Integrating Self and System: An Empty Intersection?*

ROBERT ROSENBAUM, Ph.D.†
JOHN DYCKMAN, Ph.D.‡

Synthesizing individual and family therapies can founder if the underlying epistemological assumptions concerning "what is self" are not taken into account. Most individual therapies assume self "really" exists as a relatively stable internal entity, the repository of residues of experience where traits, memories, et cetera are organized via internal schemas. Such a view tends to treat self as a thing, and implies that psychological problems are the result of internal deficits or conflicts; this can lead to difficulties in therapy. In contrast, ecosystemic views employ constructivist and contextualist approaches that are more fluid. However, by basing autopoetic self-organization in language, ecosystemic epistemology still separates subject from object. Adopting a perspective in which self has no fixed, distinguishing characteristics can resolve many difficulties and create a dimensionless point where self and system, individual and family, therapist and client can meet without hindrance.

Fam Proc 34:21–44, 1995

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in synthesizing individual and family therapies (Duncan & Parks, 1988; Duncan & Solovey, 1989; Feldman, 1988; Feldman & Pinsof, 1982; Kirschner & Kirschner, 1992; Pinsof, 1983; Wachtel & Wachtel, 1986). This may be seen as part of the movement toward psychotherapy integration (Beitman, Goldfried, & Norcross, 1989; Norcross & Goldfried, 1992; Stricker & Gold, 1993). Clearly, any attempt at promoting an integration of individual and family treatments must have some conceptualization of individual self (Brighton-Cleghorn, 1987; Dunn, 1985; Jacobs, 1991; Rubin, 1986). However, perhaps not coincidentally, the rising interest in synthesizing individual and systems viewpoints comes at a time of lessening interest and even condemnation of epistemological theorizing (Coyne, Denner, & Ransom, 1982; Falzer, 1986). While we are sympathetic to the ideals of psychotherapy integration (Rosenbaum, 1988a,b, 1992, 1993a), we will argue here that there are significant problems with adopting a concept of individual self without being mindful of its epistemological base. We will also attempt to develop the beginnings of a systemic approach to self.

INDIVIDUAL AND SYSTEMIC SYNTHESIS

The problem with taking concepts from one world view and grafting them onto another is that this can yield results

* Journal format requires that we list our names linearly. However, we wrote this article together and requests for reprints may be sent to either author.

† Psychologist, Psychiatry Department, Kaiser-Permanente, 27400 Hesperian Boulevard, Hayward CA 94545.

‡ Faculty member, Psychology Doctoral Program, California Institute of Integral Studies, 765 Ashbury Street, San Francisco CA 94117.

0014-7370/93/3401-0021/$02.00/0 © 1995 Family Process, Inc.

similar to what occurs when one transplants an organ. Things seem to work fine for a while, but the host body rejects the graft unless: 1) the organ comes from a donor sufficiently like the host so that the body treats it as self, or 2) the autoimmune system of the host body is suppressed. The question for a therapeutic integration of systems and self is whether individualist theories of self-autonomy are sufficiently compatible to be adopted by systems theory, or whether systems theory must suppress key aspects of its epistemological assumptions in order to accommodate those of individualist personality theories.

True integration of two differing theories involves a kind of "double description" (Bateson, 1979). It is one thing to talk of double description when the input is from two sources similar in function but differently positioned, such as two eyes. It is quite another thing to combine the input from two sources dissimilar in function as well as positioning—say, one eye and one ear. It may provide a new perspective on the family to focus on how a child's feelings are understood and responded to by a parent through a process of projective identification; but when self-psychology's language of "part-objects" is applied to family systems (see p. 30), the two become decoupled and our theoretical "stereoscope" can produce a blurry picture. Of course, we use information from both our eyes and our ears. Odd synesthesias can result, however, if the brain does not keep the two modes of information separate. Similarly, our minds may become confused when we try to combine input from two qualitatively different epistemologies: realism and constructivism.

Looking at the world through the lens of philosophical realism, real objects actually exist that can be discovered or interacted with by a separate, real observer. A constructivist position argues that neither reality nor observer can be determined independent of each other; knowledge is not of objects but a creation of the act of knowing (Niemeyer, 1993; Neimeyer & Feixas, 1990; Omer & Strenger, 1992; Watzlawick, 1976, 1984; White & Epston, 1990). In this view, there are no "things" existing "out there" but rather a continual, mutual co-arising of creator/created. If "reality" is embedded in a constructed world view, defining the mode of therapy creates the therapeutic phenomenon in question (or at least the idea of the phenomenon): psychotherapy becomes what we construe it to be. If that is the case, one may argue it may not be either possible or desirable to combine psychotherapeutic world views that rest on fundamentally different epistemological assumptions (Messer & Winokur, 1980).

Proponents of psychotherapy integration usually assume there is a "real" phenomenon, called psychotherapy, which different schools of treatment address different pieces of; adding them together will give a more complete or more adequate view. They implicitly assume that the family and the self exist as "real" entities in a "real" world; the problem is merely one of defining the governing relationships between self and system. This tends to generate statements such as the following:

> In families, we observe that micro-chains of family sequences become the basis for the formation of binding and enduring relational patterns. Analogously, in the self system, units of self-experience crystallize out of the interplay between the differently organized internal states of the child and its caretakers. [Brighton-Cleghorn, 1987, p. 186]

This viewpoint implicitly accepts the idea that there are "real" patterns that exist, which differ only in whether they are internal to an individual or transactional between individuals. The language is instructive: it speaks of "binding" patterns and "crystallized" states.

There are advantages to using language

that speaks to everyday subjective experience (Dell, 1986); we often do feel that our families "bind" us, and we usually feel that we "have" internal states that crystallize into a thing-entity we tend to call an individual "identity," which seems to exist as a relatively static and enduring entity. The very advantages of this conceptualization in speaking to everyday subjective experience, however, become disadvantages in the practice of psychotherapy. If one assumes the self is relatively fixed, then to avoid instability it must change only slowly and with difficulty; when the self is a thing that "contains" enduring, binding patterns, change becomes an uphill struggle of breaking and repairing these bonds and forging new ones. If the therapist conceptualizes clients as having problematical personality traits, then, since clients tend to pick up therapist attitudes and values, clients may soon find themselves worried about "enduring traits" they had not been aware of prior to therapy. Many family therapists are aware that identifying and labeling "enduring traits" for clients can maintain—and perhaps even create—the problem the therapist "treats."

This is a radically different position from that of cybernetic epistemology, which maintains that all change is maintained through stability, and all stability through change (Keeney, 1983). The fluid dialectic between change and stability in an ecosystemic view helps provide a basis for rapid, long-lasting changes based on relatively small perturbations of a system; it provides a basis for brief therapy. Sometimes a single brief but incandescent experience can be sufficient to transform a life (Hoyt, Talmon, & Rosenbaum, 1992; Rosenbaum, Hoyt, & Talmon, 1990).

In sum, we suggest that adopting the individual "self" into family therapy without examining its epistemological assumptions will alter the practice of therapy. If the therapist is thinking of self as a real, stable thing, this inevitably creates certain assumptions about how change can occur.

Theories that subscribe to the notion of a self that is real, "full" of enduring characteristics or schemas, tend to generate a philosophy of therapy that is necessarily lengthy. Most self-psychologies speak of "the" self, not "a" self; they thereby presume a thing-object that contains certain residues of experience, such as traits, memories, and states. This leads immediately to a view of psychopathology as a product of either conflicts or deficits "in" the self, which is said to have structures that are weak or rigid. This is essentially the view of object-relations theory in which interpersonal transactions are assimilated through "transmuting internalizations" (Kohut, 1971). The term "object relations" is itself revealing since it implies that both others and self are essentially reified, if complex, thing-objects. In this view, the stability of the self is a function of its internal structure; the self assimilates new events in ways that maintain a structure formed largely in the past. Thus, this view of the individual self is inherently conservative since treatment of such a self requires resolving its conflicts or repairing its deficits. Many therapists would have no quarrel with this. We would like to argue, however, that this sets not just a difficult but an actually impossible task for both therapist and client: in principle, one can *never* "resolve a conflict" nor "repair a deficit."

The language used in such approaches misleads the therapist into assuming certain experiences are the same as physical transactions with physical objects. Resolving a conflict, though, is not the same as finding the answer to a math problem or untying a physical knot. Contrary to popular belief, conflicts between people, between nations, or between conflicting desires "within" a person cannot be resolved by negotiation between the opposing par-

ties. Negotiating about a conflict only highlights and clarifies the differences that currently exist between the opposing forces. It is possible to compromise on these differences, but that will only minimize, not resolve, the conflict. It is also possible for one side of the conflict to give up, but that involves a process of mourning, not resolution.[1] If one views conflicts as being patterns, as in an ecosystemic view, they cannot be changed as if they were things. Rather, patterns change via alterations in context or a transformation of their elements. Conflicts do not so much resolve as dissolve, disappearing when the context that constricted them shifts to encompass new perspectives. This shift is accomplished by coordinating multiple perspectives, either through appreciating the different points of view of the contestants (a process of empathic decentering) or by incorporating the conflicting viewpoints into a larger contextual view (finding a meta-level "common ground"). So long as the multiple perspectives are regarded as having "fundamental" thing-like reality, each perspective blocks the other. Treating the multiple perspectives as transient appearances, without a core essence, allows each to exist without hindering the other, and thus facilitates the process of incorporation or appreciation that allows a shift to occur.

