Spinning the Web: The Creation of Mind and Self

The title of this presentation, Spinning the Web, is meant to suggest the process of

creating the human web of connection through which we achieve true selfhood. The

Japanese have a special for this kind of connection. They call it *giri*, and it refers to the

complex network of interpersonal relationships, loyalties and obligations that make life

meaningful. Just as the spider weaves together a myriad of silken threads to create the

web upon which she depends for survival, we humans weave together innumerable

cultural threads to create a narrative of self. As Clifford Geertz reminds us, "[without

the constituting role of culture] we are unworkable monstrosities … incomplete or

unfinished animals" (as cited in Bruner, 1990, p. 12). The meaning of human existence is

achieved through social connection; language is our means of entry into the human web.

Through mutual listening and sharing of each other's stories, we learn which narratives

will work and which will not in connecting us to our culture. It is by telling and retelling

our stories that we create and refine our conceptions of self. From earliest childhood,

culture gives shape to our minds, and as we become adults our minds in turn shape

culture.

From this lectern in 1998 this observation seems self-evident. And yet it has taken me

nearly thirty years to realize it. Why? In part because Psychology, the discipline in

which I have grown up, was not particularly interested in understanding human meaning.

Its goal was to make of the human a natural object to be studied by the objective methods

of Newtonian science. My dissertation title says it all: *Behavior Therapy for Phobias*

(Extinction of Avoidance) in Rats. Psychology's assumption was that the laws that governed humans were the same as those that governed rats. I believed, as the great behaviorist B.F. Skinner had promised, that reductionistic laboratory studies of behavior would yield the universal laws that would allow us to reach psychology's goals: The description, prediction and control of behavior. These beliefs guided my behavior: I administered a behavior modification program and designed token economies in schools and hospitals for developmentally disabled children. I continued rat research at Wabash College. I applied the principles of behavior management to raising our son. He turned out very well by the way, so I'm not about to abandon behaviorism – but I no longer see it as providing answers to very many interesting questions.

The seeds of my dissatisfaction with psychology's methods were sown as early as graduate school but remained dormant for some time. I kept the doubts I harbored hidden after I caused some consternation among my Skinnerian professors on my preliminary doctoral examinations by suggesting that a thinking mind might be shown to mediate between stimulus and response. My instincts for survival suggested that silence would be the better alternative.

About the time I was finishing up my dissertation research, the second wave of the Woman's Movement was getting underway. I had been asked to join a women's group at Dartmouth but was frankly puzzled that women were making such a fuss. I felt pretty smug about getting ahead on my own merits and efforts. Feminism was the refuge of the incompetent and the weak, I thought. And then the hammer fell: In January of 1991, 8

months pregnant, I was waiting in the psychology department's lounge to hear whether my oral dissertation defense had been successful. It was taking, I thought, an awfully long time for my advisor to return with the good news. When he did, he said the delay was occasioned not by the quality of my dissertation but by discussion among other members of the committee, all men, who shared concerns about the repercussions for my family life should I be awarded the degree earlier than my husband. My incipient feminism, on that occasion, found voice. Unfortunately, only my husband heard it!

Two years later, I sat in the Great Hall in Sparks Center at the annual welcoming dinner where Division Chair George Lovell first introduced me to the faculty as a visiting professor and the first woman to have full faculty status at Wabash. Women had taught here around the time of the first war, one for as long as 16 years, but they didn't have full faculty status. My introduction was loudly booed by some of my colleagues; I was rendered speechless. I wasn't unfamiliar with being a minority in academe, and I certainly wasn't afraid of single-sex colleges after the Dartmouth experience. But what I wasn't prepared for was people being afraid of me! My survival, personal and professional at that point, depended on making connections to other women. I joined a consciousness raising group, and as I shared my stories and listened to those of other women, I found a new voice, a feminist one. This new voice soon came to inform my critique of psychology: In a lecture on psychoanalysis to my senior seminar in 1978 I said:

> I am constantly frustrated at finding that for the most part psychological theory is a theory of men and women. I do not find my own experiences recognized, much less validated or explained in the traditional literature. I find that what had been a

quest to understand human beings has been a self-examination by men, and to borrow a term from Freud, a narcissistic examination at that. This, I believe, is a tragedy for a least half the human race whose psyches remain invisible; enshrined by men as the "other" half, the unwhole half, the half without a penis. (as cited in Bankart, 1997).

