Persons, divine and human, and therapy:
A critical correlation between a trinitarian analogy of persons and narrative therapy

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Abstract

Concern has been raised over the last few decades about the ways counselling therapies are often used without due regard for the views of human wellbeing that they implicitly represent. A key example of this is the way counselling theory and practice takes for granted various Enlightenment epistemologies, such as rational thought and empirical science. One effect of this reliance has been to downplay the therapeutic merit of engaging with people’s hopes and values, and related histories and traditions. Recent practical and anthropological innovations in narrative therapy and trinitarian theology provide resources with which to engage these concerns. But work remains to be done on understanding how professional counselling might profitably interact with relational ethics such as those associated with trinitarian thinking.

With these issues in mind, this study addresses: (1) the extent to which the key philosophies and theories of practice associated with narrative therapy are capable of representing the social trinitarian analogy of persons, and (2) what contributions narrative therapy might make to communities engaged in the trinitarian social project. In responding to these questions, critical correlation methodology is employed to construct a public theology. Trinitarian relational ethics—such as mutuality, offering forgiveness, and working for justice and reconciliation—are utilised as a lens for engagement with narrative therapists, and as the lens for Christian consideration of the broad questions about human existence.

The method involves four steps. Step-one is the identification and articulation of six aspects of narrative therapy’s philosophy and theory of practice. The six aspects are: the aims of narrative therapy, the social and linguistic formation of knowledge and identity, therapy and ethics, narrativity, metanarrative, interpretation and reality, and the person in narrative therapy. Step-two is concerned with the formulation of relevant theological principles. Step-three involves critically analysing the six aspects of narrative therapy in the light of relevant theological principles, and step-four develops reformulations as a result of the analysis.

My research findings centre on three main arguments. The first is that while narrative therapy helpfully engages people in ethical reflection and decision making, it fails to represent a specific vision of wellbeing. The second is that rather than denying absolutes, experiences of narrative therapeutic conversation can lead to knowing things differently. The third group of findings suggest that while narrative therapy effectively addresses the linguistic and narrative construction of identity, the trinitarian invitation is to also engage the interpersonal and embodied dimensions of human life.
**Declaration by author**

This thesis is composed of my original work, and contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. I have clearly stated the contribution by others to jointly-authored works that I have included in my thesis.

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Chapter one: Introduction

This thesis reflects theologically on a form of counselling known as narrative therapy. It focuses on narrative therapy’s view of people and theories of practice, and correlates these with trinitarian thinking. On the one hand, I have chosen a stream of trinitarian thinking known as social-trinitarian for its emphasises on the social and relational nature of God and humans. On the other hand, I have chosen narrative therapy because it engages people, not as independent individuals, but as persons-in-relation who are shaped by culture and language. As will become evident, both social trinitarian theology and narrative therapy understand people to gain personal identity through social processes. Together, they appear to hold promise for a time when the dominance of the centred-self view of people is passing away.

While narrative therapy and trinitarian theology have much in common, particularly in terms of their shared social view of people, I maintain that they may also learn from one another. There are two main aims of the study. The first is to evaluate key philosophies and theories of practice associated with narrative therapy as expressions of the social project implied by trinitarian thinking. The second aim is to consider what contributions narrative therapy might make to communities engaged in the trinitarian social project. To limit the scope of the thesis, priority is given to the first aim.

1.1 Motivations and context

As a counselling practitioner, and as a person who claims Christian identity, I have been drawn to work with narrative therapy. This attraction is based on the way narrative therapy opens space for respectful conversation with people about their hopes and values, and for the way it resonates with my concern for reimagining the world as a place formed in response to God’s invitation to develop experiences of wellbeing in community. Furthermore, my experience in the use of narrative therapy has contributed to a growing conviction that hope needs to be represented practically, and exercised with great care so that the things people value, are cherished and not obscured (White & Epston, 1990).

This, in turn, has led me to value social trinitarian thinking because it emphasises relational ethics and offers a specifically shaped vision of wellbeing. Specifically, it represents the hope that individuals and their communities will be shaped by experiences of receiving and giving love through everyday things such as the offering of forgiveness, interpersonal vulnerability, and working for justice. This trinitarian view of hope is associated with the events and narratives
relating to the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I value the emphasis trinitarian thinking places on relational ethics because it resonates with my practitioner observation and life experience; that people are formed in relationship, and flourish to the extent they receive and participate in relationships shaped by self-giving—love. The *social* trinitarian analogy conceives of God as both one and three, “whose being consists in a relationality that derives from the otherness-in-relation of the Father, Son, and Spirit” (Gunton, 1993, p. 6). This implies a relational unity of perfect—and therefore mutual self-giving and receiving—love. Such a version of relating “gives due weight to both one and many, to both particular and universal, to both otherness and relation” (Gunton, 1993, p. 7). Furthermore, because of the atoning work of God, through Jesus the Son and in the power of the Holy Spirit, humankind is thought to be invited to have their being consist in the otherness-in-relation of God. Participation in this ethical life of love is, at the same time, engagement in a social project orientated towards a restoration *telos*.

The interweaving of trinitarian thinking and narrative therapy within my life and practice has led to the identification of four things that animate my interest in this study. I introduce these, before going on to discuss several phenomena that shape the study’s context.

**One: Counsellor assumptions about wellbeing.** The first motivating observation is made from my standing place within trinitarian theology. From here I observe that while the counselling profession in New Zealand and beyond engages well with issues relating to practice, and with counsellor’s personal philosophies of counsellor’s practice, it is not so familiar with discussing underlying assumptions about human wellbeing. This may partly be because opening discussion to talk about human wellbeing inevitably involves cultural, political, and even theological considerations that can be contentious. In spite of the challenges, it seems to me that counsellors need to develop ways to talk about human wellbeing and related histories and traditions, so that therapeutic goals for development can be identified and negotiated; not assumed or even neglected. I hope that the thesis contributes to conversation regarding the often implicitly held assumptions about human wellbeing and, as a result, counselling may produce more meaningful outcomes.

**Two: Narrative therapy’s focus on social context.** This second motivating observation is made from the standpoint of my work as a counsellor who is educated in both psychodynamic and narrative perspectives. While I value being able to engage people from the perspective of narrative therapy, I find its scope of practice limited. It is limited because while its practices engage the social construction of identity, they do not provide the means to adequately engage embodied individuality or interpersonal dynamics. This is a difficult situation to address because without an understanding of people that represents both individual and social perspectives—such as the social trinitarian one—the thoughtful integration of different counselling approaches is hard to achieve.
This integrative challenge led me to adopt an approach to intra-disciplinary integration based on anthropological visibility (see, for example, Hollander, 2000). My hope is that this approach will foster constructive consideration and purposeful augmentation of strengths and limitations associated with narrative therapeutic practice.

**Three: Unity of knowledge and context.** The third motivating observation is made from the standpoint of my engagement with narrative therapy. I am appreciative that this provides a robust set of practices with which to therapeutically engage people as people-of-intention; those who understand their lives in terms of past and future (White & Epston, 1990). Viewing people in this way leads to the insight that knowledge and context are always linked. Reciprocally linking practice and understanding attracts me because it echoes with the trinitarian conclusion that God’s purpose in relating to humanity is more than communication, it is an invitation to communion (A. Torrance, 1996). This is to say that while trinitarian thinking represents an invitation to participate in ethically shaped relationships, they are understood, at the same time, to be participation in the triune life of God. Linking knowledge and context suggests, on the one hand, that narrative therapy needs to engage with the larger stories—such as the trinitarian one—that provide meaning for people’s lives and, on the other hand, it suggests that trinitarian theology needs to partner with therapeutic practices—such as narrative therapeutic ones—with which to ground theory into context.

**Four: Counsellor reluctance to engage Christian theology.** The fourth motivating observation is that it is difficult to coax professional counsellors to consider insight about human wellbeing that is drawn from the discipline of Christian theology. While there are many examples of so-called “Christian counselling” models (see, for example, N. Anderson, 2000) that utilise human scientific insight in support of the aims of the church, it is rare to find examples of professional practices that are explicitly linked to Christian theological insight. Furthermore, while I will argue that interdisciplinary dialogue requires respect for the uniqueness of both parties’ perspectives, it is important to note that this has not always been the case. The writings of evangelical Christians, for example, betray attitudes of indifference and sometimes even resistance to dialogue with other perspectives (B. Robinson, 2004). I hope that this study is able to involve insights sourced from the discipline of theology in respectful conversation with counselling perspectives. I now move to considering the contextual issues, beginning with the professional counselling context.
1.2 The New Zealand professional counselling context

In order to undertake such a study, in a manner that is both grounded and contextual, cognisance needs to be given to both professional counselling and theological contexts. The following section introduces the New Zealand counselling context, and the approach the study takes towards developing counselling practices through discussing the anthropological assumptions that underlie them. I then address two concerns, first the appropriateness of critical correlation research methodology with faith-based ethics, and then the gendered nature of the language traditionally associated with trinitarian theology. This introduction concludes with a precis of each chapter.

The relatively short history of professional counselling in New Zealand is characterised by rapid growth and change. Counselling and guidance provision has existed outside the church from the early 20th century. However, counselling was only formally introduced into secondary schools in 1966, and the training of counsellors at university level only began in the mid-1970s (Hermansson & Webb, 2009; Miller, 2012). There seems to be a close correlation between changes to New Zealand society and the rapid development of counselling and other social services. For example, in the 1990s New Zealand society was significantly disrupted by a transformation from state welfare to free market economics. This resulted in, amongst other things, a period of fast paced urbanisation and an increase in demand for social services.

The professional bodies that represent counsellors have also undergone various iterations (N. Rogers, 2012). The New Zealand Guidance and Counselling Association was formed in 1974; in 1990 its name was changed to the New Zealand Association of Counsellors. Additionally, the New Zealand Christian Counsellors Association was formed in 1995 to promote professional excellence in counselling practice within the Christian community and beyond. The Health Practitioners Competence Assurance Act (HPCA, 2003) introduced a fraught, and as yet unresolved, discussion about the relative merits of the state-registration of counselling, as opposed to the current self-regulatory regime.

A significant feature of the New Zealand counselling profession is its pragmatism. It has evolved in response to community need, and with community-based training. While, in recent years, there has been a proliferation of university, polytechnic, and private sector diplomas and degrees in counselling, the profession, both in New Zealand and more widely, continues to suffer from an inadequate research base. Ongoing studies highlight that research needs to be practical enough to inform day to day counselling work (M. Cooper, 2008; McLeod, 2003).

When considered from the perspective of the theory of knowledge generation for counselling, like New Zealand society in general, reductionist epistemologies have been prominent. While the growing influence of narrative therapy and other socially orientated approaches have
gone some way to challenge this, reducing multifaceted realities down to similar components has continued to dominate practice, and academic reflection on practice. While reductionist approaches are essential for capturing something of the complexity of the natural world, they have had some unfortunate side effects. These include overlooking cultural insight, and other perspectives—including theological ones—that do not appear to fit the categories that are being used for assessment. I maintain that this, and a pragmatic culture that is hesitant to invest in research, has contributed to the counselling profession developing a cautious stance towards research informed development. This situation seems to have produced two responses—namely, separatism and eclecticism.

Separatism. The Western world counselling profession is well-known for its adoption of many different approaches, each with its own philosophical stance (see, for example, Corey, 2009). It is also renowned for its separatist denominational spirit that is evidenced in the way separate schools function in relative isolation, and in cultures of mutual suspicion. This is not a recent phenomenon as it has been a feature of the psychotherapeutic school since early in the 20th century (Hollanders, 2000).

Furthermore, separate schools of counselling tend to be split along epistemological lines, where various ways of understanding human wellbeing vie for superiority. The profession’s relatively short history also demonstrates changing philosophical emphases. For the middle part of the 20th century, counselling psychologies tended to accentuate individual psychological, behavioural, and cognitive functioning, and neglect the socio-cultural dimension of human life. More recently, there has been a pendulum swing away from focusing on individuals and towards consideration of social context (Mearns & Cooper, 2005). Now, it is much more common for counsellors to focus on social and political context, and some approaches—including narrative therapy—can even be anti-psychology (T. Cooper, 2011).

Eclecticism. Another characteristic, one that can be understood as a reaction to sectarianism, is the uncritical mixing of various counselling approaches (see, for example, Clarkson, 2000). This eclectic approach reinforces the general tendency of counsellors to overlook underlying cultural and philosophical assumptions. However, philosophical naivety can be problematic in that, recognised or not, every therapy contains implicit theories of culture that exert influence over both the counsellor’s therapeutic intentions, and the client’s expectations of change (Browning, 2006; Richardson, 2006). This study may be viewed as a response to this movement through seeking to bring implicit theories to visibility, and for discussion. The hope is that illuminating taken for granted assumptions about wellbeing will provide an opportunity for
deliberately realigning practice with specifically chosen developmental goals, and will encourage other counsellors to follow suit (R. Anderson, 2001).

1.3 Core problems of research and leading research questions
The point I am moving towards making is that the development of adequately integrated counsellor practices may be supported by a different approach. This different approach is dialogue about what it means to be human and to experience wellbeing; about underlying anthropological assumptions. [Ludwig] Wittgenstein observed that the way language is used in culturally specific situations is always changing, as some uses come into favour and others are forgotten. He argued, therefore, that change is possible when individuals engage and practise different ways of talking that are based on different assumptions (Wittgenstein, 1953). This study’s “different” way of talking has to do with engaging previously implicit understanding of the human person in dialogue with practice and other ways of thinking. In this context, the hope is that through dialogue between narrative therapy and trinitarian thinking, the person in narrative therapy will be cast into relief in the light of a very different approach. The reason for choosing this dialogic approach to integration is that it offers opportunity to bring the person in narrative therapy to visibility, and to “come to a greater, more holistic and unified understanding of human persons and their social/ecosystemic worlds than is possible through any unitary disciplinary window alone” (Eck, 1996, p. 102).

Both narrative therapy’s social formulation of personhood and the trinitarian social analogy seem open to dialogue about their own assumptions, and with knowledge associated with other disciplines. I say this because social metaphors tend not to be threatened by diversity and are, therefore, open to consideration of other knowledge. This is because they recognise that all knowledge, including scientific understanding, is contingent in that it is agreement people come to through language (Parry & Doan, 1994).

It is important to say at this introductory point with regard to Christian sources of understanding that I am not advocating for a radical relativist position that is evident in some social constructionist philosophies. I am, instead, taking my lead from trinitarian theology’s advocacy for both an openness towards the social nature of knowledge, and for asking questions of whether this or that contribution is coherent, plausible, and worthy of note. It is important, therefore, when seeking to integrate material from a variety of sources, that a basis for discernment about validity is identified and declared. This is one of the reasons I have adopted trinitarian theology as a place to stand when considering narrative therapy. Implementing this kind of dialogical approach to integration, one based on a specific standing place, may lead to a more nuanced approach to difference than the pluralistic form of respect currently associated with narrative therapy, and
counsellor ethics more generally. The alternate—trinitarian—approach potentially leads to celebrating difference for its creative contribution, rather than fearing it as a threat to notions of stability (N. Wright, 1992).

Having introduced an integrative approach to the development of counsellor anthropology, I now take one step back. In the next section I discuss the value of seeking anthropological visibility.

Towards anthropological visibility. There is little doubt that the pluralistic basis of professional counsellor ethics does a fine job of protecting client self-determination (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2012). Paradoxically, however, alignment with pluralism may have diminished the capacity for the counselling profession to discuss difference, and in particular the various views of wellbeing that different schools of counselling represent. I argue this because pluralism is relativistic; and so while it infers a version of respect that cherishes difference, it avoids a basis upon which one approach might be considered more useful than another. This pluralistic approach is evidenced within ethical principles such as “respect for human dignity, partnership, autonomy and personal integrity” (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2012, 3.3.1-4). These individualistic principles suggest a supportive kind of caring; and, in the name of care, a reluctance to evaluate lifestyle choices against anything beyond the client’s subjective situation. However, they also imply a resistance to understandings of wellbeing associated with community hopes and other normative views, and so this position ultimately undermines access to resourcing. In making this point, I do not want to discredit the ethical stance so far developed by the counselling professions, but I do want to suggest a possible development. This is to openly discuss counsellor philosophies and associated anthropologies and, in doing so, recognise that these represent communities of agreement.

A significant amount of scholarship has gone towards ensuring the counselling relationship is “safe” from the influence of others, so that self-determination is protected (see for example Bond, 2000; Corey, Corey, & Callahan, 2010; Crocket, Agee, & Cornforth, 2011). It seems to me, however, that the practical effectiveness of these various ethical intentions are significantly undermined by a lack of openness, and therefore discussion about the philosophical assumptions that underlie all counselling approaches. It is simply not possible to function as counsellors without causal philosophical and anthropological assumptions (Browning & Cooper, 2004). My main point in all of this is that when counsellors assume they share similar understandings, both with other practitioners and clients, important developmental goals are obscured, resources are withheld, and awareness of power is diminished.

This leads to the conclusion that all decisions about what needs to be talked about, and what is considered “normal” human functioning, are political. By political I mean in terms of power
relations associated with who gets to speak and who gets overlooked (Brugger, 2008, 2009). I notice, for example, that conversations with my psychotherapeutically-orientated supervisor seem to gravitate towards exploring my inner world and my relational formation that this may represent, rather than considering the social and cultural assumptions that may also shape a particular experience. It appears, too, that it is almost as if there is a normalising gravitational pull guiding some counsellors towards an assumed individualistic understanding of persons. I also notice in my role as a counsellor educator that, on the one hand, student counsellors of European heritage seem to find it easier to accept the person-centred notion of self-actualisation (Corey, 2009), rather than the narrative therapeutic understanding of the social construction of identity (Burr, 2006). On the other hand, I notice that Maori and Pasifica men and women often approach their counsellor education with more community orientated assumptions (L. McMillan, 2011).

All of this points to the recognition that counselling is a value-laden practice. Without this insight, counselling is surely prone to uncritically serve dominant cultural values (Bergin, 1980; Gergen, 2006; D. Robinson, 1997). For example, the Western cultural emphasis on scientific epistemology has tended to support individual understandings of people. This bias can be observed in the discipline of psychology’s particular concern with individual cognitive functioning. In relation to this phenomena, social psychologist Edward Sampson argued that modern psychology actually perpetuates the belief that individualised conceptions of persons are normal: “Without a field like psychology it would be difficult to sustain the belief that the self-contained individual holds the key to unlocking the major secrets of human nature” (2008, p. 42). I refer to this to illustrate my point that the human sciences, including psychology and counselling, are vulnerable to working as unrecognised instruments of societal power and control (Foucault, 1982). This implies that respectful practice must ensure that these assumptions are visible, and therefore contestable.

When the potential for counselling to enact social control is considered from the perspective of the counsellor’s ethical commitment to work on behalf of human wellbeing, it follows that it is important for practitioners to seek, and to become aware of, underlying anthropological assumptions that influence the work. Put differently, there is profit in deconstructing a counselling approach’s “normal” view of wellbeing (Foucault, 1982). I say “profit”, because instead of serving hegemonic conceptions of wellbeing that are simply taken for granted and often unrecognised, counselling conversation might be used with regard to individual and community goals that have been more carefully chosen, rather than just inherited (Brugger, 2008).

On first reading, this may seem like a straightforward proposal, but my advocacy for anthropological visibility opens to the recognition that there is a general lack of anthropological agreement. In spite of the church’s and philosophy’s long histories of discussion, agreement on a
consistent ontology of human personhood continues to be elusive (Schwöbel, 1991; Zizioulas, 1991). Hence, I am saying three things. First, that it is important for counsellors to be self-aware in relation to the anthropological assumptions their practice represents. Second, that while there is little consensus on the ontology of personhood, some approaches dominate in ways that often go unnoticed. And third, that it may be helpful for counsellors to make informed choices about the view of human wellbeing that they wish to locate their work within, and select practices that represent these. This is the approach that I have taken in setting up this study. It is located it within a social trinitarian analogy of persons as a basis from which to consider practice.

In response to these core problems, I now reiterate the leading research questions. The first is to ask of key philosophies and theories of practice associated with narrative therapy to what extent they may represent the social project implied by trinitarian thinking. The second research question is to ask what contributions narrative therapy might make to communities engaged in the trinitarian social project.

1.4 Counsellor reluctance to engage with theological insight
For a long period of Western history, it was difficult to imagine the world without God. While throughout this—pre-Enlightenment—period there are some daring examples of scientists attempting to re-imagine the universe based on observation rather than the teaching of the Church; these were the exceptions. Copernicus (1473-1543), for example, invited the wrath of the Church by suggesting the Earth may orbit the Sun, and the Church continued to be profoundly challenged by the suggestion that the Earth was not the centre of the universe (Olson, 2004). The steady trickle of evidence that followed Galileo’s invention of the telescope led to his imprisonment, ill-treatment, and ultimately to the denial of a burial place in consecrated ground (Draper, 2009). Now, in the 21st century, we are living in a very different world. This is one in which a particular thrust in the Enlightenment paradigm—that towering figures of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant, for example, held together autonomy and critical thought, on the one hand, and belief in God on the other—has turned this situation right around, and it became difficult to think in terms other than autonomous power and knowledge (Brueggemann, 2010).

When viewed from the perspective of counsellor insight into human wellbeing it is apparent that we have entered a new era. There is growing openness on behalf of the Church to social scientific understanding. This is evident in some quarters of the academic discipline of theology’s consideration of its place in pastoral care and counselling (see, for example, Browning, 1991; Osmer, 2008). While the counselling profession has been much slower to engage theology as a viable source of human understanding, there are shifts taking place here too (Griffith & Griffith,
My contention is that part of the reason for counsellor reluctance to do so relates to the tendency in Barth and other neo-orthodox or kerygmatic theologians to diminish the value of other ways of knowing on the basis that they are human led enterprises (see, for example, Holder, 2012). Neo-orthodox theology stresses the practical use of sacred doctrine which can be contrasted with natural theology and more abstract and philosophical enquiry. My point is that it may not be that counselling theorists are generally disinterested in engaging with theological sources; rather they are specifically resistant to theologies that are not respectful of, and therefore open to dialogue with, traditional counselling epistemologies. Given all of this, it still takes courage for professional counsellors to reimagine the world with God.

A correlational approach to engagement. While Karl Barth, and other kerygmatic theologians, are appropriately concerned with maintaining the integrity of the eternal message, such an approach to theological understanding risks establishing a sort of “exclusive transcendence” over and above the shifting perspectives of contemporary culture (P. Tillich, 1966, p. 7). To avoid this unfortunate one-way street outcome, which contradicts the essence of the trinitarian doctrine of the incarnation, an alternative approach is needed, one capable of relating message and situation, in a manner in which neither is obscured nor destroyed. Therefore, while this study engages post-Barthian trinitarian theology, it uses a correlation methodology to shift the conversation away from the giving exclusive transcendence to the eternal message. Put differently, correlational methods invite perspectives drawn from contemporary culture to have a voice. It achieves this by relating questions and answers supplied by the Christian heritage with questions and answers supplied by cultural self-interpretation. This approach aims to invite narrative therapy and trinitarian theology to relate in a mutually respectful manner.

Furthermore, the correlational approach’s emphasis on respectful dialogue appears to be supported by a trinitarian—and therefore, participatory—understanding of God. As I indicated above, this is one that remains faithful to the integrity of the eternal message of the Father’s love for creation through Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit that comes through the Bible and doctrine on one hand, and knowing through human experience of life, the world, and God, on the other. The justification for such openness to experiential knowing is that God too is surely involved in this part of life. Present throughout the natural world in the power of the Holy Spirit, God animates it with life and restoration impetus (Moltmann, 1992). This implies that, as well as the eternal message itself, practical experience read in the light of the eternal message can be theologically revealing.

My advocacy for a correlational approach to research also appears to find some support in the counselling context. For example, British counselling educator Mick Cooper (2008) argued for
“research-informed” as opposed to “research-directed” counselling practice. He did this on the basis that the informing process holds space open for other ways of knowing. These might include personal experience, supervisory input, and other culturally derived sources. This is to say that while people can be studied from sociological and natural scientific perspective, knowledge can also come from less concrete sources, such as philosophy and theology (Brugger, 2008).

1.5 Enlightenment legacy, the social turn, and narrative therapy

As I have intimated, the counselling profession is shaped by history, and currently reflects an erosion of post-Enlightenment hegemony that is sometimes referred to as the postmodern social turn (see Freedman & Combs, 1996). Associated with this most recent shift is a philosophical movement from structuralist to the post-structuralist understanding of humans; and in response the development of narrative, discursive, and other collaborative therapies (see, for example, Malinen, 2010).

Initially developed by two Australasian social workers, Michael White and David Epston, narrative therapy draws on a range of postmodern philosophies, most specifically social constructionism and narrative theory. This approach to counselling and community work engages the linguistic and storied fabric of people’s lives (White & Epston, 1990). Rather than attempting to diagnose people on the basis of truthfulness, narrative therapy is interested in dialogue about life-likeness. This distinction suggests that people are understood by narrative therapists as social beings rather than individual interior ones. Based on this view, narrative therapists attempt to provide people with opportunities to participate in the construction of preferred identity stories through collaborative conversation. The narrative therapeutic process aims to develop personal agency in the context of searching for marginalised stories about past experiences and future hopes.

The philosophical changes represented by narrative and other collaborative therapies have opened new opportunities for therapeutic enquiry and consideration of different understandings about people—including folk and faith perspectives. These changes have also opened divides between counsellors who have adopted these new perspectives and those who remain more powerfully influenced by the Enlightenment legacy. Put another way, counsellors tend to be divided along the lines of whether they subscribe to modern individualistic or postmodern social view. Furthermore, while the influence of relational and social perspectives is growing, the individualistic view tends still to displace the significance of the role of others from the process of human decision making, and conceives of it, instead, as a personal process.

Post-Enlightenment individualism also tends to still displace God as the divine Other from a position of relevance to human decision making. A person’s locus of choice has, in effect, been
shifted by Enlightenment thinking from the relational space between, and been replaced with the impersonal force of the mind and will (see, for example, Gergen, 2009). This can be viewed as a primary shift from relationship with human and divine others, to an inner isolation (Balswick, King, & Reimer, 2005). Assuming people to be exclusively focused on the “inner” life has significant effects. Trinitarian theologian Colin Gunton (1993) contended, for example, that “when individual self-contemplation becomes the basis of self, rather than relation to the divine and human others... the self begins to disappear” (p. 118).

Both trinitarian theology and narrative therapy represent departures from the view that the self is centred interiorly. They also offer rather harsh criticisms of the way “the other” is suppressed because she is perceived as a threat to individual stability, rather than a potentially creative source of life (Volf, 1996). The point I am building towards making is that these late 20th century pan-disciplinary shifts, beyond these autonomous conceptions of the self, offer intellectual and practical means to reconsider the place of relations—with both divine and human others—in human development.

I am not alone in advocating for a social ontology as a basis for a dynamic and integrative view of people. Narrative theorists within both theology and psychology agree that humans are people of intention (Smith, 2009). By this I mean that human action is understandable when viewed in terms of what went before, and what is to come. This infers that people not only know who they are in relation to others, they are who they are in relation with others. It also infers that people are who they have been constituted to be, by being situated in the flow of life’s larger stories (Hauerwas, 1993). This is not to suggest that individuality is unimportant, but that individuality is possible only because humans are first of all relational beings.

**Ethical constitution of personal identity.** Foregrounding the primary place of relationality and sociality in the constitution of human identity and wellbeing introduces the notion that the self is fluid, rather than fixed. This implies that personal growth involves more than the development of self-awareness and “in-built” potentials. More than these things, it requires answering questions about what shape of wellbeing a person prefers, what style of relating will develop this, and which community-shaping stories will guide these developments. These, of course, are ethical and political questions. They imply that the choices faced by people with regard to personal development are simultaneously choices about the development of others, and vice versa. This is to say, on the one hand, that a choice to not relate well, or to even try and even not relate at all, imply choices not to develop as one might. These things suggest that, on the other hand, the postmodern turn as represented by narrative therapy needs to engage with ethical questions about how best to relate on behalf of life-giving human development.
This introductory discussion has arrived at an important point in my hypothesis that shapes the design of this research. Because narrative therapy avoids universal accounts of “healthy” relating, preferring instead to leave this choice to the subjectivity of individuals, confidence of success of the therapeutic solutions it offers people appear uncertain.

This is where relational ethics—such as those represented by trinitarian thinking—seem to offer a “buoyant alternative” to remaining isolated in the fearful self-preoccupation associated with individualistic views of the people, and to the social view when it resists relational ethics in the way that narrative therapy seems to do.

In the deep dislocation where God has now placed us, we must do some new deciding. While the deciding we face is complex and demanding, in the end it comes down to a few large choices... choice of fearful self-preoccupation that invites a shrivelled human spirit or a fresh embrace of this buoyant alternative that subverts fearful preoccupation and calls to a large re-entry into the pain of the world... and the possibility of God’s newness.

(Brueggemann, 2002, p. 68)

Trinitarian theology represents an example of an ethical vision for engaging in self-and community-constituting relations in a manner that leads to the possibility of God’s newness. I am referring to trinitarian thinking as an example of relational ethics because the self-giving style of relating that it represents links the successful development of personal wellbeing with the development of others. For example, as a social worker who cares for the needs of a prisoner and her family, her identity is developed. The paradox of relating in a manner that places the needs of others alongside one’s own is that this is not necessarily a threat to individuality, but may actually be constitutive of it. What emerges within the trinitarian analogy, then, is not an empty form of individuality that is devoid of others, but a reciprocating self, one with both individuality and relation held together by the mutuality of other-centred concern and service (McFadyen, 1990).