If one views conflicts as having a "real" substance, what does this substance consist of? It can only consist of opposing forces (usually, in the case of psychological conflicts, opposing desires). One is then led to a position where one must alter conflicts by altering the *amount* of each force or desire. This brings up the old economic view of mental functioning, which has been criticized from many angles (see Peterfreund & Schwartz, 1971 and Schafer, 1976, for critiques from sympathetic psychoanalysts). This economic view of mental functioning, with its attendant, reified concepts of amounts of internal forces, remains strongly embedded in many theories of intrapersonal functioning of the self. There is a reason for this: the concept of the self is, unless subjected to epistemological analysis, often tantamount to a concept of a thing. The thing-self must contain things, or lack them (self-psychology's "deficit hypothesis").

Repairing a deficit is even more difficult for therapy than resolving a conflict. People are not car engines that need to have a faulty piston gasket sealed tighter. If you believe that a client was not admired "enough" or loved "enough," how can a therapist ever provide "enough" love to help him or her feel better? How does one quantify emotions? Can one pour a certain "amount" of compassion "into" clients, or drain them of an "excess" of anger? As soon as one has an "identity," whether this be of a family system or of an individual "self," and if this identity has structures and states as "things" inside it, these "things" must have certain quantities attached to them. In this view, the individual self has received a certain amount of love and has a certain amount to give. One can protest against Freud's "economic" model of mental functioning and suggest that people are "open" systems rather than closed. But this does not get away from the idea of "amounts" of feelings; it just allows for more variation in the kinds and degrees of the amounts.

Does it really make sense, though, to talk about a specific "amount" of emotional closeness? This is of course a lingua franca of family therapy; but we consider it an error, a creeping invasion of reified physical concepts into the realm of relationships (Rosenbaum, 1989). How does one

[1] The psychoanalytic dictum that depression necessarily accompanies correct interpretations of conflicts helps illustrate this point; a successful intervention necessarily requires the client to relinquish a wish that forms part of the conflict.

measure the amount of emotional closeness in a family? Why should a high degree of emotional closeness be normative in, say, Hindu families, but not in English ones?

A deficit in love is not necessarily resolved "better" by family therapists just because they work with the actual family members, as opposed to individual therapists using transference paradigms. Unless family therapists maintain some epistemological clarity about the qualities of selves, they may encounter the same difficulty as individual therapists. If therapists adopt a view of the self as an object, a residue that contains states and experiences, they then share the clients' ideas that their problems come from "bad" stuff "inside" them, or from having "insufficient good stuff" inside them, or is some *thing* imposed on them by others. A more sophisticated view within this paradigm holds there is "not enough harmony" in either the internal states of a client or in the interpersonal goals and desires of family members. In either case, one cannot quantify harmony or touch a bad introject. In adopting a theoretical perspective that treats the self as existing with real characteristics (or deficits) "in" it, therapists join their clients in implicitly treating the client's self as a thing. In a thing-self, feelings and relationships are treated as quantities. In fact, though, the felt sense of experience cannot be predicted from its physical magnitude. A firm but gentle touch that is reassuring doesn't become more reassuring with "more" touch (which may be experienced as pain or intrusion), and may not become less reassuring with "less" touch (which may be experienced as a playful tickle). Feelings and relationships are not quantities but, rather, qualities. Emotional distress generally cannot be alleviated by providing a certain amount of a missing emotion. Clients who feel unloved do not need a certain number of hugs and nods of approval; they need a certain quality of experience within a relationship.

The Natural View of Self

The quality of our feelings, our relationships, and our sense of identity depends on our understanding of how our self-nature is constituted. Everyone lives their epistemology of what the self is. Those interested in the history of Western philosophical and psychological treatment of the concept of self are directed to Levin's (1992) excellent and scholarly review. Modern cognitive psychologists have added new fuel to the old philosophical critiques of the concept of a distinct and substantial "self" (Dennet, 1978; Minsky, 1986). However, our usual epistemology sees the self as the repository and integrator of personal experience as represented in thinking, feeling, and actions. The underlying implication is that the self is, ultimately, a thing-object or essence.

This is true of many family systems theories as well as in our daily lives. For example, Bowen family systems theory often begins with a statement like: "Everybody has a certain amount of self, and nobody has enough" (Ayllmer, personal communication, 1978). Fogarty (1978) went on to develop this concept, explicitly ascribing the quest for emotional closeness, fusion, and distancing to the lack of "enough" self. Certainly, when people pursue or distance themselves from other people, they act as if they had a certain amount of self that could be gained or lost.

What is it that the self can gain or lose? Experience. Memories. Feelings. Habits. Thoughts. Sensations. Awareness. There are volumes about the development of the sense of self in children (Stern, 1985), but essentially all of them adopt the idea of self-by-accretion. In this view, we do something or have something done to us; we then encode it in some form of representation, to be remembered later. Our self

becomes an accumulation of all that we have thought, felt, and done; these residues lie "within" us and determine how we will react to new experiences. The self in this view is a participant in linear time: we become our memories of the consequences of our desires.

It is hard, in such a view, to account for how we can ever do anything discontinuous or qualitatively new, since even our future, our hopes and wishes, are basically projections from these residues. We think we keep telling ourselves who we are, but in fact we are telling ourselves who we've been. The naive sense of self depends on making observations about one's self, that is, treating one's self as an object. This kind of self-observation tends to take place in language (see Auerback, 1985; Dell, 1987; Maturana & Varela, 1988) and leads to self-statements like "I am the person who. . ." You fill in the blank: I am the person who was beaten by my mother; likes chocolate ice cream; works hard; can touch my toes without bending my knees; wants to be good. Notice that even the self-statements, which seem present-oriented, are in fact reflections of the past: to say, "I am the person who likes chocolate ice cream" means "I am a person who has tasted chocolate ice cream, and enjoyed it, and decided that this will be a stable preference; and since I am what I want and don't want, I am the person who likes chocolate ice cream." One can actually observe the development of such a self in young children: they learn to discriminate and then to identify with their discriminations. Very young children's preferences for foods (including ice cream flavors) are quite fluid; they gradually learn to remember which one their "I" likes, and to maintain these preferences through self-statements such as those listed above. This achieves stability, but at the expense of closing off alternative avenues of experience. Cognitive therapy works in part by examining and challenging many of these self-statements, which are conceptualized as being organized in schemas or structures. To the extent that these schemas and structures are felt to be contained "in" a self, people become constrained by their self-statements: prisoners of their selves.

Most people feel they may change certain aspects of themselves, but not others. When experience is discordant with our concepts of what the self "ought" to be or is, our attempts to sustain self-image may result in psychological symptoms. In such situations, our clients don't "have" a self; they are "had" by their self. This is, after all, what therapy is about: a person or family comes to therapy when they perceive some "core essence" of their self or family identity has been threatened or challenged. As therapists, we usually attempt to increase the flexibility or broaden the scope of the definition of identity. We rarely challenge the concept of identity itself because we tend to share the naive view of self: that there is some essence underlying the changeable parts. Our unexamined acceptance of this concept of self can constrain our therapies unnecessarily.

Careful observation reveals self-identity to be fluid and constantly changing according to its context and relationships. At work, we may be decisive and authoritative; when out to dinner with our spouse, we may be hesitant and deferent about what to order for dinner. Yet we believe ourselves to be the "same" person, even in the face of events that radically alter our perceptions of ourselves. If we lose a limb, we think of ourselves as still our (altered) self. We may think ourselves to be dutiful sons or daughters, but when our parent dies, we are still our (altered) self.

We all would agree that we can put on different pairs of shoes and not change our essential self. A client might come to us after the amputation of an arm and insist

they don't feel like their old self anymore; we will try to bolster a widened view of the self that is not dependent on having two good arms. But how far can we take this? Isn't there some point at which, if you take away too much, the self disintegrates? Most people would answer this question in the affirmative. Within the field of therapy, there is an assumption that certain subordinate parts are expendable or changeable, but that there is a "core essence," a "superordinate self-concept" (Horowitz, 1988) or core set of relationships, homeostasis, or coherence which, if upset or destroyed, means the destruction of the self as well.