In the 1980-81 academic year I traveled to Tokyo to direct the Japan Study Program. This afforded me the exciting opportunity to study another culture firsthand and to conduct a detailed comparison of Japanese and American women's roles. At first it seemed obvious to me that the Japanese were substantially behind Americans in terms of being liberated. Women had few of the rights in the workplace I had come to expect even at a single sex college. But, as I dug deeper into the culture I came to suspect that American biases about what it means to be liberated had prevented me from recognizing that the place of women in Japanese culture was much more complex than my so-called objective research methods revealed. I am glad to say that as I finally learned to listen nonjudgmentally to women's stories I began to perceive and to appreciate the value of a separate women's sphere of influence within the Japanese culture. I realized that my own biases had colluded with an insensitive methodology to silence the women I had hoped to understand. That is not to say, however, that I wasn't relieved to return home where American women have more choices and more freedom within the public sphere.

These three threads from my early professional career- nascent dissatisfaction with behaviorism and its reductionistic view of humans, commitment to a feminist social constructionist explanation of human experience, and an understanding of culture both as creator of human experience and as a lens through which we make evaluative judgments -

are the consistent elements that have come to inform my epistemological stance.   You'll recognize these same themes in this afternoon's critique of the history of psychology, and in my articulation of my hopes for psychology's future.

In the 17th century, René Descartes (1596-1650) separated the body from mind. According to Descartes, the body was *res extensa* – the extended or material thing. The mind was *res cogitans* – the thinking thing. Unlike the body, the mind had no material substance, and this, it turned out would be a problem for a science of psychology.

A science, in the tradition of positivist Enlightenment thinking, considers the human being a thing of nature, a material thing, and as such governed by the same deterministic laws as the rest of the natural, material world. The task of psychology, the science of mind, was to uncover the objective and free-standing reality of human experience that stemmed from natural law - to discover the psychic unity of humankind - our essential being. The method of science was observation. And therein lies a dilemma, for how can one dispassionately observe and verify publicly an insubstantial mind, a mind known only to the self through introspection. The psychological study of the mind appeared to be ruled out by the mind's immaterial nature and the artificial but necessary limits of a positivist scientific method.

But, perhaps not. Descartes thought that mind interacted with body.   Since mind was immaterial it permeated the entire body and through the pineal gland, a tiny cluster of neurons in the back of the brain, willed the body to act or not. Thus the mind influenced

body. Perhaps one could study the body as a window to the mind. If so, the problem of the inaccessibility of mind to observation could be overcome.

An 18th century attempt to apply this method to the study of the mind is illustrated by the work of Casper Lavater (1741- 1801). He was a practitioner of physiognomy, the "science" of explaining mental traits and personality from facial features, body structure, and habitual postures. Lavater believed that "… physiognomy [was] as capable of becoming as [good] a science as any of the sciences, mathematics, of course, excepted." (Lavater as cited in Bringman *et al*, 1997, p.31). An illustration from *his Essays on Physiognomy* showed the profiles of six orphan boys, (OVERHEAD 1)) whose "personalities, talents, aptitudes, strength," and "general outlook on life" were known to Lavater through his personal contact with them (Lavater, as cited in Bringman *et al*, 1997, p.31). Lavater posed sixteen questions about the young orphans, which his readers were to answer on the basis of their physiognomic skills. Let's see how well you do on one of his questions: "Which orphan is the most suited for education? (The answer is # 3.) Had Lavater's theory been valid, no doubt the Driector of Admissions would now be hiring physiognomists to assess applicants to Wabash College. He was not right of course; even critics of his time challenged Lavater's naïve claims about the universal validity of his physiognomic signs. One particularly acerbic critic published a biting satire of Lavater's assessment of the orphan boys under the title of *Fragment of Tails* which diagnosed the personalities of "six anonymous and mostly inactive pigs" from the silhouettes of their tails (Bringman et al, 1998, p. 32). (OVERHEAD 2)