This is to say that even when people who may be very different from oneself are encountered according to the trinitarian ethic of self-giving love, they can be embraced with hospitality, and not necessarily viewed as a threat. My hope in choosing the trinitarian reciprocating-self as a basis for correlation with narrative therapy is that it proves to be a constructive source of ethical guidance, and that it goes some way towards addressing the disjunction between the more individual and the social-orientated approaches to counselling.

While aspects of my suggestion that a postmodern collaborative approach to therapy and ethics associated with a religious metanarrative may have something to offer one another may be unique, it does not represent something entirely new. New conceptions of psychology, such as those represented by narrative therapy and trinitarian thinking, are already permeating contemporary
scholarship with the notion that people are primarily relational, rather than with the more traditional view that they are self-contained (Gergen, 2006). The growing influence of these relational psychologies implies a reversing of the disjunction between a person’s interior life and life with others, between scientific and narrative knowledge, and between narratives about people’s encounters with one another and narratives about encounters with the sacred. While Enlightenment psychology focuses on the interior life of the individual and individual neglects social and relational domains, the social constructionist psychologies associated with narrative therapy overlook interiority. In contrast to both of these perspectives, trinitarian anthropology strikes a balance between individuality and relations. Here, what it means to be human is re-written in a way that gives equal emphasis to individuals and community, to uniqueness and shared life, and to otherness and relation (Gunton, 1993).

**Social trinitarian anthropology.** The trinitarian analogy of persons associated with post-Barthian neo-orthodoxy suggests that to a significant extent individuals indwell one another. The recent redevelopment of this view in Christian theology has been as significant as the social turn in psychology that accompanies the postmodern turn (A. Torrance, 1996).

My suggestion is that the style of relating that is chronicled in the story of God and humanity across the span of the Jewish and Christian scriptures constitutes appropriate relational ethics with which to shape counsellor identity, relating, and therapeutic goals. I claim this because the trinitarian reciprocating self is hospitably open to herself and others, she is open to being shaped in ways that lead to genuine encounter (LaMothe, 2008), and this is of primary interest to counsellors. As such, trinitarian thinking offers one place to stand, amongst many alternatives, from where to dialogue with some of the taken for granted assumptions that currently guide the counselling task.

This proposal amounts to the suggestion that social psychologies—such as those represented by narrative therapy—can be usefully located in a story that represents relational ethics drawn from history and tradition. Similar examples of this include Sampson (1993, 2003, 2008) looking to the Jewish tradition for the ethic of unconditional kindness to strangers as a guiding metaphor for the development of specifically shaped personal and community life. Drewery (2005) advanced Sampson’s work through applying it to social practice, including narrative therapeutic practice. While he stopped short of identifying a specific tradition associated with his advocacy for “love”, one of the founders of narrative therapy, Epston (1997), suggested enquiring about “love’s version” as a way of overcoming the impact of trouble in couple relationships. Also, clinical psychologist Larner (2011) considered ethics associated with the work of Derrida and Levinas with a view to developing an ethical practice model. Larner developed this approach to addressing theory and
practice dilemmas brought about by attempting to practice from a narrative and social constructionist perspective in health and welfare settings dominated by scientific epistemologies.

These developments point beyond the confines of individualistic psychologies, and relativistic social psychologies, to more deliberately inclusive relational ethics. One key hope already associated with these innovations is that space may be opened within the postmodern impetus to liberate psychology from the confines of reductionist epistemology and diagnosis. Building on the impetus of these examples, this study looks to the ethical traditions associated with the story of Israel and Christ and the epistemology of other-centred love that it represents. According to Watson (2004), an epistemology of love promises to be “non-authoritarian, critical and integrative” (p. 248). Watson’s reference to “critical” alludes to love’s interest in encountering the other; an interest that leads inevitably to new perspectives being made available.

1.6 Concerns

Now that I have introduced the study, identified the context, and surveyed key issues, I will address three concerns before outlining the shape of each chapter.

Two-way street, one-way traffic. So far, I have introduced trinitarian theology in terms of an ethic of love. As well as this ethical approach to love, I also want to refer to the way love can be approached through participation in the life that trinitarian thinking suggests. When love is understood ethically— as an implicit faith category—it need not necessarily be associated with the Christian religion. This is much the same methodology as taken by Paul Tillich with regard to the categories of guilt, meaninglessness, and despair. P. Tillich (1952) attempted to make these ethics available for everyone to engage with, regardless of religious affiliation. When taken in this way trinitarian love can be embraced in a genuinely two-way street correlation both by people who share faith in God, and those who do not.

However, there is a problem with my employment of the doctrine of the Trinity that this approach does not directly address. This is that the trinitarian story implies more than a set of ethics, it also implies faith in, and relationship with, God. This suggests that although I have referred to this correlation as a two-way street, it is more likely to carry one-way traffic; that is people of faith engaging with narrative therapy, and not the other way around. I say this because although trinitarian theology is grounded in faith in God, faith and God are rejected by many. And so my approach can be criticised for its apparent exclusivity. I have two related responses to this critique.

My first response is that while the doctrine of the Trinity is rich and complex, it does involve the central element of love—as the atoning sacrifice of Jesus death illustrates—and the invitation to participate in love as a social project that this implies is not reserved for people who
believe in the Trinity. This suggestion, that there is an intrinsic link between God, humans, and love, offers the view that the main purpose of trinitarian theology is to promote the good in human community, not a Christian religion (Gunton, 2002). Put differently, the doctrine of the Trinity provides a relational way to elucidate a social and political vision for human society, from the history-bound narratives associated with the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

My second response is that I am not proposing that the insights into human wellbeing associated with the story of Christ are the only viable ones. As I have already established, all counselling approaches represent implicit faith positions that will always only align with some counsellors’ life commitments.

**Gendered language and the Trinity.** The gendered language—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—traditionally used to refer to God as triune can be problematic for some. Concern seems to centre on three things. One, because all attempts to understand or speak of God are limited, settling on any definite formulation is problematic. Two, the extent to which the male expressions of God represent the way God is in God’s self—God in se. And three, related to the second concern is the feminist critique is that the male-orientated language associated with the doctrine of the Trinity fails to represent God as feminine, and the unfortunate consequences this has for human society.

**Gendered-language and God in se.** The recognition of the problematic nature of the male-orientated language for God predates the more recent feminist critique. While it is commonly recognised that God is not gendered in the way humans are, the formulation of the Father, Son, and Spirit leaves little space for representing God in feminine gendered form. Although this is frequently interpreted to mean that God is male, such an interpretation has been explicitly rejected by many Christian theologies on the basis that naming God as Father has to do with a relation within the Trinity, and it does not to speak of the divine substance. Particularly in languages other than English, where gender is not reduced to sexual identity, there are important instances of more inclusive gender imaging of the Trinity. Examples include early Syriac liturgies representing the Holy Spirit in the feminine. Jesus being referred to as being born from the “womb of the Father” by the Third Council of Toledo (Irvin, 2011); and, Moltmann (1981) suggesting that God is best understood as a “motherly Father” and “fatherly Mother” (p. 165). The important point with regard to the gender implications of the way God is referred to is that they are a means to a more non-hierarchical social life. While I am using the traditional formula—Father, Son, and Spirit—I am

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1 Whether the male and female nature of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is emphasised or de-emphasised, it is difficult to get away from the gender-bound nature of the Trinity. This reality poses questions for theologically informed therapists such as: “How do I know which person of the Trinity responds to my client’s story?” And, what if the client views the Holy Spirit as too feminine, or the Father too oppressive?”
doing so on the basis that it is in common usage and because it represents familial relations, not because it implies gender exclusivity.

However, to avoid confusion I have chosen not to use “he” or “him” to refer to God more generally, instead, I refer to God as “God” or the “Trinity”. Furthermore, because of trinitarian theology’s inference that mutuality, rather than patriarchal relationships is favoured, and because the English language lacks gender neutral personal pronouns, I have also chosen not to refer generally to individual humans as “he” or “him”, but instead “she” and “her”.

Feminist critique. The feminist critique addresses more than the use of gendered language. It extends to the male-driven processes that led to the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity adopting “Father” and “Son”. On this basis, there is considerable impetus for a reconceptualisation using gender inclusive terminology. The feminist concern focuses on the implications of the use of male language on human behaviour and social arrangements (Coakley, 1999). A particularly troubling implication of the prominence of male-biased language is what it implies for human life. Trinitarian formulations that emphasise inter-trinitarian hierarchy are of particular concern for the way they are used to legitimise the subordination of women to men, and interpersonal oppression more generally. Responses designed to redress the imbalance range from rejecting all male pronouns for God through to emphasising mothering attributes of God.

In terms of this study’s use of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit analogy, theologian Catherine Mowry LaCunga’s response is particularly helpful. LaCunga (1991, 1985) urged that we look not to models of the Trinity that represent divine hierarchy, but to those that indicate a reciprocal style of relating that emphasise love, freedom, and mutual submission. Quite apart from seeming to better represent a God of love, the reciprocal analogy is helpful because, when viewed in terms of the way society has moved to value inclusivity over hierarchy, it communicates in a manner that may be understood by people from beyond the church. I have adopted this analogy of shared, mutually submissive, inter-trinitarian life as the theological basis for this study through engaging with Catherine LaCugna, Thomas and James Torrance, Jürgen Moltmann, Miroslav Volf, and others. This doctrine of the social trinity is understood through the hermeneutic of Jesus’ life and teaching, and it is one that shapes non-hierarchical communities through other-centred acts of service in the midst of everyday life. Alison Wilson-Kastner (1983) responded to the feminist critique in a similar way to LaCugna. She argued that while it has problems, the social trinitarian analogy supports the feminist agenda:

Because feminism identifies interrelatedness and mutuality—equal, respectful and nurturing relationships—as the basis of the world as it really is and as it ought to be, we can find no better understanding and image of the divine than that of the perfect and open relationships
of love. (p. 201)

It is important, both out of respect for the iconic role it plays in Christian theology and because of the way it represents something of the intimacy associated with familial relating, that I still use the traditional formulation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I hope, however, that the way this gender-biased formulation has unfortunately resulted in licence for misrepresenting God as prejudiced towards the male sex, and patriarchy within the church, will be mitigated by my selection and use of the social Trinity analogy.²

1.7 Thesis structure
As a critical correlation, the study sets up an engagement between questions and answers generated by narrative therapy, on the one hand, and questions and answers produced by trinitarian theology, on the other.

Chapter two. This chapter is concerned with methodology. It backgrounds the development of the critical correlative methodology associated with David Tracy and Don Browning, and provides a detailed account of the way the approach will be used.

Chapter three. Here a view of wellbeing is introduced. It is one that is drawn from the social doctrine of the Trinity. The first section of this chapter locates the particular relational analogy of the Triune life in historical context. Based on the Christ story, the second section argues for analogia relationis, the view that human wellbeing is associated with participating in God’s relational life as a social project. The chapter concludes that trinitarian anthropology involves a reciprocity between three aspects of human life: embodied individuality, other-centred relating, and social life shaped through participation in God’s triune life.

Chapter four. This chapter introduces narrative therapy. It begins with an introduction of narrative therapy’s social constructionist and narrative philosophy. It then considers the main aspects of theory and practice, and concludes with a survey of the contributions narrative therapy has made to the counselling landscape.

Chapters five, six, and seven. It is here that I conduct the mutual critical correlation work. Together these three chapters consider six key aspects of narrative therapeutic philosophy and

² When considered from the perspective of the narrative therapeutic view that language itself creates reality, an irony appears to exist in making the argument that the Trinity is inevitably gender bound. This issue is discussed more fully in section 7.4. Some alternative theological response to the narrative therapeutic view of reality is represented, for example, in the type of work undertaken by process theologians Russell, H., Howell, N., & Coleman, M. (2011).
theory of practice. In chapter four I discuss narrative therapy’s therapeutic aims. Chapter five considers narrative therapy’s engagement with postmodernity; and, in turn, narrative therapy’s postmodern philosophy and anthropology, the social and linguistic formation of knowledge and identity, narrativity, and metanarrative, interpretation, and reality. Finally, chapter six draws the various threads of the correlation together in a consideration of the person in narrative therapy. Each of the points made in this summative discussion are applied to revised practice implications.

**Chapter eight.** This concluding chapter draws the findings together, and summarises the thesis. It arranges the findings in response to the two aims of the study, concludes the discussion by reflecting on the overall effectiveness of the chosen method, and identifies limitations and opportunities for further research.
Chapter two: Methodology

The subject matter and research methodology both locate this work as a study in practical and public theology. This methodological blend aims to produce findings that enrich narrative therapy in its application to pastoral counselling, and communicate to narrative therapists who are interested in hearing.

Because I aim to address the church and Christian counsellors, and secular narrative therapists and therapists more generally, I am using mutual critical correlation to construct a public theology. This is achieved by looking to Christian stories that will communicate to narrative therapists both as a source of ethics—thus leaving them free not to embrace the faith that forms the full context of these stories—and as narrative plots with which to develop identity for those who wish to do so. As I said in the introduction, the stories that are chosen to form the theological basis of the correlation are the ones associated with God’s self-revelation in the person of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit that indicate the loving relational nature of God. My contention is that constructing the study as a public theology will contribute to the development of narrative therapy’s capacity to be intellectually critical and practically transforming, by grounding practice upon stories that represent an ethical vision of wellbeing (Pattison, 1994).

This chapter is structured in three parts. The first introduces mutual critical correlation, the second narrative public theology, and the third discusses the method that these imply.

2.1 Correlation

While the discipline of practical theology has a variety of methodologies at its disposal, this research employs a mutual critical correlation approach (Browning, 1991; Tracy, 1975). I have chosen this approach to set up a dialogue between questions and answers drawn from narrative therapy with questions and answers associated with trinitarian thinking. While this implies a mutually critical conversation, a fully two-way dialogue is beyond the scope of the project. This is to say that while the conversation will be two-way, most of the traffic will be moving in the direction of critiquing key aspects of narrative therapeutic philosophy and practice. Only some critique of the manner in which Christian communities typically response to the Christ story will be included.

All therapies embody implicit commitments to ethical values, and so it would seem appropriate to enquire of narrative therapy what these might be, how well they resonate with the social trinitarian understanding of wellbeing, and what ways practice may be invited to change if
there was a closer alignment (Browning, 1966). My use of critical correlation in order to engage these questions, is appropriate because it is a dialogic approach to practical theology. By this I mean it is concerned with respectful meetings between religious belief and practice, on the one hand, and contemporary experience, questions, and action, on the other. Combining “theological ethics and the social sciences to articulate a normative vision of the human life cycle” is one of the primary aims of practical theology (Browning, 1987, p. 187).

It is also important to recognise that while the discipline of practical theology is generally concerned with dialogue between theological ethics and the social sciences, the overarching methodological framework that it operates within remains theological. This infers that it is not as open to giving up its fundamental beliefs in things such as the triune God as creator, sustainer, governor, and redeemer of the world. Because the ability to write as theologians is predicated in these founding beliefs, they cannot be given up. But there are many non-foundational beliefs that can be critiqued while still operating as a theologian who is faithful to the fundamentals. Examples of these include the notion of male headship, the contention that homosexual lifestyle is sinful, and how to respond to human conflict. This implies that while my use of correlational method is mutually critical, it is, nonetheless, tilted away from a fully orbed critique of theological assumptions, and leans towards a fuller critique of narrative therapy. This is not problematic because the thesis aims to develop therapeutic understanding in concert with trinitarian theology, not to question the historical Christian sources. By which I mean that it aims to contribute to reconsidering the way the fundamentals of Christian belief are interpreted in this new era. This reinterpretation is both appropriate and necessary, and my contention is that narrative therapy may well have an important role to play in this. This point is specifically relevant to trinitarian theology because it represents a revisionist epistemology that recognises the formulation of all insight is contingent on historic and social context (Swinton & Mowat, 2006). This theological and epistemological stance supports the methodological aim of this study which is to confront, illuminate, and identify corrections associated with narrative therapy, along with a basic reconciliation of post-modern consciousness with a reinterpreted Christianity (Tracy, 1975). I will now introduce the key features of the methodology through a discussion about key aspects of its historical development.

Critical correlation. In order to introduce the key features of critical correlation methodology, it is helpful to chart something of the rich history of academic engagement between religion and culture. I begin with German theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834 CE). Schleiermacher is relevant because his work represents an influential early attempt to break the post-Enlightenment hold that theory-based knowledge often has on experiential
knowledge (Burkhart, 1983; Schleiermacher, 1963). Based on the alternate proposition that there is a fundamental unity between theory and practice, he categorised theological studies into the separate fields of philosophical, historical, and practical theology. He even went as far as advocating that practice should be given precedence over theory when assessing theological truth claims.

Although these aspects of Schleiermacher’s thinking were innovative, his method still betrayed the more traditional view that practice is ultimately under the authority of the theory. That is, he stopped short of realising a methodology, such as critical correlation, based on the view that life experience generates valid theological understanding (Burkhart, 1983). Put differently, while the theory Schleiermacher espoused was ground-breaking, his method actually followed the more traditional linear movement from theory to practice. Schleiermacher, however, is not alone in demonstrating ambivalence, as “the extent to which the pastoral encounter might be of itself theologically disclosive remained a persistent undercurrent within the discipline until the present day” (Graham, 1996, p. 61).

2.2 The emerging discipline of pastoral theology

Building on Schleiermacher’s call to take seriously the theologically disclosive capacity of the pastoral encounter itself, the early disciplines of pastoral theology were shaped around professional clergy training. By the early 20th century, this pragmatic approach led to the discipline suffering from narrowly focusing on application models. These are ones that stress skills at the expense of more overarching theoretical considerations, including theological ones. The gap between theological reflection and pastoral practice grew as the discipline slowly engaged the need to address the lack of theoretical reflection by looking to so-called secular sources of knowledge, rather than theological sources (Park, 2006).

By the middle of the 20th century, pastoral engagement with non-theological resources, such as psychology, medicine, and psychoanalytic theory, had gained considerable weight. As a result, a range of approaches to pastoral theology emerged, most of which could be characterised by a lack of engagement with underlying worldviews. This, however, is not the end of the story; some pastoral practitioners responded to the lack of theological reflection by looking for ways to engage pastoral practice with specifically theological sources. Lesley Weatherhead (1951) broke new ground with his idea of a critical synthesis of religious concepts and modern psychological insight.

Theology and culture on a one-way street. Like Weatherhead, Paul Tillich was a theologian who used existential philosophy to engage pastoral practice in critical theological reflection (P. Tillich, 1951, 1966). Tillich’s aim was to engage existentialist philosophers in order to
discern the questions contemporary culture asks. His emergent “critical correlation” methodology attempts to explore how traditional Christian understanding might address contemporary social experience. Tillich seminally argues that a main task of Christian theology is to seek to address the existential and cultural questions of successive generations:

Being human means asking the question of one’s own being and living under the impact of the answers given to this question. And conversely, being human means receiving answers to the question of one’s own being and asking questions under the impact of those answers. In using this method of correlation, systematic theology proceeds in the following way: it makes an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answers to these questions. (P. Tillich, 1951, p. 70)

Tillich’s “answering theology” looks to the theological tradition to supply answers to the questions generated by philosophical, psychological, and artistic voices.

Theology and culture on a two-way street: Mutual critical correlation. In response to earlier one-way street approaches, such as Tillich’s, some argue that because Christian understanding can never be considered complete in and of itself, a two-way street method is more appropriate. Here, as well as developing pastoral practices in conversation with Christian belief, Christian understanding can also develop through engagement with practice. This form of correlation offers a means to take seriously the suggestion that God’s immanent revelation in local pastoral situations needs to be considered, along with understanding drawn from scripture and tradition. In support of this view, a highly significant voice within American and international pastoral theology, Seward Hiltner (1958) posited:

if we hold that theology is always an assimilation of the faith, not just the abstract idea of the faith apart from its reception, then it becomes necessary to say that culture may find answers to questions raised by faith as well as to assert that faith has answers to questions raised by culture. (p. 223)

American Roman catholic theologian David Tracy (1983) marked these developments by referring to them as mutual critical correlation. With Tracy’s innovation, progress reached a point of practice consistent with Schleiermacher’s theoretical position that seeks to value the theologically disclosive capacity of pastoral encounter. While the two-way street approach represents an important advance in practical theology methodology, it still fails to address questions about how to appropriately weight the historical and traditional sources in relation to sources associated with pastoral experience. It is in response to this concern, that I introduce the work of practical theologian Don Browning.
Establishing pastoral practice on religio-ethical belief. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, fast paced sociological change made for an increasingly complex pastoral care task. Partly in response to this, and like Hiltner and Tracy before him, Browning sought to bridge the study of religion with the social sciences through a form of correlation that looks for common areas in the way they seek to explain the predicaments and potentials of human life (Jensen, 2010). However, Browning’s correlative work differs in that it seeks to ground the disciplines of care in religio-ethical beliefs, rather than unexamined metaphors of human wellbeing. Particularly relevant to this study is Browning’s establishment of two methodological approaches: the practice-theory-practice sequencing of enquiry and a form of mutual critical correlation. My intention is to meld these together by critically correlating narrative therapy with trinitarian theology, beginning with practice, moving to theoretical critique, and moving back to reconsider practice.

My rationale for utilising these aspects of Browning’s work is the suggestion that drawing Christian root metaphors of human flourishing into dialogue with secular forms of knowledge results in new practices that remain faithful to Christian sources (Browning, 1976). More specifically, and with an eye on the narrative therapeutic community, this study draws root metaphors of human wellbeing from trinitarian theology into dialogue with key areas of narrative therapeutic philosophy and practice, thereby aiming to develop explanations about human predicament and potential. Directing focus to the pastoral counselling constituency, trinitarian thinking is also utilised to represent social order, and narrative therapy has been chosen as a suitable means to assist in the integration of people into this specific theologically shaped moral universe.

To explain this rationale in more detail, it is necessary to refer to some broader issues in practical theology.

Post-Enlightenment hermeneutics. The guiding assumptions within Browning’s work are particularly appropriate for working with narrative therapy’s postmodernist philosophy and trinitarian theology’s social emphasis. I say this because Browning’s work represents more than an incremental shift away from the Enlightenment emphasis on the application of theory to practice. Rather, it represents a fundamental rejection of the Cartesian dualist split between theory and practice. In contrast, it assumes a vital interrelationship between the apprehension of theological truth and the exercise of human agency (Browning, 1991). This is to say that human agency has a part to play in apprehending truths associated with history and tradition.

Accepting that human agency has a central role in apprehending truth claims, implies that the reasoning is flawed if it leads to the conclusion that theological insight can be apprehended separately from human experience. This conclusion is grounded in the rebirth of practical philosophy or *phronesis*. The practical philosophical approach locates critical reflection within the
goals of human action, through engaging with tradition and practice in order to answer questions concerned with “how shall we live” and “what shall we do”? Put differently, a discipline of theology that is grounded in practical philosophy is a fundamentally practical one. As an aside, while the reasoning within the Christian narrative of the incarnation is different than this, it leads to a similar conclusion: that an appropriate goal of theological reflection is orthopraxy, or right practice.

I am referring, here, to a dialectical approach to knowledge. This is the approach through which philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975) offers the view that all cultural sciences can be understood in terms of a hermeneutical spiral. That is, in contrast to the traditional theory-practice movement, an ongoing movement is perceived between theory-laden practice to theory, and back to new theory-laden practice (Browning, 1991). Browning applied this hermeneutical, practice-theory-practice, approach to “critical reflection on the church’s dialogue with Christian sources and other communities of experience and interpretation, with the aim of guiding its action toward social and individual transformation” (p. 36).

When practical theology is understood hermeneutically—and incarnationally—churches can be viewed as communities of memory, drawing on history, tradition, and sacred text and practical reason to inform beliefs, values, and practices. This hermeneutical practice-theory-practice unity offers communities the capacity to engage changing contexts, while attempting to remain faithful to God and relevant to lived experience. Practical theologian Elaine Graham (1996) argued that when the theological task is understood hermeneutically, it becomes a “purposeful activity performed by embodied persons in time and space as both the subjects of agency and the objects of history” (p. 110).

Because these definitions of theological practice are expansive enough to include the whole of human experience—in spheres such as physiology, psychology, sociology, spirituality, economics, and politics—insight gained can be understood to be contributing to the formation of belief, values, and practices. The overall aim of the hermeneutical approach to practical theology is to remain faithful to God while seeking to “find ways to make shared and workable decisions about the common good and common life” (Browning, 1991, p. 4). It is appropriate, therefore, to argue that my use of this hermeneutical approach to correlation is a valid exercise in practical theology. It is also appropriate to argue that it offers a valid form of public theological engagement between the narratives that suggest God’s triune nature and the ethics of other-centred love they represent, with a postmodern approach to counselling.
2.3 Practical theology as public theology

Locating this study within both the trinitarian tradition and the professional counselling context implies the focus of the work is both towards the church’s pastoral practice and beyond to public ethical debate (Ballard & Pritchard, 1996). As a theological engagement with public debate, my selection of mutually critical correlation is appropriate. I claim this because of its capacity to develop publicly accessible and defensible contributions to public life that draw on theological sources, in a manner that does not necessarily require belief in God.

However, it can be a challenge to achieve this with theological insight sourced from Christian narratives, rather than general theological principles. This is because the narrative approach typically holds that Christ is God’s true Word, and so we believe that contemporary thought and practice is best served by conforming itself to the story of Israel and Christ. While this is appropriate, it needs to guard against establishing, what Tillich (1951, p. 7) referred to as an “exclusive transcendence” of Christian sources, over and above contemporary culture. This concern is with merely throwing the story of Israel and Jesus at contemporary culture, with no real engagement with the questions people who do not share Christian faith are asking. To avoid this situation I propose a constructive-narrative approach to engaging theological source material in the manner of Donald Capps (1990) and Duncan Forrester (2000).

2.4 Theological source material: Constructive narrative approach

While today the role of narrative in practical theology is generally accepted, the difficulty associated with it has produced ongoing disagreement about an appropriate scope of engagement (Dreyer, 2014). Responses to the role and scope questions include Browning’s (1991) position that public theological debate should not engage the particularities and peculiar language of biblical narratives if they pose a barrier to mutual understanding. In response to this concern, he proposed that dialogue is better to focus on establishing points of contact with secular people that are drawn from the biblical narratives. These may include philosophical and ethical principles such as love, justice, and compassion. Browning went as far as reasoning that maintaining an assumption that the Christian narratives are universally true, inevitably results in the manipulation of cultural sources.

The problem with this stance, as narrativists see it, is that Christian values such as “justice” cannot be adequately communicated through a generic philosophical articulation of the concept.

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3 My selection of Hiltner and Capp’s approach to pastoral theology is consistent with the thesis’ method. It is, however, useful to recognise that their work precedes the current emphasis in pastoral theology upon a public theology. See, for example, White (2014) citing three contemporary approaches, and Jacobsen’s (2012) survey of a range of approaches and categories arranged under the headings of “foundational” and “action” models.
Instead, it needs to be communicated through the particularity contained in the biblical stories of divine and human justice.

My response to this challenge is to adopt a postfoundationalist approach to narrative (Park, 2010). This approach draws together “canonical narrative theology” and “constructive narrative theology” (Graham, Walton, & Ward, 2005). In doing so it provides a means of maintaining a belief that the Christian story is the right one, and an openness to others and the shaping effects of culture and language. This approach suggests that rather than one party needing to give up her basic beliefs, it is legitimate for the constructive-narrative correlationalist to hold to her faith story as the story, and to listen to voices that challenge one’s assumptions and interpretations. In this way the correlationalist is able to allow the dialogue partner—in this case narrative therapy—to critique one’s interpretation of the story, while still holding to the central symbols of faith as absolutes. It will be clear from this that my use of a constructive-narrative approach does not imply a pluralist or relativist approach, because while saying that I believe that there is a true way, I fully respect that others may believe the same of their ways. It is a leap from this position to one in which a Christian sees her story as being on the same level as competing stories.

This approach provides the means to hold the Trinity as the lens for the Christian when it comes to viewing human existence and destiny, and holding the doctrine of the Trinity is a lens through which to view narrative therapy. It is both legitimate and laudable that Christians have a deep respect for, and openness to, other sacred stories, and it is necessary for them to have the humility to learn from other story-holders. This implies the acknowledgement, in the context of this thesis, that the doctrine of the Trinity cannot give us all we need to know about the concrete details and practices of narrative therapy.

The central role that story plays in the development of individual and communal identity has been increasingly considered throughout the second half of the 20th century (Gergen, 2005; J. Smith, 2009; Stroup, 1981). Indeed, the innovation that is narrative therapy is one expression of this narrative turn, as is practical theology’s engagement with narrative. It is now generally recognised that many stories are available within the rich resources of any given culture as guidance through times of change and growth. The relevant postfoundationalist insight is that stories do not need to be conferred with truth status, in order to be successfully utilised. This recognition opens the way to argue that all culturally valued stories can be considered sacred, whether explicitly religious or not (Graham et al., 2005). The point I am making is that the validity of the Christian story is not diminished by relating to it as one story among many; hence, opens space for other stories to also be engaged on their own terms.
The concern that Browning (1991) raised with regard to the canonical-narrative approach is not that it utilises sacred stories, but that it elevates them to Truth status. While inviting readers to literally inhabit the story of the text is relevant to those who claim Christian identity, it has limited application for non-believers and people of other faiths (Graham et al., 2005). My point is that while the canonical approach holds that the Christian stories point beyond themselves, and towards knowing in relationships with God and one another (N. Wright, 2000), the ethical power of the stories is not denied by overlooking this approach. Therefore, by adopting a hybrid approach, between those who wish to engage the stories as *habitus* and those who wish to relate to it as one set of stories amongst many equally valid ethical stories, does not diminish the ethical power of the story either. This is appropriate because the practices of love, mutuality, other-centredness, justice, and forgiveness that are narrated in the stories of Israel and Jesus have potential application as relational motifs both within and beyond the confessing church.