This is ultimately the fear that fuels symptoms: that the self is threatened, will be overwhelmed or disintegrate. This is why clients say things like "I can't do that; it's not me." The problem is that, to the extent therapists believe the client has a core "me," any intervention they engage in will not address the fundamental point. When therapists reassure clients by saying "You can try it" (that is, your self will still be there), they still do not address the core, incorrect belief: that the self is a thing. If the self is a thing, it may be lost, damaged, or hurt. It is important that the therapist not collude with the client in the illusion that the client is missing something. Such collusion is tempting for therapists because they can then pretend that they "have" something the client needs. Then you may feel like a very helpful therapist, and you may have a very grateful client, but both you and the client run the risk of spending therapy looking elsewhere for solutions when the "solution" is right at hand.

Self is not a thing, but a process: This process is constantly shifting. Even as an individual breathes in and breathes out, the atoms that comprise his or her body are being exchanged. While most of us consider ourselves "the same self" from day to day, this is probably closer to a wish than to a reality. Therapists are used to allying themselves with the client's wish for security and stability, but this alliance is founded in a chimera that reflects the therapist's own existential insecurity. Therapists, like clients, prefer to imagine themselves "the same self" from day to day. But if we do not need to be attached to an unchanging self and can see change as the only constant, it becomes somewhat easier to imagine change in problem behaviors. Therapists like White (1986) or de Shazer (1985) employ the examination of "unique outcomes"—exceptions to the problem—in initial interviews of troubled families. By arousing curiosity about the exceptions to the problem, families begin to let go of overgeneralizations and other behaviors that may support the problem, and to experience themselves as already "different" than when they came in. The Mental Research Institute group similarly works to undermine the erstwhile "problem-solving" behaviors of the family, which in fact maintain the unsatisfactory status quo, by redefining ("reframing") the presenting problem (Fisch, Weakland, & Segal 1982). Narrative and constructivist approaches to self are consonant with a notion of constantly changing self.

Self is not unitary, but the product of multiple drafts: The view that the self is not one but many has been ably presented in social psychology by Mischel and Peake (1982). Self is a composite experience. We are not only different in different social contexts, but, at any instant, we are engaged in a process of "summation" of different selves-in-action that produce the working "draft" of our consciousness (Minsky, 1986). If we adopt this view, it immediately recontextualizes our view of dissociative disorders, particularly of multiple personality disorder. If we speak in terms of multiple contextual selves, the focus becomes not on how the personality is "split" but on how the dialogue/summa-

tion of the "selves" is interrupted. Holding this view produces the salutary effect on the therapist of normalizing these somewhat dramatic patients and increasing empathic connection: in this view, they are not so "different" from the rest of us. It also fits with our clinical experience of fairly rapid reintegration once conversation between the "selves" begins as the trauma-induced emotional barriers to this exchange are explored and reduced.

Often clients complain, "I'm not myself." Who, then, are they? The therapist who relies on a real "inner" self may be tempted to help the client find a "better" self, or return the client to some comfortable image of self. The therapist who is not attached to such a view, though, eschews any images or ideas about what self the client "should be" or "have," and recognizes that you cannot escape being yourself each moment for all time. In order for therapists to adopt this useful stance, it is helpful to view self as empty: not a thing; not created; not destroyable. *The self is not an accrual of experience but an ongoing, ever-changing manifestation of potentiality.*

Recursiveness in Self-Identity

Even when we see self not as a thing but as a process, if we wish to reconcile individual self with participation in larger systems, we are still left with the problem of parts and wholes. We tend to equate the word "part" with *thingness.* We can talk of a "process" that is part of a larger process (such as a subroutine in a computer program), but the question of self-identity is not resolved, and we are still left with several problems. For example, does the addition or subtraction of any process make the larger process unrecognizable, that is, not "itself"? Does the smaller process, when it becomes part of the larger one, "merge" with that process and lose its identity?

If we assume that selves "have" an identity, even if we view that identity as a process rather than a thing, we create a split self that becomes ensnared in a recursive self-referential system. Consider the sentence "I am observing myself" (or to make the paradox more evident: "Self observes self"). What self observes the self observing the self? The infinite regress is apparent. To use a spatial analogy, "self" cannot contain the longer string, "observes self" if we mean the same thing by the word "self" in both instances, since $A + B > A$ for all $B >$ zero. Note that in this analogy, if "self" is not a thing, and in fact is without quantity, then the paradox dissolves.

In symbolic logic, the value of a "call" (a distinction drawn), when made again, simply equals the value of the call made once, or $A + A = A$ (Spencer Brown, 1972). What is the nature of such a call? It is a distinction drawn between "inner" and "outer," between "self" and "other" ("not-self"). But what is the meaningful place to draw this distinction for psychology? Expanding Bateson's (1972) metaphor of the blind man and his cane, we may draw boundaries differently depending upon our purpose. If we wish to describe how the blind man gets around, his cane is an integral part of his perceptual-motor "self." If we sit together to talk about his reactions to a piece of music, his cane is quiet. When we do not use a functional ability, where does it go? Is it still part of our "self"?

Recursive self-referential systems can avoid infinite regress only by having a least one pathway that avoids recursivity (Hofstadter, 1979). We will argue that the path which avoids this trap is the notion that "self" is "empty." For the moment, this can be translated to mean that "self" cannot be reduced to some essence with fixed, defining characteristics; rather, "self" and "other" are analytic fictions and inseparable from the systems through which we come to know them.

Twentieth-century physics and philosophy have been devoted to exploring the relationship between the observer and the observed. On the one hand, if the observer is separate from the experience, how can she be influenced by experience? On the other hand, if the observer is not separate from experience, how can he have an independent identity or sustain a sense of self? Cybernetics of cybernetics attempts to get around this problem by putting the observer observing into the equation. This, however, does not resolve the question of *who* is the observer.

Self and Relationship

There is a pervasive tendency to assume that we each have some core identity that underlies our existence and defines each of us. However, as soon as one assumes that a substantive identity exists, which has an intrinsic essence separate from its interactions with the world, then a gap arises between "I" and "it," "me" and "you," "self" and "system." Treating self as non-empty, as containing "things" that are "inside" an "it," leads inevitably to a wildly solipsistic viewpoint. If I am what is "inside" me, if I have an internal reality separate from my ongoing being-in-the-world, ultimately my "I" can exist in isolation, forever separate both from what I do and who I'm with. The self becomes an observer, separate from what it participates in. It then becomes difficult to account for human relatedness. I can never know your experience since we are each ultimately separate, each holding some private, core existence. If we have a core existence, we must be "true to ourselves" in order to live a good life; then there are conflicts between selfishness and altruism.

The apparent problem here is how to resolve the question of an observing self "inside" you and a world of people or objects to be observed "outside" you. If a person "has" a "real self," then when the person is involved with a family system, "where" is the person's individual self? Family therapy has struggled in various ways to account for the role of the therapist in the family system, but this is merely a specific case of the more general problem of integrating "self" and "system." We talk of a person "fusing" with a system, but how does "fusion" occur, and what does it consist of? If a person "has" a self, viewed as a distinct entity with its own identity, "where" is it when it "fuses"? How can a therapist both participate with and observe a family? More generally, how can any individual both participate fully in the world and be self-conscious, aware of but separate from the objects of his or her experience?

The most common way out of this dilemma is to assume an "interpersonal" perspective that sees the self as having a fundamental essence, but acknowledges that much of the enduring sense of self derives from our interpersonal matrix. This perspective follows Sullivan (1953) by stating that self consists of the reflected appraisals of others. If we are consistent in this position, though, we must then consider that the other's self is also a reflected appraisal, and that our selves are reflections of reflections.

This kind of circular causality—in which my perception of you is affected by your perception of me, which is affected by my perception of you—is of no surprise to family therapists who daily encounter its clinical manifestations (Tomm, 1987; White, 1986). Conceptually, however, this presents challenges to the naive view of self. In its attempt to avoid creating a chasm between self and others, while still holding on to the notion of a "real" self, the interpersonal perspective becomes lost in a maze of mirrors. If "self" and "other" are treated as real, rather than as analytic fictions, then introducing the idea of a self with its own coherent identity "inside" it

produces an inevitable chasm between self and other that cannot be fully traversed through interpersonal bridges. Stating that the self "interacts" with others is not sufficient in itself to explain how the self crosses the chasm to be related to the other.

As Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991) point out, once self is considered to have a fundamental existence that somehow stands apart from and is separate from the "objects" of its experience, then whether those "objects" are people or teacups they must somehow be *represented* within the self's mind. It is not surprising that object relations, a prominent school of psychoanalytic self-psychology, expends a great deal of theorizing on how individuals "take in" "part-objects" (that is, aspects of people), represent them within an individual psyche as introjects, and organize them into schemas. While this kind of psychology prides itself on being steeped in interpersonal transactions, it still partakes of a reified self that is inherently separate from the people with whom the self interacts, and which contains important things—that is, representations of people and the world outside it. Such representationalism leads to an inherent dualistic separation between thinking and acting, being and doing, since the representations must be "in" a mind, and a mind that is full of such representations must be separate from the experiences it represents.