Somewhat later Franz Joseph Gall 1758-1828) become the first scientist to take seriously the idea that the brain was the seat of the mind.   Gall set out to correlate specific behavioral functions with analogous areas of the brain. He assumed that well-developed behaviors would correspond to well-developed areas of the brain, and that these areas would be registered on the skull as bumps. Similarly, weak traits would correspond to underdeveloped areas of the brain and would be reflected by indentations in the skull. It remained only for Gall and other phrenologists as they were called, to map out the brain by observing the personality traits of people with various skull bumps and indentations. (OVERHEAD 3) Phrenology or Cranioscopy, as it was known, didn't fare well with critical scientists of the day but that didn't stop it from gaining considerable popularity in the United States. Two industrious business men, Orson and Lorenzo Fowler, set up offices in New York where clients came to have their characters read for a fee (Leahey, 1997, p. 270). They also gave lectures and demonstrations claiming that they could tell employers what people to hire and advise men which women to marry. Had phrenology stood the test of empiricism, no doubt today's deans would be applying this technique to find those faculty most deserving of tenure.

Unfortunately for people who parted with their money for such analyses, Gall was wrong about the skull corresponding to the topography of the brain. In this respect he shares good company, however, with a number of equally misguided psychologists who, at the turn of the century, failed to confirm their beliefs that women's smaller brain size was proof of their inferior intelligence. Other attempts to correlate skull shape with qualities of mind proved as fruitless as this overhead illustrates. (OVERHEAD 4)

Gall was right, however, about the brain being the organ of the mind, and about the specialization of brain function. Furthermore, his connecting of functional behavior to the mind's organ, the brain, was consistent with the evolutionary perspective that mind evolved in humans as an adaptive mechanism to help us manage everyday life (Leahey, 1997).

In the years following Gall's work, the refinement of his reductionistic view of mind became increasingly equated with a structuralist view of the brain. Today we monitor brain activity while people are doing various psychological tasks, and locate precisely which areas of the brain are at work. Here are composite MRI images (OVERHEAD 4) of brain activation during phonological processing in 19 men and 19 women. You can see clearly that the male is using different areas of the brain than the female. At last, you may say, clear cut evidence that male and female brains work differently when engaged in the same task. Evidence perhaps of an essential natural difference between the psychologies, if not the minds, of males and females? Ah, but I haven't told you the whole story. Both men and women perform the task equally well! Two different brain patterns- the same end behavior. So we have found essential neurological differences between males and females, but we still don't know anything about the psychological processes that gave rise to the same performance. We know about brain, but the mind remains illusive (Lyon & Ramsey (Eds.), 1996, p. xxxi).

One could argue convincingly and remain in good company that a reductionistic approach to mind is never going to yield answers to all the questions psychologists have about mind. In 1890 *in Principles of Psychology*, William James stated his belief that the physical and mental worlds were on parallel but different planes in the following passage where he distinguishes between mind history and body history:

> If we knew thoroughly the nervous system of Shakespeare, and as thoroughly all his environing conditions, we should be able to show why at a certain period of his life his hand came to trace on certain sheets of paper those crabbed little black marks which we for shortness' sake call the manuscript of Hamlet. We should understand … all this without in the slightest degree acknowledging the existence of thoughts in Shakespeare's mind. [B]ut, on the other hand, nothing in all this could prevent us from giving an equally complete account of … Shakespeare's spiritual history, an account in which gleam of thought and emotion should find its place. The mind-history would run alongside the body-history of each man, and each point in the one would correspond to, but not react upon, a point in the other. (James, 1890 as cited in Flanagan, 1991, p. 40)

