPTER 1

FACING THE STEPFAMILY CHALLENGE**Introduction**

As the contemporary nuclear family's validity as the primary child-rearing and relational system comes under increasing threat from an ever-spiraling divorce rate, both here in South Africa and across the Western world, so more viable alternatives for such practices are being sought.

Co-habiting couples, gay marriages and single parents are now increasing in both number and social profile (Schwebel, Fine & Renner, 1991), and yet perhaps the most serious challenger to the nuclear family, the stepfamily, remains something of an enigma (Fine, Kurdek & Hennigen, 1992; Schwebel et al., 1991). Stepfamilies were growing at an estimated rate of 1300 *per day* in the United States by the end of the last decade - and that excludes "non-traditional" stepfamilies such as those with non-resident stepchildren, cohabiting parents and gay parents. But despite stepfamilies making up 18% of families in the US, there is still a tendency among stepfamilies to hide their status, ostensibly for fear of being negatively stereotyped (Ganong & Coleman, 1987; Schwebel et al., 1991; Visher & Visher, 1979, 1985, 1990).

The Family Life Centre in Johannesburg and the Family and Marriage Society of South Africa (FAMSA) report a sharp increase in the number of stepfamilies presenting with problems, with an estimated 30% of new families being reconstituted or stepfamilies (Personal correspondence with FAMSA and the Family Life Centre). Even the late Diana,

Princess of Wales, grew up with a stepmother and was reluctant in the extreme to reveal details about those experiences when she came into the public eye (Personality, June 1996).

An estimated 35% of American children born in the 1980's could be expected to be part of a stepfamily today, with a projected increase to at least 40% by the end of the century (Bray, 1992; Fine, Kurdek & Hennigen, 1992; Ganong & Coleman, 1986; Wolf, 1982). Despite its increasing popularity, however, the stepfamily falls prey to negative stereotyping. Drawing on M. White's (1989a, 1989b, 1991; Epston & White, 1990) notion of the dominant narrative in society, the stepfamily is perceived as being somehow evil or as an inferior model of the normal family.

Its very definition - "steope" is the Olde English root for step and denotes loss or bereavement - draws heavily on the assumption that the stepfamily is a departure from a desired societal norm (Robinson & Smith, 1994, p. 178). It is also embedded in sadness, failure and other ostensibly negative emotions. It is therefore commonly considered fundamentally different to intact families (Schwebel et al., 1991). The author's usage of the term 'intact' in reference to stepfamilies would, therefore, imply deviation from an accepted norm. But, the nuclear family has also come under attack from media portrayals of such families as being dysfunctional and even chaotic (for example, televisions' *Married With Children* and *Happily Ever After*; Bray, 1992; Robinson & Smith, 1994).

This is in sharp contrast to portrayals of a decade or so ago where the nuclear family was believed to be ideal and, indeed, almost idyllic (televisions' *The Cosby Show*, and *The Waltons*; Robinson & Smith, 1994). But is the power of the popular media such that perceptions of the family are to be affected to such an extent that individual's experience their day-to-day lives differently?

This study will rely substantially on the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, and his notion of the practices of power as they pertain to the dominant narratives which affect stepfamily experience. While a much more detailed exploration of Foucault's work as it applies to this study will be conducted in chapters 3, 6 and 7, it should be stated here that his work is of principal importance in overcoming the impasse with regards to power.

Bateson (1972; 1980) regarded the notion of power as an epistemological error, while Keeney (1983) and Keeney and Ross (1985) and many radical social constructionists would regard power simply as a construct. For Foucault (1976, 1979), however, power is experienced in such a way that it shapes and constitutes our lives through exposing us to normalising truths or facts.

These truths are not an objective reality, but are constructed ideas that are accorded truth status. The positive aspects of power are such that they are not necessarily beneficial to people in the strictest sense, but rather that they constitute how people think, talk and behave (Epston & White, 1990; Foucault, 1976, 1977, 1979). For Foucault (1972; 1977; 1979) portrayals of the family represent society's power to convey that which is desired and their power to influence the reproductive practices of individuals, the manner in which family is experienced or the meanings given to the notion of family.

It is important here, though, to comment on what Butchart (1997) describes as "the systematic misreading of the Foucaultian thesis" (p. 101) by some South African scholars. His contention, broadly speaking, is that to see Foucault as the champion of the repressed and as wanting all forms of power to be neutralised is incorrect. Foucaultian power, Butchart (1997) argues, is not a tool which is wielded and utilised objectively, but rather "suffuses each and every relationship to manufacture multiple objects of knowledge" (p. 103).

All entities and points of focus in the socio-medical sphere are neither found nor discovered by science, but rather these disciplines invent the objects of their investigation (Butchart, 1997). Far from being an appendage to the machinations of power, then, the socio-medical disciplines - and culture too - are the very essence of that power. But Foucault (1977) and Butchart (1997) argue that power is not merely repressive and limiting in the sense that Marxists might assert, but that it is also productive and illuminating. The individual, family or community are not forces which are acted upon by the forces of power, but are instead the end result of relations of power (Butchart, 1997). To remove all vestiges of such power would be to remove the victim of the power too, since it is only through existence of such power that a victim is able to exist (Butchart, 1997).

In that light, then, the aim of this study is not to replace dominant narratives (M. White, 1989a, 1989b; 1991) with other narratives, since that would be, in the Foucaultian sense (1977), to dispense with the individual, since his or her stories are constitutive of their self or selves. Rather, the hope is to challenge the hidden nature of such powerful stories (Foucault, 1977; M. White, 1991), and so alter the relations of power which lead to such dominant stories.

To what extent this study is able to escape from the trap into which so many local scholars have fallen of perceiving power as a repressive force which needs to be eradicated (Butchart, 1997) will be up to the reader to decide.

Challenges to the Normal Family

The world has changed dramatically within the last two decades, with technology connecting people across continents and across cultures, and opening up new vistas of

possibility. The world appears to be undergoing a shift from the modernist perspective - the desire to access an objective reality, predict and generalise - to a post-modernist perspective - which accepts multiple realities and selves and where the world and reality is seen as socially constructed (Gergen, 1991a, 1991b; Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Gergen & Kaye, 1992).

Modernists, according to Berger & Kellner (in Elliot, 1989) saw marriage and the family as occupying a privileged place in society, one which as “a social arrangement...creates for the individual the sort of order in which he can experience his life as making sense” (p. 116). The functional family was also an area of some interest for early family therapists such as Minuchin (1974) who describes a six step diagnostic process for examining family interactions.

Indeed, Berger and Kellner (in Elliot, 1989) are seen to align themselves with the functionalist perspective that views the family as meeting “basic needs and stands in sharp opposition to the cold impersonality and merciless competitiveness of a rootless and bureaucratised ...world” (p. 117). Even the term ‘nuclear’ implies a strong link to positivistic (and hence modernist) science with the root metaphor being one that reduces the family to an accessible, stable reality.

For Gergen (1991a, 1991b) and other postmodernists, however, the notion of the family as being distinct from a rootless world no longer holds sway. The world and all of its diversities is now forced into the living rooms of families across the globe with the advent of the technologies of social saturation, particularly the car, telephone, aeroplane, radio and television (and even more so now with advances in computer technology such as the Internet) (Gergen, 1991a, 1991b).

For Gergen (1991a, 1991b) the ingestion of a myriad bits and pieces of others’ being, values, attitudes, life-styles, personality and opinions creates a maelstrom of contradictions

and paradoxical selves. It becomes increasingly difficult, therefore, to define what it is we are, what we believe in and what we want to be. This is social saturation for Gergen (1991a, 1991b).

Indeed, technologies pose particular challenges to relationships within the family on the brink of the 21st century because they

have made it possible for any member of the family to be in virtually any state of mind or motion at any time. The ordinary, daily confluence of multiple lives within one household makes for a sense of fragmentation, as if the members of the family were being scattered by the centrifugal force of postmodern life. (Gergen, 1991b, p. 29)

Life in the family can be “one damned thing after another” (Gergen, 1991b, p. 30) in a world which Gergen feels is socially saturated, and with increasing divorce rates and separation and novel living arrangements the definition of who is and who is not family blurs along with relational ties and expectations. For Gergen (1991b) “a person belongs to what could be called a *floating family* [italics in original], which comprises a relatively formless array of familial relationships in a continuous state of flux” (p. 30).

It is consequently difficult to establish the boundaries of a normal or nuclear family, with media depictions of the family providing people with many more alternatives to the nuclear family (Gergen, 1991b). The advent of gay marriages, couples living together, serial marriages and the resulting popularity of stepfamilies mean that each household presents itself as a viable alternative to the nuclear family, and challenges its exclusivity.

These floating families are, according to Gergen (1991b), more susceptible to conflict, with each member occupying any number of different spaces within it and with a blurring of the clear-cut roles that went with the traditional family. The reasons for this deviance from

accepted standards of the nuclear or sacred family born out of a spiritual belief that implies a sacred bond between two people who choose to start a family (Jonnes, 1990; Robinson & Smith, 1994) may vary (divorce, et cetera.), but the stepfamily remains outside of the modernist ideal.

Stepfamilies are tainted because they cannot attain the cultural dream, especially prevalent in the Anglo-European world, of two adults married for the first (and only) time with children, linked by love and biology and supported by a loving family network (Robinson & Smith, 1994, p 136).

Problems Facing Stepfamilies

Where, then, does this leave the stepfamily, with its own stigmas and biases? Is the contemporary family, as Baudrillard (in Gergen, 1991b) states, a “terminal of multiple networks” (p. 32)? And, if so, what of the stepfamily which is a marriage of so many more narratives and familial realities? Members of stepfamilies have divergent experiences of family life and the rubbing together of these various realities may be experienced as distressing.

What of the stepparent and their sense of role ambiguity, in light of the postmodern view that we are multiple selves but, always, in a world where we are stretched thin to meet the demands of all these selves and their contexts? (Minuchin, 1974; Visher & Visher, 1988, 1990; Whitsett & Land, 1992).

Role Ambiguity and Role Captivity

Some of the most pressing concerns for those living in stepfamilies, according to existing research, is that of role confusion and role ambiguity, as newly constituted members attempt to establish what is expected of them (Cherlin, 1978; Fine, Kurdek & Hennigen, 1992; Roberts & Price, 1994; Schwebel et al., 1991; Visher & Visher, 1988). The new stepfamily is, reportedly, susceptible to the influence that myths of stepfamilies and their members and negative stereotypes have on their roles and relational functioning (Kompara, 1980; Morrison & Thompson-Guppy, 1985; Rallings 1976; Salwen, 1990; Visher & Visher, 1985, 1988; Wolf, 1982).

One of the many challenges facing stepparents is coming to terms with negative stereotypes

that tend to label stepmothers as “wicked” and stepfathers as “abusive”....The wicked stepmother is a prominent character in many fairy tales, such as Cinderella, Hansel and Gretel, and Snow White, and the stereotype of the abusive stepfather is regularly expressed in newspapers and on television (Claxton-Oldfield, 1992, p.378).

Role captivity or the feeling of being trapped by expectations in one role while wishing, and being frustrated at not being able to fulfill other roles, is a central theme within the more empirical studies on the stepfamily (Whitsett & Land, 1992). Within this frame, and without necessarily taking Gergen’s (1991a, 1991b) notion of social saturation in the contemporary family into account, stepparents often find themselves floundering around in role ambiguity

because they are, by definition, not real parents (Claxton-Oldfield, 1992; Halperin & Smith, 1983; Salwen, 1990; Schwebel et al., 1991).

As a result Cherlin (1978), Schwebel et al. (1991) and Visher and Visher (1988) note that stepfamilies, and particularly stepparents, must cope with stressors not found in normal or intact families. Some of these stressors include feeling excluded from the more developed parent-child relationship; a distant or tumultuous relationship with the stepchild(ren); sexual tension and difficulties in exercising discipline with stepchildren; financial difficulties in maintaining two households; being in conflicting life-stages with one's spouse and stepchildren; conflictual interactions with ex-spouses over legal, financial and child-rearing issues and difficulties with biological children living outside of the house.

But it is the sense that one is held captive within a set role - that is, bound to one role while wishing to play another - that has attracted the attention of most researchers. Wanting the marriage but not the parenting role, or feelings of inadequacy as a stepparent - perhaps battling with the wicked/good stepparent dichotomy - are seen as playing into the role ambiguity of the stepparent (Cherlin, 1978; Fine et al., 1992; Kompara, 1980; Visher & Visher, 1988; Whitsett & Land, 1992).

For Ferreira (in Watzlawick, 1967) all family members contribute to this. These realities are subscribed to despite the reality distortions they might imply, and represent nodal resting points in relationships. These realities aid in the ascribing of roles and prescribing behaviour which, in turn, strengthen these roles.

The roles of stepmother and stepfather have come under particular scrutiny in the last decade or so (Bray, 1992; Halperin & Smith, 1983; Marsiglio, 1992; Morrison & Thompson-Guppy, 1985; Rallings, 1976; Salwen, 1990; Schwebel et al., 1991; Stern, 1984) with biological and psychological determinants such as reproductive and nurturant functions particularly important to researchers. Preconceived notions of role function - described as

myths - are regarded as being influential in their experience of stepfamily life (Fine et al., 1992; Schwebel et al., 1991).

Stepchildren face equally harrowing consequences of growing up in a stepfamily, with poor adjustment and attachment difficulties perhaps the most commonly cited by researchers (Bray, 1992; Fine et al., 1992; Halperin & Smith, 1983; Stern, 1984). These children are placed at risk for psychological difficulties by dint of their being part of a stepfamily, and are described as being prone to behavioural problems, impaired social competence and high rates of substance abuse (Fine et al., 1992).

Girls are seen to be particularly vulnerable to adjustment and behavioural problems when in a stepfamily (Bray & Berger, 1993; Fine, Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1993). Adolescents, boys and girls, are seen as being placed in a parlous position because of the combination of "normal adolescent developmental tasks and the complexities of stepfamily life [which] may put these adolescents at particular risk." (Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994, p. 394). Additionally, adolescents appear to be less completely socialised and have lower educational expectations and attainment when they come from stepfamilies (Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994).

Adjustment problems among children and adolescents, though, are also believed to be linked to dysfunctional beliefs about stepparents and stepfamilies (Fine et al., 1992; Visher & Visher, 1988). These dysfunctional beliefs or myths have been the focus of empirical study, with relatively mixed findings (Fine et al., 1992; Kurdek & Fine, 1991).

Stepfamily Myths

What then, are these myths of which we speak? 'Myth' is variously defined as "an expression of popular ideas or beliefs about natural or social phenomena , subscribed to uncritically" (Oxford Dictionary, 1984, p. 486). However, for Robinson and Smith (1994) myths about stepfamilies

explain the belief, arising from religious and cultural systems that they are a deviant family form - not 'right' or 'ordinary' or 'natural' because they do not conform to the ideal for families. Therefore the myths about them protect the family with two parents and their biological children and maintain a belief that no other family form can successfully rear children (pp. 77-78).

Ferreira (in Dallos, 1997), however, adopts a view of family myths more resonant of the systemic approach to family therapy, by defining 'myths' as

a series of fairly well integrated beliefs shared by all the family members, concerning each other and their mutual positions in the family life, beliefs that go unchallenged by everyone involved in spite of the reality distortions which they may conspicuously imply ... The family myth describes the roles and attributions of family members in their transactions with each other which although false and mirage-like, are accepted by everyone as something sacred and taboo that no-one would dare to investigate, much less challenge (p.179).

From this perspective myths may be seen to act as a homeostatic mechanism which prevent the break-up of the family when faced with a crisis (Dallos, 1997; Minuchin, 1974). There may, therefore, be a tendency to see the myth as being generated within the family as a means of protecting itself, but this would ignore the impact that expectations from the ecology in which the family co-exists have on myth generation (Dallos, 1997).

Visher and Visher (1979) identified eight of the most common myths surrounding stepfamilies and roles within stepfamilies:

- (a) Stepmothers are wicked and stepfathers are abusers.
- (b) Love happens instantly.
- (c) A stepfamily can replicate a biological family.
- (d) Children of divorce and remarriage are permanently damaged.
- (e) Children adjust more easily if their non-resident parent withdraws from contact.
- (f) Stepfamilies which follow a death are easier to integrate than those which follow divorce.
- (g) Stepfamilies can be integrated quickly.
- (h) Stepfamilies must resemble the perfect family, with little conflict.

Within the context of this study, however, it is important to use the term 'myth' with caution, since the myths to which it refers are not meant to be portrayed or regarded as immutable or reified truths. 'Myth' will be used seemingly interchangeably with the term "dominant narrative" (M. White, 1991) throughout this study, with the latter receiving preference from the author because of the accompanying implication that narratives are constantly changing. Furthermore, these narratives are socially co-constructed within a specific time-space framework. This will hopefully guard against the reification of the myths outlined above and those elicited later in the study.

There have been repeated calls from within the positivist camp for more in-depth, quantitative studies of the stepfamily (Filinson, 1986). A review of the theoretical underpinnings of the ever-changing narrative of stepfamilies reveals that they have, by and large, shown a strong leaning towards the deficit model favoured by positivism and, therefore, modernism.

As such, much that has been written about the stepfamily has attempted primarily to understand the facts and causes of problems surrounding its increasing prominence in societies and communities (Fine et al., 1992; Ganong & Coleman, 1986; Kompara, 1980; Salwen, 1990; Visher & Visher, 1985; Wolf, 1982). Stepfamilies are described as being less cohesive, lacking clear role expectations, having conflictual relational patterns, and having detached, independent subsystems within the broader system (Bray, 1992; Bray & Berger, 1993; Roberts & Price, 1989).

The dominant narrative in society appears to be that the stepfamily is somehow an evil or inferior model of the normal family. Its very definition - as denoting loss or bereavement - draws heavily on the assumption that the stepfamily is a departure from a desired societal norm (Robinson & Smith, 1994). It is also embedded in sadness, failure and other ostensibly negative emotions on the part of both parents and researchers.

When exploring stepfamily life, most studies have relied on comparisons, differences, syndromes, categories, scientific analysis and evaluations. Stern (1984) reflects the modernist view by calling for “scientists to continue their efforts to develop psychometric scales that can test interactions in larger populations (*of stepfamilies*) [italics added]” (p 99).

Indeed, much work has been done constructing typologies of stepfamilies and delineating the differences between stepfamilies and normal families (Fine et al., 1992; Kompara, 1980; Roberts & Price, 1989; Robinson & Smith, 1994; Visher & Visher, 1985; Wolf, 1982).

For Visher & Visher (1985) stepfamilies differ from normal families for the following six reasons:

- (a) Stepfamilies are born of loss through either death or divorce.
- (b) The life cycles between stepparent and the rest of the family are often incongruent.
- (c) Children and adults in stepfamilies come together with divergent beliefs from the past.
- (d) Parent-child relationships precede the couple relationship in stepfamilies.
- (e) In stepfamilies there is a biological parent “out there” somewhere - either in reality or in memory.
- (f) Children in stepfamilies often have two households and travel between them frequently.

With this in mind, Robinson and Smith (1994) have identified seven types of stepfamily:

- (a) Both parents have at least one adult child from a previous relationship.
- (b) They have at least one child in common as well as one or both having children from a previous relationship.
- (c) They have no children in common but have at least one child from a previous relationship living with them.
- (d) At least one parent has children from a previous relationship living with them.
- (e) Both have at least one child from a previous relationship living with them.
- (f) Both have children from a previous relationship living with them, plus at least one child in common.
- (g) Both have children from a previous relationship, at least one of whom lives with them while the others live elsewhere, plus at least one child in common.

Further to that, Robinson and Smith (1994) note that stepfamilies' reasons for coming about can be found in one or more of four broad categories:

Legitimising family

A natural parent - usually the mother - previously unmarried, marries the biological father or another adult to alleviate the societal stigma of being an unmarried single parent.

Revitalised family

A widow or widower marries a partner where one or both have a child(ren) from previous relationships.

Combination family

Both parents (widowed/divorced, et cetera) join forces and families.

Reassembled family

A childless stepparent marries a divorced parent with at least one child.

For the purposes of this study the term 'stepparent' will apply to those non-biological parents in stepfamilies, even though it may be more correct to term *all* parents in a stepfamily as stepparents.

Qualitative research - that is research which has focused on producing descriptions using people's own written or spoken words and observable behaviours (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984; Babbie, 1989) - has, by comparison, not kept up with the rapid ballooning of empirical research on the matter of stepfamilies and only really took notice of the phenomenon towards the end of the last decade. There is a particular dearth of studies from a postmodern, narrative

perspective. There are no qualitative, or in fact quantitative, studies which challenge the immutability of myths in stepfamilies, and precious few that recognise the problems these narratives pose.

From the outset it is important to state that the intention of this study is not to add yet another generalisation to the list of existing research, but instead by localising and pluralising descriptions (Best, in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993; M. White, 1991) meaning will be generated *beyond* and not *in* the language, but *through* it and *through the interaction* with those who agreed to take part in this study.

It is my assumption that these myths are well established or repetitive stories which can be deconstructed through interaction and language, and that this would be experienced as liberating by the families concerned. Furthermore, it is my contention that the roles people occupy within stepfamilies are limited by the way people story about them, thereby attributing fixed meanings to such situations. These roles, then, could, to follow Gergen's (1991b) thinking, be experienced as less restricting if seen in terms of multiple selves and multiple roles.

My contention, then, is that the manner in which stepfamily members story about their experience is dictated by these established societal myths, and that the notion that there are no alternative ways to attribute meaning to the experience of stepfamilies is, in itself, restricting.

Objectives of the study

The view that this study espouses is by no means intended as a replacement of the old view - namely one which is superior and less deficient - but one which de-emphasises those perceptions by giving prominence "to those knowledges on the 'other side', those considered

to be secondary, derivative and worthless.” (M. White, 1991, p. 34). It should therefore be seen as a challenge to those stories about stepfamilies which emphasise deficit and deviance, and give prominence to stories which have more to do with richness in diversity and versatility. In the context of this study, then, those stories which are not told, or left unsaid (Hoffman, 1990), will be elicited in an effort to challenge the dominance of the myths or narratives which impact on the storying of experience in stepfamilies.

It is of vital importance that this study be regarded as useful and meaningful for those who took part as well as those who may find themselves in a clinical setting with a stepfamily. This has particular significance within the frame of new paradigm research, where ethics assume greater prominence than generalisability and the idea of one truth (Keeney, 1983; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Reason & Rowan (Eds), 1981).

For the stepfamilies who co-authored this research, the study hopefully has allowed them to expand their narrative repertoire. It was never the aim of this study to enter into a therapeutic dimension with these families, although at times the distinction between therapy and research seemed a blurred one.

Storytelling, though, is a process which comes naturally to people (H. White, 1981) and as such may be seen as the central focus of both therapy and the research process. The telling, re-telling and hearing of stories by others lead to alternative stories being allowed a voice, and so the generation of subjugated stories and meanings within this study may well have seen a process of healing or meaning shifts akin to that in therapy in some respects. The purpose of the narrative approach, after all, is the changing and shifting of meanings.

Aims of the Study

The aim has been to complement the modernist notion of objectification by giving voice to the relativisation of meaning through co-construction within the domain of stepfamilies. With the social constructionist views of Gergen (1991a, 1991b), Anderson and Goolishian (1987, 1988), Best (in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993) and others that social problems are merely the act of claims making and defining events - real or imagined - as problematic, the aim of this study would therefore be to examine ways in which the problems constructed around stepfamilies could be deconstructed.

Deconstruction involves the subversion of taken-for-granted realities and practices, which are cut-off from their contexts and which are ascribed the status of immutable truth (M. White, 1991). The deconstructive process also entails the objectification of these practices and realities, in order that the degree and nature of their subjugation of people's lives may be explored. The manner in which this will be done in this study will be discussed at length in chapters 5, 6 and 7, but suffice it to say here that the deconstruction of these dominant narratives opens the door to more complex stories which include positive and negative aspects of experience in unique, unpredictable ways.

The primary focus of the study, therefore, is *the deconstruction of stepfamily myths, or dominant narratives, which are constructed through social interaction*. The aim is not to substitute a narrative which is diametrically opposed to those within the families, since this would be akin to substituting one dominant narrative with another. Rather, the aim is to open to question the assumptions and presuppositions which guide the storytelling process itself, in a process likened to Bateson's (1980) and Keeney's (1983) notion of second-order change.

It is only through challenging our assumptions about the reality of stepfamily life that we can move beyond what Keeney (1983) refers to as shuffling the deckchairs on the Titanic. By exploring the *ways* in which we story about our experience, it is possible to challenge those practices of power (Foucault, 1977, 1979) which operate to keep certain stories dominant.

By keeping alive the notion and assumption that one story is better than another and can replace another, the essential storying process will not change. This is one such set of assumptions that will be examined in this study. There should, as Gergen and Kaye (1992) point out, be an invitation to a multitude of narratives, but a commitment to none on the part of the researcher. This flies in the face of popular perceptions of the stepfamily, inviting that which is not storied about or left unsaid yet not placing these new stories in a position of undue prominence, or committing to any of them as the new truth.

But no dialogical space can be monologic if meaning is to be ascribed - it is, after all, only through social interaction which is mediated through language that knowledge or meaning comes to be. This has important implications for this study since my role as researcher took me into the dialogical domain, and places me, the observer, in the observed. This further implies that all observation is, therefore, self-referential (Keeney, 1983).

My own voice will influence, be influenced by and interweave with those who participated in the study and it is of crucial importance that the tone (assumptions) with which I speak be elucidated as well. This will be done in chapter 3. Further to this is the point that as a stepfather myself I have a perception of the stepfamily shaped both by societal values and my own experiences, and it was important to be aware of how my taken-for-granted assumptions (Gergen, 1991a, 1991b; Troyer in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993; M. White, 1991) have influenced my constructions and punctuations. In terms of self-referentiality and the above

statement, the use of the terms constructions and punctuations suggests a preference on my part for the social constructionist approach.

The Research Process

Since narratives are seen to unfold across time, and the nature of that unfolding is unpredictable, a rigid approach to research design was foregone in favour of an emergent design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, the difficulty in getting families to participate in the study necessitated a flexible approach, and one which was sensitive enough to allow the subjugated stepfamily narratives to emerge.

Ultimately two families took part in the study, and were involved in a series of three interviews in which the dominant narratives were explored and, finally, exposed to attempts at deconstruction. Process notes were kept and included in this study as a means of validation. Families were required to construct a script, play or story which, hopefully, contained both the dominant narrative(s) but also those contradictions which M. White (1989a, 1989b, 1991) and Epston & White (1990) refer to as unique outcomes and which allowed for the deconstruction of those myths.

Conclusion

There is, therefore, a strong social constructionist and narrative thread in this study, and one that will be explored in more detail in the next chapter. It is important, though, to have first established here the importance of embarking on a journey which will challenge the view espoused by popular perceptions of the stepfamily. There is a large body of modernist

research which focuses on the deficits of the stepfamily but, as has been outlined in this chapter, there is a growing dissatisfaction with such a view.

The work of Gergen and the other postmodernists will be explored in the next, and succeeding, chapters. In particular, the voice of Michael White and the narrativists will be heard, and the notion of deconstructionism will become a central focus of this study.

In the next chapter, existing research into stepfamily functioning and areas which have been highlighted as important, will be discussed. Chapter 3 will explore the theoretical underpinnings of social constructionism and the narrative approach as aspects of the broader postmodernist thrust. Postmodernism will also be seen in dialogue with the modernist ethic.

Chapter 4 will examine the research process and the methodology employed in this study, while chapter 5 will deal more closely with the interviews and narratives of the families involved in the study. In chapter 6 the journey that has been travelled will be mapped and the deconstruction of the myths prevalent in the families in the study will be explored in more depth. Finally, chapter seven will serve as an overview by looking at what has been achieved, suggestions made for further research and the limitations of the study will be examined.