The way out of this dilemma is to acknowledge that it is an analytic fiction to see an object as existing independent of its context. In a lived world, objects exist *only in relationship*—a crucial point made by postmodernist and feminist writers (Jordan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991) who stress the inherent relational and contextual nature of self. While this emphasis is helpful, it often stops short of fully developing the ramifications of this view. Once we realize that objects exist only in the context of relationship, we implicitly are saying that identity is always fluid, lacking any core essence. There is no such "thing" as self and no such "thing" as other. This realization, of course, appeared long ago in Buddhism, which teaches that self and other are empty. This does not mean that they are void; it means that they have no independent, permanent existence other than their appearance in relationships that are constantly arising in immediate experience in the present moment.

Experience, however, need not be represented "in" an actor who is separate from his or her action. Just as "self" and "other" are not things, neither is the experience of relationship. Indeed, it would be more accurate to talk of experience not as a noun, but as a gerund: experienc*ing*. Experiencing does not involve discrete stages of function, perception, and cognitive representation, but rather a total immersion in the actions of being alive (Bohart, 1993). Taylor, a perceptual theorist, argues (1962) that consciousness itself is a property of readiness-for-action. Varela et al. (1991), attempting to reconcile modern cognitive psychology with a Buddhist epistemology, conclude that cognition is embodied *enaction,* and like the philosopher David Hume, that the self does not exist apart from these enactions. When one is immersed in the immediacy of the moment, the separateness of "self" and "other" drops away: there is neither "knower" nor "known," but only knowing. In other words, *self is undivided activity.*

Self and Action

Self is self-in-action and as such is always contextual. As Piaget pointed out, intelligence is at base a sensorimotor process. Views of self-identity that treat it as internalized representations or schemas tend to ignore the action component; that is, actions always take place in a context, a lived-world. Internal symbolic structures, archetypes, can be seen as generalized

representations of interpersonal *acts,* to borrow and extend Stern's (1987) terminology.

This view is quite compatible with the behavior therapists' on response-in-context (that is, contingencies), as well as with family therapists who emphasize the role of contextualizing behavior (for example, O'Hanlon & Wilk, 1987). If we change contexts, we change behavior. Behavior can also change abruptly as the cognitive "field" is reconfigured. An analytic interpretation, a systemic "reframe," or an empathic reflection are all social events and, as such, actions. Several issues are important here: the fluidity of context, the "sufficiency" of experience to account for behavior, and the embodied nature of self.

As contexts change, self changes, or more precisely, self-in-context is a constantly changing process. It is not, as Zucker (1967) pointed out, that a person *has* a problem, but, rather, that they *are* their problem, that is, that their lived experience is problematic to them or to others. The notion of a "full" self promotes an illusion that we are somehow separate from what we do. Our notions of conflicts, complexes, and even character structure are shorthand expressions that describe behavioral processes and proclivities. They can be very useful ways of organizing and describing experience as long as we do not reify them. A case example may illustrate:

Case Example

A 55-year-old woman with a long history of medically documented seizure disorder poorly controlled by medication, was referred by her neurologist who felt that emotional factors might be contributing to the frequency of seizures. The patient presented herself as the victim of a number of people in her life: her husband and her adult but dependent adopted children. She felt powerless to express either her dissatisfaction or her needs, and requested hypnosis to help her "relax." In the course of a relaxation induction, the therapist interspersed suggestions about how she might get the furniture in her house moved around in a way that was more pleasing to her (this had been a minor concern she mentioned while describing her current situation). The patient returned the next week to report that not only had she gone out and bought some new furniture, but that she had also been seizure-free. She was seen twice more and given a variety of indirect suggestions as to getting her needs met. But she was way ahead of the therapist, describing a number of instances where she had shown appropriately assertive behavior. She experienced a dramatic reduction in her seizure frequency, which persisted at followup 7 months later.

A perspective that views people as having a stable, underlying self-structure has difficulty explaining such improvement from what seems like a minor, "surface" rearrangement; "filled-self" theory would probably argue that the therapy of this woman is incomplete, that numerous underlying aspects of her self-structure were not addressed, and that both psychological and physical vulnerabilities remain. If we accept that self is fundamentally empty, though, we have an expectation that things *can* be moved around, resulting in rapid and dramatic shifts in experience. Since there is no "core" self that must be addressed, we can focus on selective attributes of the person; this in turn makes it relatively easy to focus on client strengths. That this client told a therapist of her dissatisfactions was already a change from her passive, "victim" stance, and it seemed to precipitate an avalanche of positive change. The metaphor is chosen deliberately because it is a powerful reminder that change in the natural world is also often abrupt, enormous, and apparently discontinuous. Similar examples abound in the literature of family therapy. Follow-

ing the work of Epston (1986), one of us (JD) has had success in very brief therapy of sleep disturbances in children using the "Night Watching" technique, which places the "victim" in the role of the active and powerful protector of self and family. One could claim that this technique is an "ordeal," such as that prescribed by Haley (1984), because it requires the child to arise from bed every 2 hours to "make rounds." The problem behavior—getting up at night and disturbing one or both parents—is recontextualized, with similar behavior occurring but with a very different view of that behavior and a qualitatively different affect (pride instead of fear). In families where the parents are appropriate and where abuse is not an issue, making rounds—or any other disturbance of sleep—rarely persists past one week, even in cases where the wakings have been chronic and long-standing.

Self is embodied *action*: Self appears in mind-and-body as a necessary unity. This of course is consonant with the re-emergence in psychotherapy of bodily oriented techniques (see Juhan, 1987; Kellerman, 1979). The work of family therapy researchers Minuchin, Rosman, and Baker (1978) offers some intriguing implications for our view of bodily "self." Their studies of free fatty acid levels (serum markers of physiological pathology) in juvenile diabetics and their families suggest that there is a physiological as well as psychological homeostasis in these families. That is, there is a "family body" as well as a "family psyche." This further stretches our common language notions of a skin-encapsulated "self."

From the time Freud (1961) argued that the ego is first and foremost a projection of bodily experience, psychologists have long recognized that the way the body and mind present themselves to each other constitutes a critical area for defining self-identity. The issue is not one of how the body is represented "in" the mind. This view perpetuates a mind-body dualism that is particularly pernicious, and leads to fruitless debates regarding whether the locus of "the self" resides in body, mind, or somewhere "in between." Varela et al. (1991) point out that the essential problem here is the idea that experience needs to be *represented* by a self separate from that experience. When self and experience are united in embodied action, much of this difficulty is resolved, since there is then no separation between self and experience, and therefore no need to "re-present" experience "out there" to a self "in here."

When we consider self as embodied action, new avenues for the treatment of problems in living open up. The treatment of panic disorder is a useful case in point since 10 of the 13 DSM-III-R diagnostic criteria are bodily sensations or experiences (APA, 1987). Barlow (1985) describes the utility of bodily-focused techniques such as diaphragmatic breathing and relaxation training in the treatment of panic disorder. While Barlow focuses on cognitive restructuring and on exposure as essential elements of the therapy, one of us (JD) has found that awareness "with" the body helps create the confidence and reinterpretation of bodily sensation needed to proceed with exposure exercises. Interestingly, several clients have spontaneously commented, "I lost track of myself," and were surprised to find themselves doing things that had previously been terrifying, and even unthinkable. When a client says, "I lost track of myself," a view of a "true" self leads to the difficult question of who is "the" self here: the person losing track or the person being lost track of? A therapist subscribing to "full-self" theory might attribute the client's experience to dissociation, but a therapist comfortable with an empty self may note the similarity of this type of unselfconscious action to the experience of "no-mind" that is described in

religious contexts, and only rarely in psychotherapy (Greenleaf, 1971). In this experience, there is no separate "doer" and "deed," just "doing."

However, we are used to thinking of ourselves as substantive agents, "doers" who perform "deeds." As we become more aware of the insubstantiality of the "self," anxiety often increases (Claxton, 1990). Much of this anxiety comes from the mistaken counterbelief that, if the self is empty, it is somehow hollow or unreal. This merely perpetuates the epistemological error that "the self" exists, but replaces its stable characteristics of traits, attitudes, and so on with other stable characteristics of nullity, voidness, and incompleteness. To say that the self is empty, however, is merely a convenient shorthand for saying self is not a thing, and therefore has no unchanging core characteristics or essence. Emptiness is itself empty: it has no ultimate, identifying characteristics. Saying the self is empty is a way of indicating that self is always completely connected to its immediate experience, that in the immediacy of the moment, unconstrained by past residues or future expectations, self is always free. The Diamond Sutra notes that the past is gone, the future is not here, and the present cannot be grasped. This is perfect freedom, without constraint. In order to realize such freedom, it is helpful to establish ourselves in a coherent epistemological base.