The concept of there being two separate histories or stories accounting for the creation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* suggests that "any analysis of a significant human act framed totally in the languages of physics and neuroscience will fail to capture certain essential facts related to the meaning and significance of that act" (Flanagan, 1991,p. 40-41). A full-blown science of the mind may indeed require different levels of description, some intentional, some neurological, in order to answer different explanatory questions. James himself had concluded that "science is not the only order" (Karier, p.15)

James was offering an alternative view of mind from the one offered by the competing psychology of the day - structural psychology - which viewed mind as reducible to its elements. Franz Brentano, James' contemporary, also challenged the structural view of mind. Mind, he argued, should be defined not by its contents but by its activity. All mental acts, he said, had intentions; that is, they were about something. One thought about an idea. One judged an idea. One felt an emotion. One created Hamlet. Furthermore, only mental states possess intentionality: "A neuron can never refer to, be about, or intend anything, because it is mere matter and can no more refer to something outside itself than can a rock" (Leahey, 1996, p. 213). Scientific methods can reduce mind to neurons but will not find intentionality in the process. An objective scientific method which by definition, has to exclude unobservable phenomenon can not investigate the intentional quality of mind.

Another direction that psychology took after Gall's pronouncement of the mind-brain connection was informed by Darwinian functionalism. Psychologists began to study behavior as the reflection of an adaptive mind. This route led ultimately to the doctrine of behaviorism that in its most radical form, dispensed with mind altogether. Behaviorism, positivism's kin, had no need for mind in order to achieve its Holy Grail to describe, predict, and control behavior. A difficulty with such goals is that "[psychology's] obsession with methodology had created a discipline whose primary goal [became] the application of technology rather than the investigation of issues of genuine import to our understanding of human experience (Caplan & Nelson (1973) as cited in Bohan, 1992, p.13). Jerome Bruner in writing a landmark series of essays, which he collected in his

book, *Acts of Meaning*, agrees. Psychology had become so narrow and sealed in, he declared, that the wider intellectual community largely ignored our journals which were filled with "intellectually unsituated little studies, each a response to handful of like little studies" (Bruner, 1990, p. xi). The ethos of the scientific methodology that characterized our physics envy had given way to methodolatry, leaving no room for seeking answers to the "great psychological questions… about the nature of mind and its processes, … about how we construct our meanings and our realities, … [and] about the shaping of mind by history" (Bruner, 1990, p.xi). It seemed in the words of Sigmund Koch that [the] stipulation that psychology be adequate to science [has] outweighed [the] commitment that it be adequate to humanity…. (as cited in Bohan, 1992, p. 14).

Behaviorism, thankfully for those of us interested in big questions, fell from power during the 1960s as psychologists returned to the study of mind in a shift that was dubbed "The Cognitive Revolution." There was hope in certain circles that the new psychology would study the symbolic activities that humans employed in constructing and in making sense not only of the world but also of themselves, and that meaning would be established as the central concept of psychology.

Alas, this hope was premature. As always, science's metaphors take their cue from the technology of the times and not surprisingly by the late 1970s, electronic computing became the dominant model of mind. The mind became an information processor and meaning became information. Cognitive processes were likened to computers programmed with a set of heuristics for decision-making. There was no room in this CPU

metaphor of mind for intentional states like believing, desiring, intending, and grasping meaning. Nor was there room for human agency since agency "implies the conduct of action under sway of intentional states." Electronic circuits, it turns out, are no more capable of intention than are neurons. Once more a positivist, reductionist model of human mind overshadowed one organized around meaning-making.