This, then, is an invitation to you, the reader, to experience this interweaving of stories - in essence a story about stories about stories - and to add your voice to it and to allow it to influence your stories in a way that is meaningful to you.

It is also hoped that the reader will examine the distinctions/ constructions/ punctuations and stories I have made around the stories of those I interviewed and to be aware of how this is as much a story about me as it is of those it purports to story about.

As researchers we might benefit from more clearly showing each other how we have drawn distinctions in organising the world of experience. Many times we are not aware of the distinctions that we ourselves draw in organising perceptions of data...[thus] an essential activity of the researcher would be examining his or her own patterns of organising experience, and then exposing them to scrutiny...[showing] the process of how the data was organised, allowing readers to decide for themselves the legitimacy of that particular way of organising experience (Atkinson & Heath, 1991, p. 13).

CHAPTER 2

THE STEPFAMILY AS THE OBJECT OF STUDY

Introduction

Much of the existing research into the functioning of stepfamilies, while admittedly predominantly American, focuses on the deficits in such families, and the unique problems which they face. In this chapter those views which have helped shape popular perceptions of the stepfamily will be discussed, and pertinent themes extracted.

While the temptation may be strong to disregard such research as overly pessimistic or as old school, that is positivistic and modernistic, that would not only go against the postmodern ethic of inclusion and relationship between seemingly diametrically opposite poles (Jones, Natter & Schatski, 1993; Keeney, 1983; Keeney & Ross, 1985; Rosenau, 1992), it would also rob this study of much of the richness of the work predating it.

Important Emerging Themes

While this chapter will not attempt an exhaustive review of all the literature written on stepfamilies, various pertinent themes have been identified in this body of research and which had a bearing on the process of this study. The themes identified here are not meant to be definitive, but rather should be seen as guidelines and as influenced by my own punctuations. Many other themes will have an equal claim to validity. To ignore their existence would be to reify those which have been highlighted here.

The identification of such themes, then, is akin to the identification of the myths and dominant narratives which will be explored in chapters 5, 6 and 7. They proved valuable for me in that they highlighted the roles of the stepparents and stepchild, and connected in very personal ways with my own experiences of stepfamily life. The themes which appeared to me to be common to nearly all the studies consulted, may well be described in the following ways:

- (a) Difficulty in adjusting to accommodate new members;
- (b) Stepparent role ambiguity and role strain;
- (c) Differences between experiences of stepmothers and stepfathers;
- (d) Adjustment difficulties facing stepchildren.

It is important to note, though, that while the definition of what constitutes a stepfamily may be debatable, within the majority of these studies the focus has not been on *resident* stepfamilies - namely those that are to be found under one roof. Relationships between a non-resident stepparent and their child(ren) are thus also taken into consideration in the majority of studies.

Problems of Elasticity

Papernow (1984) identifies seven stages through which the stepfamily must pass on its journey, with the assimilation phase fraught with perhaps the most difficulties. Following as it does on Papernow's initial fantasy stage, the actual nuts and bolts of incorporating new members into the existing family may be a troublesome process.

These difficulties may be financial (having to pay more for groceries, et cetera), legal (custody issues that affect step-relationships), logistical and, importantly, relational (Cherlin,

1978; Schwebel et al, 1991; Visher & Visher, 1988). Having to accommodate the feelings and thoughts of others who did not comprise the family system prior to remarriage can be experienced as both onerous and exhausting (Schwebel et al., 1991).

Consequently, Roberts and Price (1989) and Schwebel et al. (1991) note that marital satisfaction is perceived as being lower by stepparents than do their counterparts in first marriages or in remarriages without children. Marital roles assume particular importance in the newly-born stepfamily, but the ambiguity surrounding these and parental roles may leave the stepfamily trying to establish what these roles are, at the expense of anything else (Roberts & Price, 1989).

Stepchildren also experience a certain amount of dissatisfaction at having to share their parent with another child(ren) or with a stepparent (Roberts & Price, 1989). It is hypothesised that sibling or stepchildren subsystems in stepfamilies may well be more independent in stepfamilies than in normal families, as a result of little apparent evidence of enough of a correlation between marital adjustment and stepchild adjustment according to Bray and Berger (1993). Accordingly, though, some scholars suggest that it may take the stepfamily from two to four years to stabilise and adjust to the transition involved in remarriage. In fact, five years after marriage, stepfamilies were still posited to be more unstable and less cohesive than “normal” or nuclear families (Bray and Berger (1993).

Role Ambiguity and Role Strain

In the previous chapter, Gergen (1991a, 1991b) spoke of the dissipation of a unified sense of self, and the spreading of self-identity across varied contexts. It is ironic then, that role ambiguity and role strain have been the focus of a number of empirical studies (Bray, 1992;

Bray & Berger, 1993; Crosbie-Burnett & Giles-Sims, 1994; Filinson, 1986; Fine et al., 1992; Roberts & Price, 1989; Stern, 1984; Whitsett & Land, 1992).

Cherlin (1978) notes that there is a lack of conventional wisdom in society with regards to stepfamily life and, as a result, stepparents face life in their new families without a guide-book to help them negotiate the day to day stressors that are seemingly inherent in stepfamily life. This role ambiguity is seen not only to significantly increase the stress that stepparents face in terms of not knowing what is expected of them in various situations (Bray, 1992; Bray & Berger, 1993; Marsiglio, 1992; Schwebel et al., 1991), but it is also posited that this ambiguity has an impact on the way stepchildren perceive their stepparents.

Halperin and Smith (1983) noted that positive perceptions of stepfathers were more likely to be held in families in which a clear differentiation of the stepfather role was achieved. Furthermore, Fine et al. (1992) found that adolescents reported more role ambiguity surrounding both stepmothers and stepfathers than they did for their biological parents. And while they warn against making overarching claims with regard to adolescent perceptions, they believe that their findings are congruent with the views of Cherlin (1978) and Visher and Visher (1988).

Stepmothers and Stepfathers: Are they Different?

Findings would appear to suggest, though, that stepfamily members perceive stepparent-stepchild relationships more negatively than members of normal families (Schwebel et al., 1991). While stereotypes abound about stepparents - the wicked stepmother in Cinderella, Hansel and Gretel and the abusive stepfather portrayed in the media - not only are stepparents

rated less positively by respondents in some studies, but stepfathers are also rated less positively than stepmothers (Claxton-Oldfield, 1992; Rallings, 1976).

Girls are reportedly at a disadvantage in stepfamilies which include a stepfather, experiencing more difficulty than their male siblings (Fine et al., 1992). This may be due to the perception that the ability to maintain appropriate sexual boundaries between a stepfather and his stepdaughter is extremely difficult (Kompara, 1980; Rallings, 1976; Schwebel et al., 1991). It may also have something to do with the fact that stepfathers may relate better to same-sex stepchildren because they will have more in common (Marsiglio, 1992).

In counterpoint to this, however, is the view that same-sex stepfather-stepchild relationships may be more problematic because of sons' tendencies to protect their mothers from the other man in their lives, and so keep the idea of their own father alive (Marsiglio, 1992; Stern, 1984).

Problems which have been seen to arise in stepfather families are issues of discipline rather than of warmth (Claxton-Oldfield, 1992; Kurdek & Fine, 1993; Marsiglio, 1992; Rallings, 1976; Schwebel et al., 1991) and who is to carry out this function within the stepfamily. It may be difficult for a stepfather to discipline children socialised by their biological father and their mother (Kompara, 1980), and they may find that their interactions with their stepchild(ren) are being monitored by the mother to determine whether or not they are being too stentorian (Stern, 1984).

In fact, such is the difficulty surrounding the role of stepfather as disciplinarian, that successful stepfathers are those that Hetherington (in Marsiglio, 1992) identifies as not trying to take over the family system, but rather taking a back seat to their spouse in such matters. Duberman (in Papernow, 1984) lists the role of disciplinarian as less important than provider and guide to the stepchild(ren), while Waldron and Whittington (in Papernow, 1984) do not

see it as part of the stepparent's make-up at all. Both Kompara (1980) and Marsiglio (1992) note, though, that stepfather-stepchild relationships are much more harmonious when the relationship started when the children were young.

One reason put forward as to why stepfathers are rated more negatively than stepmothers is the link between the stepfather role and the term *abusive* (Claxton-Oldfield, 1992). This, however, would not appear to apply for Rallings (1976) who believes that the stepmother has had far worse publicity in literature (Cinderella's wicked stepmother, et cetera). Indeed, Bowerman (in Morrison & Thompson-Guppy, 1985) notes that stepmothers have more difficult roles than do stepfathers as children were most rejecting of father-stepmother families.

Why the discrepancy? Salwen (1990) believes that it may have to do with the fact that men are generally out of the home environment more often than women, thus putting the stepmother in closer proximity to the children, and creating more opportunity for disharmony. Added to this is the additional pressure on women to fulfill all the nurturing roles of a mother, with the realisation that, at the end of the day, she is not the biological mother (Salwen, 1990). Most problems would appear to arise in the areas of child-rearing where the influence of people outside of the house (biological mothers, mothers-in-law) impacts on the stepmother-stepchild relationship (Morrison & Thompson-Guppy, 1985). The advice given to stepfathers in terms of withdrawing from disciplinary issues is also given to stepmothers when it comes to nurturing and child-rearing issues, with Salwen (1990) suggesting greater emphasis being given to the biological parent - the father. There would thus appear to be a convergence in some respects between the experiences, perceptions and regard of stepfathers and stepmothers. Fine et al., (1993) suggest that there is little clinical or empirical evidence to support a significant difference between the two positions.

Adjustment Problems facing Stepchildren

✓ Children in stepfamilies can be seen to experience many of the difficulties facing their parents and stepparents. Changes in family structure, changes in family processes and relationships will affect the development and adjustment of the child in the stepfamily, with much of their less positive well-being arising not from being in a stepfamily per se but from the tumultuous changes it involves (Fine et al., 1993). Further to this, and perhaps a mitigating factor, is the importance of warmth shown by stepparents towards their stepchildren and was seen to increase the sense of well-being in stepchildren (Fine et al., 1993).

With stepfathers reportedly behaving less positively towards their stepchildren and as having less contact with them than the stepmother, stepchildren would appear to be at risk of becoming poorly adjusted (Bray, 1992; Fine et al., 1992; Fine et al., 1993; Halperin & Smith, 1983). Bray (1992) states that stepfamilies with adolescents appear to be at greater risk than nuclear families of developing destructive parent-adolescent relationships, resulting in greater developmental difficulties for these children.

Ganong and Coleman (1986) state, however, that the majority of studies indicate that stepchild-stepparent relationships are less conflictual than "common sense" would have us believe. Their study showed that there was little difference between the reactions of stepdaughters and stepsons towards stepparents, although stepdaughters rated stepfathers less highly on issues surrounding emotional closeness.

Conclusion

The descriptions available from existing research would appear to be ambivalent in some respects with regards to the various merits or pitfalls of stepfamily life. While there has been considerable attention paid to the stresses and strains facing stepfamilies with regards to role ambiguity and the difficulty of embracing transition, there are areas which need greater clarification.

The relative roles and positions of the stepfather and stepmother have been explored with little apparent evidence to suggest that there is a significant difference between the experiences. Also the relative dangers and problems facing stepchildren may not be as serious as some studies would make out.

Stern (1984) points out that most stepchildren grow up to become well-adjusted adults, with little or no difference in levels of later career or personal success. A conclusion that could well be drawn is that all such experience is therefore contextual, and influenced by the individual narratives of the individual.

In that light it is now prudent to explore an alternative and complementary view or theoretical approach to understanding the stepfamily. This will involve looking in more depth at the postmodern view which, loosely, would argue the point made above that all experience is context-bound, and that attempts to generalise across these contexts may not always be useful.

CHAPTER 3

**POSTMODERNISM, SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND NARRATIVE: OTHER
LENSES****Introduction**

It would seem to this author, then, that attempts at extrapolating the stepfamily experience have been less than definitive, and that the arguments put forward in the previous chapter do not adequately account for all lived experience in stepfamilies. If all experience and roles are context-bound, then meaning may be seen as an active and interactive process of ascription, rather than the encountering of an objective reality. The stories by which we live our lives are constitutive of who we are.

As stated in the first chapter, the aim of this study is to explore the dominant narratives (Epston & White, 1990; M. White, 1989a, 1989b, 1991) which shape stepfamily life and, in doing so, this study will draw heavily upon the narrative theory of M. White (1989a, 1989b, 1991; Epston & White, 1990) and its notions of deconstruction both of knowledge and power practices (Foucault, 1972, 1979).

In order to reach that point, however, it will be necessary to briefly explore the claims made by modernism, postmodernism and one of the latter's most vocal proponents, social constructionism. This has important implications when exploring notions of the self and the family within the modern/postmodern world. A key element within the postmodern frame is self-referentiality and, while some of the assumptions which guided this endeavour were outlined in the preceding chapter, it is important to once again return to them.

The choice of a social constructionist and narrativist approach reflects a moment in time in a journey that took shape during my training as a therapist at Unisa, where the ecosystemic voice was perhaps strongest for me. There has been for me, though, a gradual shift which has expanded both first and second-order cybernetic languaging about systems as being homeostatic and notions of circularity and autopoiesis (Bateson, 1972, 1980; Keeney, 1983; Maturana & Varela, 1980) to include notions that recognised the temporal dimension of stories - recognition of the changing realities of stories across different contexts and over time.

The stabilising language of Maturana and Varela (1980, 1987) and others mentioned above, did not sufficiently enhance my own experience of ever-changing meaning through interaction and feedback from my trainers, fellow students, clients and many others. That is not to deny their influence, but merely to give voice to a dissatisfaction that there appeared to be something missing. In a sense, the expansion of my own expressive repertoire has allowed voices such as those espoused by cybernetics - first and second order - to exist and speak *alongside* and not at the *expense* of the narrative and other approaches.

This, in itself, reflects the complementarity which exists for me between these views, thus begging the question - not addressed here - as to whether the narrative approach is indeed a move beyond cybernetics or merely another technique in its armoury.

The social constructionist lens (Hoffman, 1988, 1990) which has become so important in my work as therapist and stepfather is really the lens *about* my other lenses, and the lens through which I view assumptions such as those espoused by cybernetics. It encompasses assumptions about the world, realities and knowledge as emerging from the interaction between people and, as such, as influencing the stories which are told. It is a lens through which the emergence of meaning is seen as being in a constant state of change, where “all

therapy takes the form of conversations between people and...the findings of these conversations have no other 'reality' than that bestowed by mutual consent" (Hoffman, 1990, p. 4). It is important, though, to be aware of the self-reflexivity that such a lens demands and to realise that it too is merely a construction, not the final lens.

What then, to refer back to Hoffman (1988, 1990), are the other lenses of which I speak?

One already mentioned is the ecosystemic lens with its notions of self-referentiality, complementarity, co-construction, contextuality, interdependence, feedback loops and the observing system as being part of the observed (Bateson, 1980; Boscolo, 1983 Keeney, 1983).

Another is role. This lens encompasses the notion of the perception of the role of stepfather as being easier than that of the stepmother since men are advantaged within our society.

Further to that is the lens of history, with individuals unable to ignore the effect that being born into a particular community, in a particular culture at a particular time has on the unfolding of their lives. In that sense, role and history may well be connected, with expectations and agreed upon meanings around each role being influenced by the story of the culture at a particular time.

It is important, though, to explore some of the language and concepts which I will use both in this chapter and in the interpretation of my descriptions. It is through language, after all, that social interaction is mediated, and it is through social interaction that meanings are developed. It is also through language that we draw distinctions, punctuate the flow of events and tell the stories which shape our world and thereby give it meaning (Anderson & Goolishian, 1987, 1988; Keeney, 1983). The terms should not be reified, however, and serve merely as markers for those reading this text as to how I have punctuated my experience with those involved in this study.

Central to the interweaving of stories within this study are the notions of feedback and co-construction, and they bear some looking into at this point. Wiener (in Keeney, 1983) defines 'feedback' as the method of regulating a system's operations, by means of reinserting into it the results of its last action or performance. Feedback may be seen to operate to stabilise, regulate and keep a system's behaviour within certain acceptable parameters (Keeney, 1983, Keeney & Ross, 1985). Also, Bateson (1972) notes that corrective action is activated by *difference* between the current state and the preferred state of the system. Thus, those behaviours which fall outside of the acceptable limits may be corrected through feedback. Such systems endure because of their ability to self correct (Keeney, 1983). The Jones family in this study, for instance, seem to regulating their over-connectedness through bouts of fighting or avoidant and distancing behaviour and so an enduring system emerges.

There is more than one level of feedback, however, with the process described above often referred to as simple feedback. There is then, by implication, a feedback of feedback which controls or governs feedback loops between systems (Keeney, 1983). The aim of therapy, for Keeney, is the attempt at creating alternative forms of feedback which provide suitable paths to change.

In that sense this study may well come close to being defined as therapy. However, it was necessary for this study to be of value to those who participated (Bannister in Reason & Rowan (Eds), 1981). But the cybernetic process does not presume a static, stable state. Instead, it suggests that change can be understood as an attempt to maintain constancy, and all constancy as being maintained through change (Keeney, 1983). There is a suggestion, therefore, that change emerges through attempts at stability, and that stability is maintained through efforts at change. This calls for a reassessment of any view which regards stability and change as a dichotomy.

Cybernetics calls on us to embrace both sides of the stability/change distinction, seeing it as an “*imbrication* [italics in original] of levels, where one term of the pair *emerges* from the other” (Keeney, 1983, p. 92). Varela (in Keeney, 1983) volunteers a revised form of the distinction as being “the it/the process leading to it” (p. 92). The relationship between the two sides of the distinction is self-referential since one is “(re)cycled out of the other (Keeney, 1983, p. 92). While the two sides remain distinct, they are nonetheless in relationship with one another.

This relationship between the sides of the distinction is therefore not of the order either/or but rather both/and. Thus, the distinction family/stepfamily might not be out of place within this context, with the stepfamily both a valid form of family and unique since reality is context-bound. Also, the distinction between researcher and those being researched is not an either/or split but rather a both/and relationship, since the researcher is *observing* and *being observed* in much the same way as those participants we might otherwise call subjects (Keeney, 1983; Rosenau, 1992).

The behaviours of both researcher and researched are recursively connected in much the same way as are those of the therapist and client, with behaviours influencing, shaping, changing and reinforcing the behaviours of the other (Keeney, 1983). This calls for the therapist and researcher to know how and why his or her stories, punctuations, distinctions and behaviours are influencing the interchange in the therapy and research context.

This process of mutual influence, feedback and construction is akin to Bateson’s (1980) notion of double description (Keeney, 1983), but also connects strongly to the notions of the social constructionists of meaning developing through social interaction. The notion of co-construction would appear to imply the process of interchange through which meanings are negotiated and agreed upon, in such a manner that consensus is reached (Bateson, 1980;

Hoffman, 1988, 1990). To see interaction as reducible to discreet parts or components of individual action is to be disrespectful to the input and involvement that the various storytellers provide. It is, therefore, against this backdrop that narrative's claims to validity are to be viewed and, thereby, hopefully respect the integrity of the contextual requirements made by social constructionism.

Modernism, Postmodernism and Contemporary Life

The Modernist Perspective

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution towards the end of the 19th century and the subsequent death of the Romantic era, modernist philosophy came to the fore in Europe (Gergen, 1990; Mahoney, 1993). For Gergen (1991a) "the (modernist) [parentheses added] grand narrative is one of continuous upward movement - improvement, conquest, achievement - towards some goal. Science furnishes the guiding metaphor" (pp. 30-31).

The machine was that root metaphor and rational and lineal progress its sole purpose. The modernist self was seen as being the very antithesis of the Romantic self, with objectivity, accessibility and modifiability replacing the multilayered deep interior of the Romantic individual (Gergen, 1991a, 1991b; Mahoney, 1993; Sarbin, 1983). The modernist self was thus a distinct, stable entity whose truths could be accessed and generalised. Furthermore it was seen as representing a singular truth which was "publicly apprehended and mapped out as invariant structures of knowledge...concepts of ego and id, systems conscious and unconscious" (Leary, 1994, p. 441).

The emphasis was firmly placed on the importance of rational knowledge, positivism and scientific method (Leary, 1994). Predictions of cause and effect relations and mastery of the environmental and temporal dimensions were highly prized, with “good society erected on the foundations of empirical knowledge” (Gergen, 1993, p. 243).

Mental health models were based on the notion of deficit and deviation from the optimum or desirable (Madigan & Law, 1992). They are still largely based on the modernist approach, with psychopathology drawing strongly on the categorisation and treatment of conditions within the individual. These pathologies or mental illnesses can be accessed through psychotherapies which call on the therapist to wear the coat of the scientist, and to thus become someone who is objective, in control and in the know.

Therapists are not required to expose their own weaknesses or foibles in therapy. Instead, these need to be controlled, and dealt with through objective means such as personal therapy. The dedication to finding a singular truth, or a derivation thereof, means that “the therapeutic procedure virtually ensures that it will be vindicated” (Gergen & Kaye, in Gergen & Kaye (Eds), 1993, p. 246). The client’s narrative accounts are regarded as inherently garbled and inaccurate - given his pathology and lack of scientific sophistication - and assume a position of inferiority in relation to that of the therapist (Gergen, 1993).

The claims to scientific knowledge, and the ever-increasing field of established doctrine, and the steadfast adherence to a singular truth, mean that the modernist approach is severely self-limiting in terms of self-reflection. This for Gergen & Kaye is to be found in the “way biologists seldom question the basic stipulations of Darwinian theory...(so) [parentheses added] psychoanalysts who question the foundations of psychoanalytic theory are placed in professional peril” (1992, p. 247).

Postmodernity: The Way Ahead?

Described by Leary (1994, p. 435) as the “leitmotif of the latter part of the 20th century” postmodernism is, nonetheless, not a perspective that lends itself particularly well to accurate, clearly articulated theoretical definition. Described variously as “not conceptually coherent” (Hartman, 1996, p. 19), and as not having a “single statement or a single spokesperson...(and as being) [parentheses added] difficult to render a precise description” (Troyer in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993, p. 120) it has been posited that it is “a stance that one takes toward a theory and a way of looking at theory, rather than a theory itself” (Leary, 1994, p. 435). It has also been said, by Gitlin (1990), that postmodernist thinking has distinguished itself as an approach distinct from modernism, and not merely an extension or modification of modernist thought.

Issues of Duality and Objective Reality

Given these concerns, then, what is the postmodern standpoint with regards to objectivity, rationality and reality? It has been described as the move away from the homogeneity, singularity, predictability and objectivist principles so highly valued by modernism (Doherty, 1991; Gergen, 1990, 1991a, 1991b; Gitlin, 1990; Jones et al., 1993), towards a social consciousness of multiple belief systems and multiple perspectives (Gonzalez, Biever & Gardner, 1994).

It is, nonetheless, a discursive process of knowing, which holds nothing as sacred or above reflection and question. The very assumptions upon which postmodernity itself rests, then, should be subject to change - even the ideologies which share its world should not be seen as

immutable. There is no right way to do anything, but rather many equally valid outlooks (Gonzalez et al., 1994). Context rather than generalisability is seen as dictating usefulness.

The modernist belief in duality - right/wrong, powerful/powerless, healthy/sick, researcher/researched - is circumvented by postmodernist thought not by rejecting, but by acknowledging its usefulness in certain given situations. Rather it includes modernism as one broadly agreed upon view (Gonzalez et al., 1994). Drawing again on the work of Keeney (1983) the postmodernist perspective views dualisms as complementarities in which either/or descriptions are not always useful. This is evident in the work of Keeney (1983), Keeney & Ross (1985) and Keeney & Sprenkle (1982) and their emphasis on cybernetic complementarities, which views linear (modernist) thought as being useful in certain instances.

The Postmodern View of Self

Gergen (1991a, 1991b) talks of the multiplicity of selves, and much of the existing research on stepfamilies refers to role strain and role ambiguity (Fine et al., 1992; Schwebel et al., 1991; Whitsett & Land, 1992), all of which poses intriguing questions as to notions of selfhood within the stepfamily. Much of the discomfort experienced by stepparents would appear to be as a result of needing to comply with the expectations of a new role. Much of the existing research on stepfamilies refers to role strain and role ambiguity (Fine et al., 1992; Schwebel et al., 1991; Whitsett & Land, 1992), and these are roles for which they may not be prepared.

There is perhaps the feeling, as Sarah Smith in this study puts it, of "having to be many people at the same time, and yet still remain the same". The self of the stepparent would therefore appear to be anything but self-contained, co-shaped as it is by cultural values and the stories of the family into which he or she is entering.

What then of the postmodern self, with the dominant narratives of the societies in which stepfamilies live seen as limiting the selves which are deemed permissible (Foucault, 1977; Gergen, 1991a, 1991b)? The technologies of what Gergen terms social saturation (1991a, 1991b) have seen the erosion of the objectivity and purposeful authority so highly prized by modernists (Hoffman, 1990), and the fragmentation of the modernist self.

Previously regarded as a separate, self-contained and stable entity, the self was now regarded as tenuous and fragmented. People are spread thin across regions, contexts, roles and relationships, with an ever-present media ready to invade their inner lives (Gergen, 1991a, 1991b). Exposure to differing cultural views and perceptions through the burgeoning media - electronic and otherwise - challenged the notion of the way in which the world was both perceived and experienced, and forcing a form of cross-cultural pollination both within and between cultures.

The individual as the centre of cultural concern and focus is, perhaps irrevocably, being replaced with a consciousness of connection, and existence may now be experienced *in connection to* others rather than as *separate and distinct* from others as the modernist view held (Gergen, 1991b).

This fragmentation and shift from the notion of singularity has given rise to a backlash against notions of truth (Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1994). Questions are asked of the usefulness in using a "19th century theory of mind to account for subjectivity on the cusp of the 21st century" (Leary, 1994, p. 434), at a time when "we ingest myriad bits of others' being - values, attitudes, opinions, life-styles, personalities - synthesising and incorporating them into our own definition of self" (Gergen, 1991a, p. 28).

For Gergen (1991a) the notion that the individual possesses a distinct identity with their own values, emotions, reasoning capacity and intentions becomes implausible.

We have gathered so many bits (or bytes) of being to create ourselves that the pieces no longer mix well together, perhaps even contradict each other. To look inward, then, is to risk seeing a maelstrom of partial beings in conflict (p.28).

There is a sense of an ill fit between various components of ourSELVES. This arises primarily out of the network of connections that people now feel with others, and the demands that are made through being exposed to so many different contexts. This is brought about in no small measure by being mediate. It is then that we may experience what Gergen (1991b) refers to as social saturation.

The postmodern world is one which poses a unique threat to our ability to retain a sense of continuity of self, with relationships characterised by diversity as people become nodal points of all that they ingest. More generally, for Rorty (in Leary, 1994, p.435) postmodernism aims to “break the crust of convention”, by claiming that all knowledge is derived only through social agreements rendered through language. Objective knowledge of the world - namely direct, accurate experience of tangible, objective reality - is seen as impossible outside of language-mediated social interaction (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Best in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993; Epston & White, 1990; Gergen, 1988, 1990; Gonzalez et al., 1994; Hoffman, 1990; Keeney, 1983; Kippax, Crawford, Benton, Gault & Noesjirwan, 1988; Leary, 1994; Penn & Frankfurt, 1994; M. White, 1991).

This implies that postmodernism rests, or is expressed amongst the most vocally, in the social constructionist debate (Gonzalez et al., 1994).