The aim of utilising the mutual critical correlation method, in conjunction with a constructive-narrative theological approach, is to follow anthropologist David Augsburger’s lead. Augsburger (1995) aimed for the stories of Israel and Jesus to be made broadly available to augment, enlighten, and even transform, but not colonise, people’s experience of their lives storied with regard to their indigenous sacred stories. While the constructive-approach assumes that the sacred Christian stories are true, they must not be deployed to determine the total pattern of a person’s narrated identity. Taking account of this caution, the constructive-narrative approach seeks to make the biblical stories available as resources to be woven together with people’s already existing cultural stories, into new stories.

### 2.5 Method

Now that I have discussed the methodology, I will introduce the method. The methodology can be summarised as a mutual critical correlation that is constructed as a public theology through engaging with constructive narrative theological insight, and follows a practice-theory-practice process.

The correlative discussion utilises Pattison’s (1994) four-stage method: (i) an initial reflection on the issues, (ii) a cultural and context analysis, (iii) theological reflection, and (iv) the formulation of revised philosophical and anthropological foundations, and integrated theories of practice. While some revised practices will be suggested, the aim of the project is not to develop a new form of narrative therapy. Rather, it is to evaluate key philosophies and theories of practice associated with narrative therapy as expressions of the social project implied by the trinitarian analogy, and to identify other approaches that may complement existing narrative therapeutic ones.
This approach is similar to a typical public-theological method that employs: (i) a phenomenological description of the public issue or problem, (ii) a reformulation of the relevant theological principles in public language and symbols, (iii) a critical analysis of relevant philosophical and social scientific literature, and (iv) a philosophical correlation of the theological and secular discussions (Graham et al., 2005).

Steps one and two: Narrative therapy’s philosophy and theory of practice. The formal narrative therapeutic approach was developed by Australian family therapist Michael White and New Zealand social worker and linguist David Epston. Their seminal work is published as *Literate means to therapeutic ends* (1989) and *Narrative means to therapeutic ends* (1990). As a post-structuralist form of psychotherapy, it seeks to assist people develop stories about themselves that are helpful to them. Since these revolutionary beginnings both men have practiced, taught, and published extensively. Over the following 25 years, the work has developed in many countries; into many innovate expressions of therapeutic engagement with individuals, families, and communities. There is little doubt that these practices have influenced the professional practices of many men and women, and transformed the lives of countless individuals and communities (see, for example, Madigan, 2011; Polkinghorne, 2004).

Because of the many developments associated with narrative approaches to counselling and community work, it is necessary to limit the scope of engagement. The limited approach to “narrative therapy” that this study engages is the seminal work of White and Epston, along with subsequent articulations.

Furthermore, as well as convoluted historical development, narrative therapy also entails complexities in terms of its engagement with philosophy, its view of personhood, its theory of practice, and the various practices it advocates. Because the aim of the study is to evaluate key philosophies and theories of practice as expressions of the social project implied by the trinitarian analogy, a comprehensive development of the practical implications of the correlation is not possible. For this reason, I have chosen to particularly focus on six areas of narrative therapy’s philosophy and theory of practice to focus on. While there are many to choose from, the selection is made with regard to common questions I, and other practitioners who claim Christian identity, identify as important. See, for example, a summary of my Master of Counselling degree research (McMillan, 2008). The specific considerations are (i) therapeutic intentions and relationships, (ii) narrative therapy’s engagement with postmodern philosophy, (iii) the social formation of knowledge and identity, (iv) narrativity, (v) metanarrative, and (vi) the person in narrative therapy.

Step three: Theological reflection. The constructive-narrative approach to theological understanding is grounded in the narratives contained in the Christian scriptures and other early
church documents. In broad terms, this analogy offers insight into the nature of reality and knowledge, and into the ethics and practices that form people in reciprocal relationships and unites them in a social project of restoration. These are the insights that form the basis of the theological reflection on the six aspects of narrative therapeutic philosophy and theory of practice. Each aspect is evaluated for ways in which it expresses, and fails to represent, the trinitarian analogy. Along with these narrative therapy facing developments, some critique is brought to ways the church sometimes interprets the fundamental beliefs of the faith into practice.

Step four: Revised philosophy, anthropology, and theory of practice. On the basis of these evaluations developments are formulated for each of the six aspects of narrative therapeutic philosophy and practice theory, and suggestions offered for how the church might reinterpret some of its fundamental beliefs. Chapter seven draws the suggested practice developments and faith-related reinterpretations together to conclude the study’s findings. Now that the research method has been presented in the light of a discussion about methodology, I move to introduce the social trinitarian analogy as the first of two theory chapters.
Chapter three: A trinitarian analogy of persons

The purpose of this chapter is to establish a trinitarian anthropology as a basis for considering the person in narrative therapy and associated theories of practice. This particular social trinitarian approach is one that draws from what is considered to be God’s self-revelation through the person of Jesus of Nazareth in the power of the Holy Spirit. As such, God is analogised as Three persons who are One in relational unity. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit constitute each other through the quality of the relations they share, and invite humans to participate in their divine life of love, thus becoming ethically shaped persons-in-relation.

Because a range of conclusions have resulted from seeking to understand God as Trinity, it is important that I place the social trinitarian approach in historical and theological context. In straightforward terms the history of understanding God as triune can be viewed as starting with the claim that Jesus Christ is one with God, and the challenge this brings to the Jewish view of God as One. The Jewish claim that God is one divine being runs through Scripture, for example, Deuteronomy (6:4) beseeches “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone”.

Christian church history represents a range of interpretations of the events associated with Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. The Church’s challenge has been, on one hand, to remain faithful to Jewish monotheism; and, on the other hand, take the claims attributed to Jesus of Nazareth seriously. A rudimentary analysis of the range of Christian responses to this challenge identifies two broad streams of thinking. The first of these prioritises unity—God as One-in-Three, and the second emphasises diversity—God as Three-in-One. A subsequent 20th century movement, the one involving Karl Barth’s (1886-1968) seminal work, establishes a confluence between these two streams. Amongst several important theological implications, this movement represents a significant recalibration of Western thinking about the Trinity, and the establishment of a neo-orthodoxy. These things have come about through a reengagement with the Christian scriptures and long-neglected patristic traditions. The Eastern patristic traditions have been particularly relevant to this movement because they were as distorted by speculative scholasticism as Western Medieval Catholicism was (Oden, 1995). A significant result of thinking about God as trinity using this new hermeneutic has been the flourishing of a new appreciation for the diversity of God.

Barthian neo-orthodoxy challenges the Western tendency to over emphasise the unity of God and to overlook the significance of relations. As a result, human relationships and community have come to be viewed by many as vital aspects of individual wellbeing (Grenz, 2001). These challenges to individualism have been carried forward in a number of ways. Thomas Torrance’s
editorial work for the English translation of Barth’s (1936-61) *Church Dogmatics*, and his own extensive engagement with the writings of Athanasius of Alexandria (ca. 296-298 – 373), opened and developed the English speaking church’s appreciation for the social and relational aspects of God and the implications for human wellbeing. Furthermore, Barth and Torrance’s work has been extensively engaged with by a succession of theologians including, relatives James and Alan Torrance, Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928-2014), Jürgen Moltmann (1926-), Colin Gunton (1941-2003), Catherine LaCugna (1952-1997), and Miroslav Volf (1956-).

While it is difficult for the Western theological conversation to dispute the relational understanding of God, there is still work to be done translating these claims to understanding men and women in the same way. The social analogy of God associated with Barthian neo-orthodoxy seems well placed to contribute to this translation. Specifically, the claim that:

the three trinitarian Persons are persons-in-relation and gain their personal identity by means of their inter-relationality hold[s] promise for understanding what it means to be human persons in the wake of the demise of the centered self and the advent of the global soul. (Grenz, 2001, p. 9)

In order to engage with this promise, through considering the postmodern theories and practices of narrative therapy, in the light of the claim that the three trinitarian Persons are persons-in-relation in relational unity, I will discuss this analogy in detail.

3.1 Part one: Trinity, the character of God

A discussion about the persons of the Trinity is fundamentally an enquiry into the nature of God that lies at the heart of the Christian faith. The answer to how God is to be understood if God and Jesus of Nazareth are one is, as Lewis (1957) argued, “so shocking - a paradox, even a horror, which we may easily be lulled into taking too lightly” (p. 11). Part of the Western church’s challenge involves weighing this claim appropriately in cultural and social contexts where more legal understandings of God associated with Greek-founded cultures dominate. Understanding God legally tends towards emphasising God’s holy requirements, human transgression from these, and requirements with regard to reconciliation. Because of this, and the Jewish monotheistic view of God that dominates the cultural environment in which Jesus lived, and in which he shared, the relational aspects of God evidenced in the incarnation have tended to be overlooked (see, for example, T. Torrance, 1996). In the persuasive opinion of A. Torrance (1996):

God’s purpose for humanity, and thus the purpose of revelation, tends to be interpreted within the Western cultural milieu, “as primarily legal rather than filial, as essentially contractual rather than covenant… Interpreting the function of revelation along these lines
led to its being seen as essentially an event of communication rather than of communion”.
(p. 63)

Furthermore, some argue that in response to the Western Church’s predisposition to interpret revelation as primarily acts of communication:

[i]t is not a return to recover the objectivity of truth, beauty, goodness and justice that is needed. Nor is it to revive notions of natural law in the light of reason, but to the “forgotten Trinity” that we must return to create in our day a new humanity of persons who find true fulfillment in other-centered communion and service in the kingdom of God. (J. Torrance, 1997, p. 41)

This neo-orthodox approach is the one that I am adopting for the purposes of establishing a historically located view of human wellbeing with which to consider narrative therapy. J. Torrance’s reference to “other-centred communion” relates to the shared life of God into which people are invited to participate through the atoning work of God through the person of Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit (Volf, 2006). As I will demonstrate, this vision of other-centred communion offers a social and relational conception of human flourishing. As such, this is a view of persons that challenges individualism and offers instead an ethical conception of persons centred on community (Moltmann, 1981). In order to develop this discussion, it is necessary to further consider the two unity and diversity streams that I introduced above.

3.2 Two streams: God as community and God as communicator

The Western church that was originally centred on Rome has tended to interpret God’s purpose within the events associated with Jesus of Nazareth’s life, death, and resurrection as primarily acts of communication. This is communication about the nature of the cosmos and humanity’s place in it. The “Western” theological stream takes its lead from Tertullian’s early work that emphasised the unity of God (Grenz, 2001). For a combination of historical, political, and theological reasons, the tendency to view God in this way has endured, as has its tendency to conceptualise humans in individualistic and mechanistic terms and to structure social relationships hierarchically (Kruger, 2005).

In contrast, the Eastern Church that was originally centred on Constantinople has been more successful in maintaining a communal analogy of God. This is partly a result of adopting Origen’s formulation and the work of the Cappadocians’. The communal analogy functions on the premise that the three divine persons are not substantially one, but perfectly united through the quality of relations they share. This implies an emphatically social doctrine of God that criticises the Western
modalistic tendency (Moltmann, 1981). Now neo-Barthian theology seeks to reengage with these documents of the early church and the God-as-community hermeneutic. As a result, a teaching about God’s life in community and the ethical value of shared life in community are being emphasised at a time when there is a similar relational turn taking place in many other disciplines, including the social sciences (Gergen, 2009).

The Nicene Creed. Efforts to understand God’s triune nature are not only complicated by historical and geopolitical factors, they are also complicated because the analogy of God as triune is revealed entirely in the economy of salvation. By this I mean that the trinitarian nature of God is only implied by God’s engagement with the world through Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit (Rahner, 1970). However, while the Christian Scriptures do not explicitly refer to God as trinity, they do refer to God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in narrative form. For example, the prologue to John's Gospel announces that God is present, and made known in Jesus:

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1: 1-5)

The pattern of speech attributed to Jesus also seems to infer the triune nature of God. For example, Jesus is credited with commanding his disciples in Matthew 28:19 “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”. Jesus’ use of “I am” statements is also suggestive of his close association with the Father. Examples of this include: “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am” (John 8: 58); “Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life’” (John 6: 35), and “Jesus said to them ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Jesus is also reported to have demonstrated a sense of divine entitlement in a number of other ways, including offering forgiveness for sins. For example: “Then he said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven’” (Luke 7:48). Explicit references to Jesus’ unity with the Father are also included in the Gospels, such as, “The Father and I are one” (John 10:30). Based on these kinds of claims, it is little wonder that the gospel presentation of Jesus sounds heretical to Jewish monotheists. And yet these very writers, and Jesus himself, were Jewish monotheists!

The narratives of the Christian scriptures also imply that it is appropriate to think of God as three-in-one. The account in Acts 9 of the apostle Paul’s encounter with “the Lord” on the road to Damascus offers a vivid example of the transformational impact that the Father’s love in the person of Jesus the Son experienced through the Holy Spirit as Paraclete appeared to have on people with
other prior analogies of God (Fee, 1999). The early disciples not only began to recognise God the Father and God the Son, but there are also passages in the Christian scriptures where all three Persons of the Godhead are mentioned together (for example Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14; and 1 Peter 1:1-2). In the Gospel of John, the Holy Spirit is promised as “another Advocate” and familiarly related to both the Father and the Son (John 14:16). The apostle Paul’s writing also employs the triadic form to refer to God, for example, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you” (2 Corinthians 13:13). My point is that the divine works of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit appear to be closely and variously linked across the span of the Christian scriptures. Based on this, the implication that together they form a far-reaching divine self-disclosure about the communal nature of God is drawn out by later thinkers. As I will demonstrate below, the Nicene Creed (325 CE) illustrates an important point of agreement about the manner in which God can be understood to be three-in-one (Butin, 2001).

**Heresy.** Within the life of the early Christian church, theological formulations about God’s triune nature continued to be refined. These developments were partly motivated by challenges to defend the divine status of the Son and the Spirit, and to communicate the faith to successive generations of converts. Four movements, or heresies, played particularly influential roles within this period of refinement. First, the unity of God was affirmed as a polemic response to the Marcion dualist rejection of Christ’s deity. This heresy, named after Marcion of Sinope in the mid-second century, represents the view that the Judge-God of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Redeemer-God of the Christian scriptures are two different entities (Raisanen, 2008). Second, the dualistic view in Gnosticism that construed material things—including the body—as evil, and spiritual things as good, challenged the claim that the Son became flesh in the person of Jesus (King, 2005). Third, the Arian heresy claims that “the Son is created” effectively denies his divinity, and subordinates his nature and role to that of the Father. Initiated by Arius (d. ca. 336), this heresy challenged the early church to affirm homoousios: the doctrine that the being of the Son and the being of the Father is the same (Davis, Kendall, & O’Collins, 1999). The fourth heresy of note is Sabellian modalism that also advocates a subordinated Son. This is not subordination through relegating the Son to the level of created being, but through dissolving his distinctiveness into the Father. This movement led the church to respond by affirming the hypostasis or the particular uniqueness of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Moltmann, 1981). While these early heresies promoted considerable concern amongst early Christian thinkers, they also animated the development of doxologies and sacramental practices, such as those for Baptism and Eucharist, which represent triune understandings of God revealed through the risen Christ in the power of the Spirit.
One-in-Three or Three-in-One? Several theologians stand out for their contributions to the development of the Trinity-affirming statements of the Nicene Creed. Justin Martyr (d. ca. 165 CE) paid particular attention to the relationship between the Father and the Son. Theophilus, bishop of Antioch in 180 CE, is credited with introducing the use of the Greek word *trias*, or a set of three. Irenaeus (d. 200 CE) offered what became known as the Irenaeus principle: that “God reveals Himself through Himself” (T. Torrance, 1996, p. 13). And, Tertullian (d. 222 CE) is widely considered the father of the doctrine of the Trinity because he bequeathed to the Western church the terminology for God that is still in common usage. This formula, “*una substantia - tres personae*”—one substance in three persons—employs the notion of *one substance* to represent the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Tertullian affirmed substantial unity by giving prime place to *una substantia* (T. Torrance, 1996).

In contrast to Tertullian’s approach that a search for the most adequate metaphors for God should begin with an affirmation of divine *unity*, Origen Adamantius (ca. 182 – ca. 251 CE) reasoned that because God and *Logos* are real and distinct beings, it is more appropriate to begin reference to God with an affirmation of divine *particularity*. To avoid the modalist implication of Tertullian’s argument—that God and the *Logos* are just different expressions of one being—Origen rejected *una substantia* and instead adopted the Greek word *ousia* to refer to the unity of God. While *una substantia* indicates one shared substance, *ousia* is better translated as “shared genus” or “family likeness”. The shift that this implies is similar to moving from viewing God as one person who takes on different roles—adult, parent, and child for example—to viewing God in terms of genetic variation, perhaps between siblings or cousins. The point I am leading to is that employing *ousia* to highlight God’s unity allows for understanding the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as three distinct persons, or *hypostases*, who are united relationally, rather than substantially.

This discussion, using human language to analogise the mystery of God, is, of course, full of complexity. The word *ousia*, for example, while it is analogous with the English word “being”, is often translated, some would argue wrongly, using the Latin *substantia* (substance) or *essentia* (essence). Additionally:

If we consider the series formed by *ousia* in Plato, *ousia* in Aristotle, *ousia* in the Stoics, *ousia* in the Neoplatonists, and the *substantia* and *essentia* in the church Fathers and the Scholastics, we shall find that the idea of *ousia* or essence is amongst the most confused and confusing notions. (Hadot, 1995, p. 76)

This specific example of the complexity involved with the use of the word *ousia* illustrates the difficulties involved in seeking to speak about God who is mystery and foreshadows the two distinct paths the Eastern and Western church have tended to follow.
**Nicene affirmation of relational unity.** Amidst these controversies, the council of Nicaea drew representatives from both the Constantinopolitan and Roman churches in the hope of reaching doctrinal agreement. Given the complexity of the issues involved it seems miraculous that they were able to do so. Importantly, in terms of this discussion, the council condemned the Arian subordination of Jesus, and in its place confessed that God consists of three persons in one being. By this I mean to indicate that they adopted Origen’s formulation—one *ousia* in three *hypoostases*. The Nicene council also debated whether to refine their use of *ousia* by adopting *homoousios*—same being, or *homoiousios*—similar being. Decisively the council chose *homoousios*, which effectively shut out the Arian perspective. This achievement is attributed to Athanasius who, as a central theological architect of the Creed, approached knowledge of God, “strictly through the Son… and *homoousion* undoubtedly provided the controlling center of his thought, for it gave a clear and decisive account of the underlying oneness in Being and Activity” (T. Torrance, 1999, pp. 8-10).

However, while the choice of *homoousios* serves to affirm Jesus’ unity with the Father, and hence full divine status, it also introduces the risk of appearing to diminish a clear distinction between the Father and the Son. The later council of Alexandria (362 CE) addressed this concern and, while it re-affirmed the use of *homoousios*, it did so on the understanding that it was not intended to obscure distinctions between the divine persons.

Resulting from these deliberations, the person of the Son came to be viewed as distinct from that of the Father and of the Spirit. Furthermore, Jesus as the Son came to be affirmed as fundamental to God’s purpose for humanity, protologically, incarnationally, and eschatologically (Davis et al., 1999). It is important to note that the polemic nature of the Nicene deliberations imply a concern to clarify the relationship Jesus shares with the Father. This emphasis led to the unintended neglect of directly addressing the status of the Holy Spirit. It was not until 381 CE that a further council was convened in Constantinople to consider the way in which the Holy Spirit is one with the Father and the Son (A. Torrance, 1996). Along with Athanasius, three Cappadocian bishops – Basil of Caesarea (d. 379 AD), Basil’s brother Gregory of Nyssa (c 335 – after 394 AD), and Gregory Nazianzus (329-389 AD)—later referred to as the Cappadocians—played key roles in the deliberations.

Basil is credited with leading the work that affirmed the view that the Holy Spirit is one with the Father and the Son, and he contributed to the important work on *hypoostasis*. According to Athanasius, being truly divine the Spirit “proceeds” from the Father and is “given” by the Son (T. Torrance, 1999). Basil built on this, arguing that “the distinguishing property of the Father is that he
is un-generated, of the Son that he is generated, and of the Holy Spirit, his being is sent from God and sustained by the Son” (Alston 1999, p. 184).

**The Cappadocians.** The Councils of Nicaea, Alexandria, and Constantinople progressively affirmed God’s three-in-one triune nature. However, various historical and political issues led to very different interpretations of these foundational agreements being adopted by the Roman and Constantinopolitan churches. In the face of this, it is relevant to consider the Cappadocian emphasis on relational unity in some detail because it contributes to the Barthian-inspired 20th century Western re-engagement with the relational view.

As I indicated earlier, Cappadocian theology promoted Origin’s primary placement of hypostasis, and secondary placement of ousia, and this implies that the uniqueness of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is affirmed first; only then is God’s unity—ousia—considered. In response to the conundrum that this represents—how God can be one while three—Gregory of Nazianzus put forward the idea that God’s oneness results from sharing “substantive relations”. Thus by developing the notion of relational unity, they stepped carefully between modalism by moving away from using the terminology una substantia and from Arianism by adopting “three hypostases” (T. Torrance, 1996).

Ultimately, the Cappadocians’ work advocated to the Council of Chalcedon’s 451 CE adoption of “one ousia in three hypostases” as the normative terminology for the Eastern, Greek-speaking, church (see for example, Coppedge, 2007, pp. 97-101). When the Cappodocians referred to God in this way they meant that God is One as he is in himself. Gregory Nazianzen (trans. 1979) poetically summarised this era of doctrinal development:

> This I give you to share, and to defend all your life, the One Godhead and Power, found in the Three in Unity, and comprising the Three separately, not unequal, in substances or natures, neither increased nor diminished by superiorities or inferiorities; in every respect equal, in every respect the same; just as the beauty and the greatness of the heavens is one; the infinite conjunction of Three Infinite Ones, Each God when considered in Himself; as the Father so the Son, as the Son so the Holy Ghost; the Three One God when contemplated together; Each God because Consubstantial; One God because of the Monarchia. No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the Splendor of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the One. When I think of any One of the Three I think of Him as the Whole, and my eyes are filled, and the greater part of what I am thinking of escapes me. I cannot grasp the greatness of That One so as to attribute a greater greatness to the Rest. When I contemplate the Three together, I see but one torch, and cannot divide or measure out the Undivided Light. (*Orationes*, 40:41)

It is important to recognise that the recent neo-orthodox practice of analogising God as three-in-one and one-in-three implies a departure from the position typically associated with the
Eastern trinitarian formulation. This is the position that the monarchy of God—that which we honour—belongs to the Father alone. The Three-in-unity view, instead, indicates that the monarchy belongs to the Trinity (Horrell, 2004). Gregory Nazianzus (2002) reasoned that this is “not a monarchy limited to a single person but a monarchy constituted by equal dignity of nature, accord of will, identity of movement, and the return to unity of those who come from it” (20.9). I make this point because it implies for human community a more consensus decision-making style than an autocratic one. Eastern orthodoxy has become renowned for the way community life is structured based on this relational view of God’s inner life, and for the way human development is understood as a process integrally related to community participation (Dumitrascu, 2014; Zizioulas, 1985, 2010). This is the reason I argued earlier that the Eastern patristic work is significant for understanding people in this post-modern era where individualism is questioned. The Eastern Church’s use of the term *perichoresis* to represent the qualities of the trinitarian shared-life illuminates something of the detail involved in the relational analogy of persons. “The doctrine of *perichoresis* links together in a brilliant way the threeness and the unity, without reducing the threeness to the unity, or dissolving the unity in the threeness” (Moltmann, 1981, p. 175).

The impact of this social view of divine personhood is not to be underestimated because inherent in this concept of *perichoresis* is a distinctly different vision of persons than the individually-centred being represented by the Western conception of the Trinity inspired by Tertullian, and later developed by Augustine and others.

### 3.3 Post-Nicaea: The Western stream

Consistent with Tertullian’s formulation, “*una substantia - tres personae*”, Augustine’s theological influence has been so vast that until recently all Western trinitarian theology was obliged to take its lead from him. Augustine’s grasp on the extent to which the Nicene selection of *hypostasis* indicates the uniqueness of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit seems to have been dulled by his association with Manichaean dualism. Before his Christian conversion, Augustine embraced a form of Neoplatonism called Manichaism. Manichaism holds to belief in one good and one bad divine force opposing one another. He was attracted to the alternative Christian belief all things stand under the supreme sovereignty and goodness of one God who is all powerful (Augustine, trans. 1991). Given these influences it is unsurprising that Augustine’s Christian theology represents some hybridization, for example that he utilised a Neoplatonic interpretation of *hypostasis*. This may also explain why he went on to develop an analogy of the Trinity that emphasises the unity of God, and that his “psychological Trinity” represents the view that the
Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not from the same essence; they are the same essence without remainder (Butin, 2001).

My point is that in order to preserve the unity of God, Augustine’s “psychological Trinity” is developed using intricate analogies of three facets of one reality rather than interpersonal relations, and this has had a significant impact on the church (Cunningham, 1998b). Drawing on a mix of anthropomorphic analogy and neo-platonic insight, Augustine concluded that “based on the assumption that each human being is created in, and reflects the image of the triune God as an individual… the human individual is the best source of trinitarian analogy” (Butin, 2001, p. 39). While this conclusion is far removed from the Nicaean agreements based on homoousios, it does typify the Western trinitarian analogy:

Two different categories of analogy have always been used for the eternal life of the Trinity: the category of the individual person, and the category of community. Ever since Augustine’s development of the psychological doctrine of the Trinity, the first has taken precedence in the West; whereas the Cappadocian Fathers and Orthodox theologians, down to the present day, employ the second category. (Gunton, 1993, p. 198)

In the face of the increased emphasis on Enlightenment scholastic rationalism, the reformer, Calvin, made pleas for a return to understanding God as a God of grace that had all but disappeared. Through reiterating the orthodox position, that it was only with the coming of Christ that God became known in three distinct persons, Calvin argued for reclaiming a relational view of God and humans. Moltmann (1981) put it this way:

Calvin’s almost complete acceptance of perichoresis, and therefore the conception of the whole Trinity comprising three inseparable consubstantial Persons indwelling one another and constituting the Monarchia that lies behind this view of the procession… takes Calvin’s thought out of the orbit of the usual Western notion of the filioque, added to the Nicene-Constantinople Creed. (p. 35)

In spite of the major impact of Calvin and other reformers’ theology, the Western church continued to be dominated by Augustine’s influence and to represent a deistic disjunction between God and the world that this implies. This split between God and the world is far removed from the communion implied by the Christian scriptures. Some argue that by the 20th century the doctrine of the Trinity was considered to be so irrelevant to Christian theology that it was common practice for theology texts to include chapters on the doctrine of God, while consigning discussion about the Trinity to footnotes and appendices (T. Torrance, 1999).

**Neo-orthodox reciprocity: Three Hypostases in one Ousia.** Departing from the traditional Western drive to develop plurality within the Trinity from the concept of God as one, Barth’s re-
engagement with the orthodox position espoused within the documents of the early church makes available an alternative, a social analogy. This social analogy of God understands personhood as something based on mutual acts of self-giving, rather than something that is intrinsic to an individual. “Insofar as the one who differentiates oneself from another is dependent on the other for one’s identity, the concept of dependence is bound up with self-differentiation, and consequently, *person* is a correlative term” (Grenz, 2001, p. 48). Within the reciprocity of self-giving interdependent relations, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are differentiated. This analogy of persons suggests that three reciprocally related domains are involved in this view of persons. The first is relations, and second is the quality or ethical shape of relating, and the third is differentiated persons. I will now speak to each of these, before discussing implications for understanding human persons.

* A first characteristic: Relational unity or divine ouisa. The relational dynamics associated with the social trinitarian analogy of God are sometimes represented by the terms co-inherence and co-indwelling. As already indicated, the use of the related term *perichoresis* is associated with the patristic insights into these person-forming dynamics. *Perichoresis* is based on two Greek words, *peri*—around, and *chorein*—to give way. This implies that the person forming dynamics of the Trinity can be likened to a rotating dance that flows between otherness and relation (T. Torrance, 1996). These reciprocal dynamics are implied in Jesus’ prayer in John 17:1, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that your Son may glorify you”, and in John 16:14, where Jesus says the Spirit of truth “will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” In passages like these, movements that would later be referred to as *perichoretic*—going around—movements of the Spirit glorifying the Son and the Father, the Son glorifying the Father, and the Father glorifying the Son, are apparent. These are considered to be examples of co-equals expressing intimacy, and embracing in love and mutuality. My point with regard to the relational dynamics of the three divine persons is that, in the words of LaCugna (1991), they “mutually inhere in one another, draw life from one another, ‘are’ what they are by relation to one another” (pp. 270-71).

When relations are ethically centred in this way, even reference to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as persons becomes problematic for some. Fiddes (2000) and Cunningham (2002), for example, argued that all talk of God as “persons” should be avoided. Instead, they proposed that it is preferable to think of God in terms of events or relations. One advantage of referring to God in relation-only terms is that it avoids confusion amongst the different ways the word “person” is used, and gives priority to the idea of participation. The notion of divine participation gets to the heart of the distinction between the more holistic early formulation of God as community, and the dualistic Western formulation of God. It also provides a link between God’s relational life and human life.
God-as-community is hospitably open to humankind inviting person-forming participation in events of the divine relations.