Epistemology of Empty Self

Ecosystemic epistemology replaces the study of objects and substances with a participative appreciation of patterns and minds (Auerswald, 1987). Ecosystemic epistemology looks for patterns in relationships, but these patterns are devoid of substance and lack "realness" (Keeney, 1983, p. 154). The mind does not *contain* logic or ideas; mind and nature are *constituted* by logic and ideas (Bateson, 1972). Falzer (1986) faults ecosystemic epistemology for denying "that we and all that is in the world exist as something" (p. 362); but, for our purposes, it is precisely this "emptiness" of ecosystemic epistemology, its insistence against reification, that will lead the way to a new conception of self, one that has room for self and system.

There are, however, several problems with the ecosystemic epistemological position when it comes to deriving an epistemology of the self. First, in any cybernetic epistemology, it is assumed that (a) the primary epistemological act is one of drawing distinctions, and (b) that the drawing of distinctions is arbitrary. In this view, to talk about a self-system is an arbitrary decision of the observer: there is no inherent set of boundaries one can identify as "*the*" self.

How, then, can an ecosystemic epistemology derive a self-concept as anything but arbitrary? The work of Maturana and Varela (1992) is useful in this regard, in that they are able to describe "autonomous unities." Working from a biological perspective, they are able to define a living organism in terms of the way it participates in the creation of its boundary:

> The most striking feature of an autopoetic system is that it pulls itself up by its own bootstraps and becomes distinct from its environment through its own dynamics, in such a way that both things are inseparable. [pp. 46–47]

In this view, living beings are self-producing in a unitary phenomenon. On the unicellular level, the chemistry of the cell creates, through dynamic transformations, the components necessary to create a boundary (the cell membrane); however, the boundary itself is essential for the network of transformations that produced it as a unity. Neither one comes first: this is the autopoetic process of living, which holds true for all living beings.

In Maturana and Varela's view, though, self-consciousness can only take place in language, in the social domain (p. 230). By making languaging so critical, they deny the experience of self not only to nonlinguistic species but also, more importantly, exclude the whole realm of nonverbal experience. Is a preverbal child without self? How about a monk sitting in silent, wordless meditation? What about two lovers touching each other? How about the skier zooming downhill with the wind on her face and no words for the flashing images that streak by? If self is language-bound, where does self "go" when we sleep?

The act of awareness has special properties that provide a cornerstone for the experience of self, but neither awareness in general, nor self-consciousness in particular need necessarily be linguistic. As Varela and colleagues (1991) point out, consciousness always arises through activity, though the quality of activity and consciousness may covary. One can distinguish at least three types of consciousness: 1) consciousness *of* an object separate from the observer (looking at a rock); 2) consciousness *by* an experience in which awareness is subsumed by the action (tying one's shoelaces without "thinking" about it), such that there is an intentional act without self-consciousness; and 3) consciousness *with* a process. The third type of consciousness straddles the previous two: awareness coexists with a changing stimulus in such a way that it simultaneously is determining and being determined by the shifting quality of awareness (sitting on a rock and experiencing it as variously rough or smooth, depending on one's position; meditating on a candle flame; listening to a piece of music; working with a family). All of these must be included in the domain of self, but not all require language.

It is possible to locate self not in language but in the inherent activity and experience of autopoesis: the self constitutes itself through a bootstrap operation. This process is inherently recursive and thus self-referential: the "I" arises not just in observing myself observing, but also in touching myself touching (Merleau-Ponty, 1964).[2] The self is not separate from its object but exists immanent in the context of a boundary that creates an interface of experiences. I may touch myself touching others or touch myself touching myself: "where" I touch is not so important as the act itself of recursive touching. For stylistic purposes, let us call this constitutive act, whereby we touch ourselves touching ourselves touching, "touching-quined" (see Hofstadter, 1979).

Touching-quined constitutes a self, but it is a self without a locus: since touching-quined operates *at* a boundary (not *within* one), a touching self is immanent in the act of relationship, throughout a boundary. Touching yourself touching yourself, the precise locus of the self becomes confused. Where is "you" in this experience? You are neither "within" your body nor "absorbed" by the object, nor are you somewhere "in between." Think of this the next time you touch yourself touching a family. Doing therapy, being a person, involves touching-quined.

Touching-quined is quintessentially a present-time experience. It occurs only in the now, at the immediate present of the current interface. It has no history, no future; it provides the model for therapy that the psychoanalyst Bion (1967) advocated: entering a session "without memory and without desire." It is similar to what Maturana and Varela (1992) refer to as "structural coupling," whereby autonomous entities engage in present-time coordinated behaviors. Whereas Maturana and

---

[2] Kierkegaard (1849/1944) also defines the self by virtue of its recursiveness: "by relating itself to its own self and willing to be itself"—*The Sickness unto Death,* p. 146, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

Varela scrupulously define structural coupling from the viewpoint of an observer, we prefer to find the emergence of self in the process itself. This is an experiencing, self-reflecting self, but not necessarily an observing self, in that the kind of consciousness involved in touching-quined is not consciousness *of* an object, but rather consciousness *with* a co-participant. An external observer might label the interactions of co-participants in touching-quined as being "within" an autonomous unity or "between" autonomous unities, but, to the participants, this distinction—of inside/outside—is meaningless. Touching-quined is a horizoning of each with other: it generates self and other, not as entities separate from each other but as co-participants in the creation of the boundary.

Touching-quined alone is not sufficient, though, to account for our lived sense of self. Maturana and Varela rightly point out that in addition to the moment-to-moment, ongoing structural coupling between an organism and its environment, there are historical mechanisms of structural transformation. They describe this as an intergenerational process of natural drift, dependent on transmission through reproduction over generations. We would like to suggest that a similar process goes on at the individual level of self, which is continuously reproducing itself. We call this process proceeding-from.

We have criticized the view of the self as an accrual of past experiences existing as some sort of crystallized "engram-thing" "within" the self. It is quite possible, however, to have history without such crystallization. Here again, we can be misled by the role of language. Modern historians recognize there is no single "reality" to the past to be captured and codified; rather, each history text constitutes a particular present-time reconstructing. We make our pasts in the present. Personal history is not restricted to that which can be remembered and represented in language any more than the history of humankind consists only of *written* history. Thus a constructivist view of history does not deny history to the thousands of years for which written records do not exist, any more than a psychologist will assert that a child has no history for the time prior to, say, 3 years old, which the adult cannot remember with words. History is, like being-in-the-world, a dialectic between consensually agreed-upon events and the creative imagination that finds meaning in the relationships that are constructed between events. The history of humankind is not the mere collation of more or less accurate recollections of "real" past events, nor is the history of an individual self simply comprised of memories of things that happened to the self.

Modern theories of memory reject the idea of an encoded engram, which is recovered from an attic or storeroom in the brain, in favor of a processive view of memory: memory is always a present-time construction, although the act of constructing it may be facilitated by previous, similar acts (Friedman, 1993). Memories are created moment by moment by successive, associative processes that pick up on partial information received from the activity of the subject in relation to his or her total environment; drawing upon a categorically organized information pool, bits and pieces are assembled into forms that are then recognized as forming a familiar "fit" with experience. We do not remember how to go from home to the office by dredging up a map: rather, we re-traverse the territory, responding to cues at each corner along the way, and the more often we do this, the easier it becomes. The same thing holds true for our emotional pathways: we always re-live them in the present, rather than re-call them from the dead past. Acknowledging memory as constructive rather than as a retrieval system helps to

avoid difficulties such as the controversies that have arisen regarding the "reality" of recovered memories of traumas and abuse. A constructive view has, of course, recently become popular with the adoption of narrative approaches toward therapy (Schafer, 1976; Spence, 1982; White & Epston, 1990).

Given the dynamic quality of memory, history—of self or species—is modeled best not by an attic storeroom, but rather by a growing tree. History is a process of branching growth, departures, and returns: its qualitative hallmark is a sense of continuity. The process of touching is defined by discontinuity, by intersections at boundaries: the tree's height, number of knots, annual rings, and so forth, inform us about its boundary with its environment (rainfall, windstorms, forest fires). At any one moment, though, history unfolds continuously; boundaries are added as punctuation. If one examines a growing tree, you can say, "It was four feet five inches tall last month, and is currently four feet six inches tall." You can never say, though, at what precise moment it passed from being 4′5″ to 4′6″ because it occurred not as a discrete quantum jump but rather in infinitesimally small bits. The same is true for all growth. However fine your measuring stick and your stopwatch, you will never be able to find a precise moment for the phase transition. At ever-decreasing intervals of time you will need to measure ever-decreasing intervals of space until, finally, you will have to make an arbitrary decision as to where to mark the point of transition.