Social Constructionism as the Bedrock of Postmodernism

The postmodernist move is away from objectivity to a relativity that is mediated and, indeed, constructed through social interaction (Leary, 1994; Fruggeri, 1992). It is through recursive interaction that the ascription of meaning takes place. Furthermore, it is a move away from belief in a single, objective reality and direct accessibility (Bateson, 1980, Keeney, 1983) to a multitude of realities (Anderson and Goolishian, 1987; Epston & White, 1990; Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Gergen, 1990; Hoffman, 1990; Neimeyer, 1994; Neimeyer & Neimeyer, 1993)

Indeed, the notion that reality is mediated through social interaction and language and each relational encounter giving rise to a new reality, gives voice to the postmodern view of multiple realities and multiple selves put forth by Gergen (1991a, 1991b) and others. Mahoney (1993) puts it succinctly when he says “the postmodern self is then rendered as a dynamic capacity for shifting perspective, and something defined not so much from within but from the context(s) of its (ever-changing) social relationships” (p. 248).

It is in this light then that social constructionism, as a postmodern paradigm (Gonzalez et al., 1994), makes several important assertions.

- (a) Meanings and understandings of the world are developed through social interaction.
- (b) Constructions of meanings are derived from social contexts.
- (c) Knowledge of the world is placed with the process of social interchange.
- (d) Knowledge of self is through interaction with others.
- (e) Actions and behaviours are secondary to language as the primary vehicle for transmission of meanings and understandings.

(f) Social constructionism takes into account the social origins of assumptions about reality (p. 518).

These assumptions may, hopefully, be seen to guide this study in many ways. It is only through the interactive process between myself and my co-researchers that meanings have been generated by this study. Through this interaction knowledge of other selves has been generated, and that it is through the language of the stories or plays that the Smith and Jones family wrote that such meanings could be externalised (M. White, 1989a, 1989b, 1991) and explored.

Knowledge as a Process Mediated Through Language

Social Constructionism (SC) espouses the view that discourse - "to talk, converse; to express one's ideas in words or writing" (Oxford Dictionary, 1984, p. 208) - about the world is not a reflection or map, but is, rather, an artifact of communal interchange (Gergen, 1985; Gonzalez et al., 1994). Discourse, then, could be viewed as being composed of written or spoken words that are *responding at the moment* (Penn & Frankfurt, 1994) to other spoken or written words. It is through social interaction and interchange that knowledge is produced - knowledge is therefore seen as relational and not *within* the individual (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Gergen & Gergen, 1988, 1990; Gonzalez et al., 1994; Hoffman, 1990; Penn & Frankfurt, 1994).

This brings into question the modernist, reductionist view of mind and psychopathology espoused by many psychotherapies, and allies itself closely with Bateson's (Keeney, 1983) notion of the mind as social - that is within relationships, not within the skull.

Words can never bear any relation to an external world since there is no access to an objective reality (the map is not the territory), nor do they have inherent meaning or representational value (the thing is not the thing named). Instead, words can only be seen as

referring to each other (Doherty, 1991; Gergen, 1991; Hoffman, 1990). For Anderson & Goolishian “language can only take on meaning in human action and, therefore, meaning is interactional, is local in nature and is always changing. There is no universal validity to meaning. Meaning, like thinking, is intersubjective” (1987, p. 532).

Theories, then, are not applicable across contexts as the modernists would have us believe, but are merely agreed upon understandings or stories which have proven useful in one or more context. Scarr (1985) states that “we do not discover scientific facts; we invent them. Their usefulness to us depends both on shared perceptions of the ‘facts’ (consensual validation) and on whether they work for various purposes” (p. 507). The notion of fit between theory and context is important here, since it implies that not only are theories context-bound but also that they are a product of the relationship between theorist and context.

Social Problems and the Claims-Making Process

This has important implications for the focus of psychology, sociology and related disciplines whose main focus is social problems. For the social constructionists social problems are the result of a *social process* of definition (Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993) and do not exist objectively within individuals (Gergen, 1990, 1991a, 1991b; Hoffman, 1990; Kippax et al., 1988; Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993; Penn & Frankfurt, 1994).

Rather, they are a result of punctuating particular contexts as problematic (Best in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993; Keeney, 1983) and are, according to Best (in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993) little more than a socially created reality which is sustained by behaviour mutually coordinated in language. Problems, therefore, are a reflection of a particular meaning that arises intersubjectively between persons engaged in discourse around those meanings. There is alarmed concern at these meanings and a concurrent insistence on a change that is not forthcoming.

The task of social constructionism, then, is to explore the claims made by individuals and groups, with regards to the making of assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions (Michalowski in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993). The conditions themselves need not actually exist in reality, according to Michalowski, serving merely as the stimulus for claims-making and therefore need only exist in the mind of the claims-makers.

Within a truly social constructionist framework, then, there can be no such things as victims of social problems, real experiences or lived-lives - there can be only *claims* about them (Hazelrigg in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993; Michalowski in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993).

Problems such as those experienced within stepfamilies, then, would take on a whole new light from this perspective. The myth of the wicked stepmother and other problems that stepfamilies experience in this regard are a case in point.

From the modernist, empiricist view-point and from case studies at the Transvaal Memorial Institute (TMI) in Johannesburg a strong correlation between the development of conduct disorder and oppositional defiant disorder in children in stepfamilies with “strong-willed, over-controlling” stepmothers has reportedly been shown to exist (Dr Cora Smith, personal conversation, 1997).

Another related pathogenic outflow of the stepmother-stepchild relationship is outlined by Morrison and Thompson-Guppy (1985), who describe these interactions as leading to Dysthymic Disorder or Depressive Neurosis (DSM III classification). The social constructionist perspective would, it would seem, be more interested in understanding such cases in terms of the ways in which such interactions are punctuated, the languaging about such problems and looking at the assertion of grievance and claims with respect to these putative conditions (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988).

In this view *all* who language about the problem would be included - that is fables, cultural beliefs, professionals who describe stepparenting as problematic et cetera - as part of the significant system (Boscolo, Cecchin, Hoffman & Penn, 1987). A therapist faced with such a family in his consulting rooms may well feel extremely limited by the modernist notion that therapy with conduct disorder children is an exercise in futility.

After all, the assertion that such problems are subject to an external body of knowledge of (psychological) reality is inflexible, and not open to question. Approaching the same problem from a social constructionist perspective opens up a range of further possibilities. An example would be the notion that each member has many selves and that all views are equally valuable; placing the emphasis on the relationship as the vehicle through which meaning is constituted and not the linear imposition of a pre-defined and a-contextually defined label which falls within the good/evil dichotomy.

Deconstructionism and Reflexivity.

If one approaches social problems as constructions generated through social interaction and ascribed particular meaning through this process, then how does one attempt to rid oneself of these problems? As intimated above, those who have a stake in constructing the problem through languaging about it would need to do so by changing the way in which they language about the situation. Through changing the problem language, in effect, the problem is deconstructed (Anderson & Goolishian, 1987, 1988). What is deconstructionism, though, and how does it relate to this study?

While a more detailed discussion of narrative theory and the role deconstruction has to play within it will be entered into in the next section, it is necessary to give a brief outline as it relates to the discussion outlined so far. M. White (1991) defines deconstruction as the

procedures that subvert taken-for-granted realities and practices; those so-called 'truths' that are split off from the conditions and the context of their production, those disembodied ways of speaking that hide their biases and prejudices, and those familiar practices of self and of relationship that are subjugating of person's lives (p 27).

According to Pfohl (in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993) social deconstructionism concerns itself primarily with the ways in which representational rituals and practices visited on people, ultimately construct "a common sense that certain ways of doing things are acceptable, or even valued, while others must be resisted, prohibited, or confined within socially constituted limits" (p. 419).

Michalowski (in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993) places deconstructionism in counter-point to social constructionism in terms of the research process, by claiming that the term 'social construction' directs attention to what is being done *by those being studied*. Social deconstruction, on the other hand, places emphasis on what is done *by those doing the studying*.

Indeed, there is a strong element of self-reflexivity generated through this process, reinforcing the discursive nature of postmodernism, which calls for a questioning of the assumptions made by social constructionism. This would serve to reveal those discourses which influence the privilege given to certain claims and disregard others, and to allay fears that the construction process is concerned with providing a fixed reality.

That is not to say that deconstruction is concerned with championing the cause of those oppressed voices, constructions or claims, for that would simply be falling into the same trap by replacing the old cause with a new one. Rather, for Michalowski (in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993) it aims to expose the claims-making process and punctuation schemata of the researcher, and not to speak on behalf of the other.

Literary deconstructionism, rose to prominence in the late 1960's in literary criticism and art (Leary, 1994; M. White, 1991). Jacques Derrida, according to Leary (1994) and Scholes (in Mitchell, 1981), lead the literary deconstructionist school in their attempts to remove the emphasis placed on the written word, and to de-link language from the world it purports to describe. This is an important distinction as it allows us to see that no approach's language, be it modernist or postmodernist, is applicable across the board.

Troyer (in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993) holds that there are several major themes within postmodern literature:

1. Language as an objective means of communication is inadequate in its efforts to capture the quintessence of reality, since it is only through the recursive nature of social interaction that meaning is ascribed. Scientific language, and therefore research and other related knowledge-gathering pursuits that rely on objective texts and professional languages, can never represent the world (Troyer in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993; Gergen & Kaye in Gergen, 1988) but should rather be analysed for their "hidden political and social agendas rather than statements of objectifiable fact" (Hoffman, 1990, p. 1).

Fish (in Leary, 1994) points out that this move towards relativity - there can be no objectivity - meant that the text lost its authority as a representation of fact and that, therefore, the reader's response to the text constructed what the text meant. Written texts had been assumed to be repositories of reality, with the reader retrieving the reality put forward by the

author. That reality did not change from reader to reader, but remained the private possession of the author (Leary, 1993).

2. But with postmodernism's intrusion into the literary field and the subjectification of narrative each reader would respond differently, and also from moment to moment rendering the meaning of a scientific text fluid and ever-changing. It is meaningful "only for a moment in time" (Leary, 1994, p 438).

3. The impossibility of language to ever accurately represent the world without social mediation and that a fixed and final account of such a world (Troyer in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993) is therefore out of the question, reflects on the notion of reflexivity. This points to the need for a constant attention on the part of the researcher to the rhetorical moves in creating a narrative, and an awareness and exploration of his/her constitutive practices and representational acts (Troyer in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993; Pollner in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993; Schneider in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993).

But the notion of deconstruction as de-linking language from the world it attempts to describe, has found, at best, a grudging following from the more established psychological disciplines such as psychoanalysis (Leary, 1994; Schafer in Mitchell (ed), 1981). The notion of the unconscious comes under particular threat by deconstructionism, since representations of reality - a phantasy perhaps - cannot exist outside of social interaction, and thus cannot exist as an internal, yet objective psychic reality (Leary, 1994).

But Leary's (1994) criticism of the postmodernist view as applied to psychoanalysis extends to its seemingly impregnable position of superiority since it "easily accommodates inconsistency and contradiction and, indeed, celebrates discontinuity" (p. 452).

The notion of multiple selves (Gergen, 1991a, 1991b), experienced as liberating from the strictures of not being the preferred self (Dallos, 1997) but of a less agreeable self, is akin to

moving the party indoors if adopted uncritically by psychoanalysts, according to Leary (1994). Schafer (in Mitchell (ed), 1981), though, who is criticised by Leary (1994) for doing this to some degree, points out that the narrative approach and the reinvention of ourselves in different contexts has value for psychoanalysis.

One of the pitfalls of the narrative approach, though, pointed out by Leary (1994) and others, is that despite its seemingly liberating approach to story-generation, it still requires the active participation of the therapist if it is to avoid becoming directionless. Sluzki (1992), Vogel (1994) and Weingarten and Cobb (1995) all point to the active choreography required of the narrative therapist and researcher, with particular importance placed on the timing of disclosures and ways of helping the client to reach what Wigen (1994) refers to as “narrative closure” (p. 415).

Within this study I played an active part in the co-creation of narratives, intervening and attempting to re-direct processes in a way that far belied the misconception of the narrative approach as merely telling stories. According to Troyer (in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993), Pollner (in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993) and Schneider (in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993) this activity requires therapists and researchers to be constantly aware of their constitutive practices or representational acts.

Having explored a few of the pitfalls and criticisms of the narrative approach, it is also necessary to take a more in-depth look at the work of Michael White (1989a, 1989b, 1991) and others.

Narrative Approaches and Perspectives

Sarbin (1983) identifies narrative as the root metaphor in psychology which serves to structure the way people think, perceive, make moral choices and imagine. But while the role of narrative or story (Sarbin, 1983) in psychological theory has long been recognised, it has rarely been publicly acknowledged as the principle which, to some degree, unifies approaches as diverse as psychoanalysis, the cognitive therapies, hypnotherapy and systems therapy (Herrnstein-Smith, 1981; Wigren, 1994).

Schafer (in Mitchell, 1981) points out that people are storying beings who tell stories to others and to themselves and that it is through this process that we narrate others and selves. It is consequently the role of the psychoanalyst to retell the stories of the analysand, and thus progressively influence the what and how of the person. The transference serves as a retelling or re-experiencing of a story, to which the analyst will add his interpretations (re-telling) (Schafer in Mitchell, 1981).

Cognitive therapies are also undergoing radical changes according to Gonçalves (1994), with a shift from a rationalist towards a constructivist philosophy and, more importantly, from an information process model towards a narrative model of the knowing processes. Within the narrative paradigm in cognitive therapies humans are seen as storytellers, for Gonçalves, and thoughts are metaphorical. The manipulation of thoughts therefore becomes a search for meaning.

Narratives, according to Gonçalves (1994), were the earliest tools used to describe life events and develop meaning, and should promote the move from seeing humans as *Homo fabulus* instead of *Homo scientus* in order to emphasise that their access to realities is through meaningful personal narratives or stories.

The Role of Stories

In accordance with Gonçalves (1994), Hayden White (1981) sees storytelling as a natural impulse which traces its roots back to pre-modern times. It was the way in which people made sense of their lives, transmitted meanings, morals and hiSTORIES to others (H. White, 1981). They are, for Mair (1989, 1990), habitations and our way of living in the world - a world that we conjure through stories, and through telling and re-telling stories to others.

Stories are concerned with meaning-making and making sense of lived experience. They are not imaginary abstractions, but shape and influence the person's life in such a way that their effects are felt by the story-teller and others. This is almost inevitable since stories are interwoven in social exchange (Epston & White 1990; Penn & Frankfurt, 1994; M. White 1991).

Stories are social creations which, until they are told to an audience, remain monologues, some of which can be negative - for example a monologue of failure (Gergen & Kaye, 1992; Penn & Frankfurt, 1994; White, 1991). But, by entering into the dialogic space with others, these stories are interwoven with others which changes their nature (Penn & Frankfurt, 1994). As such they may be the focus of the therapeutic process, as stories about stories emerge through feedback loops (Keeney, 1983), allowing for the self-correction or deconstruction of those stories.

Furthermore, it is through the interchange with others that we come to story not only about them but also about ourselves, and the number of selves that can be generated is infinite since stories about stories about stories are emerging (Penn & Frankfurt, 1994; Schafer in Mitchell, 1981). This gives rise, according to Penn and Frankfurt (1994), to narrative multiplicity since the stories we tell ourselves are the way that we invent ourselves with others.

Stories as Organising Principle

Stories also serve to organise experience by bringing together episodes, actions, accounts of actions, time and place and even the fantastic and imaginative, and providing a sense of connectedness or coherence and temporality (Gergen & Gergen in Sarbin, 1983; Sarbin, 1983). Stories have a beginning, a middle and an end - although these are not necessarily discrete stages - and they need to link accounts of events or actions in a sequence that is meaningful to another *through time* (Gergen & Gergen, 1983; Sarbin, 1983; Scholes in Mitchell (ed), 1981).

Narrative is a temporal icon for Scholes (in Mitchell (ed), 1981) which places events within the story in relation to one another, without which “we have only a list” (Scholes in Mitchell (ed), 1981). Narratives also make the links between emotions and thoughts (Kippax et al., 1988), and without a sense of narrative closure both Weingarten and Cobb (1995) and Wigren (1994) state that psychopathology may result. This occurs when the narrative process about traumatic events is disrupted (for example Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). This is particularly pertinent for stories that are not good stories, where the relationships between events within the story (its structure) are too loose and disconnected. It is only through the re-telling and re-living of the story in therapy or other contexts where stories encounter meaningful noise (Keeney, 1983) or that which complexifies meanings, that closure can be found.

A story can never encompass all aspects of lived experience, though, and the individual will come across contradictions which Epston and White (1990) and M. White (1989a, 1989b, 1991) believe can lead to a change in the dominant story that they may be struggling with. This may lead to unique outcomes, that is to say, stories which are not arranged around

notions such as problems or stuckness but which allow for alternative meanings to be generated.

Dominant Narratives, Discourses and Myths

Stories are never a-contextual or culture- or value-free, however, and are always historically negotiated and constructed within the context of the social structures and institutions which surround us (Epston & White, 1990; Hare-Mustin, 1994; Penn & Frankfurt, 1994; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1994). Cultural stories are never neutral and, indeed, there is a strong canonical dimension to them in that they are co-authored by members of the community. These dominant cultural knowledges act to influence what is deemed acceptable or not, and to sustain a particular world view (Hare-Mustin, 1994; M. White, 1991).

It is important here to make the distinction, however subtle it may seem, between narrative and discourse since they are used almost interchangeably here. According to Foucault (1977, 1979), Hare-Mustin (1994), Madigan and Law (1992) and Shotter (1989) the term 'discourse' refers to those practices which serve to sustain a particular world view.

They constitute, or produce social interaction but are also constituted and produced through social interaction, and influences what can be said, thought and done (Madigan & Law, 1992; White, 1991). They specify what is said as well as *how* it is said and, importantly, what remains unsaid. The *how* is achieved through the influence on the type of languaging and language use, that is acceptable.

Where there appears to be a distinction between narrative and discourse, though, is the emphasis that discourse places on the non-linguistic or non-verbal aspects of communication (Hare-Mustin, 1994). While narrative does not necessarily reject the notion of non-linguistic

communication, these practices as shaped and influenced by institutionalised talk (Madigan & Law, 1992) appear to be dominant or master narratives.

Examples of some of the more dominant discourses have been race, sex and, most importantly for this study, the notion of a discreet, nuclear family as the basic living unit. The latter has been installed as the dominant discourse through the exercising of power on the part of institutions within communities - for example, the church.

There is thus a strong link between the notion of societally established myth and dominant discourse/narrative and, for the purposes of this study, the myths that surround stepfamilies have been approached in this way. Those myths outlined in the preceding chapter are not to be seen as reified truths, but rather as dominant narratives which serve to shape the way the Smith and Jones family have come to experience stepfamily life.

It is the deconstruction of these dominant narratives which is one of the aims of this study, with a primary goal being the deconstruction of the notion of myth as truth. Discourses and narratives co-exist in a landscape of competing narratives and there may be narratives that are silenced or limited and constrained in their degree of expression (Hare-Mustin, 1994; M. White, 1991; Zito, 1984).

These stories remain unsaid (Hoffman, 1988, 1990) and unexpressed, with such pertinent examples as the stepparent as a friend rather than evil enemy, and the stepfamily as rich in diversity rather than as laden with problems. The narrative that dominates public perception is that of stepfamilies as somehow inferior or deviant, thus not allowing expression of the stepfamily story as one that includes love, warmth and alternative forms of approaching contemporary problems.

For Bateson (1972) and many of the social constructionists power is an epistemological error since it required construction in language for it to exist. But by following Epston and

White (1990) into the work of Michel Foucault there may be a way through. For Foucault (1976, 1979) discourses exercise their influence in society to “avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous awesome reality” (1976, p. 216).

He further argues that we experience the positive effects of power by generating knowledge practices that define our world and which have improved and eased the burden of living. It avoids the negative aspects of control such as is evident in prisons, but that we are nonetheless subject to the influence of this power through its normalisation of truths that shape our reality (Epston & White, 1990; Foucault, 1979).

For Foucault (1976, 1977, 1979) power and knowledge are inseparable since it is an endeavour through which people’s lives are shaped. This is achieved by, in most cases, laying claim to objective truth and the accessing of a singular reality. Those involved in the generation of knowledge zealously guard their territory through the establishment of professional qualification criteria (Foucault, 1976).

The truths of which Foucault speaks are not positivistic, tangible realities but rather those constructions and stories that are accorded truth status through co-created claims of global truth or fact. These are then internalised by individuals and accepted as part of their storying process (Epston & White, 1990). People are isolated in their experience of this subjugation to the dominant discourses and exercise of power, and are incited to police themselves (White, 1991).

But this exercise of power is not an authoritarian, top-down approach since it operates at the level of positively influencing and structuring people’s lives. Power is constitutive rather than simply oppressive or beneficial, and is therefore instrumental in inventing realities which are deemed acceptable. It is therefore necessary to intervene at the level of taken-for-granted

realities to alter things - namely at the level of storying and constructing personal and family narratives.

Discourses, for Foucault (1976), operate on the principle of exclusion - eliminating contradictory or troublesome descriptions - and subjugate those discourses that do not fit the frame of the dominant discourses.

If the point of intervention in subverting these dominant narratives and allowing the expression of all narratives - without prejudice - is at the local level of taken-for-granted realities and assumptions, then that indicates a deconstruction of dominant narratives. It is the very realisation that the individual's dominant narrative(s) does not account for the entirety of lived experience that brings him or her to therapy (M. White, 1991).

Therapy, as a process, is involved in the eliciting of those stories which are not given a voice, in order to complexify meanings and to find alternative feedback paths or unique outcomes which facilitate change (Keeney, 1983; M. White, 1991). Change entails the shifts in meaning which the person might undergo through altering feedback loops, and which alter the way in which they experience their world.

This study has set out to facilitate this shift in meanings in the Smith and Jones families by questioning the process of storying or meaning generation which has left both families feeling stuck. By highlighting incidents where the dominant narratives were seemingly silenced, and creating contexts in which this can happen again, meanings were altered in a way which proved all the more effective because it happened in a context where it could be commented on.

The Jones family, for instance, played a game of musical chairs which helped create a sense of relaxation similar to that of a holiday which had been experienced as being free of

the effects of their dominant narrative of competition for intimacy. By co-creating this context and commenting on the process as it unfolded, so meanings could be explored and shifted.

Deconstruction through Exoticising the Domestic

The process of deconstruction for M. White (1991) involves exoticising the domestic - that is objectifying the familiar to facilitate the reappropriation of the self by externalising conversations rather than internalising them. By entering into an external dialogic space in which the relationship between the individual and the personal and cultural stories is mapped, the individual is placed in relationship to these stories.

This is done by mapping the influence these problematic stories have on their lives in real terms since they are not abstractions, but influence life decisions. Furthermore, it involves exploring how this has influenced their view or perception of themselves and their relationships. The way in which the individual was recruited into policing himself and adopting these problematic stories is also discussed. The person is then oriented to those stories which contradict the dominant narrative, and which allow for exploration of unique outcomes (nodal points which allow for re-authoring) and shifts in meaning (Epston & White, 1990; M. White, 1989a, 1989b, 1991).

These unique outcomes are the gateway to alternative stories and meanings (Epston & White, 1990; M. White, 1989a, 1989b, 1991), and provide the individual with alternatives to the pathologised or entrenched stories which shape his or her experience. They allow for the meanings by which they have lived their lives and occupied roles, to be altered in a way which allows more relevant meanings to be generated.

These unique outcomes, or points of meaning shifts, are necessary if the influence of these dominant narratives is to be altered, and other stories allowed a voice. Within the context of this study, the process has been one of, for instance, challenging the dominance of wicked stepmother stories within the Smith family, by looking for the unique outcomes or alternative stories that challenge their ascendancy.

Landscapes of Action and Consciousness

In order to facilitate the re-authoring process it is possible to ask questions that encourage the person to situate unique outcomes in sequences of events that unfold across time according to particular plots (landscape of action), or which encourage reflection on, and to determine the meaning of those developments outlined in the landscape of action (landscape of consciousness).

While there are many questions which can be asked within each frame, and which are too lengthy to elucidate in this study, it is important to briefly outline the aims of each type of question, since they were used in interviews of stepfamilies.

Landscape of Action

These questions aim to historicise unique outcomes by resurrecting and bringing forth alternative landscapes that stretch through the temporal dimensions (M. White, 1989a, 1989b, 1991). They reach back to a time that predates the landscapes of action of problem saturated dominant stories that people have about their lives.

Landscape of Consciousness

These questions hope to review developments as they unfold in the landscape of action and to determine what these reveal about the nature of the person's preferences and desires; the character of various personal and relationship qualities; the composition of their preferred beliefs; the composition of their intentional states and the nature of their commitments (M. White, 1991).

Conclusion

The main thrust of this study, then, lies in exposing and deconstructing the dominant narratives (myths) influencing stepfamily life, and allowing other unsaid or untold stories to emerge. This is important in the light of changes in the perceptions of the family, and the greater prominence in society that the stepfamily is enjoying.

It is also important to deconstruct the notion of these myths as being immutable truths, and that this can be partly achieved by looking for alternative stories which are otherwise subjugated. In order to do so, I will draw on the work of the social constructionists and deconstructionists such as Michael White, Michel Foucault, Kenneth Gergen and others.

In this chapter we have seen that meaning arises out of social interaction, mediated through language, and that myths or dominant narratives will undergo altered meaning through interaction in this study. The notion of self-referentiality has also been explored in this chapter, and it would be remiss of me to not state that my wish to undertake this study has personal interest for me.

As a stepparent, the importance of the changing nature of the narratives which influence my experience of stepfamily life has been as liberating for me as it was intended to be for the

families who took part in this study. It is also important for me to state, as openly as possible, what my own commitment is to the theoretical premises and viewpoints outlined in this chapter.

The mantle of postmodernist is not one that sits easily since, if the postmodern ethic of both/and is taken to heart, then I would feel unfairly disposed to one side of the distinction postmodernism/modernism. I am unwilling to throw modernist principles out of the window as will no doubt be seen in subsequent chapters since doing so would be unfaithful to the postmodern ethic.

I thus feel caught between wanting to commit myself, but feeling at the same time that this would be wrong. It is this ambivalence which may be evident to the reader when exploring my punctuations of the stories of which I formed part. What are the implications of this, and the narrative and social constructionist approaches for the research process?

In the next chapter the usefulness of these stances will be explored in relation to research principles, and how they can add to, or complement the traditional approaches by adding meaning and the shift in meaning rather than fact, to the process of knowledge generation.

CHAPTER 4

COPING WITH THE UNPREDICTABLE: THE RESEARCH PROCESS**Introduction**

Having outlined the theoretical stances to be adopted in this study, particularly the social constructionist and narrative approaches, the implications of these for the generation of the descriptions which will form the backbone of this study need to be discussed.

In this chapter, then, the methods used to operationalise the eliciting of subjugated narratives and aid in the deconstruction of dominant stepfamily narratives will be examined. The aim will be to arrive at the best possible design to allow for the generation of rich descriptions of participant's experiences. There is no wish to develop a data-base which may be utilised to generalise participant experiences across contexts, but rather the hope that the descriptions generated here will be deemed as meaningful as possible by the participants themselves.

These descriptions may also prove to be useful for other researchers and therapists in their work with stepfamilies, but it should be borne in mind that descriptions that are generated here describe realities which may not be pertinent to all stepfamilies. There is, thus, no singular experience which can be captured or accessed in these descriptions.

Research methodology, within the modernist, empiricist approach, concerns itself chiefly with the assumptions that not only can an objective reality - whether internal or external to the objects of the study - be accessed and accurately represented, but that tools are available to that end. It implies that through the acquisition of knowledge an objective, real social problem

can be investigated and solved. There are well defined rules for determining within what limits description will be regarded as acceptable.