Fortunately, the Cognitive Revolution fell on more fertile soil elsewhere. Psychologists like Kenneth Gergen and anthropologists like Clifford Geertz, although marginalized by mainstream computationalism, continued their work on the fringes of the Revolution. They were sympathetic to William James' understanding of mind almost a century earlier:

> The knower is not simply a mirror floating with no foothold anywhere, and passively reflecting an order that he comes upon and finds existing. The knower is an actor, and co-efficient of the truth on one side, whilst on the other he registers the truth which he helps to create. (Reed, 1997, p. 204)

James' humans were creatures of Darwinian evolution, possessors of a unique set of abilities and inclinations who must select aspects of their surroundings to attend to and act on, even transform (Reed, 1997, p. 205).

> Minds are not internal realities that reflect the external ones…. They are parts of living organisms and aid in the process of selection, as Darwin intimated. We are forced to select what we do and what we attend to, and this selection is based largely on the interests and needs tied up with action. (Reed, 1997, p. 216)

What James didn't emphasize in his time was the role that culture plays in directing our actions. Humans have a social history as well as a physical one. Jerome Bruner tells us

that culture is "the major factor [which gives] form to the minds of those living under its sway… [The human is] a product of history rather than nature" (1990, p. 11-12). This contextual view of human mind is one that informs the new interdisciplinary field of Cultural Psychology, which is concerned with cultural and ethnic differences in the processes of consciousness. In their classic essay, "Cultural Psychology: Who Needs It?", Shweder and Sullivan (1993) elaborate:

> A culture, from this analytic perspective, is that subset of possible or available meanings, which by virtue of enculturation … has so given shape to the psychological processes of individuals in a society that those meanings have become, for those individuals, indistinguishable from experience itself. (p. 512).

The goals of cultural psychology are to spell out the implicit meanings that shape psychological processes, and to identify the manner of their social acquisition. Let me give you a concrete example of what I mean.   In the American culture we must adapt to a world which emphasizes independence. At birth we are dependent on others. The job of our culture, in the hands of our parents and other socializing agents, is to teach us to become autonomous and capable individuals.   In Japanese culture, the newborn infant is perceived differently. He or she is seen as unconnected to significant others. The task of Japanese culture is to connect the child to his or her community. To this end, children rarely leave their mothers' sight until they first attend preschool or kindergarten. For several years they are carried close to their mothers bodies in special coats made just for this purpose, and they sleep in the same bed with their parents The yield of these two approaches to child-rearing is, on the one hand, the creation of the Independent Self characteristic of American culture, and on the other, the creation of the Interdependent Self more characteristic of Asian culture (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In each case the

culture has shaped a self which is a reflection of the community at large, and which

determines the very nature of individual experience including cognition, emotion, and

motivation. This is not to say that individuals within these cultures consciously recognize

the concepts involved in their construals of self. As Geertz puts it, " People use these

concepts spontaneously, unselfconsciously, as it were colloquially; they do not, except

fleetingly and on occasion, recognize that there are any concepts involved at all" (Geertz,

as cited in Shweder & Sullivan, 1193, p. 508). It is the task of the cultural psychology of

self to determine the concepts and beliefs implicit in the individual's self-functioning

regardless of whether the members of the group acknowledge these concepts and beliefs

or spell them out for themselves. So a cultural psychology is an interpretive psychology

in the sense that history and anthropology are interpretive disciplines. But that does not

mean that it need be unprincipled or without methods, even hard-nosed ones (Bruner,

1990).

Let me give you an illustration of such principled methods. In their work on independent

and interdependent selves, Markus & Kitayama (1991) tested whether or not persons

presumed to have such differently constituted selves acted in predictably different ways.