This trinitarian ontology of persons-as-communion suggests that:
God does not exist because He cannot but exist… God the Father perpetually confirms - constitutes! - His own existence in the free personal activity of the divine life… This free confirmation of the divine being on the side of God, however, does not occur in self-isolation, but rather through constitutive relationships with the Son and Spirit: it is precisely in trinitarian existence that constitutes this confirmation. (Zizioulas, 1985, pp. 18 & 42)

While I agree with this emphasis on relational ontology, I question its lopsided view of reciprocity. This is because the notion of an inter-trinitarian hierarchy, one in which the Father constitutes the Son and Spirit, while the Son and the Spirit condition the Father, appears to nullify the notion of reciprocity that is fundamental to agape love. This is LaCugna’s point that I referred to in the introduction. Volf (1998a) put it like this:

As soon as we allow inter-trinitarian reciprocity, the inter-trinitarian asymmetry seems to vanish, unless one distinguishes between the level of constitution at which the Father as cause is first, and the level of relations at which all three are equal and mutually conditioned by one another. In any case, Zizioulas’ distinction between the Son and Spirit being constituted through the Father, and the Father being conditioned by the Son and Spirit, would have to be explicated more precisely to be persuasive. And only such explication would sufficiently ground the notion of God as hierarchical-relational entity. (p. 80)

While Zizioulas’ hierarchical conclusion about inter-trinitarian relations rests on the notion of the Father as the fount of trinitarian life, when homoousin is taken as the “ontological and epistemological linchpin of Christian theology” (T. Torrance, 1980, pp. 160-61), non-hierarchical mutuality is suggested. Homoousin represents the Nicene agreement that Jesus is of one being with the Father, and of one being with humanity. Further, homoousin suggests the indivisibility of the one-ness and three-ness of God (Habets, 2009). “The one Being of God is identical with the communion of the three divine Persons and the Communion of the three divine Persons is identical with the one being of God” (T. Torrance, 1996, p. 159-60).

Therefore, a consideration of the relational dynamics of inter-trinitarian life, from the perspective of homoousin, leads to the conclusion that the Three enjoy symmetrical relations. This implies that the Father is not called “Father” because he is “the sole cause with all things dependent of him” but because of the eternal generation of the Son (Moltmann, 1981, p. 183). Furthermore, rather than divine monarchy resting with the Father as a substantial possession, homoousin suggests that divine monarchy is a triadic relational achievement. This implies that leadership is shared by more than one person; it is exercise in communion. This approach addresses the earlier concern that
referring to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as persons may take away from the significance of participation. Now it is clear that because the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three relations who are persons, rather than three persons who have relations, this concern is addressed (Pannenberg, 1998). Analogueising God in this way leads to the conclusion that communion is ontological, or the basis of being.

**A second characteristic: Loving reciprocity.** Now that I have established a trinitarian ontology of communion, it is important to recognise that God would not be God if it were not for the specific quality of love that shapes communion. Pannenberg (1998) helpfully developed an analogy of love through a correlation with Hegel’s notion of self-differentiation:

> [a]s Jesus glorifies the Father and not himself, and precisely in doing so shows himself to be the Son of the Father, so the Spirit glorifies not himself but the Son, and in him the Father, precisely by not speaking of himself (John 16:13) but bearing witness to Jesus (15:26) and reminding us of his teaching (14:26) he shows himself to be the Spirit of truth (16:26). Distinct from the Father and the Son, he thus belongs to both. (p. 315)

This analogy, of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit distinguishing one another through other-centred loving action, suggests that, as is the case with the monarchy, even deity is something that is received, and not owned. By existing in each other, the unique trinitarian fellowship is formed in which diversity is experienced within union. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit exist in each other because in giving to each other, one to another, space is given for full flourishing. Reflections of the quality of reciprocity between the Father and Son can, for example, be found in John’s Gospel. The Father and Son are one, and the Son is sent by the Father. The Father grants responsibility to the Son, and the Son only acts in accord with the Father. “Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me when I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24). The Father pours love on the Son and so glorifies him, and the Son reciprocates the love he has received and glorifies the Father (Gunton, 1993). This is an example of the quality of participation that gives specific shape to the triune life.

**A third characteristic: Differentiated persons.** In addition to relational unity and loving reciprocity, the third characteristic of social trinitarian personhood is hypostases, or differentiated persons. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit live in the unity of love as one, and yet they each enjoy personal distinction. I mean by this that, far from threatening their communion, the quality of their shared life actually forms their distinctiveness (T. Torrance, 1992). For this reason, it is appropriate to say that relation and particularity co-occur because of the perfect quality of their reciprocity. The Nicene Creed confesses the particular hypostases so that the conception of Father,
Son, and Holy Spirit is without confusion and clear. The coherence of the uniqueness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is at the heart of Orthodox and neo-Orthodox theology. For example, the unifying work of the Holy Spirit draws people through Christ to the Father, but in doing so maintains, and even strengthens, particularity. This is a form of unity, therefore, that is orientated towards the establishment and cherishing of the particularity of the other, and not towards assimilation (Gunton, 1993). The fundamental point to be made here is that because of the quality of divine love, unity and distinction are mutually dependent categories.

3.4 Part two: Trinitarian anthropology

The purpose of the following discussion is to articulate an understanding of human wellbeing drawn from an understanding of God founded on the concept of *homoousios*. The adoption of *homoousios* as a basis for understanding God and humans represents Karl Rahner’s (1970) renowned proclamation that “the ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity, and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity” (p. 22). Put another way, God does not have a way of being that is other than that which is evidenced in the Christ event. And so the doctrine of the Trinity, one predicated upon the notion of *homoousin*, reveals that relational participation forms the centre of personal life. It is the quality of this participatory life that ensures that individual people remain distinct, while living as one. This is because when relatedness is shaped by perfect reciprocity, particularity and relatedness co-occur, and so it is this quality of reciprocity that leads to experiences of personal and community flourishing. Furthermore, the notion of *homoousin* suggests that it is appropriate to claim an intrinsic link between the manifestation of these particular virtues in human community and participation in the shared divine life (Pembroke, 2006).

Focus on participation suggests that human beings are called to understand themselves, not as “individuals” who may (or may not) choose to enter into relationships, but rather as mutually indwelling and indwelt, and to such a degree that—echoing the mutual indwelling of the Three—all pretensions to wholly independent existence are abolished. (Cunningham, 1998a, p. 10)

This linking of human and divine participation is predicated on the claim that because God entered human history at a specific time and place, creation is restored to participation in God through Jesus’ own participation. Put differently, the Spirit-empowered life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—“the first-born of all creation” (Colossians 1:15)—provides an *experiential* basis for knowing both God and humans as relational beings. This implies that, like God, humans are not just capable of relating, they are ontologically relational. Most of the work of Jesus seen in the New Testament is that of an agent of God. God raised Jesus, God reconciled the world, God loved the
world; God has poured out the Spirit etc. I will now move to discuss what is meant by *imago Dei* by first considering the breadth of interpretation, second God’s call and gift of capacity to respond, third *imago Trinitatis* as eschatological direction, and fourth the limits to the *imago Dei* analogy.

**Imago Dei: Imaging God’s life in human community.** Christian theology traditionally develops the notion of *imago Dei*—Latin for image of God—to refer to conclusions about humans that are drawn from the study of God. One of the most striking aspects of the Genesis creation narratives, beyond the assertion that God is Creator and Sustainer of all things, is surely the suggestion that “the human” is created in God’s image. Understanding humans as *imago Dei* may begin with the reference to it in Genesis 1: 26-27:

> The God said: “Let us make humankind in our image, According to our likeness.” …
> So God created humankind in his image, In the image of God, he created them; male and female he created them.

The author of Genesis seems to support the argument that God is Three in One. This can be seen, for example, in the claim that “the human” images God as two in one; both male and female. Furthermore, the suggestion of unity between God and the human can be seen in Genesis (3:22) “Then the **LORD** God said, ‘See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever.’” Something new is being said here. It is a profoundly new mystery that people are bestowed with such honour, and it is a mystery that draws Israelites to contemplate with holy awe (Renckens, 1964). The discipline of systematic theology, however, is engaged in ongoing contemplation and debate about what is meant in this context by imaging God (see, for example, Brown, 1991). As is usual when there is an enormous amount of theological writing on a topic, there are a variety of positions and interpretations about the *imago Dei* (Gunton, 1998).

**Breadth of interpretation.** Interestingly, for such a significant doctrine as the *imago Dei*, the Jewish and Christian Scriptures only directly referenced it a few times; thus reading between the lines is essential. Considering the creation narratives first, a number of interrelated interpretations emerge that seem to be based on the exegetical approaches that have been used and the philosophical trends within each era of interpretation. Towner’s (2005) survey indicated there are, at least, 11 interpretations of the Genesis texts. Helpfully, all of these interpretations fall into either the “substantial” category—something residing in the substantial nature of humans, or the “relational” category—something to do with the way people relate. In order to go beyond this rudimentary categorisation, I propose additional criteria. First, that the doctrine is not just
considered in terms of the specific scriptural references, but in the context of the whole teaching of the Jewish and Christian scriptures. And second, to approach understanding the *imago Dei* in a similar manner to how the writers of the Christian Scriptures do, that is, in the light of the incarnation, which of course implies a trinitarian analogy of God.

To put this in a more refined way, what does it mean to be made in the image of the Trinity—*imago Trinitatis*? The first thing to note is that it favours the relational *imago* over the substantial view. The relational view is prioritised in the affirmation that simply by virtue of being created, humans are dignified with the honour of being God’s counterpart who can address the divine “I” (Brunner, 1944). Therefore, imaging God has something to do with participating in subject-to-subject encounters, and through this becoming what and who they already are in Christ.

In *Church Dogmatics* III/2, Barth referred to this view of *imago Dei* as *analogia relationis*:

>[T]here is disparity between the relationship of God and man and the prior relationship of the Father to the Son and the Son to the Father, of God to Himself. But for all the disparity… there is a correspondence and similarity between the two relationships. This is not a correspondence and similarity of being, an *analogia entis*. The being of God cannot be compared with that of man. But it is not a question of this twofold being. It is a question of the relationship within the being of God on the one side and between the being of God and that of man on the other. Between these two relationships as such—and it is in this sense that the second is the image of the first—there is correspondence and similarity. There is an *analogia relationis*. The correspondence and similarity of the two relationships consists in the fact that the freedom in which God posits Himself as the Father, is posited by Himself as the Son and confirms Himself as the Holy Ghost, is the same freedom as that in which He is the Creator of man, in which man may be His creature, and in which the Creator-creature relationship is established by the Creator. (Barth, 1960, p. 220)

*Analogia relationis* draws an analogy between the inter-trinitarian life and human life in community. These are relations that are initiated by the triune God, and they are relations that are received by humanity. As such, this style of image does not exist in any one individual but is present when one individual relates to another in the loving style of the inter-trinitarian life. This trinitarian understanding of *imago Dei* is, therefore, vulnerable to human agency because, for example, it is destroyed by murder.

It is helpful to note that while Barth’s (1960) exposition of *analogia relationis* may appear to come close to a version of an analogy of being—*analogia entis*—they are distinctly different. This is a relevant point to make because Barth despised the substantial analogy of *imago Dei* on the basis that it suggests human wellbeing can be enjoyed because of the way humans are structured, and so without quality relations. However, Barth’s approach did come close in that it sought to affirm that even in humanity’s very being, people are ordained for covenantal relations with God, as
beings-in-encounter. He did this through arguing that humanity “corresponds . . . to the nature of God Himself” (p. 323). I conclude that Barth’s view is that a loving God creates humans with the capacity to love, and thus to participate in the creation of a new humanity. This approach varies from analogia entis in that it is God through the power of the Holy Spirit who creates the capacity to love (Moltmann, 1997).

**God’s call and gift of capacity to respond.** Even with this created capacity to love, free will to choose to participate or not is maintained. Emil Brunner argued that rather than humans being ethically obliged to participate in love, they are personally invited and gifted with the capacity to respond. By this he meant that when a person looks to God as Trinity for understanding, she is able to recognise the ontological reality, that the Word of God through the power of the Spirit constitutes people. This recognition, and thus capacity to respond, comes through first experiencing the love of God in the power of the Spirit, and thus being able to open oneself to God as other. Through such co-indwelling, Jesus, as the spoken Word of God to humankind, forms both “call”, and the “capacity” to respond to the call (Brunner, 1953, p. 55). Through these reciprocal dynamics—of call, the constitution of the capacity to respond, and the response itself—people are formed in the image and likeness of the Trinity as beings-in-encounter. This personal formation necessarily involves mutual vulnerability, as people allow their personalities to be permeable; to “overlap” with God, and with discernment, each other. These are the relational dynamics of human participation in love that LaCugna (1991) referred to as “co-indwelling” and “interpenetration”.

**Imago Trinitatis as eschatological direction.** I have been arguing that “the human” in the Genesis account is invited, and enabled, to image God through participation in the mutual constitution of one another as persons-in-community, or beings in-encounter. This relational analogy of imago Dei is similar to the Jewish one in which God is understood to be acting in people when they act with hesed, or loyalty and compassionate devotion (Hubbard, 1988). This dynamic view of participation suggests that imago Trinitatis needs to be understood as a direction people are called to grow towards. Further, the direction is towards being who they already are in-Christ, the true imago Dei (González, 1970).

**Limits to the imago Dei analogy.** Questions remain about the extent to which it is appropriate to map God’s social life onto human community. In response, I suggest plotting a path between the two extremes of, on one hand, dismissing the Trinity as a viable guide to human flourishing and, on the other hand, over-realising a correspondence between divine and human life (Volf, 1998b). This middle ground offers a means to establish principles, while avoiding the risk of collapsing distinctions between God and creation over which Cunningham (1998a) and Peters (1993), for example, expressed concern. A perceived risk associated with attempting to establish a
correspondence between God and human life is that it may appear to lean towards a form of pantheism that regards the earth as a form a manifestation of God. Contrary to how it may appear, homoousin-centred trinitarian theology does not represent a form of pantheism, but accounts for the reconciling work of the Father, through Jesus, and in the power of the Spirit, exercised in partnership with the world. I mean by “partnership” that the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit is personally present in the world inviting participation in practices that lead to experiences of individual, community, and social wellbeing. This relational presence of God in the natural world is very different to the pantheistic contention that the universe and God are fused together. Far from a collapse of distinction between God and the world, this partnership approach to unity affirms difference, and even challenges a Christo-centric approach passed off as trinitarian (Moltmann, 1997).

This relational view of unity between God and the natural world implies that, amidst the complexity of human community, God is always present replete with desire that strangers experience hospitality, and inviting and enabling people to partner in the creative formation of responses. Furthermore, traces of divine love can always be identified in experiences such as vulnerable caring, neighbourliness, seeking justice, and the offering of forgiveness. This trinitarian approach that follows the model of Jesus’ teaching invites questioning what, in every human situation, the signs of God’s presence are, and how to respond, rather than questioning whether God is present or not (Bosch, 1991).

While these broad theological principles can be described with some confidence, it is important to engage in the application of them humbly, remembering that all attempts to speak of God, such as “a community of persons”, “perichoresis”, or “relation”, will never mirror God accurately. This is because even the best human attempts are limited by a combination of sinfulness—understood as the avoidance of relational encounter—and the finite nature of the human mind and language that account for our extremely limited and partial grasp of the nature of God. Trinitarian theology implies both the need to be bold in imagining human communities shaped by love and realistic enough to recognise that the gap between God and humans is so massive that the traces of trinitarian life in human social engagement are necessarily faint.

3.5 Human personhood: Three domains

I have discussed the broad conclusion that people image God relationally as they participate in God’s triune life as a social project. I want to move to ground the discussion more practically, by discussing three, interrelated, dimensions that constitute this dynamic conception of human
personhood: embodied and psychological particularity, relational encounter, and community and social dimension.

**Domain one: Embodied individuality.** Inherent in the *imago Trinitatis* is the affirmation of personal uniqueness. The particularity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is not compromised by their unity, indeed it is developed. And because human difference is developed through the unifying work of the Spirit, it is appropriate to assume that this should be the case in the context of human relations (Gunton, 1993). The trinitarian ideal is for a person to grow particularity in reciprocal relationship with others. For humans, of course, this is an embodied particularity, and so key events in one’s relational history become lodged, or sedimented, in a person’s physicality, which, subsequently shape the way relationships are entered, experienced, and interpreted (McFadyen, 1990).

Embodiment is fundamental to human personhood in that it is as embodied persons that the capacities of self-consciousness, presence, uniqueness, sexuality, community engagement, relationships, and agency all find expression (Balswick et al., 2005). It is the body that forms the basis of personal identity, uniqueness, and self-consciousness. More than this, the physical domain is where responsiveness to God is outworked in community, so that ultimately humans and all of creation may flourish. Barth (1960) reasoned that “without en-souling the human person would be ‘subject-less’, just as conversely a human being would be ‘objectless’ should the significance of the body be denied” (p. 392). This implies that the human body provides a person with independent life and the potential for subjectivity which are manifest in the unique mystery of perceiving, thinking and willing, desiring, and active existence. By virtue of these human capacities, a person is qualified to engage in partnership through hearing and responding to one another, and to God who advocates for people to make decisions to live shared, rather than isolated, lives.

In spite of these affirmations of the embodied dimension of human life, Western anthropology has treated the body as something to be freed from and, failing this, as something to be disciplined (Hui, 2002). This dualism has also been expressed for centuries within the Church where while the human person has been considered “good”, the fleshly aspect of humankind has often been treated as “bad” (see, for example, Fenton, 1974). This stance can be contrasted with the affirmation associated with the incarnation of the Son in Jesus of Nazareth; that the human body is actually very good. This affirmation is made on the basis that God has become fully human—fully embodied—in the incarnation, and so the human body has intrinsic value.

The body, in other words, has consistently been treated as something to be freed from, rather than inhabited. Indeed, it is not too strong to say that the aim of detaching oneself from the body has been a fundamental element in the history of freedom (Moltmann, 1985). However, throughout the
20th century theologians, along with phenomenologists and feminists, have sought to advance the notion that the human body exists in a unique relationship with the self. The phenomenological view of the body is far from the opinion that it is passive. Instead it offers the view that the embodied self-experiences itself in a variety of paradoxical ways, including both the well-known and inexplicable, personal and other, and the intimate yet foreign (Zaner, 1995). Phenomenologists go as far as suggesting that embodiment provides the primary sense of being human, and that because the body communicates a person’s presence it is far from ethically neutral. Feminist writers have further endorsed the worth of the body.

The trinitarian claim that relations are the primary ontology does not negate this view that human embodiment is fundamentally important in terms of things like presence, action, and identity, particularity and self-consciousness, one’s sexual and communicative relations, and personal history (Hui, 2002). Furthermore, while the trinitarian perspective suggests that embodied individuality must be seen as only one aspect of human existence, it is nonetheless important because it is by this means that a person inhabits the world, and enters relations. Through organising both time and space, the body becomes the centre of action. And so, Christian faith advocates for bodily apprehension of God, “not simply so we can make religious pronouncements about the bodily life, but so one’s life may be redefined… mediating God’s love for the world and his divine presence in the world” (Hui, 2002, p. 83). The body, then, is the place within which relationships between God and humanity both hinge. The body is also the fulcrum of relations between a person and her own self, family, community, and the world. While embodiment does not appear to have a role in the immanent Trinity, my contention is that it does. I make this claim again following Rahner’s (1970) view that God’s being and activity are the same. This leads to the recognition that through the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus, human life is ontologically joined to the life of God. This leads to the suggestion that from this trinitarian perspective human wellbeing cannot be understood as an exclusively relational and social concern any more than it can an exclusively embodied concern.

**Psychological particularity.** While trinitarian theology advocates that human embodiment is central to a theological understanding of personhood, it simultaneously challenges the view that human wellbeing is based exclusively on a person’s embodied capacities. My point is that embodiment and relationality must be viewed together. Taking psychological function, for example the unifying role the body plays within a person’s life, contributes to both the substantial and relational dimensions. The capacities of consciousness and self-consciousness underlie one’s identity, emphasise personal particularity, and provide the capacities to interpret oneself as a moral agent. Moral agency forms the basis of the ability to reach beyond oneself as a relational being
Furthermore, there is a reciprocal dynamic between relations and the psyche, in that it is through relations that the psyche is shaped, it is through language and discourse that meaning is made of these things, and it is through relations that the uniquely shaped—relationally sedimented—psyche is expressed more or less in accord with love.

Psychosomatic unity. From the trinitarian perspective, it is important to emphasise that personhood only emerges through the psychosomatic unity of physical, psychological and social dimensions. Barth (1960) was careful to argue that the soul and body do not merely combine; rather, that the person is “wholly and simultaneously both soul and body, always and in every relation soulful, and always and in every relation bodily... for the concrete reality of man consists in his being both, and only in both one” (46, p. 3). Barth is helpful here because he argued that the unity of human body and soul is brought about because a person has spirit that is gifted by God’s Spirit. By this he meant that a person is “grounded, constituted and maintained by God as the soul of his body” (46, p. 2), which implies that the ongoing unifying action of the Spirit is needed if a person is to be the soul of one’s body and not a perplexing duality. And so, while humans are called into existence as a biological entity—an object—to be human is to be essentially a subject—a personal, thinking, moral agent (Fee Nordling, 2007).

Key enquiry questions with regard to one’s embodied life might include: What practices assist the development of self-awareness? What aspects of my inner life do I need to offer hospitality to? How have significant formational relationships shaped the way my body responds to invitations to trust and move towards others without self-protection? How does my body respond to stressors, and what wisdom might it hold?

Domain two: Subject-to-subject relations. I wish to state at the outset of this discussion about relations that human beings have their being because they are freely loved by God and by others. This is to say that as well as existing bodily in space and time, “[t]o be human is to be created in and for relationship with divine and human others” (Gunton, 1993, p. 222). I mean by this, that humans are created for fellowship with God, and as male and female to be in relation to one another; thus implying that relations are intended to be joyous, sensual, and creative dealings. Such an affirmation leads back to my earlier point that imago Trinitatis is not a “thing” that resides within individuals, but within communities of persons who are engaged in relational encounter. In brief, male and female equals “the human”.

Boff (1988) contends that trinitarian relational encounter involves “direct and immediate relationships: eye to eye, face to face, heart to heart”, and that the “result of mutual surrender and reciprocal communion is community” (p. 3). This is to say that community forming relations are characterised by mutual acceptance as he or she is, opening to the other, and giving the best of
himself or herself. It is in these face-to-face relationships that people make one another what and who they are. Just as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit constitute the being of God, humans become authentically personal insofar as they engage in mutually constructive relations with one another (Gunton, 1998).

**Domain three: Social context.** As indicated earlier, it is a key feature of trinitarian anthropology that it offers the means to “harmonize personality and sociality in the community of men and women, without sacrificing the one to the other” (J. Torrance, 1997, p. 38). This contention broadens the discussion from embodied individuality in relation, to include the relevance of sociality. Sociality includes an acknowledgement of the way identity is shaped through culture, social stories, and language. Viewed in this way, sociality represents the ethical and political questions about the kinds of social arrangement that gives rise to the development of healthy experiences of life. A trinitarian response is to these questions is that:

nothing is as humanizing as love, and a conscious interest in the life of others, particularly in the life of the oppressed. For love leaves us open to wounding and disappointment. It makes us ready to suffer. It leads us out of isolation into a fellowship with others, with people different from ourselves, and this fellowship is always associated with suffering. (Moltmann, 1993, pp. 62-63)

My point here is that from the trinitarian perspective social life is best structured around themes of participation in other-centered love. This particular kind of social life involves, and is expressed in, things like vulnerable mutuality, offering forgiveness, and working for justice. This is to say that trinitarian anthropology is located within a specific social project that might be identified with the Kingdom or Realm of God. The Realm of God offers a vision of the future shaped by love, and it represents the practices that comprise a person’s day to day participation in making this future promise a present reality; becoming persons-in-community-in-Christ (Andersen, 2001).

Because the trinitarian vision is for participation as persons-in-community, it implies that a counsellor’s therapeutic goals need to engage community concerns, as well as individual and relational ones, and recognition of the interdependence of all three domains. For example, a counselling conversation should be structured to engage, on behalf of a restoration telos, both a mother’s struggle with despair and related social factors. These may include inadequate income, a poorly insulated home leading to child illness, or loneliness associated with unresolved family conflict or unsatisfactorily designed bus routes, and thus inaccessible community. Neo-Barthian scholar Wolf Krotke (2000) argued that such trinitarian anthropology is predicated on very a specific ethical vision:
On the basis of faith’s experience of true human existence in the midst of the world of disorder and injustice, the Christian community and individual Christians are always in the process of setting out anew in order to stand up concretely for true human existence in the midst of a world of injustice… Anthropology, as Barth understood it, can and must be lived out as a practical anthropology in the Christian community and in the lives of individual Christians in the midst of society and in opposition to all the inhumanity that reigns there; it must be lived out in active service of a better human righteousness. The Christian community must never allow itself to be surpassed by anyone in its solidity with real people. But rather - and this is not the least of its task - this community will represent to all people the world of human beings reconciled in Christ when, in freedom, it offers the image of a strangely human person. (p. 174)

Whether it is explicitly named or not in the therapeutic context, trinitarian thinking suggests that as professional counsellors, imaging the triune life involves engaging with people at their points of need, enquiring about the ways in which need represents individual, relational, and social concerns, and engaging the history, presence, and hope of love.

3.6 Summary
In this first of two theoretical position chapters I have introduced a social trinitarian anthropology in the context of the complex historical discussion about God as Trinity. Based on the hermeneutic of God’s self-revelation through the person of Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit, I have argued for the analogy of persons that involves embodied individuality, relationality, and social life. Furthermore, this analogy offers the suggestion that to be human is to be invited to participate in God’s reciprocal life of otherness in loving relational unity. Such participation involves practical every-day things, such as self-giving care for others, vulnerable presence, reconciliation through the offering of forgiveness, and working for justice and freedom. Put another way, trinitarian anthropology presents a vision of becoming who we are already in Christ, through participating in God’s ethical life as a social project with a restoration telos.

This trinitarian theological anthropology is relevant to a consideration of narrative therapy because it is concerned with exploring the way people understand their lives through socially constructed stories, considering the particular effects of doing so, and developing the freedom to choose to become people who are shaped according to ethical hopes and values. Next, I introduce narrative therapy, before moving to correlate specific aspects of its philosophies and theories of practice with the trinitarian insights just presented.
Chapter four: Narrative Therapy

There are a variety of philosophical insights that contribute to what has become known as narrative therapy. Narrative therapy seeks to be a respectful and non-blaming approach to therapy and community work. Furthermore, it views problems as separate from people, and represents hope that people have access to skills, abilities, values, and commitments that can assist them to change their relationship with the problems in their lives (White, 2007). From a narrative therapeutic perspective, people live and interpret their lives through stories that are constructed within communities of conversation.

Narrative therapy has only formally developed over the last three decades, and from the beginning it has been a practice-based approach. Its emphasis on client empowerment and ethical coherence has characterised the work throughout its continual development in an environment of ongoing reflexivity between therapist and client, and therapist and theory. Co-developers, Michael White and David Epston, worked throughout the 1980s as Australasian clinical social workers. It was here that they began to critique the dominant therapeutic paradigms on the basis of what worked for their clients, and not on the basis of pathology, as was the custom (Chamberlain, 2012; White & Epston, 1990).

4.1 Philosophical ferment leading to the emergence of narrative therapy

Narrative therapy emerged from an upheaval of influences that include the anti-psychiatry movement, existentialism, advances in family therapy, and the emergence of post-structuralist philosophy, in particular Foucault’s (1979, 1980, 1984) ideas about power and knowledge. The so-called anti-psychiatry movement had its roots in the post-World War II critique of the essentialist internalised-self paradigm. Prominently, Victor Frankl, an Austrian Jewish holocaust survivor and psychiatrist, reflected that all his psychiatric training had been of little use within the four Nazi concentration camps in which he was interned. He realised that his survival had been based on the development and sustenance of meaning through very practical daily routines. In the context of his clinical work, Michael White reached similar conclusions, and came to view the sustenance of meaning as central to human wellbeing; citing Frankl’s influential work, Man’s Search for Meaning (1959), in his early writings. Frankl’s logotherapy and existentialism represent an early shift in that they both take their ontologies from the perspective of the individual, rather than from the normalising gaze of modern psychology. Narrative therapy now reflects this early development that
related people and their problems to meaning, meaninglessness, and the freedom to take individual political action.

While White and Epston do not appear to have been directly influenced by the existential movement, beyond adopting its emphasis on valuing personal knowing, prominent existentialist R. D. Laing’s (1960/1972, 1967/1972, 1969) work did contribute to an atmosphere of questioning traditional methods. This questioning seems to have opened space for White and Epston’s challenging critique of the establishment to emerge. Influential family therapist Gregory Bateson, among others, was also influenced by Laing’s work, and White certainly was heavily influenced by Bateson. Bateson (1958) described interpersonal relations in terms of power and rejects the notion of an “internalised self” (Chamberlain, 2012, p. 107). Bateson’s rejection of the internalised conception of the self indicates another significant philosophical shift in narrative therapy’s post-structuralist ontology. While this philosophical shift has not been instant, it has been dramatic, and can be traced throughout the development of family therapy across the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Murray Bowen is also prominent in that he developed what became known as the Bowen family systems theory; in which he sought to contextualise individuals within their family systems, and in so doing, the self in the context of therapy came to be seen as interactive, rather than fixed (Bowen, 1978).