Reality is, therefore, seen as tangible and can be predicted and controlled. Furthermore there is a dualistic distinction between the knower and the known, with the researcher independent of the body of knowledge he or she produces. Time, value and context free generalisations can be made with regards to the information collected, since not only do rules of cause and effect apply to all living things, but inquiry is also value-free (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Social constructionism, on the other hand, while it does not completely reject many of the methods and principles of empirical research, requires researchers to adopt a far more self-reflexive stance, since knowledge exists and is co-created in the interchange with others (Best in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993; Krippendorff in Steier (Ed), 1991).

And since the construction of reality is a mutual process it requires the researcher to more carefully examine his role and influence on the descriptions gathered, as he or she is “not just describing a world that exists, they are ‘creating it’ with their rhetorical practices” (Troyer in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993, p. 121).

Social constructionist (SC) research can, according to Franklin (1995), take on three forms:

(a) Strict SC researchers who believe that one should not make any assumptions about objective reality - the claims people make about situations are more important than the situations, and facts have no relevance to the analysis;

(b) SC researchers who assume an objectivist position in which both social constructions and the problems itself are regarded as equally important;

(c) Contextual SC researchers - the most common form - argue that taking social conditions into account is important and say that although objective reports are constructions themselves, they are still useful.

This study falls within the last grouping, with the postmodernist influence highlighted in the previous chapter again showing its influence. All reports, whether empirical or not, are useful in certain contexts, since there can be no ultimate truth.

Principles of Social Constructionist and Post-Empiricist Research

Although the principles underlying social constructionism were discussed in some detail in the previous chapter, it is important to outline here the major tenets as they apply to social constructionist-oriented research.

Knowledge as a Social Construction

Since knowledge is regarded as always being a matter of the relationship between people (Reason & Rowan, 1981), it follows that there can be no one objective truth or body of information that is independent of the knower (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher is thus irrevocably an active participant in the knowledge creating process, and research is therefore “a perspective which emphasises the observer’s participation in constructing what is observed” (Keeney & Ross, 1985, p.12).

The researcher, then, is not only always part of the process of knowledge generation (Krippendorff in Steier, 1991), but for Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Maturana (1988) the very act of observing influences what is seen, since what is seen is seen in a relationship and

not in isolation. As such it no longer becomes appropriate to use the terms 'researcher' and 'object', but to recognise the co-constructed nature of the realities explored by using the term 'co-researchers' (Heron in Reason & Rowan (Eds), 1981). This respects the client's role in constructing the knowledge, and also gives him or her more say in the research process in terms of what shifts in focus could take place (Maruyama in Reason & Rowan (Eds), 1981).

It is also important, however, to note that the act of drawing distinctions (Keeney, 1983) and engaging with others in the construction of a reality, is also a political act (Dallos, 1997).

The therapist, or researcher is a nodal point of competing narratives and ideologies which influence the distinctions drawn during the information gathering, and interpretation process (Dallos, 1997). This means that all research is, necessarily, self-referential, with the point being made in the previous chapter that research material is as much about the researcher as it is about the co-researchers (Dallos, 1997; Keeney, 1983).

In terms of this study it has been necessary to explore the nature of the way in which my voice - shaped by an epistemology developing in contexts outside of the research process - influenced the constructions that were generated. My perceptions of the stepfamily may be seen to be riven with myths such as the evil stepfather or wicked stepmother, and yet ignoring myths which may have been constructed outside of the narrow frameworks which portray the stepfamily as bad.

Language and the Development of Knowledge

Within the social constructionist frame meaning is only ascribed through social interaction and it is through language that reality is constructed and constituted (Anderson & Goolishian, 1987; Leary, 1994). But language need not necessarily refer to the words or sounds we make,

or even those which make up texts, but rather the process of “interactional co-ordination, the dialogical creation of intersubjectivity” (Anderson & Goolishian, 1987, p. 532).

Gergen and Kaye (1992) point out the dangers of falling prey to solipsism by seeing language as the lens through which we experience the world, and of seeing the individual as possessing an *internal model* which guides actions. Gergen and Kaye defer to the Wittgensteinian notion of *language games* through which words are given meaning. For language is not an external reality, merely a code that is generated through interchange and needs to be seen as such - it is not a representation of the real world, but is the *process* through which realities are created (Leary, 1994). There is little value then in seeking out a singular truth which can be objectified in a scientific text, since there are multiple realities, and readers of scientific texts will react from within their own narratives and constructions (Leary, 1994).

For the social constructionist and narrativist co-constructing the research process, then, the primary aim is to translate (Steier in Hartman, 1996) those languages to which he is exposed, and to determine the underlying claims that they are making. This entails an exploration of the punctuation process of the co-researchers, and how they come to punctuate events and make claims. Furthermore, it entails an exploration of the new language that develops through the co-construction of meanings by researcher and co-researcher (Steier in Hartman, 1996). In this sense, then, it is a translation from the singular to the plural, from the general to the local and from a monologue to a dialogue.

It is important, though, to be equally aware of which voices are not allowed to express themselves since they are subject to cultural and historical influence (Anderson & Goolishian, 1987). The construction of a woman as primarily a mother and nurturer would appear to

linger, despite increasing vociferousness of voices such as those of career person or breadwinner.

These passive voices are akin to Derrida's other side, M. White's suppressed narratives and Hoffman's unsaid, and may comprise perceptions of the self that society or other groups deem undesirable. These dominant discourses (Foucault, 1977; Zito, 1984) then determine what is languaged about, how and in favour of what. The language as it may be expressed by co-researchers, theorists and the like, is not an objective statement of fact, but rather an invitation to a multitude of possibilities and realities.

It is important, therefore, for the principal researcher to tap those meanings which may be suppressed or silenced by dominant narratives and discourses, if the research process is to be *meaningful* to those involved in it.

Issues of Validity, Generalisability and Usefulness

Issues of validity are of importance within any research paradigm, be it modernist or postmodernist, but it is the *claims* of what constitutes validity that bear closer scrutiny. Positivistic paradigms place their faith in internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity, while research drawing on social constructionism, or what Lincoln and Guba (1985) term naturalistic research, flies in the face of many of these assumptions.

For Lincoln and Guba (1985) internal validity fails in post-empirical research because there is no singular reality onto which inquiry can converge. External validity flounders because the nomothetic debate ignores the locality and plurality of multiple realities since knowledge is context bound (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Reliability is implausible since it requires stability and replicability, though meaning is not only fleeting and in the moment, but predictability is still not possible because no two contexts will ever be the same. Objectivity falls prey to the move towards relativism and the recognition that the researcher is an active member in knowledge generation and has assumptions, values and biases which influence their descriptions of problems and knowledge processes (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Validity within the naturalistic, or post-empiricist paradigm needs to be based on interaction, since traditional notions of validity are seemingly more concerned with *methods* than with *people* and what the latter find meaningful or useful (Reason & Rowan, 1981).

By seeing reality as a process of becoming and emerging through interactions and as being neither entirely external nor internal, validity must then concern itself with both the knowers and what is to be known. For Reason and Rowan (1981) valid knowledge then becomes a matter of relationship. By us knowing - since knowing takes place within the relationship - a binocular vision akin to Bateson's (1980) notion of double description emerges.

Within the context of this study, my descriptions or those of the families, when seen in isolation, would not capture the richness nor usefulness that an overlapping description manages to achieve. Without this, any description is merely an extracted half of a social exchange, and therefore to attempt to extract meaning from such a description would be to ignore the co-constructed nature of reality (Bateson 1980; Keeney, 1983).

It is only when the generation of meaning is perceived as being a process of interchange and multiple descriptions, that this study will have been faithful to its stated intention of allowing other voices to be heard. It meant in this study that, for any descriptions to be regarded as relevant or valid, the co-constructed reality that was my relationship with the families would have needed to have encompass this double description.

Within the context of this study validity has been approached by including as addenda all process notes and written narratives of the families involved (Atkinson & Heath, 1990). This will hopefully provide the reader and critics with the background against which to interpret this text, and to determine whether or not my punctuations have been faithful to the stories which emerged.

The decision to do so falls within the parameters of the argument that validity also lies in the skills and sensitivities of the researcher, with the researcher regarded as the key tool in the exploration. Validity may be said then to be more relative than methodological (Reason & Rowan, 1981). It, too, is a matter of what is construed as useful and illuminating for those involved, rather than with what is right. That is to say, that it is fruitful for a group of people who live in a similar set of realities (Reason & Rowan, 1981).

This places a great deal more ethical responsibility and accountability on the researcher who then is no longer concerned with depicting reality as it is, but of generating alternatives, choices and increasing options for the co-researchers. Thus, the final product may not be a neatly packaged representation of an objective reality, which limits our responses to it. Rather it is hopefully an opening up of pathways to different realities, which may prove more meaningful.

Some Thoughts on Reflexivity in the Research Process

Social constructionism calls for an awareness of the ways in which we define and punctuate situations or contexts as problematic, and the way in which the researcher punctuates the knowledge process (Bannister in Reason & Rowan (Eds), 1981; Keeney, 1983).

The process of research should be recursive and should place the researcher in relation to unfolding events, with those questions which the researcher asks having personal meaning and significance for him or her (Bannister in Reason & Rowan (Eds), 1981). Personal experience, values and constructs are thus seen by Bannister as a rich vein of creativity for the researcher, and neither chaotic nor anecdotal and thus an obstacle to objectivity.

Reflexivity implies not only that the researcher should be aware of what his influence is at every step in the process, but that he or she also make explicit the moral and political significance of the research. This point will be discussed further in chapter 7, as it relates to this particular study, but it is important to ask to what ends the study is aimed, and to what extent, it reinforces or deconstructs dominant narratives.

All research establishes a relationship between researcher and co-researcher and that relationship is also influenced by dominant narratives in societies (for example patriarchy and racism) which need to be deconstructed, possibly, if meaningful interchange between the two is to be achieved. Without this any knowledge generated is of questionable validity, since it will not take the usefulness of both parties into account.

According to Bannister (in Reason & Rowan (Eds), 1981) certain freedoms come with this new approach to reality as being multitudinous, and truth as not immutable but evolutionary. The researcher, Bannister suggests, is free to choose topics that are personally relevant to him or her, to explore personal experience as a source of richness and to eschew reified constructions such as intelligence, personality and pathology.

Narrative and Research

While a more detailed discussion of the narrative approach was conducted in the previous chapter there are a few points that need to be made with regards to the application of this approach to research. In this regard, I turn to Epston and White (1990) who outline the advantages of narrative as a means of conducting research, over the more traditional, positivist approaches.

Experience

The narrative approach privileges lived experience over the reified constructs, systems of classification and diagnoses of the modernist/positivist approach.

Time

The modernist/ positivist approach aims to produce general laws of nature which are applicable across contexts and time, standing as they must the test of time. The narrative approach, by contrast, is acutely attuned to the plotting and unfolding of events through time, and acknowledges the contextual embeddedness of co-created meanings. Within specific contexts there is a beginning and an end to a story, which implies the passage of time.

Language

The modernist/positivist approach values technical languages that require univocal word usage, which reduces uncertainty and provides a tangible reality for readers and aims at structuring arguments towards proof of a singular truth. Multiple perspectives, implicit rather

than explicit meanings and the notion that interpretation is a relative and changing process unique to each person, are the cornerstones of the narrative approach.

Personal Agency

Within the modernist/positivist paradigm the individual is seen as passive and reacts to impersonal forces, drives, impacts et cetera, with little personal agency. The narrative approach locates the person as an active protagonist in his or her world. It is a world of interpretive acts which require telling and re-telling of stories in the construction of reality.

Position of the Observer

The modernist/positivist observer and the observed are separate entities, with the subject being acted upon by the observer. The observer is not seen as being implicated in the creation of the phenomena being observed, nor is he or she seen to impact on the subject in any way. The narrative paradigm, though, places the observer and observed in a relationship, with both placed as co-authors of the story they tell. The narrative frame is not unique in this respect, though, and draws heavily on the work of the second-order cyberneticists such as Boscolo et al. (1987), Dallos (1997), Hoffman (1990) and Keeney (1983).

The observer is seen as being part of the observed, and as playing an active part in the construction of the reality that is the focus of the research. In that sense, the distinction between researcher and subject is an arbitrary one (Rosenau, 1992), since the observer is making statements about him or herself as much as he or she is doing so about those we refer to as subjects.

Doing Research with Families

There are, nonetheless, a few points that pertain to the approach that need to be adopted with family research and which may fall outside of the narrative domain, but which need to be made here. It is of some importance to state here that while every effort was made to construct a context which was not punctuated as therapy by my co-researchers, the interviews and process notes drew heavily on cybernetic theoretical principles - such as feedback loops - which fed into the narrative understanding of the co-authoring of stories.

Consequently, and in the light of the stated intention of aiming for a clinically relevant study, my own lived experience as stepparent, man, intern psychologist, husband - and many of the other stories I tell about myself in differing relationships - was an important influence in terms of what alternative meanings my story was open to. The notions of personal agency and self-reflexivity were of crucial importance as they allowed for more meaningful interaction and storytelling with others.

Principles of the Research Process

Before outlining the research process it is prudent to briefly outline those principles of the new or naturalistic paradigm of research (Reason & Rowan (Eds), 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), in addition to the narrative and social constructionist principles outlined above, which guided it.

Natural Setting

Interviews were carried out in the homes of the stepfamilies since realities are context bound, and because of the richness of the stories generated in this, and not some alien or clinical setting.

Human Instrument

Knowledge is located within the relationship, and it would have been impossible to construct a non-human instrument which was able to grasp and actively participate in the process in which meanings were explored and changed.

Case Study Reporting

This method is more agreeable to the eliciting and exploration of multiple realities since it demonstrates the biases and constructions of the researcher in a more meaningful way than a scientific report would.

The Research Process

Sample

Three families signed consent forms and were included in the initial study, although one family dropped out at the final stages of the research process for reasons that arose out of issues reportedly unconnected with the research. They subsequently withdrew permission to include their protocols and written narratives in this study. The names of the remaining two families and their members have been changed, at their request, and the fictional names

chosen by them were deemed suitable “because they’re so *common*” (italics mine) and “those are *normal*”, perhaps again reflecting their need to be assimilated within the dominant narrative(s) as acceptable.

Method

Families were informed of the purpose of the study and were interviewed for approximately 90 minutes to two hours to determine the role of the dominant narratives/myths in their constructions of stepfamily realities. No formal interview schedule was constructed for use across settings since that would have been antithetical to the notion of multiple realities.

Process notes were kept and included comments on non-verbal as well as verbal communications within the system. They were also used to highlight and track what I felt to be dominant narratives. Initial plans made provision for the video taping of the sessions or, failing that, the audio taping of sessions but neither family consented to the use of either means of recording their stories. While hypotheses about why this was the case will be discussed in chapter 6, immediate feedback from the families was that they felt unsafe at having a copy of their experience on tape.

No attempt was made to transcribe everything that was said, and this means that what was recorded may not include information or exchanges that the reader may feel is relevant. The process notes which are attached as addenda then are not to be viewed as my exclusive punctuation of events, since they were shown to the families who were then asked to add their comments.

Use was made of landscape of action and consciousness questions to externalise the dominant/narrative and to track its influence (M. White, 1989a, 1989b; 1991). The focus was

on externalising the dominant narrative and exploring ways in which alternatives to these stories could be found, and then to what extent these opened up role definition and the meanings these roles were engendered with within the family.

In essence, the hope was that alternative role definitions and meanings, and the ways in which roles were experienced would be explored so that there existed an ecology of roles with none more dominant than the others. Furthermore, in accordance with Epston and White's (1990) notions of recruiting an audience to generate new meanings and of making public the secret biographies, my process notes were typed up and given to family members for comment. In this way it was hoped to not only generate a sense of co-authorship, but also to determine to what extent my own biases and punctuations were useful or not.

A follow-up appointment was made for a month from the date of the initial interview, during which time the family were asked to prepare a script for a play, dance or ritual that would encapsulate in some way the interweaving of the old narrative with the new. The families were instructed to construct the play together and to be aware of how each was interacting during the creative process. This, it was hoped, would generate new storying around family realities while, in the process, adding yet another voice to the choir.

The families were then to present it at the next session - and were given permission to include me in the play if they so desired - at which time further exploration and tracking of the alternative story or unique outcome was undertaken. I actively intervened in both plays by stopping the action where I felt further exploration of the relationship between the old, the new and the story *about* the old and the new needed further explication. This took the form of asking questions about how the stories other people were telling were impacting on different members' roles.

At the end of the session I again typed up my notes detailing my story of what I had experienced and gave it to the family for feedback, before the next session which was a month away. At the final session the influence that the meta-story had had on family life within the last month was explored, and how members felt their stories of themselves as the wicked stepmother, abusive stepfather, manipulative stepchild et cetera had altered.

By placing this within the dialogic space and inviting people to hear and see (the written texts) the stories others were telling it was assumed that this would further change their experience of themselves and of family. As a result of certain emotional and possibly therapeutic issues having arisen through the sessions, I offered to refer families to a private therapist or to see them myself at Tara Hospital if they felt the need. This, I felt, was necessary if the study was to maintain the ethical stance of usefulness it espoused. To encourage the telling of other stories without providing a means of containment later on would have been irresponsible.

Problems and the Need for an Emergent Design

My initial assumption about doing research with stepfamilies was that, by virtue of their subjugation within the dominant narratives, it would not be particularly difficult to get willing participants. Initial intentions were to obtain three families that would not only be clinically intriguing, but would also fit within one of the broad typologies outlined by Robinson and Smith (1994). The hope was to see to what extent dominant narratives/myths were influenced by the differing structures for generating meaning in particular contexts.

Adopting a purposive sampling approach, and obtaining the five families that were hoped for through such sources as Life Line, FAMSA and the Family Life Centre - difficulties soon

arose. Four of the families withdrew from the study for reasons ranging from “not wanting to air our dirty laundry” to “keeping the problems within the family, no-one else needs to know about it.”

It was perhaps naiveté that led me to thinking that the process would be uncomplicated, and to overlook the influence that the dominant narratives/myths have in keeping the stepfamily hidden. Ganong and Coleman (1987) and Visher and Visher (1979) both cite stepfamily tendencies to hide their status, due primarily to the negative stereotypes that abound in society about the stepfamily. Indeed, even when the final three families were contracted for the study one withdrew ostensibly for personal reasons, but the actual reasons remain an intriguing mystery.

It thus appeared evident that my initial outline and design had to be revised at increasingly regular intervals and emphasised the need for emergent design. Drawing on the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) this research process elects to allow the research to emerge or unfold rather than strictly construct it ahead of time, because of the implausibility of predicting what the multiple realities encountered would deliver up.

The very relational nature of the research process - between co-researchers - implies that what emerges is subject to unpredictable events and meanings. The value systems of all those involved in the research process, through their interweaving, interact in ways one cannot guard against or compensate for.

This allowed me too to reflect on the difficulties I was experiencing as an important part of the dominant narratives influencing stepfamilies. The process being mirrored within this study meant that nothing needed to be excluded or thrown out, it could be included and added to the descriptions as it happened.

Conclusion

Self-referentiality and self-reflexivity are the cornerstones of the research process as it unfolded in this study, leading, as they did, to the asking of important questions about the role of the researcher, the position of the observer in the system, the co-construction of meaning and the validity and generalisability of the descriptions produced.

As we have seen, the distinction between observer and observed, researcher and the researched is, in many ways, an arbitrary one, and one which is influenced to a large degree by the dominant narratives which shape acceptable research methods. The need to generalise the results of a study which defines itself in terms of the generation of stories and the understanding thereof, is therefore not as great as it may be in those methods deemed acceptable by positivist science.

The hope is that the implementation of an emergent design has done justice to the richness of the unfolding stories of the Smith and Jones families in ways that have not sought to exclude descriptions, or to categorise descriptive information as tainted because of an inflexible approach. The questions regarding the validity of descriptions presented here are hopefully partially answered by the inclusion, as an addendum, of process notes and the written narratives of the families. This will allow readers and critics to decide for themselves what usefulness this study has for those finding themselves working in the field.

What is essential in this regard, however, are the positions of the families who found their involvement in this study very useful, and as being valid in that it produced a meaningful Rorschach for Keeney (1983) or a unique outcome (Epston & White, 1990) which changed the way in which they story their lived experience. In that sense, then, this study achieved a degree of validity if not generalisability.

Having drawn the theoretical tapestries together within the methodology employed and having, hopefully, elucidated the principles, advantages and difficulties within this approach, it is now necessary to listen to the stories as told by the families. In the following chapter, the narratives of the Smith and Jones families and the processes which unfolded in the interviews will be explored.

CHAPTER 5

FACE TO FACE: INTERVIEWS WITH TWO STEPFAMILIES**Introduction**

It is within the frames of White's dominant narratives (1991) and Foucault's (1976, 1979) notion of discourse as reflection of the prevailing structure of social and power relationships which actively constitute relationships, that the texts and plays co-authored by the families is approached.

The stories told are, inevitably, not the true stories of the families themselves since my voice(s) has been added to the choir and what emerges is a story about a story about a story. Readers will also, therefore, add their voices and subjective meaning to the words printed here, and change the story once more.

It is through this discursive process that what has remained unsaid will hopefully find a voice which is able to co-exist with others (M. White, 1991; Shotter, 1990). It is, therefore, not the language itself - presented here as a written story - which is constitutive of meaning but, rather, the discursive processes which constrain its use and pre-empt alternative uses and meanings (Foucault, 1979).

Of necessity these interviews have been abridged to allow discussion within the space limits of this study, but both families were consulted on how this could be done. It is with their permission and guidance that our stories have been condensed in a way which, they felt, still generated meaning for them. Furthermore, the process notes and written narratives have been included as addenda so as to satisfy the need for validity.

What follows is a brief discussion of the interview process and some of the dominant narratives which were prevalent in each family's experience are highlighted. A more comprehensive discussion of the deconstruction of these, and other, myths or dominant narratives will follow in the next chapter.

The Families and Their Stories

Before elaborating on the processes which unfolded between the families and myself, it is perhaps prudent here to make mention of my assumptions, or lenses, of the families involved. In both cases I expected them to find the dominant narratives which surround stepfamilies to be extremely limiting and conflictual, and to be looking for alternatives to those stories.

I also expected the dominant narratives which surround stepfamilies to be the most influential narratives in their everyday experience. Other narratives which predated the formation of the stepfamily were regarded as useful and important, but as possibly being outside the scope of this study.

I also expected the two families to differ in their experience of the dominant narratives because the Smith family included a stepmother, and the Jones family a stepfather. The extent to which these assumptions changed and influenced my interpretation of descriptions will be explored at some length in the next chapter.

As the interviews are presented here, the reader would be forgiven for thinking that the process of interacting with the families was simply a matter of presenting them with the dominant narratives or myths I was concerned with. It took a considerable amount of time to establish a working relationship with both families, with much inquisitiveness on their part as to *why* I was interested in stepfamilies et cetera.

In both cases examples of some of the myths outlined in chapter 1 were mentioned to the family, but were presented as some amongst many such stories which were being told. These myths served as a starting point and an important means of punctuating the context and process of the interviews, but attempts were made not to be limited by that punctuation.

The Smith Family

The Smith family consists of Dirk (45), Sarah (39), their daughter Janet (11), and Dirk's sons from two previous marriages, Biff (23) and John (16). With the family's permission the only biographical information that has been changed has been their names. Dirk has his own aircraft maintenance company, while Sarah runs her own business. Of the children only Janet still lives with them, while John is at boarding school and Biff works in the Northern Province.

Dirk and Sarah were married ten years ago and describe things "as having been very difficult right from the start". John had been living with his mother for the first few years of their marriage, but Biff had been a "problem child" and had been "thrown out" of boarding school.

Dirk described his relationship with Biff and John as "up and down, but closer since Sarah and I married" although it had been "a relief when Janet came along".

Further problems were reported once John came to live with them a few years into the marriage, and the whole family agreed that things had been at their worst at this time with the relationship between John and Sarah described as "a huge problem".

They argued frequently over John and the “special attention” he appeared to be receiving from Dirk, while Sarah felt that her own mother had been right about not wanting her to marry Dirk who her mother felt was “a bad apple, like all men”.

Dirk felt that Sarah’s experiences of an absent father during her childhood had nothing to do with him, and that she was too reliant on her mother. Both agreed that Sarah’s mother had been over-involved and critical of Sarah’s ability as a mother, and that she still felt a great deal of resentment towards her own mother.

The family were referred to me through the Family Life Centre and when I arranged the first interview, Sarah communicated her concern at the “tremendous problems” they were experiencing within the family, particularly with regards to her role as stepmother.

The Dominant Narratives

When I first interviewed the Smith family they expressed their “slight discomfort” at being together in the same room “when things might come out that people don’t want to hear.” I broached the subject of myths as being stories about people that guide and shape the way we act and wondered about their ideas of stepfamilies and the way that people were expected to behave.

Sarah said that she felt extremely vulnerable in the family as John had never accepted her and seemed to have a “fierce alliance” with his father, who did not support or understand her position within the family. She explained that she could not discipline John effectively without being labelled as “horrible, and not like my mother” by him, while she felt “worthless because I don’t love him like I do Janet”. John, for his part, felt that Sarah was “an outsider” and “not as great as my dad”, while Dirk saw Sarah’s efforts to discipline John as “unnecessary, and too harsh.”

Throughout the initial 20 to 25 minutes of the interview Janet remained silent and Biff appeared concerned at the “picking on” of Sarah. He said he felt that Sarah had been “trying her best, but that she didn’t know how the family operated”. As the “outsider”, she was expected to adjust to the demands of the family. Biff said that Sarah often appeared to show more attention to Janet than to either him or John and that he felt his father had noticed this and tried to “balance things out by siding with his natural children.”

Discussion around how this “linguaging about” (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988) had been allowed to affect their perceptions/descriptions of themselves as a family and their functioning, followed. Dirk felt “embarrassed to be in public when Sarah and the kids go at each other”; Sarah said she “felt inadequate and worthless because I don’t love them like I feel I should, and John twists everything”; Biff felt “odd, different...I wish I had a normal family I could tell my friends about”; John “hated this whole thing because I don’t have what the other kids have...I know what Cinderella felt like, now [laughs]”; Janet (who had been quiet up until this point) said she wished “that everyone could just live together happily like other people.”

Dominant narratives within the family appeared to be Sarah as the “evil” stepmother, the “outsider” who did not understand where the “family was”; Dirk as “unsupportive”; John as a “manipulator” and a “victim” but as also in a special position because of his dad’s protectiveness of him (he was also as an outsider who was rejected by his mother’s family and does not fit anywhere); Biff and Janet as “embarrassed” at being in a stepfamily.

The predominant perception of what constituted family for the Smiths appeared to be one of conflict and exclusion, with experiences of previous family relationships exerting considerable influence. Sarah’s expectations for her new family were coloured by her experiences of an absent father and over-involved mother; Dirk had had two stormy previous

marriages; Biff and John experienced mother figures as “nomadic” and uncontainable of emotions while Janet appeared to share the “embarrassed” and “victim” positions her half brothers occupied.

I then asked the family to try and think of a time when the problem did not seem so bad, or when they had managed to do to avert its influence (landscape of action questions). I also asked them to reflect on what they had noticed in others that had contributed to this victory, even though it might not have seemed like a victory at the time.

After a long period of silence Dirk said that the family did not get together and speak much, but that “body language” was often their most powerful way of communicating. Much laughter ensued, and the members - with the exception of Janet, who remained silent - agreed.

I asked how they had managed to agree with each other twice during the interview without apparent concern for their roles and how they may have been tempted not to take such a step, but to describe what had enabled them to do so.