They hypothesized that

> If people conceive of themselves as interdependent parts of larger social wholes,
> it is important for them to be sensitive to and knowledgeable about the others that
> are the coparticipants in various relationships … Maintaining one's relationships
> and ensuring a harmonious social interaction requires a full understanding of
> these others, that is, knowing how they are feeling, thinking, and likely to act in
> the context of one's relationship to them. It follows that those with interdependent

selves may develop a dense and richly elaborated store of information about others. ..(pp. 231-232)

Markus and Kitayama and their colleagues examined this idea in a study requiring similarity judgments between self and others. (OVERHEAD) The results showed a typical pattern for Americans. The self is judged to be more dissimilar to other than other is to the self. This means that for the typical American, the representation of self is more elaborated and distinctive in memory that the representation of the other person. Americans tend to believe they are unique, autonomous individuals so they tend to focus on how they are different from others. The opposite results were obtained with students from Eastern cultures. These students judged the self to be more similar to the other than is the other to the self.   That is, in Eastern culture knowledge about others is relatively more elaborated and distinctive than knowledge about the self. The Japanese want to fit in, to be part of the group, so it is in their interest to downplay how dissimilar they are to others. This research shows that how the self is constituted does make a difference in how one responds to the world. The Japanese may be unable to articulate the concept of an interdependent self but they certainly process their experience according to implicit cultural beliefs about how social relationships should operate. What Markus and Kitayama have done successfully is to construct and test empirically a theory about when, which, and how different conceptions of the self may be causally involved in a person's actions and reactions to the world.

The rich contextual view of mind that cultural psychology can offer gets lost if we dissect it under the microscope of positivist science. To the extent that we isolate behavior from its context for objective examination, we lose the nature of the object under investigation.   We strip it of the very qualities that define it. It is not surprising that science, which is itself, a western invention, has "found" an individual that is perceived as independent, isolated, and distinct from others. One must ask to what extent our scientifically oriented culture has created this individual.

I believe it's time for psychologists to reclaim a paradigm that attends to all strata of human existence: from the objective frame of the physical realm to the linguistic frame of expression and meaning-making. We need theory that is sensitive to the transformative effects on mind of culture and language, and I am persuaded that a narrative theory of human existence is a promising candidate. In an essay published in Sarbin's book, Narrative Psychology, Karl Scheibe has this to say about identity and narrative:

> Human identities are considered to be evolving constructions; they emerge out of continual social interactions in the course of life. Self-narratives are developed stories that must be told in specific historical terms, using a particular language, … a particular stock of working historical conventions, and a particular pattern of dominant beliefs and values.   The most fundamental narrative forms are universal, but the way these forms are styled and filled with content will depend upon particular historical conventions of time and place. (Scheibe as cited in Polkington, 1988, p. 106)

Embedded in Scheibe's description of narrative is one of Cultural Psychology's core assumptions: that there is human universality without uniformity. We use narratives to

organize our knowledge about our selves. Our narratives are about why we do things and why we don't. They serve to create a consistent self that transcends the inconsistencies in our acts over time, place and person. Thus narratives become a tool for understanding why people make the choices they do. They have explanatory power. And this is true across cultures. Culturally different people experience each other's stories with causal assumptions about human actions that display similar understanding. Far from leading us into the muck and mire of cultural relativism, the narrative approach holds out the potential of identifying both the universal processes that give rise to our human experience, and the diversity of our experiences.

Unlike positivist formal science, narrative explanation does not focus on how one event is predicted or deduced from another, but on how change from beginning to end takes place. It is the perception of the patterned totality that carries causal power. A life-span psychology based on a retrospective understanding of individuals' pasts could lead to some systematic understanding of the general patterns through which people have passed. Let's look at how this might be applied to a study of two different groups' life-span experiences.

Kenneth and Mary Gergen analyzed stories from 19- to 21-year-olds and 63- to 93-year-olds. They found that young adults shared a romantic story line: they tended "to view their lives as happy at an early age, then beset with difficulty during the adolescent years, but now on an upward swing that promises well for the future." In contrast the narratives of the older persons showed a shared perception of the young adult years as difficult, the years between the ages of 50 and 60 as a peak of well-being, and the later years as a

period of regression. Two things of note emerge from this study. The first is that while each narrative is unique, common themes emerge for each age group. These themes are shaped by cultural beliefs: Young adulthood is supposed to be a difficult time. We are supposed to decline after age 60. A second observation that emerges from this study is that the shape that emerges out of the past extends itself into the future. People see their lives as continuous. So that although a narrative study moves