Because growth is seamless, a process of becoming, it is fair to say that the individual self represents not an accumulation of set, reified experiences, but rather is a dimensionless point in space-time, which represents a nexus of all the species has ever been as well as the potentiality of all it ever can become. Maturana and Varela rightly point out that any individual bears the entire history of life immanent in their autopoetic organization; every individual also bears a multitudinous subset of future possibilities for subsequent directions life may take. This historical aspect of growth in the individual we call "proceeding-from becoming," to capture the past-future-in-the-present aspect of individual (and human) existence, as opposed to the immediacy of present-time touching-quined. In this view, individuals are not accruals of experience but constrained sets of potentialities.

The history of an individual, and of a species, is not what they have done or what has happened to them: this would consist of crystallized "engrams." Rather, the history of individuals and species consists of what has been *excluded* from their set of possible actions. Our genes do not carry instructions about standing on two feet; rather, they carry a set of potentialities that includes walking, crawling, somersaulting, and so forth. There are individuals who are human but who don't walk, either because of socialization (compare the case of a child who had been raised by wolves: Rymer, 1992) or by accident (for example, amputees). What our genes do, though, is eliminate certain possibilities: they don't make us walk, but they ensure that we can't physically fly. Our genes eliminate certain sets of possibilities: they are restrictive but not prescriptive.

This is how individual self develops: not by accruing experience but by eliminating certain possibilities. I am used to saying of myself, "I am a psychologist," but this is shorthand for saying "I am not a carpenter, candlemaker," or whatever. It's easier to state my identity as a positive, but it creates, through language, a dangerous illusion: that there is a "thing" called "being a psychologist," which is "in" me. Instead, I can recognize that my "identity" is not a characteristic "in" me, but merely a convenient label that marks the excluding of certain pathways. Eliminating path-

ways is convenient and efficient; I don't have to spend time considering all possibilities for every decision. From this point of view, I need not consider my self as "filled" with certain "attributes," but rather recognize that my self consists of a wide range of potentialities, many of which I have excluded but are still potentially available to me.

Psychotherapy consists, in part, of opening up the roads less traveled; but if we feel attached to our current road, saying "this is my self," we will be less likely to look at alternative pathways. If we conceive of the self as the set of the pathways taken (past experiences), it will be hard to jettison these or find new paths. If we conceive of the self as the entire nexus of potentialities, with certain ones being manifested at this particular time, then changing the self requires no act of subtracting from the self, adding to the self, or "rewiring of the pathways." Self-changes require a turning, a rediscovery of potentialities that have always been there but have been temporarily excluded. The self as an accumulation of experience is a prison; the self as empty, as shimmering potentiality, is a prism that, depending on its positioning, gives forth many different colors.

Self-identity must have a boundary, but it is a boundary with infinite length enclosing a finite, definable area:[3] not the rigid boundaries of penned-in lines on a map, but rather living shores where sea and winds constantly change the form of cliffs and cove, inlets and jutting rocks. Boundaries are always expressed in action. Human boundaries are not abstract, conceptual schemas, but always embodied; being embodied, they are not stationary things but, instead, are in constant interaction with a world from which they are not separate. World and self mutually influence and create one another; self and other arise to meet each other in each moment. Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991) use the beautiful phrase "laying down a path in walking" to describe this experience.

A self with boundaries of infinite length but finite area is a self where "inner" development and "outer" contact with the world are two faces of the same coin. We can view such a self as consisting of the intersection of immediate relationship in the present with historical growth: the intersection of touching-quined and proceeding-from/becoming. Self arises at an intersection of multiple planes, but this intersection is expressed at a single point, which, like all single points, is dimensionless and empty.

This approach to self is compatible with Buddhist views; however, it is important to understand that both Buddhist and radical systemic epistemological approaches say that not only self but *all* "things" are empty, including emptiness. To say that self or experience is empty is not to say it is void; this would imply self is marked by a particular quality of nothingness. Rather, saying self is empty is simply shorthand for saying self has no permanently fixed, defining "thing-like" characteristics. Individual self and family system manifest their selves in this emptiness, where there is no dichotomy between self and other: self does not subsume other nor other subsume self, nor does self exclude other or other exclude self. Separateness and oneness are not mutually exclusive: Bud-

[3] The problem of resolving the boundary of a self is highly reminiscent of the kind of problem that was described by Mandelbrot in his paper "How long is the coastline of Great Britain?" (described in Gleick, 1987). Because all coastlines have a certain jaggedness to them, if one takes smaller and smaller measuring sticks, the resultant measured coastline gets longer and longer. One cannot characterize precisely the exact length of a coastline, but one can characterize the degree of its jaggedness, through the use of fractal dimensions. One would think, intuitively, that an upper limit of the length of the coastline would be reached. It turns out this is not the case: coastlines have infinite length, though they enclose a finite area.

dhists say that the vast sky does not hinder the white cloud (Dogen & Uchiyama, 1983).

Most of the people consulting us are already in pain and turmoil about their lives. It would seem cruel and counterproductive to do anything that would increase their pain or augment their anxiety by asking them to confront the fluidity of self-identity. However, we have found that dis-identification with the self, paradoxically, often brings a client a sense of relief and increased freedom. While it does not generally help to talk philosophy with clients, when a client has an immediate experience of self-emptiness, this often brings an acceptance of the ubiquitousness of change, which leads to an increase in compassion and a be-friending of one's own experience (Nishitani, 1982). The following case study (by RR) illustrates some of the effects of clients encountering the empty nature of the self:

Case Study

A blue-collar couple came to therapy after the family business failed. They were going through bankruptcy, and this activated a number of problems. The wife (Mary) and husband (Joe) were quite fused, each taking responsibility for the other's difficulties. Mary, prone to extreme anxiety, had had a heart attack; Joe, whose father had become a depressed recluse after a bankruptcy at the same age as Joe's, was suffering severe depression. Their teenage son began having troubles in school.

Joe would come into the office, wring his hands, and complain how others thought him a fool and a failure—and they were right. He was worthless, nothing. I challenged this view, mentioning the high rate of failure of small businesses during the recession. Still, Joe felt it was his fault. He said that once a person stopped earning money as a productive member of society, they should be taken out and shot. That really was what people should do to him.

I was flummoxed. I knew Joe was a devout Mormon. "Joe," I said with some trepidation, "I don't know much about Mormonism. Is it like Calvinism? Do Mormons believe that if you are doing poorly it is a sign you have sinned or are unworthy, but if you are doing well economically it is a sign you are favored by God?" "No," said Joe, "really the opposite. As Mormons, we believe that material wealth and the things of the world can blind you to the proper spiritual path."

"I don't understand, then, Joe. How does this belief you hold as a Mormon fit in with the idea that since you're bankrupt you are worthless and should be shot?" Joe sat as if stunned. He was speechless for some time. Then his face assumed a different expression, and his body relaxed. "You know," he said, "it doesn't make sense what I've been telling myself. I never thought of that before. Maybe I don't have to feel so lousy."

After this session, Joe began to be less self-recriminatory. At about this time, though, perhaps in response to the lessening of Joe's guilt, Mary began to experience ego-dystonic angry feelings toward Joe for not providing for her sufficiently (economically), and for betraying her in the past. (There had been a sexual affair 10 years ago that she thought she had forgiven.) At the same time, she began to feel flooded with painful childhood memories of sexual abuse and humiliation, and she asked to be seen individually. Her parents, both nudists, would embarrass her if she brought friends home; they forced her to pose for "cheesecake" photos, and conspired to give her sexually to their friends. Her primary feeling was one of self-disgust; she felt as though she had an indelible "stain on her soul." She felt that she had been treated like shit, and that made her to be like a piece of shit on the inside, no matter how competent she appeared on the surface.

Even after several sessions, she re-

mained mired in self-disgust. I looked for some way to acknowledge her terrible experiences and yet free her from them. I said, "You know, when you take a mirror and hold it up to a piece of shit, it looks like the shit is in the mirror. It's easy to believe this illusion. Imagine what it would be like being a mirror if you believed you were everything you reflected. But you are making this mistake here. You look at yourself, and see the shit in the mirror, but fail to see that *you are the mirror,* and the mirror isn't sullied."

Mary stopped. She looked transformed, as if a great weight had fallen off her shoulders. "I'm me. . ." she stated, in some wonder, "I'm not what *happened* to me."

Joe needed to have his definition of himself stretched, but could afford to hold onto some definition of a self with certain experiences and traits. Mary, though, needed to realize that her self transcended her historical experiences: her self being empty, it was and always would be pure.