There was surprise that these incidents of agreement or unique outcomes (M. White, 1991) had been picked up on, and both Sarah and Dirk felt that this had been “interesting” because they had not been trying to be “model or perfect parents”, and had not seen it in that light before. Biff said that he felt Sarah had been “very real” during the interview, although John still felt that “this might have been something but it’s not enough yet.” Janet said that she felt everyone had “been more relaxed” during the interview.

I commented that it seemed important to shed some of the roles and expectations and to relax and be real for people within the family to get on better. I then asked people to try and think of qualities within their relationships that allowed them to do this, and what this showed about what suited them or what they desired as people and as a family (landscape of consciousness questions) (M. White, 1991).

Dirk felt that while those questions were very useful “and should be helpful” he felt that they would need time to think about it. Sarah, Janet and Biff agreed, while John said he “knew what [he] wanted”.

I said that they should think about writing a play that would tell the story of what they were going to think about and that we would present it in one month. I also said that I would like them to comment on my process notes and to see how that story influenced the play.

John said that his father had already said how body language was important in the family and that writing and speaking might be difficult, to which the others agreed. I said it was up to them to decide how they wanted to tell the story. My process notes included comments about Biff’s “softer” almost protective stance towards Sarah, which had not been openly commented on in stories within the interview, and the silence and disparaging stories of John and Janet.

One month later I returned to find that the Smiths had written two stories but that they would rather “act or mime” the stories, and that I should read the stories out aloud as a narrator. The first story centered around a pride of lions with Dirk as Black Mane, the powerful leader of the pride; Sarah was the lioness “who we couldn’t decide what her name was”; Biff and John were two cubs “who strutted around the grassland, secure in the knowledge that they would soon command their world”; Janet was not given a role in the story “because she hadn’t been born yet”.

The story described a pride in which Black Mane was all-powerful and where the lioness had been impressed with his hunting prowess and genes, both qualities important to start her own family. The pride had been a happy one until the arrival of the younger male cub (played by John) at which time Black Mane appeared to show more attention to him - he had the

beginnings of a black mane too - and the lioness and the other male cub (played by Biff) drew closer.

Attempts at breaking the alliances failed even though the pride realised that it was unusual and not accepted for another lioness to take over another's young, and that they needed to "act as a team" in order to survive in a harsh world. The lioness became angry at Black Mane's uninvolved approach to the pride and longed for a cub of her own in order to feel "loved" and accepted.

It was at this point that I intervened to ask family members to comment further on the affectionate bond between the lioness and the older cub. Dirk said that reading my process notes had changed the way people saw Sarah's relationship with Biff, which had always been more of a "mother and son" relationship than either would openly have admitted to.

Furthermore, Dirk said it had also been an "eye-opener" in terms of his own relationship with Biff and how it contrasted to that with John, who he felt the need to protect against "victimisation" by Sarah. John said that writing the story had been useful because it had allowed him to see how far he had "drifted" from his brother, and that hearing his father speak about that now had been "very un-cool".

The second half of the story involved the inclusion of voices that the family felt had been elicited by the interview, their time spent writing the story together and my process notes. This involved a hospital scene in which the Smith family are gathered around a hospital bed in which lies a "baby" fighting for its life. All wonder what "silent power" is keeping the baby alive.

The family members are described as being different, not knowing what to say to each other, and yet held together by a bond "forged through love and commitment" and each willing the baby to stay alive.

I intervened here to ask the family to story more about the baby - namely what sort of qualities it may have had. The family said they had thought about that, and decided it was a happy, easy-going baby, “the kind of child who will not be particularly fazed by what people say about him”.

The father (played by Dirk) said that the group should “welcome this baby into our lives” and the family decided that it was time to decide on the future of the baby over a cup of coffee. Each looked at it and saw something of themselves and others in it and commented on that.

Dirk saw a baby who was fighting a lonely battle and said that he felt that Sarah was doing that, with no understanding from those around her. For Sarah, the baby was an example of how life could continue to thrive despite “all the experts saying that it was dying”. Biff felt that the baby told his story of having to always have a crisis to get the attention of those around him, a story which John identified with. Janet felt that she was like the baby because she was always quiet and no-one understood what she was saying “because babies can’t talk”. Importantly, it appeared as if Janet was allowed a voice for the first time, having been disqualified and kept quiet up until now.

Returning to the play, after much “anger, tears and some laughter” decisions were made to protect and help the baby thrive, with the two youngest children taking a vocal part in proceedings and “suddenly things did not seem so serious”. Anecdotes about family life were shared and how people had “pulled together” in the face of crises experienced by characters within the story. When it came time to pay everyone “gave their bit” and when the family returned to the ward they were told the baby would “pull through”.

It was then a matter of working out who the baby belonged to, but that was resolved by everyone seeing everyone belonging to one another. The family appeared to be satisfied with

their stories, but I wondered how the process of writing both stories had changed people's stories of the family.

John returned to his earlier statement that hearing his father comment on his relationship with Biff as being "un-cool" and said that "actually hearing him say it seemed worse than seeing us write about it". Sarah said that it had changed in the process of writing the stories, and particularly the second one, there had been much debate and intensity in the family, but in a way not experienced by them before. "It was as if we were talking *about* something, rather than getting stuck in living it," she said.

The final session involved an exploration of how their story over the past month had changed the stories told in the play(s), the stories they told themselves and the way they invented themselves in their relationships with each other. Of interest here was the possible change that family members experienced in their everyday relationships, and how they might perceive their roles and selves as a result of this change. It was emphasised that for change to be regarded as useful it need not be regarded as positive by others outside the family, but should include the totality of everyday experience.

Sarah felt that she was much more involved with the boys and felt that Dirk was more supportive, although she still felt that she would like a closer relationship with John. For his part, Dirk felt that there was "a definite relaxing of tensions" between him and Sarah, and that he didn't feel the need to protect his sons that much anymore. Biff was enjoying the closer relationship between him and Sarah - "just like with my 'other' mother" - while John had starting seeing himself more as a "real player in this soccer team" and not just the "guy who always gets substituted".

Janet had also been allowed a more active and vocal part in the family, and appeared to enjoy having two big brothers "to take care of her". This did not appear to be a significant

shift away from the position of the baby which she had occupied, but was nonetheless a shift away from the alliance she had enjoyed with Sarah. There were still problems but they were now being regarded “as not so much a case of listening to the stories other people tell us, but realising that we can change those stories to ones that we want to tell.”

The Jones Family

The Jones family consists of Monty (28), Brenda (32), their twin daughters, Susan and Ann (5) and Lee (10), Brenda’s daughter from a previous relationship. Brenda’s first husband died, while Monty was divorced but had no children outside of his present relationship. Monty is a computer technician and Brenda is a nurse and the couple have been married for seven years. Brenda was six months pregnant with Lee when her first husband died.

They were chosen for the research because Monty’s role as a stepfather provided a counterpoint to the Smiths’ stepmother-related myths. They had reportedly tried seeking professional help for the problems they were experiencing - marital conflict, conflict between Monty and the children were reported as the most recent - but had been disillusioned and had decided “to live with it.”

Brenda comes from a stepfamily herself, her mother having been married three times - twice while Brenda was still living at home. She describes both experiences as “nightmarish”. In both situations her stepfathers had been harsh, physically abusive men who had been particularly demanding of Brenda. She felt that her mother had not protected her adequately from the abuse, and that it had been up to her younger brother to intervene on her behalf. Her first husband had also been an abusive, emotionally uninvolved man who allowed her no independence or responsibility and had “made her feel like a child”. She further described life

in the Jones family as “very, very tough” because of her mother’s rejection of Monty as a “poor excuse for her [Brenda’s] first husband, and bad for the children”.

Both Brenda and Monty were convinced that people were always talking about them behind their backs at family or social gatherings “because neither of us could make it in our first marriages, or, in [Monty’s] case have a child of [his] own.”

Thus, while my intention was to focus more on the myths and narratives which dominated their current stepfamily experience, there were strong indications that *other* stories which predated their marriage were still influencing their everyday experience. And therefore also their experience of this reconstituted family.

It would appear that the Jones family were burdened with stories of Monty’s possible inadequacy as a father, Brenda’s previous stepfamily experiences and their shared failure to commit to mature, adult relationships. It has become apparent during the research process, and particularly during the writing up of the experience, that these stories or myths may have been equally, if not more important to the Jones family than those I identified. This illustrates the impossibility of reifying or predicting one reality (for example, the myth of instant love) for *all* families.

Dominant Narratives

Where possible the Jones twins were included in the process but they were often too disruptive and active to be included for very long. Their absences and departures were noted for the effects they had on the developing story, though, and, where appropriate, commented on for the effect they had on the process. Their disruptiveness appears to have illuminated the parental non-acceptance of the mature adult role of child-rearing.

Monty said that he had not banked on being in a stepfamily “as being such a big deal” and thought it would be like “being in any other family”. Brenda said that it had been a shock to

all in the family to feel the “negative effects quite so soon”. This appeared to fit within the framework of the dominant narrative of the stepfamily as being different and as fraught with difficulties and negative side-effects.

Monty admits to having a “terrible temper” which Brenda says “alienates him from the kids, particularly Lee. In many ways he is a typical stepfather.” Further exploration of what Brenda meant by this revealed that her perception of a stepfather, was that of an aggressive, overpowering and distant figure. She felt that she had reason to believe the stories told about stepfathers, because of her own experiences as a stepchild.

Lee admitted to sometimes being scared of Monty, while the twins were also reluctant to go near him during the interview.

Monty feels that he was “brought in to do the disciplining of the kids, but when I do then there’s a big fuss.” Brenda, however, feels that Monty “undermines my authority as their mother and is way, way too harsh on these kids especially Lee.” There appeared to be a pattern of behaviour in which Monty felt he needed to act aggressively because of the need for discipline, but also because Brenda appeared incapable of assuming that role. For her part, Brenda appeared to need Monty to fulfill an authoritative role but felt overwhelmed by Monty’s aggression, and reacted in much the same way that she did in previous relationships - as the victim of an abuser whom she had initially sought out for comfort and protection.

The role of Monty as the aggressive stepfather appeared, therefore, to have been co-constructed by Brenda and Monty, and served to create a sense of distance between Monty and the rest of the family. Brenda also felt that when she reacted to Monty’s “outbursts” towards the children then he sulks and she feels this has a lot to do with her not paying attention to him.

I wondered when last Brenda felt that Monty had not sulked when she had paid more attention to the children, and what she thought it was that he had been able to do to beat the problem. She said that the only time she could think of when Monty had been able to control himself had been when he had left the room during an argument with her about the children.

I asked Monty what he thought it had been about Brenda that had enabled him to do so, and wondered what had stopped him from being tempted into continuing the argument - and risk escalation. He said the look of determination on her face to not back down in the face of his anger had been enough to convince him to do so, but that "leaving the scene of the crime (wasn't) [parentheses mine] a long-term solution."

Nonetheless, I wondered what had led up to Monty making that decision not to once again fall into the trap laid by the evil and abusive stepfather role, and asked Brenda and Lee to add their voices to the discussion. I felt it might be easier if the threat were externalised (M. White, 1991; Epston & White, 1990), as it may seem less dangerous, and allow Lee to contribute more to the session. If, indeed, my assumption that she was still scared of Monty held some element of validity. In many respects, Lee appeared to be the voice that Brenda had learnt to adopt through her varied experiences of family life.

This was evident by Lee's quietness, often appearing to be cowed by Monty's aggression, and only speaking when Brenda acted as the go-between or defender - a role Brenda's brother had fulfilled when she was younger. My assumption at the time was that through externalising the experience not only would the process of apportioning blame - quite prevalent in the Jones family - be sidestepped, but the feelings involved would also be scrutinised.

Feelings have been described as social constructions and not innate states since they are contextually bound (sorrow and not joy is exhibited at a funeral for example) (Dallos, 1997; Kippax et al., 1988).

Importantly, feelings are bound up with the dominant narratives since these narratives determine who can feel what, how and for how long (Dallos, 1997; Foucault, 1976, 1979; White, 1991). Within the context of the Jones family, then, Monty felt that aggression was called for and felt hurt and rejected when Brenda and the children reacted negatively. These are emotions that are acceptable within the dominant view of the stepfamily, since they bear testimony to the difficulty inherent in stepfamily relationships.

Brenda felt “fear” and “anger” towards Monty, emotions shared by the children she reported, and emotions which again fall within the framework of dominant perceptions of the stepfamily. For Dallos (1997), though, these socially constructed emotions may be at variance with the process, verbal and non-verbal, unfolding in the room. The emotions and process which unfolded in the room thus appeared to have a strong sense of history, and to have been shaped by previous experiences.

Lee was intrigued by the notion of the “stepfather bogeyman” laying a trap for Monty “as if he was something from the TV”, and both Monty and Brenda laughed and agreed with her.

I commented that it seemed easier for the family to come together to fight something that threatened them from outside, and wondered how they had managed to beat the traps laid for them by the stepfamily bogeyman in other contexts. Monty and Brenda said that it had not been easy but Lee said that they had always played lots of board games when she was younger, and that things had been happier then. Both Monty and Brenda agreed.

I wondered what qualities about their relationship were most prevalent back then, that had allowed them to beat the bogeyman, and what more recent developments showed about what their tastes, preferences and ambitions were for their lives. Monty said that it had been better when the competitiveness that he felt, and that Brenda had commented on, for time with her had been “kept within the frame of those games.”

Brenda felt that recent developments had gone against her wish to be a good mother and wife, because “this damned bogeyman thing has got us all stuck.” She felt that she was unable to “give love freely to Monty” because she was always so scared of him, or that she was so worried that the children would get hurt that she was over-protective of them. Lee said that she wanted be “happy and have a happy mommy and daddy, and to be able to call Monty daddy like the twins can. But this big scary bogeyman keeps coming into the house.” Monty said that he thought that when he got married he would be “the happiest man alive, but all we do is try to hurt each other. I want to stop that, but I need Brenda and the kids to stop seeing me as the bad guy all the time.”

There appeared to be a general sense of disillusionment, possibly as a result of unrealistic pre-marriage expectations. I commented that the bogeyman had been exerting a great deal of influence in the way the family operated by affecting the way the family saw each other, and the way that others saw the family.

It seemed to me that the dominant narrative of Monty as the evil and abusive stepfather had been affecting the way that he related with Brenda and the children, and that outsiders also saw them as somehow different. It emerged, through further exploration, that everyone in the family had been able to beat the bogeyman for a whole week while on holiday at home the year before.

This, the Jones’ said, had been made possible because Monty had decided “to take a back seat” as far as discipline was concerned, while Brenda had decided to “take a break from being the scared wife all the time” and to “only do what she could.” The children had warmed to Monty during this week, and his relationship with everyone had improved.

They had been able to beat the bogeyman the family felt, because they had been able to get away from the fighting to keep a safe distance, but also wanting closeness for protection that everyone felt within the family, and the family felt within their community.”

It was agreed by all that such an experience must have been encouraging to each have one's own space, and that this had, in fact, been a victory and had long-term effects in that it had influenced Monty's earlier story of “leaving the scene of the crime”. It had also allowed Brenda to *let* Monty change his story to one of voluntary withdrawal rather than merely sulking, and that this had changed his relationship with the children, even if only very briefly.

Monty, Brenda and Lee decided that the key elements in helping them beat the bogeyman had been a feeling that their current roles had not been fulfilling enough and that “the whole story seemed to be about trying harder and harder to change things, even going to professionals.”

This story of activity was one in which there appeared to be a belief that help should be sought for a family in crisis, and in which there was much activity within the family establishing distance and fighting the bogeyman.

The unique outcome identified in the Jones' case did not appear to require the substitution of the active story for one emphasising passivity - although that seemed one of the dominant narratives - but rather a story which questioned the assumptions of the way in which meaning was ascribed (Bateson, 1972; Gergen & Kaye, 1992). To construct a story in which this was countered would have been to exchange one extreme for another, and thus maintain the dominant story - that is, a stepfamily immobilised by the problems it experiences. It was necessary to find a new story that did not rely on an either/or dichotomy, but which opened up alternatives.

The family was asked to construct a script in which their struggle for freedom from the competition for space, and freedom from the clutches of the bogeyman was encapsulated, in time for the next session. I presented them with a copy of my process notes, in which I had commented on the role the twins appeared to play while they were in the room - they were very disruptive and noisy when there was talk of conflict - and they sat with Brenda, and not Monty throughout their time in the session. I further commented that they too seemed concerned with the need for intimacy.

When next we met, Monty and Brenda said that they had not constructed a play because the twins would be too disruptive and wouldn't understand what was going on. They had, however, written a short story - "more of a documentary really" - and would sooner play a game of musical chairs which allowed them to re-tell their story, and which included the twins.

I was to control the music, and tell all five participants when to sit down. Initially there were only two chairs and, as the music stopped, it was invariably Lee and Brenda who managed to grab a chair. I stopped the game at this point to comment on how limiting this story or song appeared to be, because it allowed only the original mother-daughter dyad to win, and wondered how this story had managed to stay alive for so long, and fill a wanted space.

Monty said that Brenda and Lee had a "special" understanding that no-one else was allowed into, and that he often felt jealous of this because he did not have such a relationship with either Brenda or Lee. Brenda felt that she had this "special understanding" with Lee because she was her mother, and that Monty should have learnt to understand Lee by now.

Monty said that he felt his "tantrums" had allowed him to not get too close to either Brenda or the children because of his feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness as a stepfather. In this

way he felt that if he was the typical stepfather Brenda had called him in the first session, then he would not feel such a failure since “all stepfathers are automatically bad guys anyway, I’d be no different.” Brenda, though, felt that she had been content at times to live within that story since it fed into her own personal story of victim of the stepfamily - both prior to and after her and Monty’s marriage.

The rest of the play saw two more chairs brought into the game, with competition or a seat still fierce but with Monty and Brenda taking more of a back seat, as it were, in allowing each other and the children to get seats more often.

I commented that the game seemed to have changed with Monty and Brenda’s disclosures earlier, and that the story being played out now by everyone seemed one of co-operation for space rather than competition. In my process notes I commented on my own assumptions - borne out of personal experience - with regards to the need for the parental couple to take the initiative in finding new stories to influence both theirs and their children’s. I asked them to consider the influence this ecology of ideas (Keeney, 1983) or stories was having on their developing narrative as a stepfamily, and to bring it up in the final interview.

The Jones’ reported feeling “relieved and lighter” now that they did not feel that they were “locked in a cupboard”, although there were still problems. They felt, though, that there was now “more room to approach problems because we don’t have to behave and think the way we have been”. Hearing what others had to say had made a difference for Monty, Brenda and Lee in that it allowed them to change the way they portrayed themselves when with others (Penn & Frankfurt, 1994; Schafer in Mitchell (ed), 1981).

They no longer felt that they had to be the disciplinarian, the victim, the go-between or protector, but that they could now fill other roles. Monty said that he did not always feel “like the bad guy when I moan at the kids these days, and I can stop before it gets out of hand. They

seem to respect that.” Brenda felt that she was happier filling the role of mother to Lee and the twins, while Lee had moved away from the role of protector to taking a greater interest in her peers and being a child again. They would still fill the old roles occasionally, but they felt that they experienced them differently.

Conclusion

The preceding accounts of what took place in the interviews is by no means as complete as some readers might wish it to be, and I will here refer them to the process notes in the addendum. What has hopefully been captured here, however, is the essence of the experience of the families and myself. Their input with regards to the compilation of this section has served to highlight once again the influence these dominant narratives have on our lives. Of central importance in this chapter has been an elucidation of my own assumptions, punctuations and relationship with the dominant narratives, and therefore the co-construction of stepfamily narratives.

For their part, the Smith family appear to have found their involvement in the research particularly useful in the deconstruction of some of the dominant narratives surrounding their family. Their story as told in their interviews is one of a seeming shift from competition for the right fit within the family - for Sarah, Biff, John, Janet and even possibly Dirk - to a sense that each person was able to occupy *many* spaces within the family.

The Jones family is different and, in many ways which will be explored in the next chapter, more complex. Here, cross-generational narratives appear to be much more of an issue for the family members. Not only that, but these cross-generational narratives appeared to need to be

exposed to deconstruction before a move could be made towards deconstructing those narratives deemed influential by the literature and myself.

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of this study has been the realisation that the notion of stepfamily myth is in many ways an arbitrary distinction, and one that should be treated with much caution and circumspection lest it be reified. Those narratives which were punctuated as important and constraining for stepfamilies proved not to be necessarily valid for the Jones', and opens the door to questioning the wisdom of reification of myths described in chapter 1.

It is useful to bear in mind that the Smiths and Jones were to be found in different categories in the typologies presented in chapter 1. The Smiths are a revitalised stepfamily, while the Jones' are a reassembled stepfamily - and yet many similar cultural discourses are and stories influence personal and family narratives.

There are many other reasons for the differences between the families, some of which have much to do with the biases of the author, and which will be explored in the next chapter. The work of Foucault, Gergen, M. White and others will be drawn upon in the discussion of the shifts in family narratives, as well as a look what usefulness this study holds for others working in this field.

CHAPTER 6

SILENT VOICES: A META PERSPECTIVE OF FAMILY NARRATIVES**Introduction**

Having outlined the process and narratives of both the Smith and Jones family, a meta-perspective of such processes and narratives will be explored within this chapter. It is hoped that this chapter will highlight the dominant themes and narrative shifts which took place within both families.

The deconstruction of dominant narratives and change as narrative shift was of key interest in this study, and while it is necessary to explore the shifts or unique outcomes (M. White, 1991) of the families who participated in this venture, it is also important to note the unfolding of processes which were not initially anticipated or accounted for by the study.

My assumptions, outlined in chapters 1 and 3 and highlighted by both the literature and myself, give strong emphasis to the notion of societally established myths, and put these forward as the focus of deconstruction within the study.

As will be seen in further discussion here, though, the initial aims and assumptions which guided my work, did not adequately take into account *other* stories or myths which were important to dominant narratives within the families concerned. This also illustrates the evolutionary nature of the kind of research model followed in this study.

As will be seen with the Jones family, there are a number of stories which appear to have more prominence in the family member's lives than those highlighted by me, and which needed deconstructing first. This blind spot in the study amounted to a succumbing to the

pervasive seductiveness of the reification of meanings. A result of this was a sense that the work done with the Jones family had failed, and that either the myths or dominant narratives influencing their experiences were too entrenched for such a short-term deconstruction intervention, or that the Jones family were in some way unsuitable co-researchers.

This illustrates the positivistic and modernistic process of researchers linearly blaming their subjects for failure, while refuting the notion of recursive interaction between participants. Further to this, has been the unfolding of a process throughout this study, and implicit in the writing up of the descriptive information, in which these myths or dominant narratives have become reified as tangible concepts which can be operated on and imposed by an external observer from an external frame of reference (Dallos, 1997; Minuchin, 1974).

In that light, therefore, those myths which were explored in chapter 1 have assumed a taken-for-granted reality at the expense of many other competing stories or narratives with great local truth-value for the participants. In both the Smith and Jones family, for example, there are cross-generational narratives which influence, and are influenced by the dominant narratives, but which may very well have slipped unnoticed into the background had it not been for the sensitive ears of those involved in the research process. It therefore required a shift in my own punctuation of events to incorporate the notion of dominant narrative or myth as being something other than those highlighted by Visher and Visher (1979) and others.

In light of this, then, to what extent were the dominant narratives of the two families involved sufficiently deconstructed to allow other subjugated and unique narratives to emerge with a strong enough voice?

The voices or stories themselves were generated, told and re-told through social interaction, through a process of languaging about and, therefore, the construction of problems (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Gergen & Kaye, 1992). For change to occur, according to Anderson and

Goolishian (1988), it is essential that the problems be resolved by the deconstruction of the problematic language. It might be argued, then, that by changing the way we language or story about problems or problematic situations we are, in essence, freeing ourSELVES from the tyranny of the dominant narratives which have served to obscure other ways of ascribing meaning (Allen & Allen, 1995).

However, these dominant narratives take on the cloak of objectified truth and the language through which they construct the world is perceived as being immutable and concrete enough to be regarded as the only valid script to reality (Foucault, 1977, 1979; M. White, 1991).

Certainly for the Smith family the notion of myths appeared to take on new importance once commented on by me and, while those particular stories elicited by the interview may well have been the most prevalent, the process of reification may have given them undue prominence. Nonetheless, the Smith family found value in the deconstruction of those dominant narratives. The notion of co-construction, or the process of consensual punctuation (Keeney, 1983), may be seen to have been one of the key differences between the processes in sessions with the two families. With the Smith family there was considerable sensitivity to the co-construction process on the part of researcher and co-researchers, whereas this appeared not to be the case with the Jones family. In the case of the Jones' a valid criticism of this study, and of the researcher, would be the emphasis on a singular reality (the myths found in the literature) and ignoring or subjugating other stories and realities.

The process of attempting to generalise across contexts, a practice questioned by this study, would appear to have been present in an expression of the dominant narratives concerning stepfamilies. And, in attempting to consign the Jones' experience of stepfamily life to a written reality (this text), the process of generating an external, objective depiction of this reality may well be seen to have been a flaw in this study.

Foucault (1979) and Madigan and Law (1992) challenge the notion that language should be regarded as an independent, value-free means of communication and meaning generation. While the statements and the words, for Foucault (1979) in particular, may make up the dominant narrative they are but one aspect of the story. It is their connection with the social and power relations, which may prevail in any given context, which constrains and shapes what is said.

The notion of power for Foucault (1977, 1979) does not imply the existence of an external tool (power) which can be wielded to champion causes or to correct injustices. Power is illuminative and productive for Foucault (1977) and is not something which can be held or seized, but which “suffuses each and every relationship to manufacture multiple objects of knowledge” (Butchart, 1997. p. 103).

For Foucault (1977) “power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this reproduction” (p. 192). These relations of power are not necessarily immediately observable, but may be well hidden (Butchart, 1997) and it is the reflexivity of Foucault’s (1977) nature of power relations which “invests the knowledge and practice of socio-medical science with the productive power of discipline by which the objects of knowledge available for sovereign manipulation at any point in time are manufactured” (Butchart, 1997. p. 104). Butchart goes on to say that it is the presence or absence of certain theoretical or methodological approaches within a society’s knowledge regime which allows for certain things to be said, thought and done and not others.

Since power for Foucault (1977) is not inherently bad - a position he has been at pains to emphasise - not all of the power relationships which influence stepfamily life are necessarily restricting. The emphasis given to stepfamilies because of their supposed vulnerability has

enabled many stepfamilies in crisis to respond to the many services offered them. But it is through the externalisation of these power practices and the taken for granted reality that the problem-language system dissolved and the power and knowledge practices which serve to constitute dominant narratives are brought forth for scrutiny (M. White, 1989b 1991). This, for Bruner (1990), is the exoticising of the domestic.

Within the postmodernist frame, then, it would appear that the three stages of narrative change outlined by Allen and Allen (1995) may be seen to apply to the process of this study:

(a) deconstruction of an old story and a related sense of self, or group of selves which are attributed meanings by that story.

(b) co-authoring of a “new” story with a new sense of selves with new possibilities.

(c) reintegration of these new selves (or families) into a community of meaningful narratives.

Of necessity then, not only are the narratives which guide stepfamily life re-authored, but the narratives which constrain the notion of self as stepparent and stepchild are also seen to be multiplicitous. This realisation is crucial to the deconstruction of the notion of role rigidity and mythical or archetypal stepfather/stepmother figures, who are otherwise seen to possess an inadequate sense of self.