> inescapably backward in its concern with the understanding of the past-in-the-present, the view of development that derives from it can retain a focus on the forward movement … It is out of retrospection that a project, an approximation toward desired ends, can be revealed. (Freeman, as cited in Polkington, 1988, p. 118)

People use self-stories to account for their lives or to create a consistent self much as I did at beginning this talk with a retrospective analysis of what I perceived to be several important themes in my life. Narratives allow us to reinterpret past events in order to give them a force of causality they didn't have originally, but as Dennett says in the lines that were the sources for this presentation's title,

[W]e do not consciously and deliberately figure out what narratives to tell and how to tell them; like spider webs, our tales are spun by us. Our human consciousness, and our narrative selfhood is their product not their source. (Dennett as cited in Flanagan, 1991, p. 354-55)

In this sense, the self is a fiction, a story line by means of which we weave together the specific events that make of our lives a coherent whole, that give our lives personal meaning (Flanagan, 1984). Like fiction, the self is subject to constant revision in response to hindsight. When one knows how one wants the story to end, one can go back and

reconstruct the plot to make it happen. Contemporary clinicians are rethinking the

therapeutic process within this framework. As they see it, the therapeutic interview may

serve to help patients bring to awareness the narrative scheme they are using to interpret

events. Sometimes just the telling of the story itself can be therapeutic because it helps

one connect to others who share similar personal stories. Other times the story is

incomplete and untherapeutic. In this case, the analyst may engage the patient in a

dialogue through which the story is transformed into a more useful plot which serves as a

more powerful shaping and connective force.

> The point of the analytic work is not to lead the [patient] to create a literal
> description of … the past [but to reconstruct the story] in the light of the
> [patient's] present awareness. According to the narrative understanding of the
> psychoanalytic process, therapy does not consist in the healing effect of the
> recovery of the repressed but in the reconstruction of a person's authentic
> psychoanalytic story. (Polkington, 1988, p. 179)

Thus, a narrative theory of human existence allows one to reconceptualize what we mean

by control and intervention. If we construct ourselves, we can also reconstruct ourselves

in a ways that lead to different choices and outcomes.

 As Flanagan (1988) reminds us " A life is satisfying from the inside and respected from

the outside when its central themes are built around worthy aims and values (p. 356).

But, like fiction, what is compelling to one audience may not please another. A self-

narrative assumes different shapes in different times and places . In one context I may

present myself as a solicitous daughter, and in another as a demanding teacher or

researcher; in still another as an empathic therapist. The features of one's identity that are

dominant in one context recede in another. (Flanagan, 1988, p 356). The narrative of self
I present to my mother, may not be the one I present to my students. Undoubtedly, it is
not! A narrative of self that works perfectly well in Fairfield, Connecticut may be less
adaptive in Harlem, New York or Pacific Palisades in California. Peggy Miller's research
with four-year olds in working class Baltimore illustrates how definitions of self are
informed by the particular subculture in which children grow up. She recorded
conversations at home between mothers and their preschool children and well as between
mothers and other adults within earshot of the child. She found that an extraordinary
amount of narrative occurs within an hour - in other words a child is exposed to a lot of
culture in very short periods of time. The mothers told simple narratives of the kind
found in everyday life and that are found in child speech by the age of three. They
involved a linear depiction with a precipitating event, a resolution, and sometimes a coda.
A quarter of the mother's narratives were about the child's own doings. A considerable
number dealt with violence, aggression or threats, even dealing explicitly with death,
wife-beatings and child abuse. Miller claims that this lack of censorship, this parading of
harsh realities, is very much part of lower-class Black culture's deliberate emphasis on
"toughening children and readying them for life. Moreover, the stories portray the
narrator in a good light. The narrators' triumphs often take the form of getting the better
of somebody in dialogue as exemplified by the following dialogue:

> And she says, 'Look at that big nosed B-I-T-C-H.' And I turned and I says, 'Uh,
> you talkin to me?' I said, 'AREYOU TALKIN TO ME?' I says, 'Well you fat slob.
> I put you in a skillet and strip you down to normal size, if you mess with me.'