CONCLUSION

Approaching self as if it were empty does not result in a particular technique that a therapist should administer to specified patients, like an internist prescribing antibiotics. Neither of the authors has said to another patient, as was said to Mary, "you are the mirror." Just as self is always changing, so the manner in which we work with clients is always moving. The view of self as "having" an "identity" is fine for the simple step of observing, recording, and recalling one's experiences in linguistic self-statements; we do not mean to suggest that people's experience of their actions lacks coherence. However, once one gets to the next order of recursiveness, that of observing the observing observer, an infinite regress occurs and naive notions of identity fail to apply as language falls silent. This is a realm that has been treated by both psychology and religion, East and West. Existential psychotherapists (for example, Yalom, 1980) seem to approach this point but then pause, on the brink, as it were, of recognizing that emptiness is different from meaninglessness. The assertion of emptiness is not an invitation to nihilism. Pragmatically, openness to emptiness can lead to a greater generosity and compassion toward the self, as the case of Mary illustrates. Though alternate explanations can be offered for the case material presented, we argue that re-conceptualizing "self" in the ways we have described orients the therapist and client toward productive change, and may be a starting point for further explorations of "actorless" actions.

When integrating self and systems, family therapists may find Buddhist logic, which does not function with the Aristotelian "rule of the excluded middle," consonant with both their clinical experience and ecosystemic epistemology, since it represents an approach to the world which, in the language of de Shazer (1985), is fundamentally "both-and" rather than "either/or." Furthermore, clinicians familiar with paradoxical interventions are already comfortable binding together apparent "opposites." The power of paradoxical interventions lies not in that they do something "to" a client, but rather that they embody a fundamental truth: in the actuality of experience, self-identity not only tolerates, but actually embraces the apparent contradiction of being both self and other simultaneously (Rosenbaum, 1982, 1990, 1993b; Rosenbaum et al, 1990). This dynamic interchange of oneness and separateness is expressed pithily by the Sandokai of Zen master Sekito Kisen Daiosho:[4]

[4] This is an excerpt from an unpublished version used at the Berkeley Zen Center, translated by M. Weitsman. The full text may be obtained by writing to this article's first author. A slightly different version appears in *Timeless Spring* (T. Cleary, tr.), New York: Weatherhill, 1980.

> Each and all the elements of the subjective and objective spheres are interdependent, and at the same time independent; related, though each thing keeps its own place.

If there is a "full" identity to a family and a "full" identity to an individual, the family self and the individual self must somehow be opposed to one another. Therapeutic maps that assume a "full" self are using a language for individual experience which implies more fixity, more separation from interpersonal interplay and inherently being-in-the-world than is necessary. Such maps create a thing-self whose boundary lines are mistaken for real delimiters on the land itself. Wars are fought over such boundaries, despite the fact that, when you stand on the land itself, the map boundaries cannot be seen, smelled, heard, tasted, or touched. An epistemology of empty self does not prescribe an egolessness of diffuse boundaries and confused pseudofreedom that seeks to abandon all constraints (Epstein, 1992). Rather, adopting an epistemology that describes self identity through the language of emptiness may be helpful in drawing a map for a self whose lands are continually arising in the meeting of touching and proceeding-from. On shorelines of such lands, the wind becomes the water disappearing into sand.

When both self and world are empty, they embrace each other fully. That point where history and immediacy meet, where boundary and limitlessness intersect, where touching and proceeding-from dance is existence its-self. From this standpoint, each person constantly expresses his or her original self, and this original self has no unchanging characteristic that brands it permanently. That being so, original empty self has no surfeit or lack; to call it perfect is not right, but it cannot be blemished. It is like when the wind strikes the water: water and wind meet for a moment in a wave, which crashes on a shore that is then wiped clean by the wind. Therapist meeting client is like this.

Fundamentally, *empty self is connected self.* When we see selves as full, there is a vast chasm that separates people. When selves are empty, arising in response to immediate experience, we are all intimately connected to that well from which all experience comes, the "singularity" that cosmologists tell us created (and is perhaps constantly creating) a universe from nothing. Looking deeply into emptiness reveals that "each can only inter-be with all the others." (Nhat Hanh, 1992, p. 27). This idea is not new to family therapy. Whitaker (see Neill & Kniskern, 1982) and others have maintained for years that there is no such thing as an individual, only parts of families. Families, however, actualize themselves through individuals; individuals actualize themselves through families. The therapist meets the family, but is created by the family; the family meets the therapist, but is created by the therapist. The therapist creates himself/herself creating the family and the family creates itself creating the therapist.

When identity is empty, there is room for wood and woodcarver, individual and family, self and society. People encountering each other have a direct experience whereby each realizes his or her self in the other, the other in his or her self, the other in the other, and the self in the self. When therapist and client meet, when individual and family meet, even when a reader picks up a journal article and eye and word meet, there is no need to worry about "self" and "other." Once freed from clinging to an illusory fixed identity, self and world arise to meet and actualize each other, and therapy—like drinking tea or baking bread—becomes spontaneous activity. In such spontaneous activity, love and compassion arise. Part of being human is that we can only approach the limitlessness of experience from a particular perspective.

Recognizing, however, that this particular perspective has no ultimate constraining characteristics, that it has the freedom and fluidity of emptiness, has the potential to liberate us from the trap of a "full" self who feels inherently isolated, bringing instead the joy of inherent connectedness.

This is the driving philosophy of family therapy:

Chuang Tzu and Hui Tzu
Were crossing Hao river
By the dam.

Chuang said:
"See how free
The fishes leap and dart:
That is their happiness."

Hui replied:
"Since you are not a fish
How do you know
What makes fishes happy?"

Chuang said:
"Since you are not I
How can you possibly know
That I do not know
What makes fishes happy?"

Hui argued:
"If I, not being you,
Cannot know what you know
It follows that you
Not being a fish
Cannot know what they know."

Chuang said:
"Wait a minute!
Let us get back
To the original question.
What you asked me was
'How do you know
What makes fishes happy?'
From the terms of your question
You evidently know I know
What makes fishes happy.

"I know the joy of fishes
In the river
Through my own joy, as I go walking
Along the same river."

—Thomas Merton
The Way of Chuang Tzu [pp. 97–98]

REFERENCES

American Psychiatric Association. (1987). *Diagnostic criteria from DSM-III-R.* Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association.

Auerback, C. (1985). What is a self? A constructivist theory. *Psychotherapy 22:* 743–746.

Auerswald, E.H. (1987). Epistemological confusion in family therapy and research. *Family Process 26:* 317–330.

Ayllmer, R. (1978). Personal communication.

Barlow, D. (1985). *Anxiety and its disorders.* New York: Guilford Press.

Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind.* New York: Ballantine Books.

_____. (1979). *Mind and nature: A necessary unity.* New York: Bantam Books.

Beitman, B., Goldfried, M., & Norcross, J. (1989). The movement toward integrating the psychotherapies: An overview. *American Journal of Psychiatry 146:* 138–147.

Bion, W.R. (1967). Notes on memory and desire. *Psychoanalytic Forum 2:* 271–280.

Bohart, A. (1993). Experiencing: The basis of psychotherapy. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration 3:* 51–68.

Brighton-Cleghorn, J. (1987). Formulations of self and family systems. *Family Process 26:* 185–201.

Claxton, G. (1990). Why selflessness seems so dreadful (pp. 76–85). In J. Crook & D. Fontana (eds.), *Space in mind.* Longmead, Great Britain: Element Books.

Coyne, J., Denner, B., & Ransom, D.C. (1982). Undressing the fashionable mind. *Family Process 21:* 391–396.

Dell, P.F. (1986). In defense of "lineal causality." *Family Process 25:* 513–521.

_____. Maturana's constitutive ontology of the observer. *Psychotherapy 24*(3S): 462–466.

Dennet, D. (1978). *Brainstorms.* Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

de Shazer, S. (1985). *Keys to solution in brief therapy.* New York: W.W. Norton.

Dogen, E., & Uchiyama, K. (1983). *Refining your life* (T. Wright, trans.). New York: Weatherhill.

Duncan, B.L., & Parks, M.B. (1988). Integrating individual and systems approaches: Strategic-behavioral therapy. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy 14:* 151–161.

_____, & Solovey, A.D. (1989). Strategic-brief

therapy: An insight-oriented approach? *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy 15:* 1–9.

Dunn, R. (1985). Issues of self-concept deficit in psychotherapy. *Psychotherapy 22:* 747–751.

Epstein, M. (1992). Freud and Dr. Buddha: The search for selflessness. *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (Spring): 51–53.

Epston, D. (1986). Night watching: An approach to night fears. *Dulwich Centre Review:* 28–39.

Falzer, P. (1986). The cybernetic metaphor: A critical examination of ecosystemic epistemology as a foundation of family therapy. *Family Process 25:* 353–363.

Feldman, L. (1988). Integrating individual and family therapy in the treatment of symptomatic children and adolescents. *American Journal of Psychotherapy 42:* 272–280.

Feldman, L.B., & Pinsof, W.M. (1982). Problem maintenance in family systems: An integrative model. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy 8:* 295–308.