Being able to be many selves in many different contexts and feeling a sense of continuity - but not determinacy - between them was experienced as liberating by members of the Smith and Jones families. In a sense, one of the most important aspects of the restorying process was the permission granted to individual members of the families to allow them to occupy their more preferred self (Dallos, 1997). This allowed them to choose from Gergen's (1991a, 1991b) myriad of ingested bits and pieces and multiple, scattered selves that self or position

which best allowed them to play a more meaningful part in the family at a particular time.

The Smith Family

Before embarking on an explication of the deconstruction of the various dominant narratives which were meaningful to the Smith family, these narratives need to be explored in more detail than they were in the previous chapter. The stated intention of the Smith family's involvement had not been to harmonise or solve their problems, merely to create a context in which, through an interplay of stories (including my own), subjugated narratives could be allowed expression (Hare-Mustin, 1994; Madigan & Law, 1992; M. White, 1991).

The family appeared to be concerned with competition for space, but there would also appear to be a narrative of family membership or belonging which was evident. Essentially there was no established or real Smith family prior to Dirk and Sarah's marriage since Dirk's sons, Biff and John, come from different relationships, and both sons were rejected by their mothers.

The arrival of Sarah, however, provided a relational reference point by which to determine membership of the family. The birth of Janet gave Sarah a closer blood link with Dirk, and therefore some sense of belonging to the Smith family. Just as important was Janet's need to fit in because she too was an outsider like her mother, who had to fit in with the existing values of Dirk, Biff and John. Janet, since she was a baby, was not privy to much of what happened between the other members of the family and was often excluded from family activities.

Janet also, however, reminded Sarah of her own inadequacy as a mother since she could not love Biff and John in the same way that she loved her own daughter. The dominant

narrative of instant love highlighted in chapter 1 would appear to have been vocal here for the Smith family, with all members seemingly concerned at their relationship with Sarah. Janet, of central importance in this perception of relationships with Sarah as being problematic, played little part in the interviews with the family, keeping very quiet and speaking only when addressed by the interviewer. Furthermore, she was allocated no role in the first family play and her interloper role did not at first appear to have been deconstructed through their participation in the research.

To an extent cross-generational myths or narratives were influential in the co-construction of Sarah and Dirk's roles as parents, with Sarah feeling that she was "eternally inadequate" as a mother in relation to her own mother. This allowed her to feel that she would not make an adequate real (biological) mother, "so what good will I be with someone else's kids." Her perceptions of what motherhood entailed would appear to have been influenced by her resentment of her own mother, who she experienced as "claustrophobic."

Her solution to this narrative (Dallos, 1997) would appear to have been to substitute the story of proximity with one of avoidance. This is not a shift to Bateson's (1972) third level of knowledge, but rather the pushing to prominence of a story of the same order - namely that of distance. This sense of inadequacy appears to fit Dirk's own story of inadequacy regarding his role as husband. His two previous marriages had failed, with the biological mothers of his children rejecting his children. This despite his ex-wives' reportedly close involvement with the children during the marriages.

Sarah's distancing and avoidant behaviour as a result of her perceived inadequacies allowed Dirk to become the parent he could not be in those previous relationships. Her being cast as the inadequate stepmother served only to reciprocally reinforce his role as concerned parent. This, in essence, highlights the recursive nature of their interaction.

With Sarah developing a closer relationship with Biff, though, this story may have changed, giving much greater voice to his internal monologue of failure as a father (Gergen and Kaye, 1992; Penn & Frankfurt, 1994), and the desire to silence it through strengthening his relationship with John. John and Biff also share the story of inadequacy, being rejected by their mothers and sent to live with their father, and with Sarah not feeling any connection with the family this story would appear to have grown louder.

Biff and John experienced Sarah as rejecting and as being distant, which resonated with their own experience of their biological mothers. Neither would appear to have felt that they belonged to the Smith family, and their own stories of distance will have helped co-create a narrative in which members of the family are competing for intimacy. Both Biff and John expressed the concern at having drifted apart, but neither was able to relate incidents in which they had felt as though they were blood brothers and as sharing a history which tied them together.

A characteristic of the dominant narratives influencing the Smith family's experience was their seeming invulnerability and immutability (Dallos, 1997; Epston & White, 1990). In that light it at first seemed to be an impossible task to deconstruct them in a way that would allow other voices a chance to be heard. It was in this sense that I found the work of M. White (1991) and Bruner (1990) particularly useful, with their exoticising of the domestic or externalising those narratives which appeared to be too complex to unravel.

Through the process of externalising the effects the dominant narratives of Sarah as the wicked stepmother, John as a victim or manipulator of stepfamily conditions; the family as inferior and embarrassing; role confusion and ambiguity; diversity as conflict and instant love as possible it was possible to aid in their deconstruction. Dominant narratives were deconstructed at many levels, some of which are no doubt unknown to me, but those which were regarded as family narratives (namely those which were shared perceptions of the

family itself) and personal narratives (namely those which allocated certain roles to members of the family) will be explored here.

The dominant narrative which shaped the way the Smiths perceived their own family appears to have been influenced by popular perceptions (or dominant narratives) which portray the stepfamily as a bed of conflict and discord. Stories of exclusion, conflict and competition were particularly troubling for the Smiths, and it was only through an intervention such as the play-writing activity which forced them to *consciously* pursue an activity which brought them together.

While critics may argue that this would seem akin to replacing one story with another of the same order, I would argue that this was not the case. This task implicitly called on family members to hear the narratives of others, in such a way that did not allow such diversity to be easily discounted. The Smith family operated primarily on a non-verbal level, relying on body language to communicate emotions and thoughts that they did not feel comfortable verbalising. To have constructed an activity that replaced non-verbal behaviour with the verbal would, indeed, have been unhelpful, and would have been a process of story substitution.

But *writing* the narrative allowed the family to examine their punctuation habits in a way that was both concrete and creative. The effect of having the family write their stories hastened the discovery of new voices (Penn & Frankfurt, 1994) and the involvement of different narrative time frames through the writing process allowed the narrative discourse to continue to multiply and expand (Penn & Frankfurt, 1994). For Bruner (1990), narratives develop through time with events which occur in one temporal dimension being narrated in another, and written in a third.

For the Smiths, then, the process of narrating events in one temporal dimension (the interview), writing it another (the family setting) and acting it out in another (researcher plus family) allowed their narrative discourse to expand. Sarah identifies the writing of the stories, particularly the second one, as the process which engendered change by allowing an intensity and lively debate about roles to unfold in ways which had not happened before.

She says that the family were now "talking *about* something, rather than getting stuck in it" which implies that that which had remained unsaid for so long, was now being said (Hoffman in McNamee & Gergen (Eds), 1992). John too felt that writing the stories had been useful. It had allowed him to see how far he had drifted away from his brother, but also to see that they shared similar stories. Both were misfits and rejects and shared a common bond which was not only defined in relation to Sarah and their opposition to her, but also in their shared story of vying for their father's attention.

But not only were the brothers reunited, the myth of exclusion too was deconstructed. The family realised the need to "pull together", and that what had been punctuated as a crisis (the ill baby) could also allow those qualities which had been silenced to be given a voice. I would argue that the latter (the acting out) expanded the narrative in a way that would not have happened had we relied on scripts alone, since it connected the dominant narrative of family functioning with written and verbal expression. It did this by entering into a dialogic space between the *forms* that narratives take.

Prior to this process the family found body language their most useful ways of telling stories about themselves and the family - for example avoidance - with the verbal and written alternatives subjugated to the point where the family did not write letters to each other, and family settings were characterised by long silences. The relationship between the various forms in which the narrative played itself out was emphasised by an activity which required

the family to do all three. The intention was not to take up the cause of the subjugated verbal and written narrative forms at the expense of the non-verbal since, as Michalowski (in Holstein & Miller (Eds), 1993) states, that would have been to lose sight of the deconstruction process.

Instead, it was seen as important to create an environment in which interplay between these narrative forms could be acted out, in the hope that a relationship other than domination of one such form would be established. Referring back to Gergen (1991a, 1991b) and his notion of social saturation, which encompasses a sense of multiple floating selves and families with no root, the Smiths appear to have become more focused in generating a family narrative which includes all the members and allows for diversity and expression of preferred selves (Dallos, 1997). And this without falling prey to dissolution of the self (Dallos, 1997).

Furthermore, the Smith family were no longer as concerned at being embarrassed about being a stepfamily, since their own stories of exclusion (which determined who belonged to the family) had changed sufficiently to allow them to feel that their own exclusion from their broader community had altered to include a greater sense of belonging.

An important aspect of the narratives of the Smith family was the apparent cross-generational coalitions which affected not only those within the immediate Smith family, but also those of the families of origin. Sarah reported feeling a greater sense of belonging to her new family and an easing of tensions with her own mother, which Dirk reported made life easier for him and the children because "now Sarah isn't too worried what her mom might say about her."

Dirk also reported feeling a lot more relaxed in his marital relationship, and not being as protective of his sons, while both Biff and John felt that their contributions were regarded as

worthwhile in the family. In that sense, the cross-generational story of inadequacy had been deconstructed, with Sarah also enjoying a closer relationship with John.

The unique outcomes (Epston & White, 1990) had been commented on as their change in stance and apparent discarding of roles during the interview, which served to make their impact more immediate. Sarah did not seem as concerned with her role as outsider and took part quite freely and in a way which seemed to allow Dirk to move away from his role as protector of his children. Furthermore, Biff moved away from his role of antagonist of Sarah to a more protective, understanding position. This was an important shift for John, as it allowed him to move away from his role of outsider too, and towards a position in which he no longer seemed concerned with his father's approval. For Janet this shift did not seem to be as great, although she has established a closer relationship with her brothers and no longer appeared to be in the role of Sarah's confidant anymore.

For the Smith's their participation in the writing of a play served as a unique outcome in that it was possible to point out to the various family members that they had, in fact, not fallen into the roles they had previously been used to during this activity. It was necessary, though, as M. White (1991) states, to only use those unique outcomes that are agreed upon by the family as being so and as having meaning. It would thus have been foolish to continue with that description had the Smiths rejected it out of hand.

A story in the telling thus emerges in which Sarah no longer feels held captive in her role as the bad stepmother since the bars of the cage are now seen to be open to allow change. She is now able to choose her preferred roles (Dallos, 1997) of career woman, friend (rather than enemy or mother) to Biff and John and mother rather than ally with Janet as the context demands it, and is comfortable not feeling trapped in a story of inadequacy.

In many respects the notion of deconstruction aligns itself closely with Bateson's (1972) notion of distinctions between levels of learning - that is, from replacing one story with another to learning new ways of telling the stories to, finally, challenging and changing the underlying assumptions that underpin storytelling habits.

This happened for the Smiths, perhaps only in part, in that there emerged a sense that it was the assumptions underlying the importance of dominant narratives that came under discussion. An example of this could be the challenge posed by the family's hospital-scene story, to the notion of distance and intimacy being of prime importance within the family's ecology of issues.

In other words the assumptions which guided the storying process itself, not just the assumptions underlying particular stories were placed in the spotlight. This can be seen in their move away from a story which was governed by competition for space and affection (the lion story) towards a story of co-operation as described in the hospital story. The family thus appeared to enter into what Maturana and Varela (1987) would call a consensual domain.

This consensual domain does not imply absolute agreement but is perhaps akin to Efran's (1994) communal cocoon of shared explanatory fictions and beliefs, and was facilitated to a large extent by the exercise of having to sit down and write a story or play together. Narrative therapy, as is narrative research, is an active process which requires the therapist or researcher to direct and choreograph the process in such a way that subjugated stories are given a voice. With this in mind, my role in the co-construction of the Smith's new, hospital story was one in which I attempted to choreograph a new way for them to connect.

This was achieved through the giving of the task of writing a play, with its implicit meaning of working together as a whole and integrating views rather than consolidating individualistic and opposing views. This is the dialogic domain referred to earlier, in which the dominant

narratives - experienced as subjugating monologues - were heard in an environment in which there were the voices of unity, acceptance of who people want to be and the generation of space.

This process is one which the Smith family will hopefully take forward, as it was not necessarily the responsibility of the research process to do so, because that may have implied a “therapy” story emerging. Of some concern, however, was the continued isolation of Janet whose story of exclusion did not seem to be deconstructed at the time of termination of participation. She appeared, in some respects, to have been allocated the role of outsider and scapegoat, or the identified patient (Keeney, 1983).

A follow-up of the Smith family four months later, however, revealed that while there had been ups and downs for everybody, Janet's increased participation in family activities had been pleasing to everyone. She represented the new beginning that the family had made, and was the link between the various stories since she shared a blood link with everyone in the family and had, at times, shared stories similar to those of the other family members.

Her inclusion in the family process appears to have been given meaning as the introduction of a new baby - much like the baby in the hospital story. Up until that story was told Janet was kept out of the family's activities, but she was introduced at the same time as the “new” family was born. In some sense, then, she may be seen to embody the hopes, fears and wishes of the Smith family. Her position in the family is governed not so much by who is closer to her, as it is by the ease with which she can move between relationships within the family.

The stuckness that the family felt they had shrugged off could perhaps be seen in Janet's ability to allow the redefinition of relationships. She is more of a sibling to her brothers, a daughter to Dirk and no longer a buffer between him and Sarah and a daughter and not an ally to Sarah.

Both families found it disturbing at first, though, to come to terms with the notion that there was no fixed history of the family, a history which they all shared in terms of the same frames or points of reference. Only Janet in the Smith family shared a common blood link to the other family members, while the cross-generational narratives in the Jones family could be seen as preventing a common starting point for Monty and Brenda. This was so because, as Allen and Allen (1995) point out, we create our memories in the present, and project them back into the past or forward into the future. The secret of history is therefore lost since our memories are reconstructions in the present time, and thus influenced, shaped and constrained by the currently dominant narratives.

The process of reshaping a previously immutable past and therefore also reauthoring a desired future was of considerable use to the Smith and Jones families. By changing a past that was experienced as being fraught with conflict, problems, rigidity and worthlessness - imposed on them by the dominant narratives of the stepfamily among others - it allowed a new experience of the present, and of relationships within the family. It allowed them, to return to a comment made by Sarah, to change their stories to ones that they wanted to tell. Thus, they were able to tell a story of the integration of the whole rather than a fragmentation and entrenchment of individual stories. The family have come to view the past as one full of diversity rather than conflict, and as allowing each person to bring something unique from their own history into the present.

The Jones family

As is to be expected, the Smith and Jones family experienced their involvement in the study in very different ways. In contrast to the Smith family, externalising and deconstructing the

dominant narratives in the case of the Jones family proved far more difficult, particularly since those narratives which I had highlighted in chapter 1 had seemingly been left unaltered at the end of the research endeavour.

It thus appeared that while the narratives of instant love, evil stepfather and the stepfamily as inferior may well have been important narratives within the Jones family, there were *other* narratives which were equally, if not more important for the family members. This led to a feeling on my part that the Jones' family stories confounded the initial aims and objectives of this study, and that they did not fit in with what amounted to a desirable, almost perfect example of new paradigm research.

This amounts to a normalising judgement (Dallos, 1997) on my part and fits within Foucault's (1977, 1979) notion of the practices of power in which individuals come to regulate their own behaviour and perception of what is acceptable or not. What is deemed true or valid is determined by these relations of power which shape whose voices or opinions we regard as important - in this case positivist science, which calls for neatly packaged parcels of data that conform to the view of those in the academic or scientific field (Butchart, 1997; Dallos, 1997; Epston & White, 1990; Foucault, 1977, 1979; M. White, 1991).

My need for pure data which conformed to the aims and objectives as set out in chapter 1 may well be seen as contradictory to the notion of emergent design, which was the chosen approach to description generation. In no small part, my ignoring in the early stages of writing up of this study many of the descriptions generated by the Jones family had to do with my own biases and punctuations, as a result of my experiences as a stepfather.

The near-chaos in the interview room with the twins drawing attention away from the task at hand, and the evidence of multi-layered meanings in the Jones family perhaps connected too closely with my own experiences to allow me to hear their narratives. More to the point,

in many respects the narratives which were playing such an influential role in the Jones' experience of stepfamily life were, in different ways, also influential in my own experience of stepfamily life. The notion of chaos and stickiness at being immersed in contexts in which I found myself feeling torn between roles and their meanings, may have detracted from my ability to hear their stories without this interference (Keeney, 1983).

It was only by commenting on that process, and the fact that the Jones family maintained contact with me after the intervention, that I began to realise that many narratives had, in fact, been deconstructed. They were, perhaps, not the narratives I had emphasised, but they had important implications for the family, and for understanding the evolutionary unfolding of this way of doing research. Thus, in an important sense this case is the one that truly illustrated the notion of localised truths, namely the co-construction of meanings around that which familial voices are expressed, rather than around my own expectations. They offered me the opportunity to immerse myself in their unique step-culture, thereby exposing more realities and richer descriptions of this form of relatedness.

For both Brenda and Monty there were influential cross-generational narratives which were at work from before their marriage, which brought to their life as a stepfamily meanings specific to them. Pearce and Cronen (in Dallos, 1997) refer to relationships as operating at many levels simultaneously, with beliefs and communications based on family traditions which then rely on intergenerational family histories and traditions for meaning generation.

Brenda's experience of stepfamily life predated her relationship with Monty, with two experiences of abusive stepfathers, a disengaged mother and an abusive first husband. In many ways Brenda had never shed the role of stepchild, and needed protection from threatening male figures. In her relationship with Monty she felt under threat from his temper,

and in need of protection from his rage. In this relationship she appears to be stuck in the role of stepchild rather than mother, wife or lover.

Her options appeared to be severely limited, and she felt that she had nowhere to go. Her only relief was the intervention of Lee, who bore the brunt of Monty's rage through exhibiting naughty behaviour and who protected her mother from Monty's rage. This, however, also prevented her mother from choosing the preferred self of Monty's equal, and someone who can stand up for herself. Monty's aggression towards Lee, though, served only to confirm to Brenda that she too was in danger, and that, like her stepfathers and first husband, men are abusive.

Her story of the stepfamily, told and re-told through her experiences as a child, wife and mother was one of a "nightmare" and she had come to expect nothing different when entering into another with Monty. But, for Pearce and Cronen (in Dallos, 1997), these intergenerational beliefs are not formed in a vacuum, and the influence of societal beliefs and narratives are evidenced by Brenda's description of Monty as "a typical stepfather".

Monty, for his part, came from a family in which his father was physically and verbally aggressive towards Monty and his two brothers, and where he had been forced to learn to fend for himself in the face of this aggression. Monty's family's story appeared to be one of being strong in the face of a relentless onslaught, and in which the family tradition regarding relationships was to attack first. The language of Monty's family of origin would appear to have been one of aggression.

Having children would enable him to take his place in the family as an equal to the other men in his family, and prove himself worthy to his father. Monty's preferred self was that of a virile, invulnerable man who was admired for his achievements. This preferred self, though,

was not only shaped within the traditions of his family of origin, but also by societal narratives which shape gender roles (Dallos, 1997).

In his new family with Brenda, Lee and the twins, then, Monty's story of aggression and need for survival plays itself out in his aggression towards those weaker than him, and who he sees as needing him to discipline them. His reactions to Brenda's defiance, Lee's naughty behaviour and the twin's chaos serves only to co-create his role as the evil stepfather. This is co-created distance, however, since Lee and Brenda developed a close alliance, even a coalition perhaps, leaving him out of the warmth of family life. It would appear that this troubled Monty as he too feels stuck in his role of aggressor.

Lee, too, appeared to feel stuck in the role of protector and parentified child within the family. She enjoyed a special relationship with Brenda, in which Brenda argued vehemently on her behalf that Monty did not understand Lee the way she [Brenda] did. But Lee may also be seen to have struck an alliance with Monty in order to survive his aggression. She was also often responsible for the care of the twins in Brenda's absence, and was regarded as something of a second mother by her sisters.

By Lee engaging in behaviour which was often quite violent she could be seen to be echoing Monty's story of aggression possibly to gain acceptance from him, and she would appear to have felt limited in her options of choosing a preferred self (Dallos, 1997). According to Gergen (1991a, 1991b), Lee has ingested the bits and pieces of various selves but is unable to distinguish what it is she wants out of her current choice of roles. To be a protected child in the Jones family is not possible as she needs to protect and engage with adults in a mature manner, and to care for her sisters.

The twins were regarded as a distraction by all those involved in the sessions, and yet they diverted the process in the room when it appeared that Brenda was entering into what

appeared to be a dangerous space with Monty - by standing up to him, perhaps - and would act up in such a way that Lee would be forced to intervene. This would provide Brenda with the protection she needed, and also allowed Lee to ally herself with Monty - perhaps to render him harmless to herself, her sisters and her mother. There appeared to be a mutual protection pact to ward off Monty the aggressor, a role learnt from within his family or origin. This is a pervasive theme and meaning throughout the Jones family process/narrative.

Entering into the dialogic space those narratives that had previously been monologues - for example, Monty as worthless, Brenda as the victim - did not necessarily have the desired influence, seemingly because of the cultural context and complexity (the influence of cross-generational narratives) from which they came (Hare-Mustin, 1994; Penn & Frankfurt, 1994; M. White, 1991).

But what was evident is that both Monty and Brenda appeared to act as protectors of the past, albeit at the level of the unsaid (Hoffman, 1990). By Monty not being able to get closer to Brenda and Lee - he was jealous of their relationship - because of his temper, he may be seen to be protecting their [Brenda and Lee's] dominant story of closeness and intimacy. By Brenda arguing on Lee's behalf - albeit up to a point at which Lee needs to intervene - she may be seen to be protecting her daughter from her [Brenda's] past, in which she had no protection at all from her mother against abusive men.

A crucial point in the sessions with the Jones family came when Lee felt that Monty was in danger of falling into a trap laid for him by the stepfather bogeyman, and the whole family picked up on the notion of the bogeyman trapping the family into doing things they did not want to do. The family appeared preoccupied with beating the bogeyman through going to professionals for help. Many of these professionals may have come to represent the bogeyman by exploring the Jones family as a problem system. The cybernetic complementarity of

stability/change (Keeney, 1983) may be important here, as attempts to change the Jones' in previous therapies had seemingly not taken into account their need to stay intact.

This study aimed to recognise both sides of that distinction by not discarding those stories which encouraged change at the expense of those stories which recognised stability as important. The need to beat the bogeyman could be seen as just as important as the need to keep him alive, since it allowed members of the family to unite as a family in their fight against it.

Lee spoke of the bogeyman as coming into the house and as preventing the family from being happy, and creating an atmosphere of fear. Brenda felt that everyone was stuck because of the bogeyman and that she had been unable to fulfill her roles of mother and wife. Monty felt that the bogeyman had convinced everyone that he was "the bad guy", and that he too wanted its influence to wane. This moment in the session provided the perfect opportunity to embark on M. White (1991) and Bruner's (1990) idea of externalising the problem, or exoticising the domestic by complexifying the bogeyman example and situating the problem outside of, and not within individuals in the family.

The externalisation of the bogeyman served several purposes. It encouraged the Jones family to identify the personal and cross-generational stories by which they lived, and which helped shape their identity and being-in-relationships (Dallos, 1997; Epston & White, 1990; M. White, 1991). The bogeyman represented those undesirable effects that personal and stepfamily narratives were having on family members' experiences.

This involved a detailed exploration of how Monty and Brenda related to each other and how the bogeyman had affected this relationship (Dallos, 1997; Epston & White, 1990; M. White, 1991). How, for example, did the bogeyman affect Monty's relationship with Lee; Lee's relationship with her mother; Brenda's relationship with the twins, and so on? It also

entailed an investigation into how the family members co-created or were recruited into the views of the bogeyman (M. White, 1989b, 1991).

The outcome of this process is, hopefully, that the stories which influence or determine the person's identity no longer transfix their life, but rather that the person comes to feel alienated from those stories (M. White, 1989b, 1991). These stories no longer have meanings which the individual may find relevant to his lived experience, and it is through a process of discovering new meanings, relevant and important to the person, that it is possible to change these old stories.

In the gap that is created through this process of alienation, the person is freed to explore alternative, and preferred, knowledges of who they might be (Dallos, 1997; Epston & White, 1990; White, 1991). This comes about as the realisation sets in that the stories by which the person lives their life do not adequately account for everyday lived experience and, as in the case of the Jones family, with this alienation comes the opportunity for the person to orient themselves to stories and knowledges that contradict the dominant narratives (Dallos, 1997; Epston & White, 1990; M. White, 1991).

It is a search for what M. White (1991) terms unique outcomes - events or contexts in which the meaning attributed to roles, stories et cetera are open to being shifted in such a way that it opens the door to many more possible meanings. This process of attribution of meaning is highlighted in the experience of Lee in the Jones family, where the story of the "bogeyman" had transfixed her relationship with Monty and Brenda. The meaning attributed to these roles incorporated the need to protect her parents from each other. The shift in meaning took place with the externalisation of the "bogeyman" and the freeing of Lee to be a child again, once her parents had assumed the adult, parental roles. Her role now assumed new meaning in that she was able to refocus on her peer relationships, and no longer feel the need to protect her

parents. Her identity was no longer cast in stone, and she was able to adopt other preferred selves (Dallos, 1997) - such as the social self, the playful self, the daughter self et cetera.

In the search for these unique outcomes (Epston & White, 1990; M. White, 1991) it is useful to explore experience before the problem surfaced or to look for occasions, however insignificant, when the person, family or group managed to beat the problem. The Jones' had displayed an ability to silence the problem while on holiday for a week. This week-long holiday had been particularly meaningful to both Brenda and Monty as it had allowed them to relate as spouses, adults and parents within the family context. It allowed family members to experience togetherness as pleasurable rather than conflictual and was often referred back to as having been a happy holiday.

This, in effect, tracks the influence the person, family or group have had on the life of the problem, and places them *in relationship* with the problem rather than accepting the objectivity of the problem (Epston & White, 1990; M. White, 1991). For the Jones' this was implemented by inquiring as to what qualities the bogeyman might have were he or she a real person. This enabled me to construct the problem for the family as the influence of the bogeyman rather than as one of them, thereby creating a sense of distance between family members and the stories of conflict, blame, threat and vulnerability that they were telling.

The bogeyman could be seen to have qualities common to all of them, but with sufficient variety - that is, with qualities from each of them - to prevent any family member from identifying too closely with the bogeyman, and thus reverting to the process of apportioning blame. It also helped separate Monty from the bogeyman, which was a narrative which appeared to be very influential for the Jones'. It also generated a story which focused on unity in the face of external threat, rather than emphasising the idea that any threat in a stepfamily is inherently internal. By spreading the symptom (Boscolo et al., 1987) no one person was to

blame for the processes that unfolded, but that there was some shared investment in keeping the problem alive and that a collective effort was required to beat off this threat.

Focusing on behaviours, tactics and thoughts that had worked at the time of the victory over the bogeyman brought forth stories of triumph and personal agency, as a challenge to the dominant narratives of defeat and helplessness. Monty, for example, was able to take a back seat with regards to disciplining of the children, while Brenda had stopped being the scared wife and therefore reciprocally reinforcing Monty's role as the bogeyman or evil stepfather. Released from this identity, Brenda was able to assume the role of mature adult, parent with Lee and the twins and was able to discipline them herself in a way that reinforces the strength of the parental system for the children. It also, therefore, aids in the deconstruction of Monty's role of dictator and punisher in the eyes of the children.

My feeling, however, was that while the deconstruction process had been marginally useful, it had not allowed the Jones family to get to grips with the real problems which they faced - namely the myths of instant love, a stepfamily being able to replicate a biological family and so on (Visher & Visher, 1979). This was the case because the notion of myth had possibly become reified through my use of the term, and as such assumed a reality that if it were not accessed meant that the process itself had been futile. It was not something which the Jones family appeared to feel, however, as they maintained contact with me for a period of five months after the termination of their role as co-researchers in the study.