During this period, the notion of the self, not merely an interactive-self but now a socially constructed-self, was also being explored on many other fronts. In a similar manner to Bowen, Goffman (1959) influentially argued that persons are constituted in their interaction with others:

When we allow that the individual projects a definition of the situation when he appears before others, we must also see that the others, however passive their role may seem to be, will themselves project a definition of the situation by virtue of their responses to the individual and by virtue of any lines of action they initiate to him. (p. 20)

This theorisation, that people are influenced by others and in turn influence them, points to the emerging social constructionist thesis that is now central to understanding narrative therapy. As I will discuss in more detail later, Goffman’s seminal notion, along with Michel Foucault’s social constructionist vision of power and the narrativity, shaped the early development of narrative therapy (Besley, 2002; Payne, 2006); a collaboration between theories that has spanned the last three decades (Chamberlain, 2012).

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4 A relevant history of the development of the philosophical ideas that contributed to the emergency to narrative therapy can be found in Chamberlain (2012).
While therapy has traditionally been thought of in terms of modernist epistemology, or the idea that things are best known through empirical science and logic, Hanson (2006) contended that reconsidering theories from a postmodern, and therefore pluralistic perspective, opens new therapeutic possibilities. This is the area of enquiry in which narrative therapy flourished. The postmodern emphasis on story and social relationships represents an interpretative shift away from therapeutic focus on individuals and systems that characterised the earlier therapeutic epochs. Through the emergent postmodern social and narrative understandings, a narrative therapist now conceives of people as interdependent and dialogic entities rather than isolated autonomous and interior ones (Anderson, 2003). Weingarten (1991) argued that “in the social constructionist view, the experience of self exists in the on-going exchange with others... the self continually creates itself through narratives that include other people who are reciprocally woven into these narratives” (p. 289). Through orientating therapeutic conversation around these social constructionist and narrative understandings of a constantly-being-created self, the narrative therapist leads enquiries into how stories constitute people’s lives, and offers conversation designed to re-constitute or “re-story” personal identity on the basis of what is preferred. In this way, the therapeutic focus is shifted from attempting to fix problems, toward bringing forth or “thickening” identity stories that do not support problems (Geertz, 1978). Through thickening thin stories, and even developing new stories, the hope is that that people can live out of new possibilities for themselves and their futures.

The proposal that we make sense of our lives through narratives that bear meaning, is sounded by a number of influential philosophers. For Taylor (1989), “a basic condition of making sense of ourselves is that we grasp our lives in a narrative” and understand ourselves as “an unfolding story” (p. 52). MacIntyre (1981) similarly referred, to the narrative structure of a person’s identity as the thing that gives a person’s life coherence:

Each of our shorter-term intentions is, and can only be made, intelligible by reference to some longer-term intentions. Behavior is only characterized adequately when we know what the longer and longest-term intentions are and how the shorter-term intentions are related to the longer. Once again, we are involved in writing a narrative history. (pp. 207-208)

In other words, McIntyre considered the unity of a person’s past, present and future life to be “a narrative embodied in a single task” (McIntyre, pp. 203-04). Taylor, and others, argued that the “task” can be understood in terms of an ethical plot. Taylor specifically nominated “the good” as the ethical plot, around which people story their intentions, and subsequently identities, across time. He argued:
Because we cannot but orient ourselves to the good, and hence determine our place relative to it and hence determine the direction of our lives, we must inescapably understand our lives in narrative form, as a “quest” must see our lives in story. (pp. 51-52)

As I will discuss below, Foucault (1994) did not appear to go as far as Taylor, but he certainly referred to people as “moral agents” in that they are motivated by ethical desire. Leaving aside the question whether ethical desire is necessarily “good” or not, narrative philosophers typically agree that—however it is theorised—ethical desire compels people forward on certain trajectories that in turn shape identity.

It is true that not everyone champions the narrative thesis. Sartre, for example, only grudgingly accepted the psychological narrativity thesis, and rejected any notion that ethics are involved in any narrating of identity that might take place. Sartre (1938/1996; in Strawson, 2004) preferred to see narrativity as something essentially inauthentic, and therefore an impediment to experiencing wellbeing. Sartre’s critical view is, however, challenged by the weight of advocates for narrativity as a way to understand how people make meaning of their lives.

There is little doubt that White and Epston’s narrative approach to therapy is animated by the narrative philosophical proposal that people make sense of their lives through story, and that these stories are themed around ethical values. However, because White and Epston draw heavily on the work of Foucault, what is meant by ethics in this context will require further consideration. Before doing so, it is important to complete the story of narrative therapy’s early development by drawing attention to some of the key figures who build on the seminal work of White and Epston.


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5 Rosenblatt (1994) devoted his text to discussing the emergence of the narrative philosophy in the field of family therapy.
4.2 Narrative and social constructionist philosophies

As I have already intimated, the philosophical basis of narrative therapy is particularly significant. Indeed, some argue that the process of forming narrative therapeutic practice is as much about engaging in a philosophical and epistemological shift, as it is about the development of the therapeutic relationship, or specific conversational formulae. White (1995b), for example, argued for a fundamental shift in the way knowledge, power, and people are conceived.

Freedman and Combs (1996) offered a helpful framework that assists discussion about the philosophical shift represented within narrative therapy. They referred to the therapeutic periods prior to the narrative therapeutic one in terms of cybernetics; what is involved here is a series of pan 20th century philosophical and epistemological shifts. Wiener (1950) is credited with coining the term cybernetics to refer to systems of guidance, whether these be missile guidance systems or the targeting of therapy towards particular goals. Freedman and Combs extended Wiener’s use of the term cybernetics through the addition of two prefixes—namely, first-order and second-order cybernetics. In this way, the early strategic family therapy framework (Haley, 1963, 1976) is considered to be a first-order example. This is because the associated philosophy conceptualises families and individuals as machines to be diagnosed and fixed, much like a malfunctioning engine. Here, the therapist is positioned as a detached assessor and engineer. With the benefit of hindsight, regarding their own early use of this approach, Freedman and Combs (1996) reflected, “While we thought that we were looking for people’s strengths and resources... first-order cybernetics gave us too many invitations to focus on what was dysfunctional in the lives of people who came to us for therapy” (p. 5).

In the latter part of the first-order cybernetic period Hoffman (1988), and others, led a family-therapy move into second-order cybernetics. Second-order approaches are less control—and dysfunction—orientated. Here the therapist does not attempt to stand detached and outside the family system in the belief that one could somehow be involved while remaining objective. Instead she recognised that even her mere presence will impact the configuration of a family’s relationships, and a member’s experience of herself in the family. The second-order stance, then, represented a shift from assuming that healthy systems were static, to a view of health in terms of ever-evolving systems. The Milan Team’s work is a good example of the second-order approach. The Milan Team adopted Bateson’s (1972, 1979) understanding of a family as an ecology-of-ideas, and thus moved away from a mechanistic systems approach to a living one. Where the first-order approach had relied on therapist expert knowledge about best family functioning, the Milan Team employed a variety of innovative methods, including circular questioning, in order to bring forward the family’s own knowledge about what worked and did not work for them. The second-order
approach represents a significant epistemological shift from relying on abstracted expert knowledge, towards beginning to value indigenous family knowledge. While this new Bateson-orientated approach was characterised by greater client-therapist collaboration, it is often considered a somewhat less potent form of therapy, particularly so when a family unit appeared to lack resources or was isolated from wider community and social relationships. These perceived inadequacies were fertile ground for further developments.

In the early 1990s, the emergence of the narrative approach to therapy can be seen as signalling the beginning of a movement beyond cybernetics, towards a narrative and discursive understanding of identity and action. This movement can most clearly be traced to White (1986). This early work of White’s developed Bateson’s (1972) mapping of personal and family events across time. White was also encouraged by David Epston and Cheryl White to progress the mapping approach through the adoption of narrative philosophy (White & Epston, 1990). While an evolution from a mechanistic to an ecological conception of family systems characterises the shift from first-order to second-order cybernetics, a less incremental and more radical transition is involved in the shift from second-order cybernetics to narrative and discursive understandings of family and individual functioning. The radical nature of this transition relates to the epistemological shift associated with moving from a structuralist to a post-structuralist ontology.

White and Epston (1990) no longer attempted to focus on resolving problems as if they indicate personal deficit, instead they attended to them as manifestations of social power. Put another way, they shifted from viewing humans as people-in-themselves, as in first-order cybernetics, and from viewing them as people-in-relation, as in second-order cybernetics, to viewing them as people-in-power. Based on the narrative and social constructionist understandings, White and Epston began to work with people and their families with a view to developing alternative stories that did not support the problems by which they were afflicted. Again, referring to the way their own work evolved, Freedman and Combs (1996) said that through adopting White and Epston’s approach, “[w]e discovered that, as people began to inhabit and live out these alternative stories, the results went beyond solving problems. Within the new stories, people could live out new self-images, new possibilities for relationships, and new futures” (p. 16).

This new and radical narrative-approach to therapy assumes people make sense of their experiential worlds, not in terms of information or patterns that reflect facts, but in terms of patterns that reflect culturally located stories. This narrative view of people fits well with the social constructionist therapist who does not see herself as a mechanic or ecologist, but rather a political activist who is part of a “subculture in collaborative social interaction with the other people to construct new realities” (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 18). Having provided a brief historical frame
for the philosophical development of narrative therapy, I will now consider both narrative philosophy and the social constructionist philosophical stance in more detail.

**A narrative philosophical stance.** Primarily, the adoption of a narrative philosophy for therapy implies a storied understanding of people’s lives. When this narrative insight joins with the social constructionist assumption, that personal reality is constructed through discursively guided conversation, the developmental possibilities for evolving preferred stories through careful conversation become apparent. Conversation, in this context, refers to the breadth of human transactions (MacIntyre, 1981).

Narrative therapeutic conversation is structured to invite a person to consider the storied nature of her particular constructions of reality, and to enquire in each particular telling what is being noticed, and what is being left out. White (1991) observed that providing people with the opportunity to tell left-out stories, about their past experiences and future hopes is an underground channel of power that can lead to change. White adopted the “underground” metaphor because the conversations that take place with a therapist are parallel to everyday conversation, and as such take place discretely and out-of-sight of every-day conversation. We might understand this form of discrete opportunity, to tell stories that are not usually told, as attempting to subvert established constructions of power in the way an underground network of resistance fighters might seek to do in an occupied country. This approach is based on the recognition that dominant narratives are units of meaning and power and so, by implication, whether a person is able to tell a personal story or not, is political (E. Bruner, 1986). They can be viewed as political because while dominant stories are allocated space to be heard by others, alternative stories are often overlooked, and even actively put aside. If alternative stories are to be heard, then more underground channels of expression are needed. Implicit in what I am saying here is that stories prosper when told and heard, and become impoverished when not.

The word “narrative” is derived from the Indo-European root *Gna* which means “to tell” and “to know”. The Greek root of narrative is knowledge or wisdom. This narrative emphasis on wisdom-knowledge, with a past and future, is a diachronic, as opposed to an episodic form of self-expression (Strawson, 2004). While episodic self-expression is concerned with *truth*, diachronic self-expression is more concerned with *meaning*. Parry and Doan (1994) contended: “the hearers of a story believed that it was true because it was meaningful, rather than it was meaningful because it was true” (p. 2). My point is that narrativity is not an “alternative to truth or reality; rather, it is the mode in which truth and reality are presented” (Schafer, 1992, pp. xiv-xv).

While it might appear that emphasising narrativity is a relatively new practice—and it is within the therapeutic context—it is actually the basis of many cultural understandings. Bruner
(1986) pointed to Plato for the introduction of “paradigmatic”, as opposed to “narrative”, cognition into Greek, and subsequently Western, philosophy. Like Schafer, Bruner argued that while paradigmatic and narrative modes of cognition are complementary, they cannot be reduced into one another. The Platonic shift implied in the pursuit of truth over meaning underpins much of Western culture and, of course, is the basis of both first and second-order cybernetic approaches to therapy. Paradigmatic thinking is associated with scientific method, which aims to describe and explain science in formal mathematical terms. Bruner said of paradigmatic thinking: “[i]t employs categorization or conceptualization and the operations by which categories are established, instantiated, idealized and related to one to the other form of system” (p. 12).

It is now apparent that the departure from diagnosis-orientated therapy based on paradigmatic thinking is grounded in a reengagement with narrative-cognition as a way of knowing. Rather than attempting to convince on the basis of truth, narrative-cognition convinces on the basis of life-likeness. It does this through providing people with webs of meaning and connectedness to people and events. The connected nature of a person’s narrative cognition implies that events happen as part of a moral universe (Parry & Doan, 1994). This narrative and shared moral meaning conception of truth varies from paradigmatic truth in that it does not set out to argue for universal truth. Put differently, narrative truth is true in terms of the webs of meaning that are held as valuable within a particular social and community setting. Because of the narrative basis of trinitarian thinking, it provides a good example of narrative truth in that its conception of people as persons-in-relation arises from the webs of meaning associated with Israel and the New Testament church’s history of engagement with God and one another.

Narrative therapy’s emphasis on narrative-truth, translates into a concern for the meaning people hold about their lives, and because this is meaning established in webs of relationships, it is at the same time a concern for ethics.\(^6\) This focus does not imply that paradigmatic-truth is considered irrelevant; rather that it is assigned secondary status. Nietzsche (1889/1990) argued that “if we possess our why of life we can put up with almost any how” (p. 33). Bruner (1986) helpfully referred to this emphasis on the moral why of life as “the vicissitudes of intention” (p. 17). I have already argued that narrative structure links present events with those past and a hoped for future; now through highlighting moral intentions it becomes apparent that the narrative plot around which

\(^6\) While there is more to narrative therapy than an emphasis on ethics—see, for example, Epston’s (2010) reference to the shared roles of ethics, poetics, and politics in narrative therapy—they nonetheless constitute a central feature of this work.
events are shaped into storylines are morally intended plots. Because of its emphasis on personal meaning, and because of its ethically-laden emphasis on how people feel about their actions with regard to their intentions, narrative-based cognition would seem to be an appropriate domain of therapy.

Having argued that a narrative philosophical orientation is centred on concern for meaning, and that meaning is constructed narratively in relation to ethical plots, I now turn to consider social constructionism. The complex post-structuralist philosophy known as social constructionism is the other seminal philosophy that White and Epston draw into the formation of narrative therapy.

**A social constructionist philosophy.** One of the early texts to formally discuss the social construction of reality was Berger and Luckmann (1966). According to them, while people might experience everyday reality as fixed, the very act of assuming that reality is fixed obscures that knowledge of reality is actually constructed through human activity. In spite of the many publications that have followed, social construction is still an emerging field. Because the unfinished nature of the conversation, my interest here is not in defining social construction, but rather to articulate its core thesis:

> the beliefs, values, institutions, customs, labels, laws, divisions of labor, and the like that make up our social realities are constructed by the members of a culture as they interact with one another from generation to generation and from day to day. That is, societies construct the “lens” through which their members interpret the world. (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 16)

Social constructionism, then, emphasises the interpretation of meaning through socially constructed lenses. Much earlier, Aristotle determined that a “thing” is first known on the basis of it being a substantial thing. In this way, he concluded that substance takes “ontological priority because a substance must be included in any predication” (Shults, 2003, p.13). Through the work of Aristotle, and later Kant and others, the prioritising of substance over relation lead to the modern structuralist assumption that reality can be discovered and known objectively. Of particular relevance to this thesis, the substance-over-relation epistemology also leads to the assumption that people can be known objectively (White, 2001).

Post-structuralism, on the other hand, challenges the epistemological assumption of objective knowledge, positing that things can only be known as they appear to be; that is to say, the phenomenon that is grasped is a construction of the mind (Shults, 2003). Social constructionism refines this “constructions of the mind” thesis, positing that language is the basis for thought (Burr, 1995). The thesis that knowledge is constructed through language points to a far greater role for...
language than merely reporting facts; it contends that language actually constructs the things people come to believe to be true (White, 2007).

All our perceived “truths” are, in the very first instance, constructed “truths.” In a sense they are “true,” but only in the sense that Richard Rorty suggests we use the word—namely, to honor those distinctions about which a more or less enduring consensus has formed within a community of discourse. (Parry & Doan, 1994, p. 16)

This social constructionist emphasis on language, as the medium through which meaning is constructed, is a central feature of the philosophy that underpins narrative therapy. Narrative therapy provides a set of conversational practices designed to harness the constructive power of language, so that people can overcome problematic realities and construct alternatives.

**Language: A revisionist view.** This constructed-through-language view of meaning suggests that, rather than being fixed, meanings are local expressions and always contestable. In other words, versions of what is considered to be true are open to revision (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This language-based and revisionist stance to meaning can be applied to meaning associated with personal identity. If the conclusions a person comes to hold about her identity represent socially constructed meaning, rather than meaning associated with fixed psychological states, then it stands to reason that identity conclusions can be modified through the judicious use of language. Burr (1995) reasoned: “if language is indeed the place where identities are built, maintained and challenged, then this also means that language is the crucible of change, both personal and social” (p. 56). This leads to the suggestion that personal identity is “constantly being sought after, contested, validated, maintained... through the use of language” (Burr, p. 46).

The social constructionist view that the development of personal identity is a collaborative exercise is well supported (Gergen, 1994, 2006; Sampson, 1993; Shotter, 1993a). Viewing language as a crucible of identity construction and change, introduces the notion that far from language being a benign force, it is, as Foucault (1980b) put it, an instrument of power.

**Power: Foucault’s view.** As an historian of systems of thought, the Frenchman Michel Foucault proposed an alternative view of power to the modern conception. A modern—as opposed to post-modern—understanding conceives of power existing at a defined centre, a force that is exercised hierarchically by those who are considered to have control of it. Foucault argued that following the demise of monarchical regimes of power, “modern-power” became the dominant Western system of achieving social control. White devoted a good amount of time to considering the therapeutic implications of Foucault’s (1988/89, 1991, 2002) social constructionist conception of power (White & Epston, 1990). For example, White (2002) discussed his experience of the Foucauldian-inspired recognition that modern power works to “oppress, repress, limit, prohibit,
impose, and to coerce” (p. 36). Based on this, White contended that the problems people struggle with often result from the operation of the modern form of power, upon and through people’s lives and experiences. “Modern-power”, he argued, “recruits people’s active participation in the fashioning of their own lives, their relationships, and their identities, according to the constructed norms of culture – we are both a consequence of this power, and a vehicle for it” (p. 36).

Foucault and White sought to draw attention to the many ways people’s lives and relationships have unwittingly become instruments of the web of “modern-power”. Within his analysis of the rise to dominance of “modern-power”, it appears that the operation of power results from the self and relationship-forming practices inherent in the local level of culture—church, medicine, school, and families for example. Foucault went as far as contending that the technologies of “modern-power” are particularly refined within the academic disciplines including criminology, medicine/psychiatry, psychology, and social work. Here power relations associated with the normalising judgements of each discipline actually engage people in the construction of their lives and identities, according to the norms inherent within these disciplines. In other words, “modern-power” sets up versions of “normal”, and recruits people to unwittingly conform to these, and professionals can—also innocently—support this recruitment. White (2002) argued that there is a close correlation between the rise of the phenomenon of personal failure, and a distinctly modern version of power that systemises control through normalising judgements. Therapy, then, based on a social constructionist critique of modern power can be seen to have a role to play in drawing attention to the coercive action of systems of power in people’s lives. Through exposing these operations of power, therapy can potentially open possibilities for other “norms” to be adopted that are more in keeping with a person’s hopes and cherished values.

White (2002) wrote of experiencing “special joy” when, with the aid of Foucault’s insights, he was first able to expose the insidious nature of power in the lives of people and their families.

This joy was due in part to his ability to unsettle what is taken-for-granted and routinely accepted, and to render the familiar newly strange and exotic... I found this opened up new avenues of inquiry into the context of many of the problems and predicaments for which people routinely seek therapy. (p. 36)

White’s therapeutic aim is to make available an alternate vision of power that lurks around the edges of traditional operations of power. This is power that cannot be reduced to law or right, it is not something substantial, nor can it be owned or exchanged (Foucault, 1998). It is power that is relational and resides in language; it only exists if it is exercised (Foucault, 2000b). This kind of power that resides in linguistic action is directed onto people’s behaviour, and not onto people directly (Foucault, 2000a). It operates as a web of micro-powers that constantly shift around
relations, it is everywhere, “not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault, 1998, p. 93). Furthermore, dominating manifestations of power are accounted for through the idea of repetition. Through repetition people tend to habitually enact and follow one another in what they say and do, and this aligns the linguistic exercising of micro-power.

Foucault (1988a) referred to having taken up a stance within his academic work on behalf of freedom from institutional power that seeks to construct us without consent:

My role - and that is too emphatic a word - is to show people that they are much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes which have been built up at a certain moment during history, and that this so-called evidence can be criticized and destroyed. To change something in the minds of people - that’s the role of an intellectual. (p. 10)

The therapeutic application of this theorisation of power hinges on the notion that the procurement of personal freedom has to do with being able to move out of the stream of aligned micro-power, and thus gain different perspectives on historically developed themes of meaning. This leads to the conclusion that people are empowered as they are able to exercise choice, or agency, to participate in the conversations that shape their lives. While White and Epston apprehended Foucault’s critique of modern power for the political purpose of assisting people to exercise personal agency, others have also utilised post-structuralist developments in the theory of language, power, and subjectivity to serve other allied political agenda, including feminist interests. Weedon (1987) argued that the developments in post-structuralism appear capable of taking difference, including class, racism and heterosexism, into account. She further argued that they are capable of explaining the patriarchal structures in which people live and the positioning of men and women within them.

4.3 Discourse, subjectivity, and agency

Having introduced narrative and social constructionist philosophies that broadly shape narrative therapy, I move to introduce three related theories of practice.

**Discourse.** I referred above to White’s joy at being able to disturb taken-for-granted assumptions that shape people’s lives. In order to understand the way in which White and Epston translate this into therapy, it is necessary to look to the way the word “discourse” is used in the narrative therapeutic context. While there are a number of uses of the term “discourse”, the narrative therapeutic custom follows the French philosophical tradition. Here language is understood in a performative sense, by which I mean that it associated with speech-act theory where the term *discourse* refers to what people are trying to achieve through talking or writing, rather than the words themselves (Foucault, 1972a). Parker’s (1992) performative definition of discourse is:
“[A] system of statements which constructs an object” (p. 5). Burr’s (1995) definition is also helpful: “a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements, and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events” (p. 48). These descriptions imply that surrounding any object, event, or person, there will be a variety of different discourses that assign meaning to them. Depending on each particular discourse, a different representation will be suggested. This is a discourse-laden view of language. It suggests that each piece of text, whether this be written, oral, or active, can be analysed to discern the discourses that are present within it, and so the different meanings that these suggest.

I previously argued that personal identity is constructed within the linguistic interactions between people, and then introduced the Foucauldian notion that power does not reside in people, but in language that is evoked and directed towards people’s behaviour in moments of speech. The point I am making now is that the utterances that evoke behaviour-directed power are not random, but guided by discourses; assumptions about how things ought to be. Put differently, because speaking is always discursive and thus power-laden, it evokes local “norms” against which those involved construct a sense of how they conform, or do not conform. Furthermore, these discourses, forces of micro-power, direct people towards the “right” way to act, and understand themselves in relation to action. Thus, personal identity is thought to be constructed linguistically and discursively, both in ways that are recognised and unrecognised, and chosen and not chosen.

**Subjectivity.** I have been referring to the discursive power of language to guide people towards particular meaning about events and personal actions. It is important to recognise, here, that discursive power does not influence people evenly. Its influence is governed by the manner in which a person is “subject” to the discourses in question. Furthermore, a person will inevitably be “subject” to several—often contradictory—discourses simultaneously. From this it can be deduced that the meaning a person makes will depend on both the discourses that are present within a conversational context, and the way in which she is positioned with regard to these. If, for example, a person participates in conversations that is shaped by a discourse that “God is male”, and she refers to God as female, she will experience effects from doing so. Whether she experiences disempowerment, criticism, or subtle and not so subtle marginalisation, will depend on the way in which she is “positioned”. White (2002) drew on these insights to address experiences of personal failure. Following Foucault, he assumed that experiencing one’s self as a failure does not originate inside the person, but from social interactions. Narrative therapy is predicated on the assumption that language, sign and discourse are to people what water is to fish. People inescapably “swim in”, and make meaning of their lives through, the medium of language (Burr, 1995).
From all that I have said so far, it may seem that the social construction of identity is inevitably a random affair, and as such outside a person’s potential influence. However, the aforementioned notion of agency provides a conception of how a person can exert influence. The development of personal agency is the domain of the narrative therapist (Drewery & McKenzie, 1999).

**Agency.** Within humanist theory, agency, or chosen action, is thought to be directly related the person’s essential self; that is, to her capacities and incapacities, aptitude, personality, etc. From this perspective, questioning why a person might exercise agency in a particular way appears to be rather straightforward in that it reflects something of the person’s essential psychological self. I say “appears to be straightforward” because, as Davies (1991) argued, this theorisation of agency may not be as sustainable as its popular acceptance suggests. Within the social constructionist thesis, where the self is conceived of in linguistic term, agency is explained in a very different manner:

In this model our existence as persons has no fundamental essence; we can only ever speak ourselves or be spoken into existence within the terms of available discourses. We are thus multiple rather than unitary beings and our patterns of desire that we took to be fundamental indicators of our essential selves (such as the desire for freedom or autonomy or for moral rightness) signify little more than the discourses, and the subject positions made available within them, to which we may have access. (Davies, 1991, p. 42)

On the basis of this spoken-into-existence view of the self, agency is understood more in terms of “compelled choices” rather than free choice. This is because the self exists within, and not beyond, discourse. Being positioned within a specific discourse makes its choice the only one available. Similarly, wanting a certain action reflects the self-in-discourse, and not something apart from the discourse. Put differently, a person is constituted as a subject through her position within that discourse to desire that course of action. Davies (1991) referred to being positioned in a discourse in this way as “subjectification”. Whether a particular action is considered agentic or not rests on whether a person is subject to a particular discourse when the act in question takes place. This implies that in order to act agentically a person must be positioned in such a discursive way—subjectified—so as to be influenced by the discourse to want what it offers. Based on this sequence of reasoning, Davies concluded that because the self is formed by discourse the notion of agency is “fundamentally illusionary” (p. 46). This being the case, where, without lapsing into structuralism, might we go to further explain agency?

In order to theorise a social rationale for agency without retreating to the notion of an essential self as determinant of choice or into social determinism, Davies (1991) looked beyond the idea that a person is only subject to one discourse at a time and towards the concept of “multiple
subjectivity”. Through the concept of “multiple subjectivity” she sought to provide a plausible explanation for how a person can choose a course of action that might contradict any one discourse’s subjectification. Here the notion of conversation as constitutive is brought together with the notion of multiple subjectivity, in an attempt to develop a non-illusionary view of agency:

The speaking/writing subject [person] can move within and between discourses, can see precisely how they subject her, can use the terms of one discourse to counteract, modify, refuse or go beyond the other, both in terms of her own experienced subjectivity and in the way in which she chooses to speak in relation to the subjectivities of others. (Davies, 1991, p. 46)

A person might, for example, be simultaneously positioned within a discourse about mothering that has her concluding that she is a successful mother, while at the same time not measuring up to the criteria of a discourse about “always being prepared as a teacher”. It may also be that she is subject to a discourse about success as a partner having something to do with vitality and attractiveness. These often-contradictory multiple subjectivities provide a person with the potential to take up different subjectivities, and to draw different conclusions about herself from doing so. How a person chooses within contradictory elements of subjectivities is partly controlled by the person’s thinking and choosing, partly by others’ speaking, and partly by the desire that each discourse bestows. In other words, “[t]he choices that the individual makes may be based on rational analysis, but desire may subvert rationality” (Davies, 1991, p. 43).

From this social constructionist perspective, desire is considered to reside in discourse, not psychological structure. We might say, therefore, that the availability of desire is dependent on specific subjectivities. Through the introduction of this theorisation of discursive desire it is apparent that the desire associated with one discursive subjectivity can be used to contradict the desire associated with another, thus moving the exercise of agency from illusion to actuality. Inferred in this “multiple subjectivity” theorisation of agency is the suggestion that personal uniqueness develops as agency is exercised in and between the competing calls from multiple discourses. This social and agentic view of agency amounts, for social constructionists, to a description of the self. It is a decentred conception of the self, not one centred on any one discursive subjectivity, but on a unique combination of contradiction and discontinuity between discourses. Having now offered this multiple-subjectivity—de-centred—theorisation of the agentic self, how is personal continuity accounted for?

Agency as authorship. The concept of authorship goes some way towards providing narrative therapy’s theorisation of personal continuity. Inherent in the suggestion that a person uses the terms of one discourse to counteract another, is the suggestion that authorship is being
exercised. Davies (1991) argued that people take up “the act of authorship, of speaking and writing in ways that are disruptive of current discourses, that invert, invent and break old bonds, that create new subject positions that do not take their meaning from... the incumbent” (p. 50). This conception of authorship is not one in which independent knowledge is claimed and enforced, but rather one in which a speaker mobilises existing discourses in order to break old patterns. Emphasised within this understanding of agency-as-authorship is the manner in which a person is constituted through exercising the always costly right to speak and be heard within a particular subject position. The right to speak and be heard is at a cost because, as Martin and Mohanty (1986) argued:

> [t]here is an irreconcilable tension between the search for a secure place from which to speak, within which to act, and the awareness of the price at which secure places are bought, the awareness of the exclusions, and denials, the blindness’s on which they are predicted. (p. 206)

It follows that if a person is unable to participate in the speech that constitutes her, she will be constituted through the speech of others. Taking this political view of linguistic participation suggests that personal uniqueness will only become a reality if a person is offered the freedom to speak in ways the dominating discourses do not predict (Sampson, 1993).