Fisch, R., Weakland, J.H., & Segal, L. (1982). *The tactics of change: Doing therapy briefly.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Fogarty, T. (1978). On emptiness and closeness (pp. 70–90). In E. Pendagast (ed.), *The best of the family.* New Rochelle NY: Center for Family Learning.

Freud, S. (1923/1961). *The ego and the id* (pp. 12–66). In J. Strachey (ed.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. XIX). London: Hogarth Press.

Friedman, W. (1993). Memory for the time of past events. *Psychological Bulletin 113:* 44–66.

Gleick, J. (1987). *Chaos: Making a new science.* New York: Penguin Books.

Greenleaf, E. (1971). A spontaneous experience of "no-mind" during hypnotherapy. Unpublished manuscript.

Haley, J. (1984). *Ordeal therapy: Unusual ways to change behavior.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hofstadter, D.R. (1979). *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An eternal golden braid.* New York: Basic Books.

Horowitz, M. (1988). *Introduction to psychodynamics.* New York: Basic Books.

Hoyt, M., Talmon, M., & Rosenbaum, R. (1992). Planned single-session therapy (pp. 59–86). In S. Budman, M. Hoyt, & S. Friedman (eds.), *The first session in brief therapy: A book of cases.* New York: Guilford Press.

Jacobs, E. (1991). Self psychology and family therapy. *American Journal of Psychotherapy 45:* 483–498.

Jordan, J., Miller, J., Stiver, I. & Surrey, J. (eds.). (1991). *Women's growth in connection: Writings from the Stone Center.* New York: Guilford Press.

Juhan, D. (1987). *Job's body: A handbook for bodywork.* Barrytown NY: Station Hill Press.

Keeney, B.P. (1983). *Aesthetics of change.* New York: Guilford Press.

Kellerman, S. (1979). *Somatic reality.* Berkeley CA: Center Press.

Kirschner, S., & Kirschner, D. (1992). Comprehensive family therapy: Integrating individual, marital, and family therapy (Vol. 2, pp. 231–243). In F. Kaslow (ed.), *Voices in family psychology.* Newbury Park CA: Sage Publications.

Kohut, H. (1971). *The analysis of the self: A systematic approach to the psychoanalytic treatment of narcissistic personality disorders.* New York: International Universities Press.

Levin, J. (1992). *Theories of the self.* Washington DC: Hemisphere Publishing.

Maturana, H.R., & Varela, F.J. (1992). *The tree of knowledge: The biological roots of human understanding* (rev. ed., R. Paolucci, trans.). Boston: Shambala Publications.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964). *Signs* (R. McCleary, trans.). Evanston Il: Northwestern University Press.

Merton, T. (1965). *The way of Chuang Tzu.* New York: New Directions.

Messer, S.B., & Winokur, M. (1980). Some limits to the integration of psychoanalytic and behavior therapy. *American Psychologist 35:* 818–827.

Minsky, M. (1986). *The society of mind.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Minuchin, S., Rosman, B.L., & Baker, L. (1978). *Psychosomatic families: Anorexia nervosa in context.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Mischel, W., & Peake, P.K. (1982). Analyzing the construction of consistency in personal-

ity. *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation:* 233–262.

Neill, J.R., & Kniskern, D.P. (eds.). (1982). *From psyche to system: The evolving therapy of Carl Whitaker.* New York: Guilford Press.

Neimeyer, R. (1993). An appraisal of constructivist psychotherapies. *Journal of Consulting & Clinical Psychology 61:* 221–234.

_____, & Feixas, G. (1990). Constructivist contributions to psychotherapy integration. *Journal of Integrative and Eclectic Psychotherapy 9:* 4–20.

Nhat Hanh, T. (1992). Commentary on the Heart Sutra. *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (Spring): 26–27.

Nishitani, K. (1982). *Religion and nothingness.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Norcross, J., & Goldfried, M. (eds.). (1992). *Handbook of psychotherapy integration.* New York: Basic Books.

O'Hanlon, W., & Wilk, J. (1987). *Shifting contexts: The generation of effective psychotherapy.* New York: Guilford Press.

Omer, H., & Strenger, P. (1992). The pluralist revolution: From the one true meaning to an infinity of constructed ones. *Psychotherapy 29:* 253–261.

Peterfreund, E., & Schwartz, J. (1971). *Information, systems, and psychoanalysis.* New York: International Universities Press.

Pinsof, W.M. (1983). Integrative problem-centered therapy: Toward the synthesis of family and individual psychotherapies. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy 9:* 19–35.

Rosenbaum, R.L. (1982). Paradox as epistemological jump. *Family Process 21:* 85–90.

_____. (1988a). Feelings toward integration. *International Journal of Eclectic Psychotherapy 7:* 52–60.

_____. (1988b). When worlds collide: Introduction to special section on emotional issues for therapists in approaching psychotherapy integration. *International Journal of Eclectic Psychotherapy 7:* 35–41.

_____. (1989). On closeness and overcloseness. Unpublished manuscript available from author.

_____. (1990). Strategic psychotherapy (pp. 351–404). In R. Wells & V. Gianetti (eds.), *Handbook of the brief psychotherapies.* New York: Plenum Press.

_____. (1992). Psychotherapy integration in India. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration 2:* 65–71.

_____. (1993a). Comment: Integration and translation. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration 3:* 73–78.

_____. (1993b). Heavy ideals: A strategic single-session therapy (pp. 109–128). In R. Wells & V. Gianetti (eds.), *Casebook of the brief psychotherapies.* New York: Plenum Press.

_____, & Bohart, A. (1994). Psychotherapy: The art of experience. Available from author.

_____, Hoyt, M., & Talmon, M. (1990). The challenge of single-session psychotherapies: Creating pivotal moments (pp. 165–192). In R. Wells & V. Gianetti (eds.), *Handbook of the brief psychotherapies.* New York: Plenum Press.

Rubin, S. (1986). Ego-focused psychotherapy: A psychodynamic framework for a technical eclecticism. *Psychotherapy 23:* 385–389.

Rymer, R. (1992). A silent childhood. *The New Yorker* (April 13).

Schafer, R. (1976). *A new language for psychoanalysis.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Spence, D. (1982). *Narrative truth and historical truth: Meaning and interpretation in psychoanalysis.* New York: W.W. Norton.

Spencer Brown, G. (1972). *Laws of form.* New York: The Julian Press.

Stern, D.N. (1985). *The interpersonal world of the infant.* New York: Basic Books.

Stricker, G., & Gold, J. (eds.). (1993). *Comprehensive handbook of psychotherapy integration.* New York: Plenum Press.

Sullivan, H.S. (1953). *The interpersonal theory of psychiatry.* New York: W.W. Norton.

Taylor, J. (1962). *The behavioral basis of perception.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Tomm, K. (1987). Interventive interviewing: Part 1. Strategizing as a fourth guideline for the therapist. *Family Process 26:* 3–13.

Varela, F.J., Thompson, E., & Rosch, E. (1991). *The embodied mind.* Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Wachtel, E., & Wachtel, P. (1986). *Family dynamics in individual psychotherapy: A guide to clinical strategies.* New York: Guilford Press.

Watzlawick, P. (1976). *How real is real?* New York: Random House.

_____. (ed.). (1984). *The invented reality.* New York: W.W. Norton.

White, M. (1986). Negative explanation, restraint, and double description: A template for family therapy. *Family Process 25:* 169–184.

_____, & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends.* New York: W.W. Norton.

Yalom, I. (1980). *Existential psychotherapy.* New York: Basic Books.

Zucker, H. (1967). *Problems of psychotherapy.* New York: Free Press.

Manuscript received October 8, 1992; revision submitted May 5, 1994; accepted October 25, 1994.

UNIVERSITY OF
ROCHESTER

Postgraduate
FAMILY THERAPY
TRAINING PROGRAM

SECOND ANNUAL

MEDICAL FAMILY THERAPY INSTITUTE

June 12 - 16, 1995 **Rochester, New York**

Co-Directors:

David B. Seaburn, M.S., N.C.C.
Susan H. McDaniel, Ph.D.

Faculty Include:
Thomas L. Campbell, M.D.
Barbara A. Gawinski, Ph.D.
Jeffrey J. Harp, M.D.
Susan H. Horwitz, M.S.
Judith Landau-Stanton, M.B.,Ch.B.,D.P.M.
Pieter le Roux, D. Litt et Phil.
Susan H. McDaniel, Ph.D.
David B. Seaburn, M.S., N.C.C.
Cleveland G. Shields, Ph.D.

Contact:
Maureen R. Clark, Organizer
University of Rochester Medical Center
300 Crittenden Boulevard
Rochester, NY 14642-8409
Phone: (716) 275-2532
Fax: (716) 271-7706

FEE: $485 (plus academic charges)