They felt that much had changed for them, and that they were no longer stuck with the bogeyman anymore. Monty reported feeling a lot more relaxed and less inclined to aggression, preferring to be to his children what his father had not been to Monty and his brothers. Brenda too felt that she no longer had to be afraid of Monty, and that her relationship with Lee, while no longer as close as it was, was "better because now I feel more

in control of what I'm doing around her. I don't need to watch her all the time." This also seemed to release Lee from her role as protector and detouring agent, and allowed her to become a child again.

Their desire for continued contact with me was puzzling, and it was only after re-reading the process notes from their sessions that I felt I had missed much of the process itself. In my desire to prove that certain myths could be deconstructed I had been blind to what the Jones' felt was important, namely the cross-generational narratives which were more current. Further follow-up revealed that the family were slowly starting to feel more comfortable being in public places, and at family gatherings. Thus, it would appear as if the narratives around being part of a stepfamily as being "such a big deal" had indeed been deconstructed, with a diminished sense of watchfulness or paranoia around what people were or were not saying about them.

They also found no reason to consult further professional help for their problems, and we agreed that we could contract for therapy if the need arose. The fact that the Jones family had been to many professionals prior to entering into this study entrenched the dominant narrative that the stepfamily is a problematic family in which some form of corrective measure is required. Furthermore, it meant that it was difficult to prevent this study from falling into the same trap. For to hear only the story that they were a family in need of help would have been to feed the dominant narrative to the exclusion of those narratives which may have emphasised other aspects of their experience. This, hopefully, was circumvented by allowing them more say in the direction that their involvement in the study took, and in allowing them to hear many other stories rather than one, corrective and normalising tale.

Also, our continued contact after the study had been completed created a sense of continuity for the Jones family. They had been in therapy before with little acknowledged

success, and it was initially perturbing for me that they wished to maintain their contact with me. They also wanted a redefinition of our relationships as one of therapy rather than one of research. I agreed to this as it had been an important aspect of the ethical stance adopted by this study to offer follow-up support where requested. It also allowed me to explore the effects of the generation of other stories within the family and their storied landscape. With permission from the family I have included a few of the developments that have unfolded since our involvement in the study.

Monty left his job soon after the end of the study, a move that at first alarmed me but which he and Brenda described as “the best thing that could have happened.” Still working in computers, Monty now feels “more relaxed on the job. My last job helped turn me into a monster, man. I was always in a bad mood, and I suppose that was the excuse I was looking for to beat up on Brenda and the kids.” Since changing jobs, Brenda describes Monty as “a lot more concerned with what is happening around the house”. She, in turn, feels that she can now approach him a lot more easily. Brenda also feels that she is starting to trust Monty more with the children, although she still finds herself being overly protective at times. This she feels still has a lot to do with her experience of stepfathers and, Monty’s improvement notwithstanding, she believes that this will take “some time to change.”

This, for, me was a reminder of the strong voice that those cross-generational narratives which pre-dated the marriage possessed. These narratives, which had fallen outside the scope of this study were still seen to be influential, and formed a considerable part of the redefinition of our relationship. To have ignored the voice of these narratives would, I feel, have been to do a disservice to the Jones’ by not having made their participation in the study as useful as they hoped. The Jones children have reportedly had mixed fortunes since the study. The twins have been “as restless as ever”, while Lee has become more concerned with

her appearance and friends than with her mother or Monty. While this caused some concern for Brenda and Monty, I commented that it would appear as if Lee had started to find a voice of her own, and that this was a normal phase through which she needed to pass. Her interest in matters outside of the family not only reflected her approaching pubescence, but it also indicated a move away from the alliances that she had helped co-create within the family.

As for the twins, they had recently started at pre-school, and I commented that the extra stimulation was no doubt a factor in their behaviour. Of interest to me, though, was the focus given to the children by Monty and Brenda. They approached me for what seemed to be advice on how to understand and deal with their children, and while this may not reflect a significant move towards adopting the mature adult, parental role, it was an important shift in focus. They now appeared to be more concerned with the story of parenting, and less with the competition for space which had dominated their relationship prior to this. Monty's more relaxed stance and Brenda's openness to him would appear to have helped shape this.

Before concluding this chapter, it is perhaps prudent to comment further on the work of Foucault and its application to this study and, particularly, to the narratives of both the Smith and Jones families. Accepting Foucault's (1977) notion that power is not a tool, nor is it a strictly negative force which necessarily needs to be challenged and negated, it has been the understanding adopted by this study that power is not to be found within the structures which impose dominant narratives on the stepfamily. Instead, these structures are the end result or effect of a relation of power in much the same way that the individual, family or society is the product of such relations of power (Butchart, 1997).

But since the socio-medical sciences "fabricate" and "sustain" (p. 102) the objects of their investigation, both of which are a product of the constitutive aspects of power, then it would seem impossible to remove the power exerted on the stepfamily (the object of study) by the

researcher (socio-medical sciences). To do so would be to ignore the understanding of power as being a function of this relationship, and of its recursive nature. Instead, what is needed is an exploration of the way in which power produces the knowledges that come to be regarded as taken-for-granted realities, and expose these to scrutiny. By changing the relationship the notion of power is not challenged or removed, since there can be no way in which to do this. All that can be done is to alter the way in which this relationship is played out.

In extrapolating this view to the experiences of the families involved in this study it appears to be evident that no attempts were made to remove the power that a particular dominant narrative may have exercised over a stepfamily. This would have ignored the constitutive nature of such narratives. To remove the power would have been to remove the narrative which, in turn, would have been to remove the family. Instead, the products of the relationship between the families and the narratives was the focus of the interventions used. This did not involve an eradication of narratives, but rather a redefinition of the relationship between the family and the narratives. This, in itself, may be regarded as removing the family which was constituted through the old narrative, but by recognising the generation of new narratives as the product of the relation of power this is seen to not necessarily be so.

No attempts were made, therefore, to remove the struggles for intimacy and adequacy within the Smith family as influenced by broader societally-established myths, since that would have done little more than remove the Smith family as an object of study. So too with the Jones family, where attempting to remove the power of cross-generational narratives would have been akin to denying the generation of narratives in the present. This, hopefully, has dovetailed to some degree with the principles within the narrative technique of generating more products of the relations of power, rather than reinforcing the notion of limiting what

may be said, thought or done. By increasing this range of relations of power, more options with regards to what may be said, thought or done are elicited.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most striking finding of this study has been the importance of having an ear open for cross-generational narratives when working in the here and now. Their influence in both the Smith and Jones family would appear to have been considerable, particularly when seen in relationship with the so-called dominant narratives identified as important in this study.

The process of deconstruction was also seen to be an active one, belying the notion that such work is merely listening to, and the telling of stories. The process also appears to have been faithful to Allen and Allen's (1995) notions of the deconstruction of an old story and a related sense of self, or group of selves; the co-authoring of a new story with a new sense of selves with new possibilities and the reintegration of these new selves (or families) into a community of meaningful narratives.

This narrative shift has also seen a shift in the meanings attributed to family members and the roles which they occupied. The aim of this study was to allow new meanings to be generated, and shifting the meanings which were embodied in the individual's old roles. More obviously so with the Smith family, whose shifts within the time-frame of this study appear to have been, at times, dramatic.

It would also appear, though, that while the Smith family is the model family with whom to deconstruct dominant narratives - after all, there appears to have been a useful shift in their

narration of their everyday experience - the Jones family may well be the more interesting from a therapeutic and research point of view.

This will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter, as will the political implications of such a therapy and research approach. The extent to which the aims and objectives of this study have been achieved as well as a discussion of the limitations of this study and suggestions for any future research will be entered into.

CHAPTER 7

END OF THE JOURNEY: BEGINNING OF THE ROAD?**Introduction**

The importance of the shift in meanings and the active stance that this requires from the researcher adopting a narrative frame for his or her research, was seen to be of vital importance in the choreographing of the interactions between the researcher and the families in this study. By deconstructing many of the myths highlighted by the existing literature on stepfamilies, and by bringing a postmodern perspective to bear on the interpretation of the descriptions generated, this final chapter will concern itself with a review of the process which unfolded during this study.

The aim was to expose to a process of deconstruction those dominant narratives which shape and influence stepfamily life and, in so doing, explore the construction of societally established myths and other dominant narratives. That is to say, to address or give voice to, if not all, then considerably more aspects of stepfamily experience than the families concerned felt they were allowed to experience. This gap between the addressed and the unaddressed is where M. White's (1989a, 1989b, 1991; Epston & White, 1990) unique outcomes are to be found. The hope was that the door would be opened to more complex stories which would encompass both positive and negative components, in such a way that would do justice to the notions of cybernetic complementarities (Keeney, 1983) and Foucault's (1977, 1979) notion of the practices of power.

This study set out to not replace, but to complement current understandings of the narratives which operate in the domain of stepfamilies. It was never the intention to replace one narrative with another, for the new narrative may be diametrically opposed to the old but may perpetuate the process of narrating lived experience in a way which implies duality, or either/or distinctions - namely, good/evil, superior/inferior, stability/change. In this light, then, the ecosystemic lenses which were alluded to in chapter 3 need to be commented on further as an important aspect of this study. After all, notions such as recursion, connectedness, complementarity and feedback are just some examples of the ecosystemic language used in this text. Further to that, an ecosystemic understanding of many of the processes unfolding between the families and myself may also be evident to the reader.

The languages of the ecosystemic and narrative approaches should not necessarily be seen as being in opposition with each other, since this study has illustrated the importance of seeing any narrative as existing in a wider ecology of narratives. It is this connectedness, for example, which allowed for the breakthrough in seeing the relationship between cross-generational and other narratives in the Jones family.

In terms of the aims and objectives of this study, then was the process useful? Did it, in fact, achieve what it set out to?

Looking Back and Taking Stock

In order to answer the questions posed above, it is necessary to ask the following:

(a) Did the families involved in the study shift from narrating their experience in a particular way to exploring the *manner* in which they narrate experience?

(b) Further to that, what are the political implications of this study, and to what extent did it give voice or support to current dominant narratives?

(c) Is success in this study to be determined by a shift to a healthier or better adjusted position?

There are no doubt many other questions which readers may wish to pose, and which may, for readers, produce more satisfying answers. The questions posed above, however, have been the most prevalent in my own mind during the process of this study.

Shifting Deckchairs on the Titanic(With Apologies to Keeney)?

Narrative therapy (White, 1991) is concerned with the shift in meanings and, in terms of the focus of this study, the change in roles that this might entail for members of the Smith and Jones families. It has been a basic premise of this study that if the meanings ascribed to a particular role are shifted, expanded or in any other way altered that role itself will shift and alter its meaning in such a way that people will discover new aspects of their now multiplicitous selfhood.

In the case of the Smith family, there certainly appears to have been a process of change in the way in which meanings are generated, and roles ascribed in terms of these. The family stated that they have moved out of the restricting "cupboard" they found themselves in, and are in a place where they can change stories to ones they want to tell. A storying process of exclusion would appear to have been expanded - not replaced - to include stories of inclusion, with family members now feeling that they could occupy many positions/roles/selves in any given context. From this point of view, then, the Smith family appears to be the model for a

study such as this. They engaged well, were receptive to my interventions and actively participated in the co-construction of a new storying process.

But the Jones family appear to have been a tougher nut to crack. Their shift is not as easy to plot as was that of the Smiths. Indeed, up to the point when they contacted me (after the completion of the study), I was not certain of the extent to which this intervention had been useful. I was also not entirely sure of how they would fit into a study which aimed to deconstruct stepfamily dominant narratives as identified by the literature as being important. Their inclusion in this study, I felt, was by no means a certainty at that point. Much of this had to do with my desire to produce perfect case examples to back up my assertions, and achieve my aims. But it also revealed a deafness on my part to the narratives which pre-dated the reconstitution of the Jones family, and which proved to be so important. Only once we had contracted for what we have come to call “re-therapy” (a definition we have come to see as meaning a new relationship which not only incorporates the old, but also implies a re-birth) did I see that this process of change had indeed taken hold during our earlier involvement. The extent to which it has unfolded is the focus of this “re-therapy”, but it was my ignoring of these other narratives which appear to have obscured or closed my eyes and ears to much of the process taking place in the room. It was only through the earlier process that they were able to open the door to other ways of narration, which included a redefining of our relationship not as therapeutic since they had tried that with other therapists and it had failed.

The Jones’, perhaps even more than the Smiths, appear to illustrate the basic propositions underlying social constructionism - namely that dominant narratives are locally co-created and reflect historical and familial (Gergen 1991a, 1991b) experiences and meanings developed over time. This is evident in the influence of the cross-generational narratives which were generated in contexts unique to the familial history of Monty and Brenda and

which were linked to the present. Their participation refuted any attempt at a lineal process of reification of myths, since those narratives which I had identified as important were just some of many narratives competing for dominance.

In conclusion, then, I feel that this study did, in fact, help the families concerned to deconstruct the way in which they narrated their lived experience, but that it is vitally important that the researcher or therapist be accountable to him- or herself and their clients/co-researchers in terms of his or her personal issues which may prevent stories being heard. This calls for greater reflexivity on the part of the researcher, and the researcher needs to be aware of where and when he or she is maintaining the status quo by reinforcing dominant narratives which are experienced as uncomfortable by the client.

The Politics of Co-Creation

Dallos (1997), Jenkins (1990) and White (in Maclean, 1994) talk at length of the therapist as being accountable to society and particularly, to his or her clients for who and what they are or represent, and for the stories that they encourage to emerge. Given the criticism this study has levelled at existing research for its perpetuation of the dominant narratives of stepfamilies through its use of deficit language (Madigan & Law, 1992), has this study avoided the same trap? I would like to think that it has, primarily by encouraging a view which recognises the difficulties involved in living in a stepfamily, but also by giving voice to alternative stories about that experience. I stand accountable to the families involved, in that they have been able to continue their contact with me, have been involved as editors in the compilation of this thesis and will receive copies of this work in the near future.

This study has drawn on the work of Foucault (1972, 1976, 1977, 1979) to expose the relations of power which may be seen to shape what may or may not be thought, said and done and it is precisely because the socio-medical sciences fabricate the objects of their study that this text is not exempt from the position which it has analysed (Butchart, 1997). The views of stepfamilies generated in this study are a function of the power relations which identified the stepfamily as an object of study. Stepparents and stepchildren in other communities, cultures or countries may differ markedly with our description of life in the Smith, Jones and, inevitably, Amoore stepfamilies, but that is not necessarily a failing of this study. The cultural, geographical and historical factors which shape the way in which we in Gauteng narrate our experience as different to people in KwaZulu-Natal, Europe, Asia or the Americas will influence and localise the descriptions generated here (Gergen, 1991a, 1991b).

Healthy or Sick? A Fine Line between Success and Failure

Indeed, this study never intended to describe the experience of stepfamilies everywhere, since contexts differ so markedly. What is hoped is that the descriptions of the Smith and Jones families have been useful and have done justice to their lived experience. Were this study to have adopted the position of wanting to change sick or unhealthy stepfamilies into more adjusted units that would have been akin to enforcing the dominant narrative of the stepfamily as inferior and in need of correction.

Success, such as it is, should not be seen to have been achieved by changes in the Smith and Jones families for change's sake alone, but rather in terms of the usefulness of such changes for the families themselves and which the families experience as having been meaningful. Change, therefore, was not an end in itself, but rather the end product of the

creation of news of difference (Keeney, 1983) for the families. The aim has also been to provide descriptions of such experience which will prove useful for clinicians who find themselves in similar settings, and who feel limited by the number of therapeutic options available to them.

Implications and Limitations of the Study

This study, while having to cope with uncertainty and unpredictability, achieved that which it set out to, and went beyond that through its descriptions of cross-generational narratives which were seen to be so impactful. This latter discovery was not a stated aim or goal of this study as even a cursory glance at chapter 1 will reveal, and yet it may be its most important achievement.

The Smith family demonstrates quite clearly the usefulness of using deconstructive techniques when approaching dominant narratives in stepfamilies, with dramatic meaning shifts taking place which allowed family members to open the door to multiple meanings and multiple selves. As such, the study achieved its stated aim of deconstructing dominant narratives which are constructed through social interaction, without replacing one dominant narrative with another.

But, ironically, it is perhaps the involvement of the Jones family which has had the most bearing on the outcomes of this study. They were a comparatively difficult family to deal with in that they generated meanings for me that connected too closely with my personal issues, and the influence of cross-generational narratives seemed only to complicate matters further.

The value in this, however, was the way in which the importance of self-referentiality and self-reflexivity on the part of the therapist and researcher was emphasised, as well as the

importance of understanding the inter-connectedness of narratives within such an ecology. Certainly the options generated by my involvement with the Jones family may be seen to have vindicated the use of an evolutionary research design, and the use of a narrative approach to exploring the experience of stepfamilies. The Jones' illustrate the importance of seeing truths as being localised, and of the co-construction of meanings around that to which familial voices give expression rather than around my own expectations.

This latter point is important and is perhaps one of the most significant achievements of this study. It emphasises the value in being open to hearing the stories of the families concerned, rather than using the constructs of the researcher or therapist as the template from which to do therapy or research. This was evident in the reification of myths identified in the literature as being more important than the narratives put forward by the family or client, in this case the cross-generational narratives which were at work in the Jones family, and which were deemed more important by the family than the myths I had identified as interesting.

Indeed, a further achievement of this study has been to show that those myths which existing positivistic research has reified need not be the most important narratives at work in stepfamilies. While such myths may be useful, this study has shown that they need not enjoy the status that positivistic research has accorded them. Instead, this study calls on researchers and therapists to pay closer attention to the generation of localised narratives which have truth value for their clients. It also calls on researchers and therapists to be more aware of the interplay between narratives, and the need to be active in creating the right environment in which subjugated narratives can be elicited. It is doubtful, however, whether a modernistic or positivistic research method would have generated the richness of description of stepfamily experience that the evolutionary approach adopted by this study produced. Allowing the process to evolve and thereby generate unexpected meanings appears to have captured the

lived experience of stepfamilies in a way which does justice to their feelings of ambiguity and ill-defined expectations.

Furthermore, this study has showed the effectiveness of utilising more creative methods of generating client narratives such as short plays or sketches based on a script constructed by the families, rather than the use of questionnaires or other quantitative data-gathering instruments.

But it would be ill-advised to consider the positive aspects to come out of this study without paying attention to its limitations.

This study never purported to be a definitive work, but rather concerned itself with understanding and describing the role of dominant narratives in the experiences of two stepfamilies. No conscious attempts were made at generating descriptions which could be generalised across different contexts. And yet, there were times during the research process that this study may have fallen prey to many of the pitfalls it had been trying to avoid.

Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, the notion of myth appears to initially have been reified to the extent that it assumes an external reality which can be directly accessed and acted upon. This was not the stated intention, and myths should, instead, be regarded as just some of the many constructions or narratives which are likely to be heard when dealing with stepfamilies.

This process of reification would appear to have been circumvented in an important way by the participation of the Jones family, who exhibited the localised nature of narratives which reflect the familial and historical experiences of meaning developed over time. It is however, difficult to prevent the reification of myths from leading this study to reinforce the dominant view of the stepfamily. The choice of myths highlighted throughout the study reflects partly

what had been elicited from a review of the literature, but also my own punctuations in terms of what societally established myths or narratives I felt were present in my own family.

My position, then, is a political one since it is implausible to see my punctuations as free of any influence from both the wider society and my experiences as a trainee psychologist and stepparent. My challenging of the dominant narratives in these two families was, by nature, a political act since it challenged the dominant discourses of power (Epston & White, 1990; Dallos, 1997; Foucault, 1977, 1979).

This is an important aspect of the next possible flaw in this study, which is the way in which the initial interview sessions were opened or started. The aims of the study were explained to both families, and the notion of myth or dominant stories was put to them for comment. This may well have influenced the nature of the material generated to a significant degree, and the reader should take that into account when reading chapters five and six. It is also an aspect which should be taken into account when considering the approach taken to the research process, namely emergent design. Given the unpredictable nature of the meanings generated through the narratives and interactions of the families, this approach would appear to be particularly well suited to any further research in this field.

Attempting again to avoid any categorisation of stepfamily experience, since that would only further entrench existing dominant narratives of the stepfamily, allowing the design to evolve from the point of conceptualisation up to this point (and still further?) has allowed a richness to come through that otherwise might have been lost. The views of the families, and shared by myself, is that a more rigid approach to the interviewing, narrating and writing up of the experiences would have stripped much of the meaning from the descriptions, and limited the potential for future meaning generation. As it is, there is a strong sense that this

whole process has been an open-ended one and that it remains as such. Hopefully, this will allow for further evolution of the meanings generated.

It would also have been preferable if some form of audio or video recording had been possible, but neither family felt comfortable with that possibility, and written notes had to suffice. This reflects, perhaps, on the secretive nature of stepfamilies but it would be advisable in any future studies of this type to find a way around this difficulty. Not only would recorded material go some way to validating the study, but it would also be useful to play the recordings back for the family for comment on the process.

It is interesting to note the reluctance on the part of both families with regards to the utilisation of such equipment in the interview setting. Both felt that it would have been too threatening for me to use it, and reinforces the notion - in some danger of reification, no doubt - that the secretiveness which surrounds stepfamilies may have been influential here.

The inclusion of a black, Asian or coloured family would also have added to the richness of the descriptive material generated, providing a cross-cultural element to the research. As it is, my experience as an intern psychologist in Katlehong, Thokoza, Vosloorus and Alexandra suggests that perceptions of the stepfamily in the various black cultures may differ significantly from those in white or Western cultures and is an area which certainly warrants further exploration. Such experiences suggest a difference in punctuation of what is defined as a stepfamily, and the strong influence of cross-generational narratives influence the roles allocated to members of such families. A criticism of this study, therefore, may be that it does not capture enough of an alternative stepfamily experience to move out of a new, but still Western construction of the stepfamily.

It has been central to the story told here that the process of interweaving of my narratives with those of the families also be open to discussion and change, since without that proviso

this study could be guilty of being unfaithful to the notion of deconstruction. The hope has been that much of my involvement has fallen within the frames provided by Neimeyer (1994) which allow for the interweaving of respectful reflections rather than making authoritative professional announcements.

It was therefore disturbing, if not altogether surprising, that it proved to be so difficult to get families to participate in the study. A number of reasons might be put forward for this, perhaps the most impactful being the extreme reluctance on the part of stepfamilies to “step” into the glare of public or academic scrutiny. Families that were initially contacted were ambivalent in the extreme about participating in a venture which promised to challenge the status quo. At first glance that may well be a natural reaction for a family embarking on a process of self referentiality, but it also gives voice to the impact and influence of dominant narratives which construct the stepfamily as somehow inferior and unworthy of the attention.

It is, as Foucault (1977) puts it, at the level of everyday-taken-for-granted reality that these discourses work so effectively in allowing the families and individuals themselves to moderate and police their own behaviour. The power and influence then of these narratives was most visibly seen in those families who opted out of the study. But why, then, did two other families so readily take part? And in what way does their openness with me complement their relationship to their wider ecology which was so secretive?

Perhaps Epston and White (1990) put it best when they talk of narratives, and particularly dominant narratives, as not encompassing all aspects of the individual or family’s lived experience. It is this realisation that is instrumental in the face of growing discomfort and uneasiness, and the seeking of help in trying to more adequately or meaningfully account or those areas which are in counterpoint to the dominant narratives.

I believe that both the Smith and Jones family were willing to co-construct this study because of the growing realisation that there were other voices, stories or experiences which could account for what they were experiencing, but which were silenced by the notion that they were typical stepfamilies. Indeed, there was within these families a tremendous sense of vibrancy and willingness to grow beyond the boundaries drawn by this study, which helped them to explore, with a critical bent, notions that they were type-cast as inherently “unhealthy”.

Ironically, there may have been an element of narrative closure (Wigren, 1994) in the experiences of both families, in that the dominant narratives were increasingly experienced as traumatic and that without the alternative voices of other stories, there were gaps in the family narratives in which lived experience was not adequately accounted for.

Their openness to me contrasted quite starkly with their desire for secrecy and embarrassment when dealing with elements of their wider social ecology. This openness complements this secretiveness in such a way that it appears to form part of the cybernetic complementarity secrecy/understanding.

Both families were used as an editorial board in the writing up of this thesis and were shown drafts of the manuscript prior to its completion, with the idea of adding yet another set of voices to those already generated. This also served as a process of validation in that any descriptions set out here, have been checked for accuracy in the capturing of meanings.

For their part, the Smiths reported that they found it particularly useful to read what they had lived, spoken about, acted and written and that it had allowed them to alter the way they saw themselves both before the study, during it and afterwards. Their comment was that it seemed as if they were changing their lives and their personal molds as if they were plasticine, and that they took new meaning from having read the text. The Jones' were equally keen to

stay involved in the process but found it a little threatening that the typed pages "looked so final, as if that was the final words on the subject."

This perception was particularly problematic and puzzling for me as I felt I had taken every care to tell a different story, but further discussion revealed that it was their new-found dissatisfaction with stereotyped perceptions that gave rise to their views. Furthermore, it may well have been upsetting seeing and hearing that some of what they regarded as a useful process had not been recognised as such by me at the time it unfolded.

A point made at the end of chapter 3 was that the mantle of postmodernism did not sit easily with me, and that I was unwilling to expunge all of the principles of modernism in my desire to find a new language of description. This remains the case, but it begs further exploration in terms of how I might or might not have found a way out of this dilemma. Some of this struggle is evident in my seeming reluctance to include the descriptions of the Jones family, since they did not conform to my modernist desire for purity of data. It is also evident in the way in which I approached their situation as one which was inherently problematic, and characterised by stuckness.

In terms of the stuckness that I felt, it was comforting to note that postmodernism is characterised by a tolerance of discontinuity and dissonance (Leary, 1994). That did not immediately solve all my problems, however, and a sense that accepting such stuckness as acceptable could be seen as sweeping the dirt under the carpet.

This sense of ambivalence commented on in chapter 3 and evident throughout my discussion of the families' narratives is not one which has been entirely resolved since completion of the study. My experiences as an intern psychologist working in Katlehong, Thokoza and Vosloorus has been, in many ways, a crystallisation of this seemingly pendulum-like swing. Forced to be a therapist, a social worker, a policeman and many other types of

person has led to a feeling that I could be only one at a time. This, however, is to ignore the multiplicity of selves and the option of a preferred self (Dallos, 1997). It is only through being a nodal point of all of these roles that I can hear what is being said by my client in such a way that I can choose how to react. This opens up many more therapeutic options.

So, too, in this study I needed to be able to hear other voices rather than those I wanted to hear. In that sense I needed to be therapist, stepparent, researcher, detective, storyteller and so on, in such a way that did not shut out the voices of all but one role. Since the completion of this study I can choose to do that and it is something that I wish I had been more receptive to during my time with the families involved. How that would have changed the descriptions given is something we can only ponder about.

While not a failing of this study, but a pity nonetheless, was the withdrawal of the third family in this study. They had agreed, initially, to take part but withdrew this commitment for reasons that were never fully explained. My desire to discover what their reservations were was tempered by the need to respect their wishes. Many questions may be asked as to what effect their involvement would have had on the dialogue between the two family narratives described here. Furthermore, it may also be useful to ask what effect their non-participation had on the descriptions presented here. That has not been discussed here in any way other than to illustrate the flexibility of the research design used in the study, but may require more substantial comment elsewhere. That, indeed, may form the focus of another study.

Some Final Remarks

The objectives and aims of this study were to explore to what extent the dominant narratives which were hypothesised to influence the experience of members of stepfamilies were important in the allocation of roles, and to what extent these were able to be

deconstructed. It has been a long journey, and one which may not lend itself to narrative closure (Wigren, 1994).