It is in the face of these rather sobering insights that Davies (1991) advocated for people to speak and therefore make moral commitments that align with their chosen communities, ones that will inevitably arouse some level of conflict. Exercising authorship offers the possibility of combining previously unrelated discourses. This is the overall aim of narrative therapist, to collaborate in the development of author agents who use language to author new identities and truths.

To this point in the discussion I have introduced the key philosophical and anthropological themes, including narrativity, language, power, discourse, subjectivity, and author-agency. Before moving to discuss the practices of narrative therapy in more detail, I will consider embodied knowledge and dialogism. While neither of these are strongly represented within narrative therapy, they are current advances associated with narrative and social constructionist thinking. They are relevant to this discussion about narrative therapy because they represent therapeutic advances that will be invited by trinitarian thinking in the later discussion.

### 4.4 Narrative therapy and embodiment

It will now be apparent narrative therapy relies on a social theorisation of people. As we will see, while trinitarian thinking affirms important aspects of the social constructionist and narrative theorisations of people, it also highlights a neglect of relationality and embodied individuality.
Although social constructionist thinking offers the concept of author-agency to explain personal continuity it does not appear to adequately explain the sense of personal continuity people experience over time. Nor does it adequately explain the resistance people often experience towards change. In response to these perceived limitations, Davies (1991) extended the social thesis through the concept of a form of socially constructed “essential self”. Far from being an essential self that resides within a person and then influences linguistic process, this social self is thought to develop through linguistic processes, and only subsequently becomes imprinted into a person’s body in a way that later influences choice.

Butler (1990) also referred to the social construction of a so called “essential self”. She meant by this that a person’s consistent speaking from positions within frequently used discourse leads to the appearance that the resulting behaviour is an expression of essential aspect of the person. She further suggested that commonality between dominant discourses, such as those associated with the construction of gender, lead to the appearance that gender represents a “natural” feature of the person. Furthermore, socially available storylines that link aspects of a person’s existence results in continuity of action. These first three social processes are all represented within the narrative therapeutic literature. The next process, however, signifies an advancement of the traditional narrative therapeutic literature. The inscribing upon one’s body of the effects of the discursive subjectivities and storylines, while not new to therapeutic literature in general, does signify an advance in narrative therapeutic understanding (Grosz, 1990).

The concept of bodily inscription implies that personal identity is produced in such a way that prescribed meanings are already partly determined by those refusing to negotiate the terms for moving forward in conversation. For example, a parent’s practice of speaking on behalf of a child may, as well as positioning the child with limited responses, inscribe something of the patterned responses onto the child’s body, which may then predispose the child to respond in ways other than what later discursive positioning might predict.

These social accounts of embodiment, according to Cromby (2004), are exceptions in that many social constructionists disregard the theorisation of subjectivity altogether. However, Burr (2003) contended that social constructionism pays insufficient attention to subjectivity in general, and embodiment in particular. She argued that this is unfortunate because the body’s meaningfulness extends beyond social construction through discourse, to areas of embodied knowledge that are difficult to translate into thought and language, such as music, dance, and sexual intimacy.

Davies’ (1991) theorisation of subjectivity through the hermeneutic of bodily inscription, then, is not typical of social constructionism, and is not formally represented in the traditional...
narrative therapeutic literature at all. This leads to the conclusion that not only does narrative therapy differ from Davies’ work, it is vastly different than the way embodiment is treated within modernist psychology (Bardour, 2011; Brown, Weber, & Ali, 2008; da Costa, Nelson, Rudas, & Guterman, 2007; Shachar, 2010).

While not directly related to the theorisation of traditional narrative therapeutic practice, Sampson (2008) argued for a general shift in social constructionist thinking towards engaging with a politics of embodiment, from the current situation that he referred to as representing dis-embodied (Sampson, 1998). Similarly, Shotter (1993a, 1993b, 2012a, 2012b) drew on, amongst others, Wittgenstein (1953) to highlight embodied intuition, a form of knowledge he referred to as knowledge-of-the-third-kind, or knowing-from-within. Shotter (2012b) specifically linked embodied intuition to a stance he referred to as participatory. He argued that while past studies of people tend to focus on behaviour and action as if they are part of a dead mechanical world, a third precursor way of knowing—a background one—involves such things as spontaneity, relationally-responsiveness, and responsive bodily activity. Shotter posited that it is within this background world of momentary and contingent existence that activity actually exists, and that within this kind of contingent existence, bodily related activities take place that are strange and special. Shotter also drew on Wittgenstein’s (1953) crucial distinction between dead mechanical knowing, associated with thought and action, and living knowledge. The introduction of the living embodied nature of knowledge into the conversation, opens the social constructionist conception of the person beyond an arena of analysing discourse and subjectivity, towards a third realm of dialogically structured relations. This is relevant in that, as I will argue later, trinitarian thinking also invites a consideration of this realm.

As I have made plain, the discussion about a social constructionist conception of agentic action has now advanced beyond Foucault’s theorisation of discourse and power, drawing not only on Davies and Butler, but also on Sampson, Gergen, Shotter, and others. These developments have partly addressed limitations associated with White and Epston’s traditional theorisation of subjectivity, and at least opened narrative therapy to new possibilities. I have taken the discussion to this level of detail, both to highlight important philosophical developments associated with narrative therapeutic practice, and provide a place from which to engage with the trinitarian conceptualisation of personal subjectivity that posits a dynamic reciprocity between embodied individuality, dialogic relations and the social construction of identity (Hui, 2002; McFadyen, 1990).

**Dialogical communication.** Inherent in Sampson’s and Shotter’s call to consider the role of dialogue alongside discourse in the formation of personal subjectivity, lies a critique of the extreme social constructionist dismissal of any reality beyond discourse. Voloshinov (1929/1986, 1987) and
Bakhtin’s (1981, 1984, 1993) seminal voices articulated the manner in which the dialogic thesis contends for a conception of joint action. By this I mean that dialogism posits that each act of communication is defined by its relationship with past, present, and future instances. For example, a second person responds to the first in a way that cannot be wholly accounted for individually, but is partly shaped by the first activity. This is the notion that what I do is overall related to what we are doing (Shotter, 2012b). Dialogue, then, is concerned with social exchange, as well as the generation of meaning through it. By contrast, monologic communication denies the relational constitution of meaning. We might say, therefore, that because traditional narrative therapeutic practice overlooks the relational—joint-action orientated—component of social interaction, it represents a more monologic than dialogic view of communication.

In contrast to monologic responses, dialogic responses are not just cognitive responses, but include bodily responses such as influences from vision, touch, hearing, taste, and smell, as well as our responses to those of others. This complex mixture of responses implies even less specificity than the discourse and subjectivity analysis of agency suggested above. Wittgenstein (1953) referred to this lack of specificity as “partially-this-partially-that”, and the “always unfinished character of our socially created realities” (p. 227).

Dialogue, then, is a relational and collaborative activity, and while dialogue is influenced by discourse and positioning, its prime focus is on the relationship between the participants. “Dialogue invites and requires of its participants a sense of mutuality, including genuine respect and sincere interest regarding the other” (Anderson, 2007a, p. 34). This definition of dialogue points to an ethical component that as well as being present in Sampson’s (2003, 2008) work, also typifies the contributions of Bakhtin (1981, 1986) and Levinas (1981, 1988, 1993, 1998, 1999). Unless relationality is shaped dialogically it only offers the illusion of shalom, and in spite of what it might claim, communication may take place at the expense of the other. Sampson (2003) advanced the Jewish metaphor of unconditional kindness to strangers as an ethical plot for dialogue.

While White and Epston’s approach to narrative therapy does not represent the place of embodiment and dialogue in their social theorisation of people, they clearly advocate for narrative practice to be undertaken in a dialogic environment of respect. While respect is a central characteristic of dialogue, it is not easy to offer this in practice without careful attention to what Drewery (2005) referred to as the micro-politics of professional conversation. In other words, for therapeutic conversation to be dialogic it must involve the capacity to reflect on the presence of, and actions associated with, discourse, as well as ethical intent. Drewery argued for more attention to be given to the micro-politics of professional conversation in the hope that people seeking counselling
might experience opportunities to speak in ways that constitute their lives in accord with their own preferences, rather than those of others.

4.5 Key practices
Put most simply, narrative therapy maps the discursive formation and effects of problems in people’s lives, considers their responses to these problems, and seeks to “redevelop subordinate storylines” based on freely chosen ethics for living and “precious life-themes” (White, 2007, p. 128). In order to achieve these aims it is vital that the therapist adopts an appropriate stance in relation to the discursive basis of knowledge, and the use of language in the formation of identity.

Therapist positioning. Because narrative therapy considers human activity to take place within an environment of understanding created through conversation, the way conversation is used in therapy is vital (Drewery, 2005). The therapist uses conversation to open space for the identification and reconsideration of meanings associated with the client’s life, and not to attempt to bring about changes according to some pre-existing formula. The ability to structure this kind of conversation requires the therapist to adopt a “not-knowing” stance in which curiosity is communicated, and where the therapist’s ideas about the kinds of change a person might “best” pursue are put aside (Anderson, 2005). Bird (2000) argued that rather than ignoring therapist knowledge she attempts to inhabit the boundary between knowing and not knowing. The aim of this is to create a conversational space where a person can experience the freedom to live free from obligation. When this aim is considered from the perspective of hermeneutical theory it is apparent that this kind of conversational freedom is critical to the theological creation of meaning (Vanhoozer, 1998).

The not-knowing style of engagement with a person’s socially constructed identity can be thought of as an engagement with the newness of the text of the person’s life; much in the same way as a written text is hermeneutically constructed. Gadamer (1975) put it like this:

A person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something. That is why a hermeneutically trained mind must be, from the start, sensitive to the text’s quality of newness. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither ‘neutrality’ in the matter of the object nor the extinction of one’s self, but the conscious assimilation of one’s own bias, so that the text may present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one’s foremeanings. (p. 238)

This all infers that the aim of client and therapist mutuality is the creation of shared meaning, not conformity with predetermined understandings about the kinds of change that might or might not be desirable. The overall therapeutic aim of this hermeneutical style of narrative therapeutic
conversation is to facilitate the strengthening of agency so that a person’s identity might be liberated from constricting descriptions, and new narratives can be developed. Broadly, then, the narrative therapeutic process spans two phases: naming and mapping the effects of problem-saturated stories, and the conversation construction of preferred identity stories. These phases involve externalising conversation, deconstructive questioning, and the naming of a problematic and preferred plots and their effects.

**Externalising conversation.** Problems are thought to develop when people take meanings that result from discursive action to themselves and assume they represent, not socially constructed reality, but fixed “truths” about their lives and relationships. Through this process of internalisation, problems are considered to become tethered to people, in the form of narrow identity descriptions. Contrary to this internalised view, Anderson (2003) argued that:

> Problems are not believed to reside within the person, the family, or the larger system. Each problem is conceived as a unique set of events or experiences that has meaning only in the context of the social exchange in which it happened. (p. 74)

Externalising conversation, then, is the art of opposing internalised and totalising ways of speaking, through shifting problems back into their social contexts.

White (1991) contended that by relating to a person’s identity, not as an essential thing residing within the person but as a social construction, the therapeutic process separates qualities and problems from persons. Hence the maxim the problem is the problem, the person is not the problem (White, 1989). The rationale for this is that people can most easily consider the effects of problem-saturated stories through the process of externalisation. Put differently, externalised conversation assists a person to consider her relationship with problems, through objectifying the problem rather than herself. It is hoped that through the process of externalising a problem, it will be changed from being viewed as *the* truth about a person’s identity, to *a* truth about a person’s discursively made up life. Through recognising that a problem only represents one of many possible discursively orientated identities, new options for its successful resolution become available (Madigan, 1992).

White (2007) proposed that the therapist is best to adopt a stance of an investigative reporter in order to “expose corruption associated with abuse of power and privilege” (p. 27). Within this investigative work careful attention is paid to client metaphors that are borrowed from specific discourses. In this way specific understanding of life and identity are invoked, and the totalisation of problems is avoided on the basis that totalising inevitably obscures aspects of the client’s life, including what she gives value to.
**Questioning: Deconstructive and relative influence.** The aim of deconstructive listening is not to change a person’s story; rather to understand the discourses that led to its particular development. Deconstructive listening is not a passive stance. It actively engages in shifting backwards and forwards from deconstructive listening to deconstructive questioning, so that entrenched patterns of injustice are exposed (Freedman & Combs, 1996) through revealing that the stories people tell about themselves are not essential features of a person’s life, but have in fact been constructed. It also seeks to point up how this came about, and to offer the teller a different place to view the story from and potentially protest it. As White (1991) argued:

> According to my rather loose definition, deconstruction has to do with procedures that subvert taken-for-granted realities and practices: those so-called “truths” that are split off from the conditions and the context of their production; those disembodied ways of speaking that hide their biases and prejudices; and those familiar practices of self and of relationship that are subjugating of person’s lives. (p. 27)

A key assumption behind this approach is that dominant stories subjugate people’s lives, and that deconstruction reveals this, and opens space for the exercise of agency. Because, as White (1991) argued, deconstruction is de-masking “truths”. It follows that responsibility rests with the narrative therapist to undertake this work so that the truths can be examined.

The narrative therapist aims to subvert taken-for-granted realities, and maps the problem’s influence on the client’s life and relationships, and the client’s influence on the problem (White, 1988a). As well as using externalised language, the use of relative-influence questions assists a person to shift from assuming that she is the problem, to recognising that she, and perhaps her family, has a relationship with the problem (White, 1988a). When problems are viewed in this way, it is consistent to search for aspects of the client’s life that have been occluded by the problem story, including ones that contradict the problem’s version. The are unique outcomes (White, 1988a), are “experiences that would not have been predicted by the plot of the problem-saturated narrative” (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 67). Unique outcomes are used as the basis for recognising that people’s lives are made up by many more stories that problems would have people think.

*Story development.* As stated above, narrative therapy is ultimately concerned with new story development. The associated narrative and social constructionist philosophies suggest that a person’s future is opened and closed according to the storied construction of her understanding. When the effects of a problem-saturated story on the client’s life and relationships have been revealed, and some unique outcomes identified, these can be taken into the development of an identity story that fits with the client’s hopes and values, rather than with the problem.
White (1991) argued that there are always events in a person’s life that contradict the problem-saturated narrative’s account. Literary theory suggests that narrative involves at least three events that are connected across time according to a plot. Given this, the conversational work of re-authoring a preferred narrative can begin when at least three unique outcomes and a preferred discursive plot have been identified. The new and preferred story is thickened through developing a history for the present unique outcomes and extending the story into the future. As people disengage more of their lives from the grip of the problem-saturated story, they are freer to envision a future that they prefer (Freedman & Combs, 1996). In other words, as the grip of a problem-saturated story is released, alternative knowledge and meaning begins to prosper.

**Developing communities of concern.** White (1988a) reminded us that “[a]s self is a performed self, the survival of alternative knowledges is enhanced if the new ideas and meanings that they bring forth are put into circulation” (p. 10). While the initial site for the conversational creation of preferred stories is between the therapist and client, it is not enough to assume that this developmental work will sustain the new story in everyday community. The various discourses that guided the client’s community conversations that authored the problem-saturated identity narratives in the first place, may easily remain undisturbed by the therapeutic conversation. Therefore, if a new narrative is to be sustained outside the therapeutic environment, a community needs to be recruited to continue the work.

Narrative therapy offers a number of practices designed to assist the spread of news about a client’s successful defence against a problem. As preferred stories are shared and circulate in a select community, the participants of this sub-culture construct each other according to the values and ideas of the preferred stories. Foucault (1980, p. 81) referred to this process as the “insurrection of subjugated knowledges” within a community of concern. The intentional development of a sub-culture of concern in which the new identity-creation project can prosper is vital. There is a burgeoning range of practices designed to recruit communities of concern to audience new stories. Once a sympathetic audience has been identified, circulating-the-story practices might include inviting letters from the audience to comment on the new-story developments in the client’s life, inviting members of a community of concern to audience a therapy session through an “outsider-witness” process (Walther & Fox, 2012), publishing certificates in honour of problem-beating achievements, and conducting a “definitional ceremony” (Speedy, 2004) in which an identity development conversation is initiated.

**Therapeutic maps.** Narrative therapy has developed in response to many practice settings that include working with: anorexia nervosa (Maisel et al., 2004), ADHD (Nylund, 2000), schizophrenia (Vaskinn et al., 2011), and Australian Indigenous communities (Bacon, 2007). All of
these developments, and many more, can be traced to the primary maps of practice. White (2007) offered a comprehensive view of this “map” aproach to structured practice:

My lifelong fascination for maps has led me to look at them as a metaphor for my work with people who consult with me about a range of concerns, dilemmas, and problems... I know that the adventures to be had on these journeys are not about the conformation of what is already known, but about expeditions into what is possible for people to know about their lives. (p. 4)

These maps of narrative practice are not to be mistaken for the actual territory of people’s lives, nor are therapeutic conversations to be ordered by the maps into predetermined responses. Instead, the maps are to be utilised to shape therapeutic enquiry on behalf of the hope that people will find themselves exploring neglected and forsaken areas of their lives with curiosity and fascination. Having introduced the main narrative therapeutic practices, it is important to recall the point I made in the introduction about therapist’s philosophical orientation being more influential of good practice than conformity to a set of practices.

4.6 Summary

The purpose of this chapter has been to engage with the philosophies and theories of practice of narrative therapy so that it can be understood in sufficient detail to now consider it from the perspective of a trinitarian theological anthropology. As I outlined, narrative therapy is a respectful and non-blaming approach to therapy and community work. Its social constructionist and narrative philosophical base combine to contend for a view of personal identity socially achieved and lived out in narrative form.

A central aim of narrative therapy is to provide people with the opportunity to choose to live according to ethics and values they have chosen rather than inherited. Narratives bring order to fragments of experience through linking current experiences with past and future according to shared meaning. The therapeutic process involves searching for left-out stories about past experiences and future hopes, as underground channels of power that can lead to change. Rather than attempting to diagnose people on the basis of truthfulness, narrative therapy is interested in dialogue about life-likeness, and in providing people with webs of meaning and connectedness to other people and their cherished hopes and values.

Narrative therapy’s close association with social constructionism infers an emphasis on language as the agent of phenomenological construction. Drawing on Foucault’s insights into culture, language, and discourse, White and Epston developed narrative therapy to harness the
constructive power of language, and to direct it towards overcoming problems and developing preferred personal identity stories.

By way of introducing the next chapter, I make these comments. I chose narrative therapy for the basis of this study because it shares with trinitarian theology a social ontology and an interest in structuring life around shared meaning. Narrative therapy is unique in the current therapeutic scene in that it is structured around the assumption that social relationships form the primary way of knowing and being. Because of this narrative therapy offers a sound set of considerations to be correlated with trinitarian thinking.

I have divided the next three chapters into discussion based on six themes. Each themed section outlines an aspect of narrative therapeutic practice and associated theorisation, reflects on this from a trinitarian perspective, and then suggests ways in which narrative practice might be further theorised in concert with the theological principles provided.
Chapter five: Narrative therapy and therapeutic aims

To place this discussion in context, let us recall that my overall interest is the development of counselling philosophy and theory of practice, through reflecting on narrative therapy from a theological perspective. The secondary aim is to consider what contributions narrative therapy might make to communities engaged in the trinitarian social project. The discussion that follows spans six key aspects of narrative therapeutic theory and practice, and moves toward a central consideration of the person in narrative therapy. The way personal wellbeing is understood is particularly relevant because of the pivotal role it performs in the formulation of therapeutic goals.

Narrative therapy’s particular view of people is centred on social subjectivity, and with this in mind the work attempts to liberate people from oppressive social structures that are thought to restrict choice and define identity. While this approach represents an innovative contribution to the field of psychotherapy, in that it emphasises social and narrative formation of identity, it can be seen as limited in that it overlooks relations and individual embodiment (Guilfoyle, 2014; J. McLeod, 1997).

As discussed in the previous chapter, White and Epston drew particularly from Foucault’s ideas about truth and power, Bruner’s approach to deconstruction, and Butler’s (1989, 1990) and Davies’ (1991) insights into the interplay between language and personal agency. As these theories go, credit for personal desire and the ability to choose is given to social relations and language. While this social focus may seem odd when modern psychology typically has us looking to the intra-personal for understanding human action, it is not too far from trinitarian thinking.

When narrative therapy is considered in the light of the trinitarian social project, both strengths and shortcomings are revealed. An obvious strength is that narrative therapy’s view of people aligns with some significant features of the social trinitarian understanding of God. However, trinitarian thinking also represents an ethically shaped relational life along with an affirmation of embodied individuality, both of which are viewed very differently by narrative therapy. I conclude, along with Guilfoyle (2014), that the social constructionist conception of an “empty” and “decentred self” is almost incapable of making the choices associated with wellbeing that narrative therapy is orientated towards. From this perspective, narrative therapy appears limited; and therefore inadequate as a comprehensive therapeutic expression of the trinitarian analogy of wellbeing. Trinitarian theology is particularly helpful as a conversation partner, because its holistic ethical conception of human wellbeing is drawn from a well-known set of historical narratives. These ethics, and the narratives they are associated with, provide a well-established
place from which to critique narrative therapy and identify possible developments for believers and non-believers alike.

5.1 Subjectivity
What this points to in relation to the perspective of trinitarian theology is that specific developments of narrative therapy’s language-based view of subjectivity are invited. Additionally, potential contributions that narrative therapy might make to communities engaged in the trinitarian social project may be identified. While the narrative vision of wellbeing presented within trinitarian thinking affirms narrative therapy’s potent deconstructive practice—one that ably identifies the social dynamics involved in personal formation and deformation—it falls short of representing a reconstructive vision for development. The trinitarian vision of relational participation addresses this lack through contending that humans are more than social constructions. They are also individuals in relation, who flourish when engaged in communities that are characterised by ethical practices such as other-centred love.

In order to consider the narrative therapeutic approach to counselling in detail, the following discussion is arranged across three chapters. First, this current chapter four evaluates narrative therapy’s view of hope, and the shape of its therapeutic relationship. Chapter five explores the social constructionist and narrative formation of knowledge and identity, the way narrative therapy appears to encourage the deconstruction of truth claims associated with meta-narratives, and relational ethics. Finally, chapter six addresses the complex issue of the person in narrative therapy.

As I have established, trinitarian theology unites knowledge of God and understanding people in a story of human flourishing. Something of this vision for human flourishing is represented by the concept of therapy. The Oxford English Dictionary (2010) relates the common usage of the word “therapy” to the “healing of disease” and “health”. It is therefore broadly appropriate to speak of the trinitarian vision for personal and social transformation in terms of “therapy”, because of its fundamental concern for health and wellbeing. While many approaches to talk therapy resonate with different aspects of the trinitarian vision of human wellbeing, narrative therapy shares a specific interest in the social freedom to participate appropriately in social arrangements, on the basis that these actually constitute people’s lives. Narrative therapy’s hope is for people to enjoy the freedom to act in accord with their preferred hopes for their lives and relationships, or in other words their ethical intentions. It is also concerned that people’s identities are narrated in accord with these hopes and intentions. In order to discuss this possible correlation, it is necessary to consider the role ethical intentions play in the narrative structuring of human life.
5.2 Engaging human intentions.

The narrativity thesis suggests that people’s ethical engagement with one another, those that accord with triune love and others, is not conducted randomly. On the contrary, it can be understood in narrative form. I mean by this that actions can be understood in terms of a past and imagined future according to an ethical plot (J. Bruner, 1986). Put differently, people narrate their identities according to various ethical intentions. Some of these have therapeutic effect—in its true sense—and some do not. As an example of an ethical intention that has destructive rather than therapeutic effects, consider the actions of a man who perpetrates emotional abuse on his wife. While emotionally abusive actions are always inexcusable, his primary motivation may not be to perpetrate violence. Indeed, his motivation might be related to a family situation that appropriately concerns him, but renders him powerless. I suggest powerlessness because while the action is violent, the frustration out of which it comes may relate his inability to succeed in terms of the narrative of manhood that forms his identity as a husband and father. This may be an identity that requires him to be a strong and capable provider, and one that does not account for a lack of well-paid jobs and affordable housing. My point is that even when choices are not therapeutic, all identity narratives are structured around some sort of ethical hope. More than this, as people enact their intentions across time, they become defined by these narratives, and positioned by them in relation to one another. For example, the man in the example above may come to know himself as a failure as a husband and father and positioned as a threat by others and, as a result, become separated from his ethical hopes for his family.

White and Epston (1990) drew on Bruner’s insight into the way narratives structure human identity and understanding. As a psychologist and linguist, Bruner (1986) recognised that narratives are “not only structures of meaning but structures of power” (p. 144). Bruner’s innovation here is to reciprocally link social life and personal meaning within the narrative structure of human understanding. By this Brunner meant that both women and men’s self-understanding, and the community’s understanding of them, are mutually influential. White and Epston’s innovation is to recognise the therapeutic merit of this. They conclude that because self-understanding is narrated, and because formation of these narratives is both individually and socially influenced, it is not enough for therapy to focus on individual meaning. The social arrangements that shape these meanings also need to be engaged. This concern to view individuals and social context together, resonates, in a general sense, with the trinitarian concern to link individual wellbeing with the ethical life of love, and the stories of God’s engagement with humankind through the Son, and in the power of the Holy Spirit.
Narrative therapy adopts a social concern on behalf of wellbeing, and engages it at the point where intentions have gone awry. Because the narration of identity involves both personal intention and social power, understanding a person in this manner is complex. Bruner (1986) referred to the narrative dynamics involved in human choice in terms of the “vicissitudes of intention” (p. 17). He used the word “vicissitudes” because the effort to live in accord with personal intentions is an elusive challenge that sometimes results in experiences of flourishing, and sometimes in unwelcome and unpleasant outcomes. For example, a woman setting out to develop a new caring friendship might achieve her goal, but equally she may not. Rather than looking *inward* to psychological rationale—such as character traits and unconscious drives—to explain success or failure, Bruner invited an altogether different enquiry. This is an *outward* enquiry into identity stories, and the social dynamics that shape their formation and actions.

Based on the approach, represented by Bruner, narrative therapy looks outward to the central role that conversation plays in the formation and degradation of identity narratives. Along with MacIntyre (1981), I take conversation to mean both verbal interaction and human actions in general. Narrative therapy’s aim in attending to conversational activities is to assist people to re-narrate identity in ways that more accurately represent their ethical hopes. Bruner’s thesis implied that contrary to how it might at times seem, conversation is not transacted randomly, but rather according to the hopes and intentions people hold for their lives, which in themselves are socially shaped. These are the hopes and intentions that people hold for their lives and relationships. For example, a mother might intend to offer her children a particular kind of supportive family home life, or a man’s intention might be to remain in relationship with the mother of his children so they, the children, can experience a two-parent childhood. Both of these intentions, and the associated social power, are involved in the narration of their identities as parents.

To this point, I have referred to the narrative contention that personal identities are developed through the complex interaction between an individual’s intentions and social power associated with conversational context as if it is one amongst many adequate explanations. I now want to argue, along with a significant number of philosophers, psychologists, ethicists, and theologians, that narrative is a *fundamental* feature of human life in the temporal domain. French philosopher Ricoeur (1984) argued that time “becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative” (p. 3). In other words, the development of understanding is always time-bound. The meaning of any one event “is only characterized adequately when we know what the longer and longest-term intentions invoked are and how the shorter-term intentions are related to the longer” (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 208). This implies that the development of meaning always involves narrative. Meaning is given to life through narrating it on a continuum with a past, present,
and future, linked by a particular quality of intentionality. I will now move to consider these narrative explanations for the way people act in accord with ethical intentions from the trinitarian perspective.

**Ethically intending love.** Recognising the narrative structure of life, and the ethical intentions that guide their development, opens the possibility of making therapeutic choices about them. If, for instance, the man in my earlier example was able to recognise that his sense of himself as a husband and parent was linked to his inability to live up to his hope to provide a particular quality of care for his family, it might be opened up to revision. In his paper on addressing personal failure, White (2002) made the point that people are not always aware that identity is narrated in community, and that they are even prone to mistakenly assuming behaviour merely reflects fixed psychological realities.

Imagine, for example, that a man’s marriage relationship with his children’s mother comes under some sort of threat, and that one of his responses to the threat is periods of intense sadness. A psychological explanation for the depression might be that he is “depressed”, “suffering from low mood”, or even that he is “struggling with mental illness”. While all of these explanations may be helpful up to a point, a narrative therapeutic inquiry would be more interested in considering the social construction of the sadness experiences. By this I mean considering the way the man’s sense of himself as a husband and father has been narrated across time, the ethical intentions that have shaped these developments, and what his performance with regard to these things have talked him into believing about himself. This kind of enquiry might involve asking about his hopes for his relationships that the presence of sadness points to, rather than exploring sadness as if it is primarily a psychological problem. The narrative therapeutic assumption is that it is through first discovering a person’s ethical hopes that actions designed to achieve them can be disputed, and alternatives considered. Both Jenkins (1990) in his narrative work with perpetrators of family violence, and Reynolds (2012) in her work with survivors of sexual trauma, successfully take this narrative approach to therapy.