This example is not meant to single out Baltimore as having a special narrative environment but only to show that environments are specialized for cultural needs, and that narrative has tremendous functional importance in bringing children into the culture. (Bruner, 1990, p. 84)

For a further illustration of how a self-narrative that is compelling to one audience may not please another, I turn to a poignant story shared by Elliot Liebow in his book Tell Them Who I am. Liebow, a therapist, is explaining how he takes a chance and benefits from being vulnerable. He entered the culture of homeless women, and as he served them meals, and accompanied them to court, they learned that he was dying of cancer. He writes,

> Some of the women would perhaps characterize me as a friend, but I am not certain how deep or steadfast this sense of friendship might be. One day, Regina and I were talking about her upcoming trial about two months away. I had already agreed to accompany her to the courtroom to serve as an advisor, but Regina wanted further reassurance.
> "You will be there, won't you?" she said.
> As a way of noting the profundity that nothing in life is certain, I said, jokingly, "It's not up to me, it's up to The Man Upstairs."
> "Well," she said, "If you die before the trial, you will ask one of your friends to help me, won't you?" I looked hard at her to see if she was joking, too. She wasn't. She was simply putting first things first. Liebow, 1993, as cited in Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997, p. 43).

Liebow's personal narrative of a middle-aged man facing cancer was not going to fly for Regina. Her concerns as a homeless person were not those of a dying therapist. Regina wanted his narrative to be about his being there for her no matter what.

In summary, a self-narrative has some of the qualities of good fiction. It has a linear continuity that proceeds from beginning to end. It is subject to constant revision when the story is unsatisfactory, and it is built around worthy goals and aims that may change depending upon the intended audience or context. The project that I am currently developing with my colleague, Peter Bankart, will examine these aspects of self-narratives in young adult men. As we read the theories of young adulthood in developmental textbooks, it is apparent to us that they are based on the lives of young men who lived in an earlier era. Life stories that were satisfying in the 1950s no longer resonate. We are conscious of the dramatic ways that changes in the larger culture have transformed the way young men come of age in contemporary America. As the culture has changed, as the economics of the family have changed, and as the roles of women have changed there has been a profound evolution in the culture's interpretation of what it means to become a man. For example, young men attend school longer than they did even in the recent past, so they remain dependent on parents longer even as they are far less likely to have come from stable intact families. Men now start careers later, expect to change jobs more often, decide to marry and become fathers later, and find the definition of success to be much more elusive than young men did a generation ago. The consequence is that young men are clearly less independent, autonomous, and self-sufficient than they were 25 years ago. We are led to ask how young men now play out independence themes in their personal lives, and whether themes of dependence and connection are more salient for them today than they have been in the past. We wonder what defines the worthy and important goals and aims around which contemporary

identify narratives are framed, and how young men adjust their goals as they encounter successes and failures in growing up. Are there themes which are more salient for one audience than for another? The ultimate point of this research is to ask whether we as psychologists using the tools of narrative analysis can identify and bring to life the meaning of being a young adult man in contemporary America? Can we bring to understanding the meanings, conceptions, and interpretive schemes that are embedded in our culture as young men seek to know themselves through their relationships with parents, with peers, and with lovers? Can we decode the significance of competition, intimacy, success, and failure in the lives of these men who are our sons, brothers, and students? Can we make connections with what the author Michael Gurian (1998) has described as those high-energy, risk-taking, fun-loving, self-sacrificing, angry, jubilant, stir-crazy, task-focused, passionately loving males whom we encounter every day of our lives? If the stories we have already heard from the young men we have been teaching and counseling for more than a quarter century are any indication, it promises to be an exciting project and one that will occupy us for the next quarter century.