Indeed, as the title of this chapter suggests, the journey may just be beginning since many more questions and areas of interest have arisen through the process of this study than have been answered here.

However, notwithstanding the discovery of the importance of cross-generational narratives in stepfamilies, the objectives were limited to challenging the families' dominant narratives, and allowing for the emergence of other voices (Hoffman, 1990; M. White, 1991; Epston & White, 1990). These objectives were achieved, with both families deconstructing the dominant myths which were prevalent in their everyday experience. Above all else, the families and I found it to be a meaningful experience in our own lives and that was the primary gain of the study. While this does not suggest that these results can be generalised to say that deconstruction will be the method of choice in all such therapies, it hopefully has added another string to the therapist's bow when dealing with stepfamilies.

This study was not intended as a replacement for other approaches, but I hoped to provide an alternative to existing approaches, which would complement them. Furthermore, while it was not a stated aim or objective of the study to deconstruct narratives other than those which appeared to be the most dominant and important, the deconstructive process was seen to also be effective in the changing of cross-generational stories. In many ways this was an unintentional outcome of the study, but once again exhibits the importance of employing an emergent design when working in this way. Had it not been for the flexibility of the approach used, much of the richness of the material that came out of the Jones family's experience would have been lost.

In conclusion, then, I make no apologies for statements which reflect my own punctuations and biases as it was a story in which I was an actor with a role of the same importance as the two families involved. It is hoped, however, that those biases and punctuations are presented with enough clarity to allow the reader to determine for him or herself to what extent they have impacted on the material generated here.

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ADDENDUM

Introduction

The following notes and narratives are not full transcripts of the sessions involving the stepfamilies and myself, but are rather reconstructions based on process notes, thoughts and perceptions which may have occurred to me after the conclusion of the interviews.

They are reproduced here exactly as they are in my written notes, with no attention paid to editing them in order to make them more presentable.

There may, therefore, appear to be gaps which mar the fluid nature of the work preceding this. I ask the indulgence and patience of the reader when exploring these notes as I hope that by not altering the notes it will provide him or her with an idea of my assumptions.

As a guideline, though, it is important to note that unless stated openly what my contributions and comments are, those notes between [] brackets are my own thoughts and questions.

The Smith Family Narrative

Family History

Dirk (45)

Comes from a family of two children (both boys). Married twice before, and has two sons from those relationships - Biff (23) from his first wife and John (16) from his second. Owns his own aircraft maintenance company and describes himself as a "workaholic". Had a fairly

happy childhood, but has never had a good relationship with his mother, who he describes as being “very difficult and demanding.”

Sarah (39)

Runs a small home industries business. Comes from a family of four children (two boys, two girls) and her parents divorced when she was 25. This is her first marriage, and she reportedly “only got married to irritate my mother”. Feels a lot of resentment towards her mother despite their close relationship now, because “the girls in the family were never as privileged as the boys.”

Says that her childhood was “not fantastic, but not bad either.” Her father was away from home a lot, and she was “very disillusioned with him later in life”. Her mother “can’t stand Dirk, who she feels is a bad apple, like all men.”

Biff (23)

Works as a game ranger in the Northern Province. Lived with Dirk and Sarah from the start of the marriage, because his mother did not want him anymore. Was reportedly a “hell-raiser” and a “problem child” when younger.

John (16)

At boarding school and is very active playing sport. Is the “apple of his dad’s eye”, but has a very uneasy relationship with his biological mother who told him to go and live with his father and Sarah five years ago.

Janet (11)

At primary school, and described by the family as a very quiet but very sensitive child.

Session One

Neil: "Let me introduce myself a bit more thoroughly than I did when we spoke over the phone. My name is Neil Amooore and I'm a Masters student in Clinical Psychology at Unisa. I'm also a stepparent, and I'm interested in exploring the experiences of other stepfamilies to see what stories they have to tell.

I'm pleased to see that all members of the family are here for our meeting, and I appreciate that some of you had to travel a long way to get here. I'd like to know what your thoughts/ feelings/ concerns/ hopes and so on were when I contacted you about meeting today".

- * That we're all in the same room, and can't say what we'd like to (Sarah, Dirk & Biff).
- * That some sort of secret might come out (John).
- * That you might think we're crazy.
- * I feel like a lab rat (John).
- * That I'll have to give up too much time at work (Dirk).
- * That we'll learn to live with some of our problems (all).

It's interesting to note that Janet doesn't say anything and attempts to get her involved are blocked by John and Biff - comment on that later.

[What sort of problems? And do people think that we react to each other in ways that are determined by previous experiences/ expectations/ stories/ myths et cetera]

- * Relationship stuff - all except Janet (again!).
- * Been difficult right from the start - Sarah & Dirk
 - > Dirk pays John special attention and leaves me out of everything; John ignores me and has this fierce alliance-like thing with his dad - Sarah.

> Sarah doesn't know my boys like I do, her methods are unnecessary and too harsh; she is also too close to her mom, maybe because her dad was away a lot when she was a kid - Dirk.

>They describe their marriage as "full of ups and downs, but a lot better since Janet came along" - Dirk feels this is true of his relationship with his sons as well.

>Sarah tries hard to fit in, but she doesn't understand how this family works. It's a lot tougher than she might think - Biff.

[Biff appears upset at the "Sarah-bashing" that's taking place - is there an alliance here to match that between John and Dirk? What of Janet?]

> She shows more attention & spends more time with Janet, though, and I think Dad has noticed this, and tries to even it out by spending more time with his natural children. Sorry, Sarah. - Biff.

[Janet was getting more and more upset at the interchange and apparent criticism of Sarah, but relaxed considerably once Biff had seemingly noticed her discomfort and intervened - does she activate mom's defenders? Also, John kept looking at Dirk for confirmation of what he said.]

[I wondered how this "languaging" about the problem affected the way they see themselves as a family, and as fitting into their community]

* Dirk - "feel embarrassed to be in public when Sarah and the kids go at each other"

> "can't really enjoy myself with the family anymore, so I try and spend more time at work"

> "there always has to be a bad guy here, either when we argue or when things go wrong"

* Sarah - "I've never felt so inadequate and worthless, because I don't love them like I feel I should, and besides John twists everything anyway."

> “I get so angry that I could spit, because John really doesn’t care about me the way I feel he should, and I know that Dirk would like us to get on a lot better.”

> “When we’re in public together I know that I sometimes lose my cool, but I also know that that’s the only time that other people might sit up and realise how hard this job is.”

> “We’re stuck in a little cupboard, I feel, and it’s hard to find a way out of there. It seems so bad at times that I wish the lights would just go out.”

[This comment of Sarah’s visibly perturbed Dirk, Janet and Biff while John nodded in agreement - is this an ‘alliance’ or a recognition of the “outsider” status that they both seem to have?]

* Biff - “Aah, it just feels so different, you know. It’s odd., but I wish I had a normal family I could tell my friends about.”

> “It’s like we’re missing something as a family.”

* John - “I just hate this whole damn thing, because I don’t have what other kids my age have. Now I know what Cinderella felt like”

[This last comment brought forth laughter, and lightened the intensity in the room - just as Janet was getting ready to speak. There seems to be a need to protect Janet from the “horrors” of family life, and she is able to co-create this with a fearful, vulnerable position (posture et cetera)]

* Janet - “ I just wish that everybody could live together happily like other people.”

[View of the family appears to be one of exclusion and conflict]

[Asked the family to try and think of a time when the problem did not seem so bad, or when they had done something to avoid its influence. Also, what have they noticed in others that had helped achieve this]

[There is a long pause, with much fidgeting, shifting in seats and looking at each other. A sense that the family are bemused]

*Dirk - "We communicate with body language in this family. Just look at the way we're all jumping around now when you ask that question (laughter and agreement from other)."

[How managed to agree twice during this interview without slipping into roles described earlier?]

* General comments from everyone that they hadn't thought of it like that, and Dirk and Sarah both thought it was particularly interesting because they hadn't been trying to be "model or perfect parents".

Biff - felt that Sarah been very real in the interview, sharing "personal stuff".

John - "it's a start, but it's not enough yet."

Janet - "everyone's been more relaxed, that's why."

[?Important to "shed" roles and be "real" for people to get on]

[What qualities within relationships allow people to do this, and what does this say about them as a family?]

Dirk - "the questions are interesting, but I'd like more time to think about them."

Sarah, Janet, Biff - agree with Dirk, but John "knows what he wants."

[Asked them to think about writing a play that tells the story of what they're going to think about, and show us next month]

* Family are hesitant about writing about themselves.

Comments

There appears to be an alliance of sorts between Dirk and John which excludes Sara and Biff, who seems very protective of his stepmother. In a sense they have both been “rejected” by Dirk because of John and the difficulty they face in getting along with him.

John continually looked to Dirk for approval or censure, while Biff appeared almost fearful of his father at times. He would not make eye-contact with Dirk, and instead seemed to need to protect himself by protecting Sarah.

Janet is extremely quiet, and is treated as though she were made of porcelain. She is a very powerful figure, though, and is able to mobilise support or temper growing intensity.

Session Two:

* Family have written two stories and want me to narrate them.

* Janet is not involved in the first one “because she had not been born yet”

[The family actually act out the story while I read it aloud. Janet looks downcast at not being included, a posture that the rest of the family have noted and attempt to console her]

Comments on my notes

Dirk - “changed the view people have of Biff and Sarah’s relationship...closer than they would like to admit. Quite a lot like a mother and son relationship should be.”

>“also highlights the difference between my relationship with Biff and my relationship with John”

John - noticed how far he's drifted from his brother, and hearing Dirk speak it out loud is "very un-cool". Much worse hearing him say it than writing it.

[How process of writing has changed people's stories of the family?]

Sarah - "It was as if we were talking *about* something, rather than getting stuck in living it."

Comments

I intervened where I felt that the opportunity to externalise the problem existed - such as when discussing the "baby" (?metaphor for their family).

It was necessary to take an active part in this process, otherwise I feel it would not have served much purpose in and of itself. People needed to hear what other voices in the family were saying, or trying to say.

I wanted to know what qualities this baby had, as it seemed to be very important to the family that it survive. What qualities were in danger of dying out? What qualities did they need to survive?

Janet also seems to gain a voice for the first time since we started, and it may be no surprise that she is also strongly aligned with the "baby" prior to this - they need her to "survive" as well.

Session 3

[I'm interested in what changes have taken place since we last spoke, and how they see their roles and selves as a result of this change in storying]

Sarah - more involved with the boys and feels that Dirk is more supportive of her, although she'd still like a closer relationship with John.

Dirk - "definite relaxing of tensions" between him and Sarah, and doesn't need to protect his sons from her anymore.

Biff - closer to Sarah (more in the open now), just like with his "other" mother.

John - more of a player now, less of a substitute.

Janet - still very quiet, but more involved with her brothers now, and is not quite so attached to her mother anymore.

[How does this "alliance" between Sarah and Janet reflect the story of "resentment and domination" that Sarah feels is the relationship with her own mother?]

The Jones Family Narrative

Family History

Monty (28)

This is his second marriage, although the twins Susan and Ann (5) are his first children. He comes from a family of three (all boys) and is the oldest, but had a tempestuous upbringing.

His father was an abusive, abrupt man who had "terrible temper outbursts". When his younger brother - the middle son - died three years ago, his relationship with his parents soured further, and they refuse to allow Brenda to visit them.

Monty is a computer technician, but feels that he has not achieved the potential he showed at school, where he was "a straight-A student."

Brenda (32)

This is Brenda's second marriage, her first husband dying when she was six months pregnant with Lee. Their relationship had been both emotionally and physically abusive for Brenda who is a nurse. She comes from a stepfamily herself, her mother having been married three times - twice while Brenda was still at home.

Both stepfathers were reportedly abusive men, who made "liberal use of physical punishment" when we were naughty.

Brenda feels that her mother did not protect her enough from the abuse she suffered at the hands of her stepfathers. Instead, Brenda's brother had to act as her protector.

Her mother does not accept Monty as a son-in-law, describing him as a "poor excuse for [Brenda's] first husband, and bad for the children."

Lee (10)

At primary school, and reportedly doing well. Did not know her biological father, and regards Monty as her father.

Susan and Ann (5)

The twins are the product of Monty and Brenda's marriage, and proved to be very disruptive in the interviews.

Session One

Neil: "Let me introduce myself a bit more thoroughly than I did when we spoke over the phone. My name is Neil Amooore and I'm a Masters student in Clinical Psychology at Unisa. I'm also a stepparent, and I'm interested in exploring the experiences of other stepfamilies to see what stories they have to tell."

* Monty - “disciplining Lee is a major problem...I’m tougher than Brenda so I end up doing the disciplining”.

> “all I do is send her to her bedroom when she’s naughty, or bollocks her (moan at her).

> “tacit assumption that I’d do the disciplining, perhaps that’s why I was brought in.”

> “I was brought up tough. I you cried you got hit.”

[Monty describes his temper outbursts and what bodily changes he experiences when he loses his temper. We then spend some time exploring ways in which Brenda can identify when Monty is going to lose his temper, and what she does when this happens]

* Brenda - “I feel that Lee is mine because she comes from my life prior to Monty. I sometimes feel like telling him to just leave her the hell alone.”

> “He goes overboard....certainly a lot more violent than me. I discipline more than him, but he does it in such a nasty way.”

> “When I react to what he’s doing he sulks. I may pay more attention to the kids than him, and he feels left out, I don’t know.”

> “When he’s angry he’s like a typical stepfather, just like my two stepfathers in fact. Mean, nasty and completely selfish and self-involved.”

> “People in the house are scared of him and his temper.”

> “I didn’t bank on this stepfamily thing being such a big issue, that it would be different this time and that it’s be the same as any other family. It’s been a massive shock, and it’s hard to keep going sometimes.”

{When last did Monty not sulk in the face of such “rejection”? How had he managed to not do this?}

Monty - by leaving the room, and taking a long walk. I can’t be there when it happens.

[What did Brenda do that made this possible that time?]

Monty - she looked really determined and set to face up to me. That was new, and I wasn't ready to deal with that.

[Lee is very quiet now. She has been watching Monty very carefully, almost to see what his intent is. I feel that she should be allowed a voice in here. She's already moderating what's going on, but that needs to be amplified and perhaps commented on.]

[It may be time to externalise the problem, so that the "blaming game" can't be played. The feelings that people may have towards the problem can be explored though]

* Lee mentions something about a "stepfather bogeyman from out of the TV" who is trying to trap Monty - this causes Monty and Brenda to laugh (again draining away the tension, but also setting up an opportunity to work at externalising the problem. Is she protecting Brenda again by rendering Monty as "harmless"?)

[Seems easier for the family to band together and fight an external threat . How have they managed to avoid the bogeyman's traps so far?]

Monty and Brenda say it hasn't been easy, but agree with Lee who says that the family were happier when they used to spend weekends playing games like Monopoly, Cluedo and so on.

[What qualities of that relationship were "loudest" and helped beat this bogeyman?]

Monty - "easier when this competition we have for each other's space was kept within the rules of those games."

> "I thought I'd be the happiest man alive when we got married, but all we do is try to hurt each other. I want to stop that, but I need Brenda and the kids to stop seeing me as the bad guy all the time."

Brenda - "this damned bogeyman thing has got us stuck. I can't be the sort of wife and mom I thought I could be because I'm always worried about what Monty is going to do next."

Lee - "I want to be happy, and have a happy mommy and daddy, and to be able to call Monty daddy like the twins can. But this big scary bogeyman keeps coming into the house, and we can't keep him away."

The family comment that they managed to beat the bogeyman by "going on holiday at home" for a week. They had relaxed a lot, and Monty had not been the disciplinarian at all. Brenda had relaxed too, and the children had seemed less disruptive.

Comments

Brenda reports that the twins will always sit with her if space permits it, but that Lee will go to Monty. During the session, though, Lee went straight to sit with Brenda, particularly when the intensity between her parents increased.

There is a sense that Lee is protecting Brenda from Monty ("parentified child"), and she often diverted the process away from Brenda and "gave Monty something to do" such as getting her water, cooldrink or telling him what she did at school that week.

The twins were in and out of the room the whole time, but particularly so when Monty appeared to get angry and Brenda looked fearful. There is a strong sense that his role as aggressor is co-constructed.

The notion of bereavement is also strong in Monty's "family stories" - his brother died, his father "wasn't much of a father" and now he's "lost" his ability to be a father to his children.

Brenda too appears to have a history of turbulence - abusive stepfathers et cetera.

Was this marriage doomed from the start?

There seems to be a struggle for space within the family - Monty wants more time with Brenda; Brenda needs space to be both wife and mom; Lee wants space to be happy; the twins need space to be playful, and take it forcefully.

Perhaps the uncertainty of which story fits the family's adult relationship is unsettling for the children. Their storying is about insecurity, and perhaps Monty and Brenda should try and take the lead in finding new ways to story about experiences.

Session 2

[The family have not written a script as such, but have written a "documentary" and will play musical chairs because games seem to allow people to relax more. I ask the family what they thought of my notes, and they say that my comments were "interesting"]

[During the musical chairs Brenda and Lee always seem to get the chairs, while Monty hangs back. Is he protecting the mother-daughter dyad in some way? How does this story stay alive, and why does Monty help it so?]

Monty - "they have a special understanding that no-one else does, and I sometimes feel jealous of that. I'd like to be that close to Brenda. I guess my temper keeps me away from them a lot. I suppose that's what all stepfathers are like, and I'm no different. We're all bad guys so I suppose Brenda's right about us."

Brenda - "I understand her because I'm her mother. He (Monty) should understand her by now. I suppose that gives me a good position though, doesn't it? I can always say he doesn't understand her like I do. Wow! What a defense!"

[There are now two more chairs brought into the game, and Monty and Brenda allow the children to win. This seem to have an impact on Lee who relaxes now that her parents seem to

be in some sort of agreement. The twins also seem more relaxed, having an “ally” in Lee who understands what the adult sub-system is up to. The game seems to have changed after what Monty and Brenda said - co-operation rather than competition. The family should consider this and my notes from the last session in trying to find out what sort of influence these changing stories are having on their perceptions of themselves as a family]

Session 3

[This session is cut short by circumstance - Monty is going away on business - and no follow-up can be scheduled for a while. In the end we agree to work as intensely as we can, and to see where we go. I am interested in the feedback from the family. What has been happening since we last met, and what developments have there been]

* The family report feeling relived and a lot “lighter” because changing things so that they could interact in a fun way was illuminating for them. Monty says they had forgotten how to do that.

* They felt as though they had been “locked in a cupboard”, cramped and without room to move but that playing the game and hearing their story read out aloud had been “loosening”.

* There are still problems - Lee is getting more and more boisterous; the twins are “naughty as hell at nursery school”; Brenda’s job is terrible and Monty is also under tremendous stress at work.

* There is more room to approach these problems, though, because “we don’t have to behave and think the way we have been.”

[Getting out of the strict confines of competition-conflict has been freeing in some way, and is a change in the way that they story about themselves as a family. They can have fun together too]

* Hearing what I had to say during the “plays” had been valuable because it allowed “another perspective” to be heard. Writing the “documentary” had also been an eye-opener because it had “been so different to see our reality changed when we changed the words we used.”

Comments

There is *some* change here, but I’m not sure what it is. It almost seems too rosy or too intangible for there to have been any second order change. There seems to be a story that I’m not hearing, and it’s very frustrating for me.

There was no sense of closure similar to that with the Smith family. I know there can’t be a generalisation, but this process still seems to be up in the air.

I needed to be particularly active in this family - intervening in the play and asking a number of questions. Does this in any way reflect the process of activity that the family feel characterises them?

The Smith Family Stories

“The way it is....”

She lay sleepily in the shadow of the thorn tree. It gave her little shade but here in this hard, unforgiving land you took what you could get. She gazed at the big, powerful male, with his magnificent black mane and arrogant stance. He seemed to be so sure of his power.

He stood on an ant heap and watched his cubs, two males - one on the verge of adulthood, the other a juvenile. They were his cubs from previous encounters with females from other prides, and she was still amazed that he had kept them with him despite his genetic programming to fatherhood.

He was a good leader to these cubs and even now they strutted around the grassland secure in the knowledge that they too would soon command their world.

As the sun rose and the flies buzzed annoyingly around her eyes, she rolled onto her back to warm her stomach. Her thoughts went back to her recent impala kill. They'd all eaten well even though the cubs had had first choice.

She knew this to be wrong as the male always ate first, but when she'd nudged them away so that he could have first taste of the soft underbelly he'd roared loudly at her and bitten her neck.

The older cub had crept over to comfort her, but he too got a painful nip from Black Mane.

The juvenile, being young and therefore excitable, had seemed to revel in the conflict and had adopted the “Black Mane” stance and attempted a great roar.

Now that the lioness was under control, Black Mane started eating.

Afterwards, as they'd lain under the thorn tree, she'd crept over to lick Black Mane's face to clean him and make peace with him.

Black Mane held pride of place with all the other males in the area and no-one dared challenge him. He took his cubs with him wherever he went to recce, and allowed them to mark his territory.

She worried about the wisdom of this act. The cubs were growing in confidence daily and she was worried that other males in the area might not tolerate such impertinent behaviour.

When she'd tried to modify their behaviour he'd been banished by Black Mane, who'd let it be known that they were his cubs and not to be touched by another.

She would then have to watch them from a safe distance.

She'd been very young when she'd first met Black Mane and had been impressed with his prowess. Not only was he a great hunter and a good leader but he seemed to carry good genes as well.

This was important to her as she wanted to continue her line of heritage and knowledge.

Black Mane had had the older cub with him at their first meeting and she had immediately tried to adopt the role of mother to the cub. This puzzled her as he did not appear to want anything to do with her.

At first Black Mane was content to let her teach the cub, but once she started teaching him her gentler ways he would stare her down with his fiery yellow eyes until she submitted.

Her own mother had been a matriarch in her own pride and had protected her cubs with a fierceness that still stunned her. This was how it was meant to be.

For a while, the three of them roamed the vast open plains learning to live as a family. One day, though, Black Mane returned from a recce with his youngest cub and everything seemed to change.

Very much like Black Mane, this youngest cub had made his first kill. Clearly enthralled with his cub, Black Mane would lie in the shade for hours and watch him play roaring with delight at each new development.

She would try to join in the play and get the other cub involved, reproaching this youngest cub when he got too boisterous with either her or his brother. He would look at her disdainfully then, and strut off to lie beside "Black Mane".

This would please Black Mane, and the two of them would wander off to stalk unsuspecting impala for fun.

She would then lie next to the other cub and they would talk of things that they had done together. She loved these moments because she knew this cub missed his own mother, who had abandoned him.

Lately, though, she'd become more and more irritated with the youngest cub and would snap at him if he came too near her. Undeterred he would fight back so viciously that she would be intimidated. He sensed this and would terrorise her further.

Black Mane was not interested in this conflict and would get irritated by her whining and would take the cub off with him. This incensed her, but she was helpless.

If only Black Mane would spend more time with them during the day to see how things were he would see she needed his support. Slowly her resentment for his relationship with the cub grew.

She knew that their survival depended on them working together as a team, but this new alliance was threatening that.

The family moved around a lot and this bothered her because she would need a patch of her own to give birth to the cub she was now sure she was carrying.

This cub would give her unconditional love, and would be the link she felt she needed with Black Mane. She would teach this new cub compassion, respect and the importance of being part of a pride.

This was her reason for being in this pride. Maybe the rest did not know it yet, but she had a higher purpose now.

“If only...”

The baby was tiny, his little chest rose dramatically with each desperate breath. His colour was terrible too, and the doctors had pushed life-giving pipes into his little nostrils to give him oxygen.

They could see through his paper-thin skin to the tiny blue and red veins trying to carry blood to all parts of his broken little body.

He had made his entry into the world far too soon, and they all wondered what silent power was keeping him alive. All around them the “beep beep” of machines and the hiss of the oxygen pipes were the only sounds. Still, it seemed loud and intrusive.

They stood quietly, staring down at this little person not knowing what to say to each other. Each with their own thoughts and fears, and yet together as a family willing this baby to hang onto life.

Life - how different their lives were from each other, the diverse paths they had taken or would still take. And yet with a bond between them that no matter what, was forged through love and commitment.

The father said to the family “Come, let’s welcome this baby into our lives.”

The women stood on one side of him and hugged him while the younger boy was unable to deal with what he was seeing and turned to stare out of the window.

Slowly he turned to face his parents and the others in the family, and said "Decisions need to be made, let's go to the coffee shop and discuss this."

As they sat around the coffee table deep in thought, they were a strange bunch. The two women had their heads bent towards each other, speaking in hushed tones.

They stopped and started instead to ask the other family members what physical features they shared with the baby. The boys seemed to take it as a bit of a joke, though, and started squabbling with each other.

That was the way it had always been, with the various members trying to deal with things each in their own way. But this time there was something different. They suddenly seemed to realise how serious this was, and started instead to try and wish this baby back to health.

Everyone was listening. The bond they shared was complex, yet had simple components, blood, love and respect.

The older woman said "Right guys, let's decide what's to be done about 'our' baby."

Slowly, but surely with moments of anger, tears and some laughter a decision was made. Finances were discussed and times to do things set down. Everyone had said their piece, even the children and suddenly the situation did not seem so serious. They finished their coffee and all scratched around for money to pay the bill and then left to go back to the ward.

As they arrived a beaming doctor told them that while the baby was not yet out of danger completely, he was holding his own and would probably pull through.

As he turned to leave, he wasn't sure who belonged to who because they all seemed to belong together.

The Jones Family Story

“A Tale of Two Tales”

This is a tale of two tales. Both concern the same family but are essentially a “before” and “after”, or should we say a “what seems like before” and what “we hope will be after”.

It’s a classic story of boy meets girl. They fall in love and get married against everyone’s wishes. He tells his family to “take a hike” and she does the same.

This is great, but also causes a lot of tension because the families still have a lot of influence over the two of them. Life is okay for a while but tension in the new family starts to rear its head sooner than anticipated.

He has a temper best left well alone and she has underlying problems that cause her great distress when this temper shows itself. Tensions really start to rise when he starts to lose his temper and raise his hands to others. He goes for therapy but still doesn’t learn to control his temper.

Throughout this, the young girl is affected by the conflict and when news of twins is announced there is some nervousness. How will the temper tantrums affect them?

The twins are born and the cycle continues. The adults try and hurt each other more and more, and so the vicious cycle is repeated. Tale one continues until either an ugly or bitter divorce happens, or someone does something pathetically stupid.

Tale two has all of the above ingredients, but the family have decided to change the ending somewhat. The time has come to stop destroying the family.

A realisation is reached that a family has to co-exist within itself even with differing people in the unit. There will always be arguments and disagreements but they do not have to remain

unresolved and swept under the carpet. The time has come where a collective bargaining structure must be put in place.

Sure, the damage done through the years will take a long time to be undone, but so long as no new damage is done the healing process will take place. The couple have come to the conclusion that it is no good to keep going to professionals in an effort to learn what went wrong.

It is up to them to begin communicating and showing one another mutual respect to ensure that nothing else goes wrong.

Once they have stabilised things to the point where they are both involved in the decision-making, they can begin to dissect their past history and learn from it without the recriminations that tend to create stumbling blocks in their path.

There will still be problem areas within the family but, with a little common sense, these can be discussed and solutions found that are workable for all.

He now realises that he cannot be alone in the family without hurting the others, and is trying to do more to change the others' perceptions of him. He is trying to help around the house more and, although he can still be selfish and has a terrible temper, is allowing those around him to see behind his mask.

She has also tried to change her story, and is now trying to integrate herself more. She has learnt that sometimes people need their space and is now prepared to allow it to happen within certain restrictions.