There is a striking parallel between this concern for the intentional ethical shaping of identity, and the trinitarian contention that humanity is invited to ethically engage in the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as a *social project*. Both are concerned for the intentional ethical shaping of personal and community identity. However, while trinitarian theology sketches a clear vision of healthy relating—through participating in the community’s story that positions as beloved and called to other-love—narrative therapy leaves the shaping of ethical intentions to the subjectivity of the individual person. While narrative therapy’s restraint from offering a specifically
shaped ethical life can be justified in terms of counselling’s commitment to pluralism, it can also be understood as a matter of differing therapeutic horizons.

5.3 Differing therapeutic horizons
To understand the various contours of the distinction—between aiming for lives shaped by trinitarian love and the postmodern commitment to ethical pluralism expressed as the granting of freedom to choose—it is useful to recognise that intentions are not merely orientated towards momentary hopes; they are future orientated. As I have already discussed, seemingly isolated experiences become woven into the fabric of stories across time, guiding past developments, and shaping future ones (White, 2007). Foucault (1994b) asked of future hope: “What is the kind of being to which we aspire when we behave in a moral way. For instance, shall we become pure, or immortal, or free, or masters of ourselves, and so on?” (p. 265). Viewed from this perspective, we can say that while trinitarian theology contends for a specific telos for personal and community development, the narrative therapist is restrained from representing any particular ethical telos for development. While this ethical stance may not attract attention from counsellors because it aligns with typical codes of ethical practice, it is not accurate to say that it does not represent a specific ethical vision. The recognition of this is confused by the shape of this ethical vision in that it leaves choice about the direction of a client’s development to the person herself. Put differently, confusion surrounds the way the narrative therapeutic telos is framed more in terms of what is to be moved away from, than aimed for. The narrative therapist aims to move the client-person away from such things as sectarianism, oppressive social systems, violence, injustice, and notions of normativity, so that she is free to choose the kind of being she truly wants to become (White, 2002).

This teleological difference, between the specific trinitarian horizon of participation in love, and the narrative therapeutic telos of freedom of choice, raises an important question about compatibility. Does narrative therapy’s resistance to normative telos necessarily imply resistance to the specifically shaped trinitarian horizon? The answer to this seems to be that if a client-person identifies participation in triune love as her preferred ethical intention, the therapist is free to collaborate. It is also clear that unless a client-person invites it, a narrative therapist would not directly introduce participation in love, nor should she listen with bias for the presence of God manifest in experiences of love. However, in spite of these teleological restraints, the narrative therapeutic emphasis on freedom of choice does not necessarily contradict the trinitarian telos.

Rather than viewing narrative therapy’s representation of the principles of (a) countering oppressive power, racism, misogyny, etc., and (b) advocating for the rights of the individual to choose her goals as an obstruction, it is more appropriate to see them as limitations. I say this for
two reasons. First, because the use of narrative therapeutic practice is most often located within the wider ethical commitments of the practice community, and because of the specific narrative therapeutic values of respect and justice, the narrative therapist feels quite justified in challenging attitudes and behaviours that are commonly viewed in the society as undesirable and destructive. The second reason narrative therapy’s failure to represent a specifically shaped telos is more of a limitation than an obstruction to correlation with trinitarian thinking is that given the choice, in the way narrative therapy is designed to do, people seem biased towards choosing the “good”. Indeed, in his *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics* (22.1.c) Aquinas (1964) argued that every person always chooses what she perceives as the good. While, of course, it is possible for a person to be mistaken about what actually constitutes the good for her, Aquinas’ point is that no one intentionally acts against the good. In his chapter entitled “Ethics” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, McInerny (1993) expressed it this way:

If we come to see that not-A rather than A contributes to our happiness, we have the same reason for doing not-A that we thought we had for doing A. We did A in the mistaken belief that it was good for us; when we learn that our judgment was mistaken, we do not need any further reason for not seeking A. We already and necessarily want what we think is good for us, and we now see that A is not good. (pp. 201-2)

My point is that if the good is always a reflection, however dull, of the good associated with God’s relational life, and every person chooses what she perceives to be good for her, there is a fair chance that narrative therapeutic assistance will re-orientate a person more closely towards the horizon of God. This is especially so given that the ethical principles I mentioned above—countering racism, oppression, misogyny, etc.—align with trinitarian principles of love, respect, freedom, and justice. This may be part of the reason that narrative therapy is often adopted as the therapy of choice by politically motivated groups involved in community development, including some committed to Christian visions for a just society. The *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work* published by the Dulwich Centre in Adelaide, Australia provides many examples of such projects.

In spite of these reasons for suggesting that narrative therapy’s tilt towards the good may be more aligned with the trinitarian telos than it first appears, narrative therapy’s philosophical view of justice remains an issue that requires further consideration.

5.4 Differing versions of justice
Narrative therapy’s understanding of justice is influenced by Derrida’s philosophical insight (see Combs & Freedman, 2012 for a helpful summary). As such it differs from the trinitarian relational
understanding of justice expounded for example by Gunton (1993). For Derrida, justice needed to be viewed as freedom without a specific telos or horizon of expectation; whereas the trinitarian relational vision of justice is freedom with a specific horizon of expectation. For this reason, the trinitarian horizon provides a specifically shaped telos for development in a way Derrida’s cannot. While it is sometimes argued that narrative therapy’s utilisation of Derrida’s (1992) horizon-without-expectation implies an always-respectful stance towards difference, it will always be limited because it is a horizon that can never be reached if justice is to be maintained.

My point is that Derrida’s justice as a horizon without expectation implies that a specific ethical shape is a danger to other possible courses of action. He used the phrase “must not” because arrival is equated with injustice towards all the possibilities that are not chosen in the selection of one. This is the same reasoning that restrains Derrida from naming a specific shape of freedom, such as one centred on participation in other-centred love, and has him settling instead for openness to the “indeterminate other”. The other is kept undetermined in order to maintain the absolute indeterminacy of justice to come. To determine a specific ethic would, according to Derrida’s logic, load the ethics to come into the present, and in doing so convert it to some sort of “law” (Derrida, 1994, p. 59). Implied in this is that every act of decision is simultaneously an act of exclusion. Or, to put it differently, every ethical choice would be attended by an injustice, and so in order to avoid injustice, hope must be endlessly undetermined (Derrida, 1992).

To frame this notion of indeterminacy in therapeutic terms, it implies that the work must be structured so that the client is always free to choose the kind of being she will become when she behaves in an ethical manner. While on this basis it is clear why a narrative therapist must not advocate for any specific ethical horizon, this is a stance that is contradicted in the way merely going about her business inevitably represents an ethical horizon (Browning, 1987). My point is that there is a disjunction between these philosophical principles and the way narrative therapy is actually used in the context of specific therapeutic narratives, and on behalf of clearly defined ethical principles. Beyond this contradiction, my concern centres on narrative therapy’s philosophical, as opposed to its relational, approach to ethics.

I have referred at a number of points to narrative therapy’s utilisation by health, political, and religious groups on behalf of their ethical projects. I am now drawn to wonder, in the light of its association with Derrida’s version of “justice without a horizon”, how these groups reconcile this with their own clearly defined commitments to ethical positions. While it is often assumed that White’s therapeutic work with individuals and communities is orientated towards a similarly shaped vision of a more ideal life, these ideas do not shape his work. White (2003) resisted approaching therapeutic engagement with a preconceived idea about how the people concerned should develop.
This is because, like Derrida, he considered notions of “well-functioning” and “good enough” functioning to be normative ideas that are held out to communities to aspire to reproduce them. And he saw this as dangerous because it curtails freedom. White referred to this stance in the following way:

Our [Dulwich Centre] participation in community assignments is based on the understanding that we cannot know, ahead of our engagement in them, what might be the knowledges of life and skills of living appropriate to achieving the goals of the people of these communities. (p. 24)

This respectful sounding stance towards specific communities and their hopes is clearly virtuous, particularly so when considered in the light of the way normative knowledge often marginalises local knowledge.

5.5 Do universal agreements necessarily perpetrate violence on the particular?

When viewed from White and Epston’s perspective, it would seem, at least initially, as if the trinitarian hope of relating the universality of triune love to the particularity of humankind might restrain people from exercising free choice. However, because the universal is grounded through the particular theological story of the incarnation it appears to represent an exception. I argue this because buried within the incarnation event is a local starting point, rather than a universal one. What was previously expressed as Judaic law, became personal in the incarnation of Jesus. I therefore contend, along with Gunton (1993), that the incarnation does not represent a philosophical unity, but a relational one that derives from the otherness-in-relation of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. To put this in different words, the Trinity’s unity is not a philosophical unity of substance, but a relational unity, and so it need not be seen as a threat to particularity. The wonder and glory of the Trinity is that the infinite love the Three share together is expressed through infinite respect for the particularity of the other. The Father fully allows the Son to be the Son; the Spirit fully allows the Father to be the Father, and so forth. This incarnational ethic, where the universal becomes particular in respect for specific others, offers a means to be just in a way, as Derrida rightly contended, that a universal ethic cannot usually do.

Starting with the Christian account of the incarnation, rooted in the notion that the transcendent God enters fully into particular human experience, is a refusal of gnostic dualism that ultimately separates ethics from context. White’s concern to cherish local knowledge about life and relationships seems to resonate with this refusal. However, unlike White’s approach, this is not to infer that the universal becomes local, or that the local becomes universal, but rather as Chalcedonian Christology suggested, the two natures of Jesus co-exist without mixing into each
other (see, for example, Bindley, 1950). Along with Smith (2009), I propose that because the Christian story creates space for the infinite to enter into the experience of finite beings, it is no longer necessary to assume that the universal will perpetrate violence on the particular. The universal story of love, expressed locally as hospitable encounter, cherishes personal uniqueness which, after all, is at the centre of White and Epston’s therapeutic concern.

Trinitarian theology can, therefore, make a claim to true materialism because the incarnational logic affirms the goodness of the particularity of a person’s life, while at the same time overcoming finitude through Christ’s offer of eternal life. Hence the Eastern Orthodox formulation: “God became human so that we might become divine”, or to put this differently, “becoming by grace what God is by nature” (Athanasius, trans. 1993, 54, 3: PG 25, 192B). This claim to true materialism is based on the scandal that God would share the nature of a Jew from Galilee, and it restates God making a particular creation and considering it good. The incarnation constitutes a refusal to separate spiritual principles, such as Derrida’s non-religious religion of freedom—however virtuous they might be—from the particularity of place, history, and tradition. Derrida and Foucault, and by association, White and Epston, appeared to prefer to distil from history a story of pure and uncompromised good news. However, such a move leaves behind embodiment, history, and particularity, and this is what the early church refused (see, for example, Coetzee, 2008).

5.6 Summary
The discussion so far leads to the conclusion that while there are several constructive implications associated with narrative therapy’s association with postmodern philosophies, it is unfortunate that it cannot present it as developmental horizons for particular people, and by particular people, in the way the stories that suggest the triune life do. If a therapy, or religion, is to be faithfully postmodern, it will need to be unapologetically particular. Smith (2009) referred to a “thick traditional orthodoxy” that offers a means for universal ethics and particular people’s identity stories to come together in a specific incarnational encounter.

Given this failure to represent a specific horizon for development, what is to be made of narrative therapy’s general effectiveness? I suggest two responses. First, as Moltmann (1992) argued, the Holy Spirit is addressing everyone with love whether they recognise it or not, and so wellbeing is available in a way the philosophy of narrative therapeutic practice may not predict. And second, while it is not yet well theorised in relation to narrative therapeutic relating, because of the way ethics have been abstracted from context, in a typical narrative therapeutic conversation more is taking place than an intellectual encounter of minds. A personal encounter is also taking
place through which the therapist’s presence and intentions are incarnated as inspiration for the client-person.

Too much is given up if we settle for abstracted ethics, because while Derrida and the Christian story can both account for violence, Derrida cannot account for the goodness, such as peace and desire for justice, that can come out of relationally orientated ethics. Understanding the work of the incarnation as the inclusion of human life in the personal life of God, opens the way for embracing narrative therapy’s concern for the politics of language and identity, while also locating therapy within a particular religious call to receive and pursue love through personal encounter, and community life. Just as narrative therapy celebrates the freedom to choose, *perichoretic* relationality celebrates love’s freedom to develop personal uniqueness in the context of a community moving together and exercising concern for others.

As I have been arguing, rather than aligning narrative therapeutic intentions with abstracted ethics, the trinitarian invitation is to engage the universality of love personally, *and* as a contextual narrative. I suggest that narrative therapy is well placed to assist with this contextualisation. In order to illustrate this possible relationship between narrative therapy and trinitarian theology’s therapeutic and missional concern for personal wellbeing, it is helpful to recognise that while trinitarian theology paints a picture on a broad canvas of the world being restored through participation in triune love, it does not attempt to address the detail of this. These details might include the cultural, linguistic, discursive, and narrative makeup of people’s lives and their communities where encounter is to take place, and love is to take root. In order to achieve this, dialogues such as this one between the symphony of the triune story and the melody of narrative therapy are not only appropriate, but also necessary.

Now that I have discussed narrative therapy’s formulation of therapeutic hope that is implied by its association with postmodern philosophy, the next chapter considers four more aspects of its postmodern orientation.
Chapter six: Narrative therapy and postmodern thinking

As I have said, narrative therapy’s postmodern philosophies imply an innovative, and not always well understood, set of therapeutic assumptions. This chapter explores four of these and evaluates them from the perspective of how well they fit with the trinitarian social project, and in terms of contributions they may be able to make in support of community living in response to stories that give rise to trinitarian thinking.

Postmodernity represents a broad range of philosophical positions that share family resemblance, but do not represent one consistent philosophy (Wittgenstein, 1953). Identifying specifically where narrative therapy stands within this diverse family is complicated. The main theories White and Epston engage are Wittgenstein’s emphasis on the reflexivity of language, Foucault’s insights into discourse and power, Derrida’s approach to textual deconstruction, and Lyotard’s concern for heterogeneity. Later expressions of narrative therapy have developed in conversation with many others, including Tom and Harlene Anderson, John Shotter, Kenneth Gergen, and Gilles Deleuze.

While Foucault is the most widely referenced thinker, even engagement with his work is selective (White, 1995a). For example, while Foucault proposed that it is not necessary to theorise the individual for his approach to power relations to work, White’s formulation of collaborative co-authoring seems to rely on just such a theory (Polkinghorne, 2004). Overall, White and Epston have used aspects of postmodern philosophy that, “conceptually isolate the therapist - family system from any social, historical, economic, or institutional context, and to deny the existence or relevance of differences in power at an interpersonal level” (Fish, 1993, p. 288).

Beyond the selective use of Foucault, Wittgenstein, Lyotard, and Derrida, narrative therapy also draws on postmodern anthropology. I argue this because its central concern is for people’s agentic wellbeing, and because Epston’s background was as an anthropologist who drew extensively on the work of cultural theorist Geertz (1978), and social theorist Bruner (1986), both of which are evident in their work. And so, White and Epston draw from a select group of postmodern philosophies and anthropology. This implies that narrative therapy should not be viewed as a simple application of postmodern philosophy to psychotherapy and family therapy. Indeed, it is more appropriate to say that it is an approach to practice in rich dialogue with a range of influential postmodern insights. I will now consider a selection of these influences in the light of a common assumption that it is difficult to reconcile postmodernity and Christianity faith, and then go on to discuss its philosophical basis in some detail.
6.1 Postmodernity and Christian faith

The first thing to be said is that narrative therapy’s association with postmodernism implies a social and relational basis of knowledge that is supportive, rather than undermining, of faith. This claim may be surprising given the entrenched views of some evangelical Christians that postmodernism is leading society towards scepticism and emptiness (see, for example, Carson, 2002, 2005; Colson, 2003). However, rather than necessarily leading to nihilism, postmodernism is quite capable of representing the obvious plurality of things, and “the plain sense of the geographical and historical contingency of our lives” (Caputo, 2007, p. 41). Given this, narrative therapy’s association with postmodernism does not infer practices that deconstruct reality, and will lead to knowing reality— including the reality of God—differently.

I am not alone in holding this view, as those involved in the emerging church movement, for example, welcome postmodernism as one of God’s gifts for the rejuvenation of the Christian faith (McLaren, 2001; Sweet, 1999). It may even be that the specific influence of the postmodern philosophies of Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault that inspire narrative therapy, could also inspire the church to recapture something of its relational heart that has been dwarfed by its association with modernism. I am arguing that through its association with postmodern insights, narrative therapy has the potential to assist people to live intentionally with regard to their hopes and wider purposes, including those associated with Christianity.

**Pursuing hope.** As argued earlier, both the post-Barthian resurgence of trinitarian anthropology and the postmodern turn reclaim a view of humans that places individuality into a social and relational context. In the light of these movements, shortcomings associated with Descartes’ realist thesis, that humans are basically “thinking things that contain ideas”, is illuminated (K. Smith, 2015). The shared postmodernist and trinitarian emphases on the social and relational nature of human life introduces the notion that people are constantly formed and reformed in relationship with others. Here, it is this relational emphasis rather than a focus on autonomy that provides people with a sense of coherence.

Contained in this dynamic view of people is the inference that humans are not content with the way things are in the present, and that they orientate their lives toward future hope. While there is huge debate about how to define religion and a religious way of life, there is a sense in which all people can be considered religious in that they move towards becoming what they love. Indeed, because of this focus on hope, it can be argued searching for hope and pursuing what one loves constitutes a religious life. Rahner (1961a), for example, discussed the orientation of courage to faith in God. This way of thinking leads to the suggestion that trinitarian theology and postmodernity do not represent quantifiably different conversations, but rather they are qualitatively
different in terms of the value of hope that is pursued. While trinitarian hope is for deeper participation in love, and by this means the ultimate restoration of creation, the postmodern hope associated with narrative therapy is for freedom from constraint (J. Smith, 2009). While Rahner linked hope and the implicit faith of the atheist, Augustine’s treatment links hope and explicit faith in God.

Augustine’s (trans. 1991) *Confessions* referred to humans as desiring agents which is a dynamic analogy of the human person as hopeful-lover. For Augustine, people as desiring agents have *cor inquietum*, or “restless hearts”. Early followers of Christ were sometimes referred to as followers of “the Way” (Schuyler, 1993). This is a reference to the way they sought to satisfy their desire for hope through faith in Jesus as the Son of God, and the ethical lifestyle associated with this. While this way can be viewed as an example of monotheistic religion’s practice of referring to the object of desire as “God”, the overall point must not be lost—namely, that both trinitarian theology, along with many ideologies, spiritualties, philosophies, psychologies etc., and postmodernism recognise that humans shape their lives around searches for better ways of experiencing wellbeing.

Accepting this restless, future-orientated, and searching-nature thesis—as both narrative therapy and trinitarian theology do—implies that it is no longer appropriate to speak of humanity in fundamentally realist or even anti-realist terms. It now seems more appropriate to refer to people in terms of hyper-realism. The hyperrealist search is not just for the real as in modernism, or agentic freedom as in social constructionism, but “the real beyond the real” (Caputo, 2007, p. 39). Viewing humans as searchers for reality, beyond the reality of the present moment, implies that each person takes her present situation seriously, and concerns herself with things that exceed the present horizon. Because these over-the-horizon things are best known experientially, they do not represent a threat to belief or participation in God. Instead, they push the recovery of the narrative shape of faith (see, for example, J. Smith, 2006, pp. 59-80).

**Knowing through experience.** Given this experiential epistemology, the threat from postmodernism—if “threat” is even the appropriate word—is not so much to faith, but to claims of certainty. The contingent nature of knowing illuminated by postmodernity implies that faithful venturing in accord with hope inevitably involves uncertainty. Hope is uncertain because it is partly obscured behind the horizon, and because the only way to speak about hope-related things is with the language of others who have gone before. By this I mean that any statement about the shape of hope to come is contingent on past and present social contexts. For example, a young man’s experience of a first job will be shaped by the ways his community speak about such things. This and the hopes he holds about work will inevitably create some uncertainty about his future.
Uncertainties such as these are highlighted by Derrida’s (1976) argument that individuals can only interpret experience, and indeed engage reality, through the traces of meaning left behind by others. Viewed in this way, the pursuit of hope, and understanding of the quest, is more of an adventure than it is a search for facts.

Understanding the pursuit of hope as an uncertain and community-bound adventure has big implications for the way reality is understood and engaged. It shifts knowledge of reality—God included—from one focused exclusively on understanding, to one where experience is also valued. This proposition is consistent with the way trinitarian theology refers to God’s invitation to humans to imitate the divine epistemic stance of loving engagement. Knowing through experience involves commitment to, and openness towards, the subject of enquiry (Lightcap Meek, 2011; Payne, 2014). In situations such as these, where reality is sought in experience, the potential contribution of narrative therapy becomes apparent. Narrative therapy assists people to engage the subjectivity of their lived experience, rather than data about them. British novelist and academic C.S. Lewis’ (1970) Meditation in a Toolshed likens this distinction between understanding and experience to the difference between looking at sunlight and looking along the sunlight to the things illuminated by it:

I was standing today in the dark toolshed. The sun was shining outside and through the crack at the top of the door there came a sunbeam. From where I stood that beam of light, with the specks of dust floating in it, was the most striking thing in the place. Everything else was almost pitch-black. I was seeing the beam, not seeing things by it. Then I moved, so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no toolshed, and (above all) no beam. Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun. Looking along the beam, and looking at the beam are very different experiences. But this is only a very simple example of the difference between looking at and looking along. (p. 212)

In terms of this metaphor, it seems as if narrative therapy is well-shaped to assist people to look subjectively along the narrative trajectories of their lives, rather than looking objectively at them, as if from the side. Narrative therapy orientates enquiry in this way because its concern is to empower people to choose to develop life practices in response to their hopes and values, rather than assessing their lives with regard to commonly held categories. While this is narrative therapy’s strength, its resistance to objective enquiry is a weakness, in that trinitarian theology involves both experience and subsequent objective consideration of experience.

The postmodern emphasis on the contingency of knowledge highlights that we find ourselves in a world of competing narratives, and therefore the value of recognising the confessional nature of stories, including Christian ones. My point is that narrative therapy offers a
means to engage in the intentional structuring of one’s life; much in the same way as Christian liturgy provides arranged opportunities for developing life in-Christ. While narrative therapy invites a broader application of liturgy than the typical ecclesial one, its concern is still the practices associated with living in response to hope in real things beyond present reality.

6.2 Social and linguistic formation of knowledge and identity
While I have spoken affirmatively about narrative therapy’s association with postmodernity, for some, this is problematic. It can be controversial because it rejects the Cartesian explanation for how people know things, and reconceptualises the basis of the problems people struggle with.

This section examines three of the most influential post-structuralist theories to shape White and Epston’s pioneering work: Wittgenstein’s revisionist theorisation of language, Derrida’s textual approach to deconstruction, and Foucault’s advocacy for viewing individual life in the context of social discourse. While these ideas may be contentious for some, I argue that they illuminate important theological and anthropological considerations that are sometimes overlooked.

Wittgenstein’s revisionist view of language. White and Epston’s engagement with a revisionist view of language is partly attributed to the Austrian-British philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein (1953) argued that meaning is not found as pre-existing fact, but rather it is found in the formulations people construct within their social encounters. This epistemological stance challenges the traditional Cartesian contention that our thoughts are put before us directly and completely, and without misrepresentation associated with internal reflection. While there is now a near unanimous rejection of the metaphysical aspects of Cartesianism, its dismissal implies the burden of finding another adequate epistemology (Tanney, 1996). Narrative therapy draws on Wittgenstein in order to establish an alternative way of knowing. From this perspective, language is not primarily related to aspects of the world, but to social “practices”. This is not to dismiss the general method of natural science, or even the relevance of talking about what might be true; rather his point is simply that whether something is considered true or false relates to social practice, rather than the reality of the world (Wittgenstein, 1953).

The criteria, therefore, for assessing the truth of something resides implicitly within language. Viewed from this perspective, scientific truth is constructed linguistically; there is no direct correlation between a scientific theory and the thing or things it refers to. This does not mean that Wittgenstein thought that there is no real connection between a scientific model and the reality that it describes. As Malinen, Cooper, and Thomas (2012) observes, “[b]ecause Wittgenstein, ...simply stepped out of the world-us dichotomy, his philosophy of language did not move him into scepticism, relativism, or antirealism” (p. 166). This leads to the conclusion that Wittgenstein’s
position avoids the constructionist trap of making it difficult to establish why therapists do what they do, and of viewing the things clients talk about as mere constructions. If it were true that personal and family stories are merely constructions, then the therapist’s role would be to simply reconstruct these for the family. However, White and Epston’s utilisation of Wittgenstein lead them to argue that the stories family members tell are always associated with actual practices (Malinen et al., 2012). Out of respect for the reality of a family’s life practices, White (2012) is careful to specify that: “In my perspective it’s not the therapist that is the constructor; rather the therapist provides the scaffolding for the family members to become the constructors, the primary authors of the stories of their life and identity” (p. 167). White’s stance towards the reality of the world is valuable in that it can be construed from it that his interest is in discussing where the family members place their hope, and the associated practices.

It can be drawn from Wittgenstein (1953) that social life is not centred on the coming together of individuals, but on language formed through deep cultural agreement. Cultural agreement provides the background meaning of people’s shared lives, that is in turn expressed in things as detailed as the way children are disciplined, the approach to family roles, the way people prioritise their time, and even the specific sense of sentences. These are implicit cultural agreements that render language to be much more influential than merely reporting on people’s lives. Laden with agreement, language socialises people into shaping their lives around these agreements, and even shaping a person’s experience of herself. Put differently, it is languaged meaning, rather than the things represented by the language—feelings, thoughts, and beliefs—that guide the formation of understandings that people come to hold (Burr, 2006). White (2002) used this approach to argue, for example, that a young man struggling with a sense of personal failure needs to address the manner in which his social world has constructed failure, and his actions with regard to this.

This linguistic approach to therapy works on the premise that because knowledge is constructed locally, rather than being directly linked to things, the formulation of beliefs people hold is revisable. A vinyl record, for example, was considered in the 1970s to be an up-to-date symbol of youth culture, but now, 40 years later, it is more likely to be viewed by young people as a relic of an unsophisticated parent’s generation. While the vinyl disk has not changed, knowledge of it has been revised. Depending on her social group, a young person may experience the reality of using her parent’s vinyl record player very differently than her parents did. Perhaps it marks her as a trendy and unconventional young woman, or maybe she finds herself excluded from peers who value the latest electronic technology as signs of group membership. This reflexive link between language and the broader patterns of life, such as rituals and tradition, implies that what is considered to be “right” depends on a certain tradition, not on fixed reality. These realisations open
possibilities for influencing versions of “right” by manipulating the way things are spoken about. In its most basic form, this is the work of narrative therapy.

In a similar way, the boy who has come to consider himself a failure may revise where he stands with regard to the social agreements about boyhood that constructed his understanding of himself as a failure. Perhaps, for example, his evaluation focuses too heavily on rugby performance, and devalues other attributes such as loyalty in friendship and diligence in school work. The salient point here is that the boy’s self-evaluation is shaped around socially constructed norms, and that he needs to be helped with deconstruction and choosing his own set of criteria. Following this, a narrative therapist would not refer to the boy’s problems as reflections of truths about him, but instead as struggles with the “thin” ways he is described (Geertz, 1978). This is not easy work because while reflexivity is always in play, it is most often hidden from view; which implies that engaging the deeper meanings carried within language is an art. It is an art that involves attempting to “place one’s premises into question, to suspend the ‘obvious’, to listen to alternative framings of reality, and to grapple with the comparative outcomes of multiple standpoints” (Gergen, 1999, p. 49).

The examples I have given reflect the way that Wittgenstein’s revisionist view of language influence a shift in the focus of therapeutic enquiry from depth to description. This can be understood as a metaphorical shift away from considering referents or objects, towards the meta-level of language and representation (Besley, 2001). Unlike a person-centred or cognitive therapist, it is not the young woman’s feelings of exclusion and associated thought-patterns that her narrative therapist focuses on, but instead the implicit meaning behind the words “I do not fit” that is engaged as the crucible for change. This does not indicate that the narrative therapist is unconcerned about the client’s troublesome thoughts and feelings, just that her assumption is that the source of the problem is social, and this should be the primary focus of the work. In a broad sense this orientation marks narrative therapy as a constructionist approach which synthesises fragmented experience into coherent patterns (Frankl, 1959). The young person referred to above, synthesised her various experiences of being excluded by her peers, and concludes that she is not a very “sweet” or “rad” person. This same synthesising dynamic may occur between a person’s thinking and her deeper psychological world where the process of thinking provides a synthesising dynamic for feelings and longings. My point is that constructionist thinking interprets detail in the light of broader socially determined concepts.

A trinitarian understanding of life is also constructionist in that the synthesising stories of God’s engagement with the world provide frameworks for understanding the detail of people’s lives (Vitz, 1997). The constructionist approach that characterises both narrative therapy and trinitarian
theology can be contrasted with the reductionist approach where larger patterns of behaviour, such as personality and relational styles, are understood in the light of underlying detail of a person’s life. For example, a Freudian explanation for Christian ideals—such as how women are to be treated, how the poor are to be cared for, and the morality of war—is that they are camouflaged expressions of the id, rather than the fruit of common agreement (Gay, 1995). Importantly, this shared constructionist orientation to meaning and knowledge offers trinitarian theology a unique opportunity for dialogue with narrative therapy. Such a dialogue opens the way for considering the place of ritual and tradition, including theologically informed ones, to become integral features of therapeutic conversation, and influential in the shaping of preferred identity. This is an approach to the integration of therapeutic work and theological understanding that is not available with reductionist therapies.

This constructionist orientation infers the need for a means to identify how experience has been synthesised. For this reason, White and Epston drew inspiration from Derrida’s approach to textual deconstruction.

6.3 Derrida and textual deconstruction
I have discussed the focus Wittgenstein’s work brings to the role of cultural agreement in people’s self-understanding. White and Epston draw on Derrida’s (1976, 1982) approach to textual deconstruction to assist people to recognise these cultural agreements. One of the ways they do this is through the externalising practices I introduced in the previous chapter. White (1995a) argued that implicit cultural knowledge becomes known through:

> [p]ocedures that subvert taken-for-granted realities and practices; those so-called ‘truths’ that are split off from the conditions and context of their production, those disembodied ways of speaking that hide their bases and prejudices, and those familiar practices of self and relationship that are subjugating of person’s lives. (p. 122)

Textual deconstruction, then, aims to tease apart problem-saturated descriptions from problem stories, so that what Goffman (1961) referred to as “unique outcomes” can be identified. White and Epston (1990) argued that armed with new awareness of things that contradict the problem’s version of a person’s life, people experience a renewed “capacity to intervene in their own lives and relationships” (p. 16).

Derrida’s seminal aim is to expose and subvert dominant binaries that typically operate in Western thinking and meaning-making. White and Epston reasoned that referring to people in binary terms limits them to “thin” descriptions that only draw on a small proportion of the initiatives they actually take in their lives. White (2004) estimated that up to 97% of a person’s
initiatives are not taken up or acknowledged within problem-saturated dominant stories. White likened engaging a person in deconstructive conversation about the lost aspects of their lives to having them stand on a platform to view their lives differently (Malinen et al., 2012). A woman may, for example, initially refer to herself as either a good or a bad parent, and through the deconstructing influence of externalised conversation reject this binary and replace it with a more nuanced reading of her parenting. For example, “in reviewing my parenting, I see quite a few strengths and positive actions, but there are also times when I make mistakes. To make a mistake from time to time is simply to be human”. It will be apparent that narrative therapy relates to people’s lives as social text that can be read in different ways, in the hope that a more faithful engagement with the text might make richer descriptions available. For Derrida, deconstruction is a matter of justice on behalf of perspectives that may usually remain overlooked. Put differently, Derrida’s deconstructive aim is not to destroy text, but to respect it by releasing what Ricoeur (1976) referred to as a “surplus of meaning”:

A “text” that is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. (p. 69)

Because of this contingent quality the texts of people’s lives need to be approached with persistence and care. To represent this, one of the metaphors Monk, Winslade, Crocket, and Epston (1997) used to refer to the practice of narrative therapy is an engagement in an “archaeology of hope”. This “archaeology” metaphor indicates the way textual deconstruction can resemble the careful brushing away of sand to reveal buried treasure in the shape of hope. Perhaps a woman has neglected to notice, in the face of the breakdown of relationship with her children’s father, that she is more than “a woman with a failed marriage”. Perhaps the strength of the “failed marriage” account, and her community’s support of this reading of the text of her life, has overshadowed other traces of life, such as survival strategies in the face of extreme pressure, or a capacity to hold hope in the face of betrayal. My point is that the deconstruction of dominating accounts of people’s lives opens the way to retrieve other more hopeful accounts.

Borrowing from Heidegger’s (1996) notion of “destructive retrieve”, Derrida opened text to alternative and repressed meaning that might literally lie in the footnotes, or be resting within unnoticed contradictions, or neglected corners of a person’s life. White and Epston’s appropriation of Derrida’s textual deconstruction can be viewed, therefore, as a means to act on behalf of justice in the small corners of a person’s life and community. I am reminded of the way the Gospel of Luke refers to Jesus in terms of a “good shepherd”, and of the Kingdom of God in ethical terms using a
number of stories to illustrate his concern for everyone, and most especially those on the margins of society; for example, the story of a woman searching for a lost coin (Luke 15: 8-10), and a shepherd searching for a lost sheep (Luke 15: 1-7). Counsellors spend a significant amount of time with people who are well acquainted with loss in one form or another. Derrida’s approach to deconstruction provides narrative therapy with a potent means to exercise justice towards these lost aspects of people’s lives.

6.4 Foucault and discursive context

Having identified the correlation between Derrida’s approach to textual deconstruction and the trinitarian justice emphasis, it is important to recognise that Foucault is critical of what he sees as Derrida’s text-bound analysis of meaning, and Derrida is critical of the emphasis Foucault (1972b) gives to discourse. Foucault’s early professional interest in psychology is represented by *Madness and Civilization*. His interest is relevant here because of the emphasis he places on the social context of text. While Derrida’s central concern is the diversity of meaning within text, Foucault’s interest is the diversity of meaning surrounding text. Foucault’s (1965) focus on discourse is particularly evident in the way he challenges institutions, such as schools and churches, to acknowledge the “oughts” and “shoulds” they represent. He is especially suspicious of the unrecognised influence of institutions that may appear neutral and nonaligned (Marshall, 1996). Narrative therapy takes up Foucault’s concern.

For Foucault, social life is made up by discourse, or the taken-for-granted assumptions about how things ought to be, that reside in the background of text. For the 1972 second edition of *History of Madness*, Foucault removed his original preface entitled “Madness, the absence of an oeuvre” because it was here that Derrida directed his attack in the first edition. In the second edition Foucault instead added a new appendix titled “My body, this paper, this fire”. He used this new forum to systematically rebut Derrida’s criticism of his focus on discourse, because for him deconstruction must contain a political element. The rebuttal was so vehement that the two thinkers stopped communicating for 10 years.

White and Epston’s hybrid approach to discourse analysis:

concerns tracing the development of present ways of understanding, of current discourses and representations of people and society, to show how current ‘truths’ have come to be constituted, how they are maintained and what power relations are carried by them. (Burr, 2006, p. 115)

It is apparent from this rendering that White and Epston draw on both Derridian and Foucualdian understandings of deconstruction in order to consider, not only the practices associated with the text
of people’s lives, but also the discursive politics that shape development. This is a potent combination that can be experienced as significantly disruptive.

**Disruptive deconstruction.** While this style of narrative therapeutic deconstruction aims to release hidden meaning from within people’s lives and society more generally, it can be experienced as a very disruptive experience resulting in both joy and anxiety. Being confronted by the loss of previously safe understandings might be helpful in terms of discovering hope, but it can also expose a person to uncertainty, and even terror. From the trinitarian perspective, emphasis on mutuality, care, and discernment is required to ensure that this therapeutic technique results in wellbeing, and not harm (Walsh & Middleton, 1995).

Like all personal identities, Christian ones are developed within a forest of social projections about how one ought to live, and so I am advocating for utilising Foucault’s insight into discourse as an aid for constructing preferred identities (Grant, 2015). However, for many people, including some Christians who have been taught—subtly and not so subtly—not to question their faith, discourse analysis can be experienced as a real threat, and as liberating (McMillan, 2008). Enquiry about who and what has been excluded in specific versions of meaning that aspire to provide a total account of reality can expose our participation in violence and evil. A man, for example, may discover that both patriarchal discourses and theologically authentic ones inform the way he has learned to behave in response to a commitment to “lead his family”. Realisations such as these can be deeply disturbing, particularly so if, for example, his wife and children have experienced his “leadership” as tyrannical; they can also open the way for a closer alignment between hope and action.

The trinitarian virtues of mutuality and interdependence invite us to consider, alongside the needs of the individual client, the needs and aspirations of her community and narrative therapy is well placed to do this. Behan (1999) presented an innovative example of a narrative therapeutic group project in which community wisdom is utilised to develop outcomes that represent shared intentions. I conclude that in spite of the risks and challenges associated with deconstruction, when undertaken in community it can be enormously constructive and lead to some new semblance of meaning, the development of just ways of living, and deeper experiences of faith (see, in support of this conclusion, MacIntyre, 1981, pp. 203-204).

The question about what might be helpfully questioned, and perhaps reformulated or rejected, is important. There is clearly an important difference between deconstructing the things people hold to be real, such as God as creator, Jesus as redeemer through his death and resurrection, and the end of all things when Jesus comes again, and those less central things such as particular approaches to sin, the role of self-sacrifice in loving others, gender roles and homosexuality, etc.
White (2007) demonstrated a clear concern for the things people hold to be sacred. One of the ways he does this is through crafting questions such as: “What is it that you are choosing to believe here?” “What are the effects of doing so in terms of your hopes and values?” “What goes unnoticed alongside your choice?” “Who stands with you in your choice to believe these things, and how is this for you?” I have now established that the deconstructive function of narrative therapy potentially lends support to people to establish life practices in support of their values and hopes.

**Therapy and ethics.** Another significant feature of the postmodern social view of language is that it is theoretically always open to others. This implies, according to Christian theologian Emil Brunner (1953), that however personal a search for hope and meaning might be, an individual’s life is always open to direct consideration of the cultural sources that constructed her subjectivity. This is relevant for counselling because however neutral it may appear, the therapeutic conversation always takes place in response to an ethical context (Browning, 2006). This insight shifts the concern from whether ethics are involved, to whether they are legitimate and helpful. Narrative therapists are well aware of this, and respond by attempting to make explicit the assumptions that motivate the work.

As discussed in chapter four, White (2007) advocated for therapist de-centred listening in order to minimise the influence of the ethical hopes that shape the counsellor’s identity and work. De-centred listening offers a means to enquire about traditions while minimising the overlay of others. The aim is not so much to *erase* therapist and contextual meaning, but to *privilege* that of the client’s. Ethical knowledge associated with religion is a particularly contentious issue in relation to the counselling task. Some will take the view that religion is an illegitimate source and want to align it with other destructive voices that contribute to the client’s psychological problems, while others may take a more open and appreciative stance. In the end value judgements must be made, and so the question is not whether it is represented in the conversation or not, but what are the effects of its presence.

I suggest a conversation about God’s authorship, as an example of how a therapeutic conversation may appropriately engage with a person’s specific religious interest might proceed. Narrative therapist and theologian Coyle (2013, 2014) employed a version of narrative therapeutic practice to assist people to discover what she referred to as God’s authorship in their lives. Her approach is contrasted with the more typical Western practice of telling single storylines as the “real truths” about people; such a practice can easily lead to violations of freedom. Coyle seeks instead to uncover the multilayered and complex narratives that represent the liberation associated with God’s loving initiative in people’s lives. This is an example of practice that looks to engage with a framework of meaning into which personal experience might be narrated, and thus stabilised.
(Holder, 2013). While it may seem ironic that an ethically pluralistic therapy might be so open to developing religious conversation, this should not really be a surprise because, as I have already argued, the work is orientated towards hope.

It would seem quite appropriate for a narrative therapist to be as open to working with this—Christian—system of belief as she is with any of the many others people live by. The real issue here is the extent to which a narrative therapist can really be open to engaging respectfully with various ethical systems. Given that personal bias will always play a part, it behoves the therapist to engage in these conversations with a similar openness to that with which she invites her clients. When both counsellor and client are open to the disruptive risks associated with questioning, then narrative therapy is capable of facilitating fruitful dialogue about what people hold to be meaningful, and what these things imply for everyday practices of living.

6.5 Narrativity
The social constructionist theorisation of the individual that I have been discussing is one based on language and discourse. While viewing a person from the perspective of multiple languaged subjectivities is constructive, in that they are always open to change and hope, it is also limited in that it does not theorise continuity, and so it risks leaving a person decentred and fragmented. This situation raises questions about how personal continuity might be secured. White and Epston’s solution is to turn to the narrativity thesis because while it is also socially orientated, it organises what may otherwise be fragmented intentions around plots, and contextualises these into specific times and places. In other words, people use the reflexivity of language to construct meaningful time-bound stories about their lives and relationships (White & Epston, 1989, 1990).

While the social constructionist position resists normative claims about wellbeing, trinitarian theology is not similarly bound. The incarnation suggests that there is something fundamental about the way people understand their lives in narrative form. While it is difficult to identify detailed links between trinitarian anthropology and the narrativity thesis, nevertheless the doctrine of the incarnation does emphasise the contextual shape of relating and knowing. Knowing in narrative form is able to do justice to the “thick, rich, holding action of local habitation” (Bartholomew, 2011, p. 3), and this is a key feature of the incarnation. Both narrative and the doctrine of the incarnation bring together knowledge and context, in a manner that reductionist forms of enquiry cannot.

The narrativity thesis suggests that out of multi-layered autobiographical memory an individual constructs and internalises stories of her life, which in some cases then become influential to her sense of identity (G. Combs & Freedman, 2012). Through constructing and
documenting the past and imagining a future according to plots, a person’s life is given some degree of coherence and meaning. It is based on these life narratives that an individual is able to communicate to herself and others who she is, how she came to be this way, and where she anticipates her life going in the future (Singer, 2004).

Given that narratives are so influential within the formation of identity; it follows that enquiry about how identity is narrated is therapeutically valuable. Indeed, it is not difficult to argue that the shaping of a constructive or destructive sense of self is associated with the freedom to participate in these processes. Put differently, the development of agency—the capacity to choose—is one of the most significant factors in accounting for therapeutic success. A good example of this is that when people are able to derive redemptive meaning from stories of suffering, they tend to enjoy correspondingly greater levels of wellbeing (Adler, Skalina, & McAdams, 2008). Engaging people in the shaping of meaningful life stories is a central concern of narrative therapeutic practice.

The proposition that individuals primarily move towards experiencing wellbeing through narrating identity, rather than through exploring ego states, is consistent with the trinitarian emphasis on shared life, and the invitation to participate as communities in God’s triune life. I now move to develop this suggestion.

**Narrativity and incarnation.** While it can be claimed that narrativity is not an integral part of the Trinity’s shared life, it is none the less relevant to a trinitarian anthropology in that human knowledge of God and people is drawn from the narratives of God’s engagement with the world (McAdams & McLean, 2013). I will reiterate the doctrine of the incarnation to substantiate this point.

Creation and incarnation come together in a “single flowing movement of the Trinitarian love of God” (I. Torrance, 1998, p. 354). Put differently, God’s activity and being are one in the same. This suggests that there is an indissoluble hypostatic bond between the mission of Christ, and the inner life of the eternal God. This bond is crucial to the Nicene homoousios that implies the incarnation falls within the life of God. This trinitarian claim that God has become one with creation, ontologically—through the life, death, resurrection of Jesus—suggests the love and power of God are brought to bear on the world’s disorder. God “penetrates back through the guilt-laden irreversibility of time into the very beginning in such a way as to undo the past” (T. Torrance, 1996, p. 215). As a result of ontological development, the natural world is now considered to be included in God’s redeeming life in community. And so, human life and God’s life are now tied together in the Spirit’s gifts of an identity that is realised through participation in the Jesus story:

[T]he Spirit places humans ‘in Christ’ and thereby bestows on them personal identity extra se in Christo insofar as the Spirit incorporates them into a transcending narrative—the Jesus
story. ...Being ‘in Christ’ ...involves retelling one’s own narrative, and hence making sense of one’s own life, by the means of the plot of Jesus narrative. (Grenz, 2001, p. 329)

In summary, individual identities are narrated according to the shared narratives people participate in. This implies that identity in-Christ is narrated as people participate in the stories of God’s redemptive engagement with the world, through Christ and in the power of the Spirit. Through this embrace, the individual and unique elements of a person’s life are given a particular shape as they are fitted into the large story that unfolds in the Bible.

**Dominant cultural stories.** The salient fact here is that narrative therapists, along with many others, observe that personal identity is shaped to a significant degree by dominant cultural stories. One can think of how stories define national identities such as Gettysburg and the ANZAC stories, the story of liberation from oppression manifest in the work of Martin Luther King, Ghandi, William Wilberforce, and suffragettes such as Christabel Pankhurst and Kate Shepherd. In one sense, the story of the Trinity’s saving engagement with humanity is just one more narrative that shapes the identity of certain people in certain places. Where it is different in a highly significant sense is its claim to be a metanarrative that seeks to redeem and transform each and every social system, rather than replace them. For the Christian, Christ is the centre-point of all of human history, and therefore defines history at the deepest level. This is a metanarrative that promotes its vision of the kingdom of God as leaven for existing cultures, rather than as an alternative culture.

Considering practice from the perspective of a large story such as the trinitarian one raises important questions about whether a person’s choice moves her towards experiencing wellbeing, or something else. What becomes apparent is that while it is valuable that narrative therapy promotes the freedom to choose, it is unfortunate that it does not include others in the discernment of life-like choices. While this resistance to community agreement, such as about the value of the trinitarian metanarrative, is understandable, it leaves the work undeveloped. I am arguing that because the presence of large stories is inevitable, it would be better to choose one that represents respect, and to enter dialogue with clients from this declared position. I chose trinitarian theology for the basis of this study because of the hypothesis that it represents a community-minded ethic that is non-colonising.

**Co-indwelling through hospitable listening.** My contention is that because the trinitarian metanarrative is capable of restoring and developing individuals and communities, it is a suitable story within which to situate narrative practice. I claim this because God is portrayed as one who represents strangers and outcasts, and this ethical stance aligns with narrative therapy’s practices of hospitality to difference. The inclusivity associated with the triune life is protected in that both
outsiders, and the people who chose to participate in Christ, are represented by them (R. Anderson, 2001; Augsburger, 1995). Because all people are already represented, the way is open to enter and embody the story, and through this to participate in the renewing of community, just as Jesus enters the narrative of Israel. My reason for specifying these things is that for a narrative to be shared meaningfully, it must have value in terms of connecting with human need. This is because when people find that a story holds value, a connection is established between their particular situation and the universal story.

The value offered by the trinitarian story, is that existentially meaningful narratives form in the lives of people as they enter into relationship with it (Perry, 2008). I mean by this that through Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit, “them” and “us” binaries are deconstructed, and unity as both a gift and an obligation to be embodied in the world is offered. It follows, then, that a significant way these narratives are embodied is through participating in the hospitable listening stance. Quite simply God creates out of love, and this forms a divine precedent for community participation in the practice of hospitality (Stewart, Zediker, & Wittborn, 2005). This is a life of love that transcends exclusivity, and moves into inclusivity in activities such as openness to children, hospitality to strangers, respect for difference, and the appropriate exercise of power. This vision of the divine community as an open human community offers us more than the opportunity to model ourselves on the divine community; it also offers an incarnational opportunity. This is the chance to participate in the divine community, and to be hospitable to the divine community’s participation in us (Fiddes, 2001).

If communion is a suitable metaphor for God’s interaction with humanity, and hospitable communion involves listening, then listening can be seen as a form of co-indwelling, or entering the private storied world of the other, and entering the triune community simultaneously. This suggestion adds another dimension to the therapeutic process. Just as the Trinity is willing to hear anything, everything can potentially be opened to the possibility of re-construction through a hospitable listening presence (Moltmann, 2000). Entering the world of the outcast through listening to stories of shame, suffering, and despair is how God listens through the Spirit and presents the living Son to those in hard places (Pasupathi, 2005). Hospitable listening is considered redemptive in that it can transform the narratives of a person’s private world (Alston, 1999). I conclude that the Jesus narratives provide rich common ground for narrative therapy to stay true to its values, while opening to the kind of hospitable listening that incarnates the presence of God, whether this is named or not.

Put differently, while narrative therapy is concerned with developing client agency, the Trinity also exercises agency through the hospitality of the counsellor. Through this, individual
stories are woven into the larger narrative of God’s loving engagement with the world towards an expected end. It seems foolish to assume, as narrative therapeutic practice urges us to do, that choice is only the responsibility of individuals. Both victim and victimiser need to look both within and beyond their local communities for meaning and direction (Perry, 2008).

Preferred stories and “the good”. Given all I have said about the trinitarian call to look within and beyond local stories for meaning and direction, I need to sound a note of caution lest what appears to be narrative therapy’s innate orientation towards life is overlooked. To achieve this, I want to return to a point about the “good” that I introduced in chapter four. While narrative therapeutic practice might fail to recognise the validity of discourse and narrative that are not already available within a person’s social context, this may not be as problematic as it appears. I say this because as I argued earlier, with the assistance of Aquinas, the way lives are shaped in narrative form always wills what the person considers “good” and “true” (C. Lee, 2004). I am associating the narration process with a quest for the “good” because while a person’s narrative preferences might be arbitrary, they are never random. Although this view has its critics, there is good reason to suggest that narratives are always concerned with shared meaning and life-likeness (Taylor, 1989).

French philosopher Deleuze adopted the metaphors of “lines of flight” and “rhizomes” to represent something of this narrative inclination towards life-likeness (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994). Winslade (2009) and others developed these metaphors in the context of narrative therapeutic practice. Rhizomes are masses of plant roots that usually move underground and perpendicular to gravity. They move inexorably towards light and moisture, overcoming, breaking down, and finding paths through obstacles. Their movement can be considered good simply because they are motivated to move and grow. This suggests that narrative therapy’s singular concern for individual freedom may not be as haphazard or ultimately self-centred as it first appears. My point here is that the process narrative development follows might be similar to a rhizome. Similar in that people will develop narratives about themselves through ongoing choices that conform to whatever “good” is embraced. In this sense, assisting a person to develop life narratives in response to their hopes and ethical intentions will always be of some value.

As I said above, the Christian story does not seek to colonise the hopes people hold for their lives, but to restore and develop them. This leads to the conclusion that a person’s performance of truth, goodness, love, beauty, creativity, to name just the most important concepts, is always valuable, whether she is aware of her inclusion in God’s triune life or not. “For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure”, whether this is recognised or not (Philippians 2:13).
6.6 Metanarrative, interpretation and reality

I have established that narrative therapy’s emphasis on language, discourse, and narrativity highlight important points of connection with the triune life. Alongside these, however, questions remain about how to reconcile its association with postmodernity if indeed it dismisses the claim Christians make that the God-story is the story for humankind.

Metanarrative. To this point, my contention has been that because postmodernity represents a narrative and experiential view of reality it is broadly compatible with the trinitarian thinking. However hopeful this might be, narrative therapy’s association with the French philosopher, sociologist, and literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard’s notable claim that postmodernism signifies “incredulity toward metanarratives” needs careful consideration. While it can appear this way, Lyotard did not intend to discredit the existence of metanarratives, or their role in the successful organisation of communities. Instead, his expression of incredulity is directed towards claims that any one telling of a story—however persuasive and strongly held it might be—can adequately represent reality. This is to say, for example, that while Marxism may purport to offer a comprehensive view of reality, it could not possibly do so.

In order to untangle the confusion that surrounds his work, it is helpful to recognise that Lyotard’s primary interest is in the power of ideas to construct and define people and their experience of life. He sought to expose the exclusivity of totalising accounts of history, so that other ways of knowing can be liberated and appreciated. For example, the strength of the scientific and rational methods of enquiry associated with modernity can also be viewed as a weakness because of the way it occludes other ways of knowing, such as personal experience, revelation, and tradition. Put another way, Lyotard’s rationale for scepticism is that overarching theories dismiss the power of individual events, and therefore the heterogeneity of human experience. Another way to put this is that his interest is not in denying the validity of metanarratives, but in challenging their exclusivity. When this insight is applied in its most simple form to a therapeutic conversation, it suggests that care needs to be taken to value different perspectives such as a wife and husband’s view of a problem, and to notice that the way their relationship is framed represents just one of many ways of doing so.

According to Lyotard’s way of thinking, reality is best approximated through engaging with a range of mini-narratives, while also remembering the inevitably of the provisional and temporary nature of these. Viewed in this light, it can be argued that narrative therapy does not seek to discredit metanarratives, but to lay bare the way they guide people to shape and interpret their lives, and to make space for listening to the various ways people experience reality. Like White and Epston, Lyotard’s primary concern is epistemological, rather than ontological. Based on this
assessment, a narrative therapist would not want to deny the significance of the Christian metanarrative, or the trinitarian stories that contribute to it, but she would want to leave space for other narratives too. This is not to say that she aims to undermine persons fully committed to the Christian story when her commitment to it is not part of the problem-story, but that she aims to further develop a person’s agentic commitments to it.

**Interpretation and reality.** In a similar manner to the way Lyotard’s expression of incredulity towards metanarrative is commonly misinterpreted, French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s work is also prone to being misread. Most notably, the meaning behind his now famous statement that, “nothing exists outside the text” *[Il n’y a pas de hors-texte]* can sound as if it is a denial of reality (1979, p. xxiv). There is, however, good reason to argue that he means to foreground the interpretative issues that always surround engagement with reality. Indeed, Derrida clearly distinguished between interpretations and “things in themselves”. Derrida is not alone using the phrase “things in themselves”, but unlike Husserl or Heidegger’s references to more abstract things, Derrida used it to refer to concrete things such as cups and saucers, trees, and human physicality (Derrida, 1976). Based on this rendering of Derrida’s view of reality, and as discussed in more detail below, the Derridian influence in narrative therapy’s traditional approach points to questioning whether it is possible to have direct access to reality. Derrida’s overall intention is to emphasise the textual contour of knowing that ensures “things in themselves” never appear in unmediated form (Leonard, 2010).

Derrida is reputed to have stated that “nothing exists outside the text” in *Of Grammatology* in response to Rousseau’s thesis put forward in *On the Origin of Language* (Sutcliffe, 2014). His emphasis on the intrinsic role of language in human knowledge explained why his work is frequently referred to in social constructionist writings, and why White and Epston engaged with it. Derrida’s emphasis on the inevitability of interpretation can be contrasted with Rousseau’s view that language is a problem because it warps access to “things in themselves”. This view of language is similar to a glass lens that inevitably implies a level of distortion of the image that is being viewed through it. For Rousseau, then, language is not a creative force but the evil that distorts reality and, because of this, he longs for a time when there would be no need for interpretation.

While it might be assumed that Rousseau’s conception of language-as-a-lens can be correlated with the trinitarian position, because Christians also long for a time when they see face-to-face, this is not an accurate conclusion. Instead, Rousseau’s early modern position now seems theologically naïve because it is not possible to get behind the text to some sort of pure reading, to do so would be to deny the social fabric of creation. Put another way, Rousseau’s approach overlooks the relational epistemology that is inherent in the gospel stories. Given these things,
Derrida’s observation that nothing exists outside the text is more hermeneutically appropriate than Rousseau’s. In summary, while Rousseau views social life as a hindrance, Derrida understands it to be the place of knowing (1978, p. 155).

**Epistemology: reality, objectivism, and interpretation.** The postmodern emphasis on the subjectivity of interpretation concerns some theologians. Particularly those who build their work on Rousseau’s assumption that it is possible to gain objective access to “things in themselves”, including God. From this epistemological perspective, it is understandable that accepting the inevitability of interpretation seems like the quest for “right” interpretation is being given up on (J. Smith, 2006). The objective knowledge position represents an assumption that knowledge contains a quality of givenness. This implies that knowing is more about accessing the givenness, than it is about interpretation. In contrast, trinitarian theology does not imply the conflation of truth and objectivity. Derrida’s interpretative claim and narrative therapy’s association with it, therefore, does not threaten trinitarian belief in the reality of God.

I have taken this position on the basis that trinitarian theology represents a hermeneutical way of affirming the reality of God, and not an objective one. Pannenberg (1983) argued that rather than objectivism, the most comprehensive horizon for Christian theology is history. It follows, therefore, that God can only ever be interpreted rather than proven objectively. This is because the best proof that can be obtained is circular and self-referential, and so Christian witness can only ever bear witness to itself. Put differently, while objectivist epistemology searches for proof and hopes for certainty, hermeneutical epistemology looks to faith as a basis for belief.

My point is that engaging a hermeneutic does not imply giving up on belief in the reality of God, or in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore, trinitarian theology does not need to be threatened by the epistemological basis of narrative therapy. I argue this because trinitarian theology also represents a view of reality that transforms belief from an activity based on individual acts of observation, to a community endeavour. In this way, the traditions of the church can be understood as the confluence of many faith stories that taken together provide a closer approximation of reality than any one reading could hope to achieve.

**Revelation as interpretative horizon.** I have been discussing a very different way—a postmodern one—of relating belief to people’s lives than classical apologetics where the reality and objectivity are assumed to go hand in hand (Grenz, 2001). Specifically, I have argued that replacing an objective hermeneutic with an interpretative one does not need to contradict belief in God, and that it actually opens the way to recalibrate belief onto the history of God’s triune engagement with the world. I now want to draw the conclusion that an interpretative approach to knowing reality is supported, rather than undermined by a revelatory hermeneutic, such as the claim that Jesus is Lord.
I am referring to the claim that Jesus is Lord as revelatory because, while it can be read in the events associated with Jesus’ life, it is associated with Holy Spirit inspired belief. Rather than undermining interpretation, revelatory claims such as this can act as interpretative horizons through which various accounts of events can be understood. This relationship between personal experience and interpretative horizon is similar to the way White and Epston associate the interpretation of personal experience with discourse (Klein & Epley, 2015).

The hermeneutical approach offers a plausible explanation for why the gospel stories offer varied accounts of the events of the first century. For example, the chief priests and the Roman centurion in Matthew 8 interpret the same events differently. Perhaps the chief priests interpreted them in the light of a political horizon, and the Roman centurion in the light of a Jesus-as-messiah one. The pluralism implied by the inevitability of interpretation does not need to be viewed as a threat to faith, and can even be embraced as good on the basis that it reflects the diversity associated with creation. Put differently, giving up claims to objectivity need not involve a loss of “kerygmatic boldness” about the truth of the gospel, because now it rests on the conviction of the Holy Spirit.

6.7 Summary
This second discussion chapter explores four aspects of narrative therapy’s postmodern philosophy, and evaluates these from the perspective of how well they fit with the trinitarian social project, and in terms of contributions they may be able to make in support of community living in response to trinitarian thinking. The four aspects of postmodern thinking are (i) the social and linguistic formation of knowledge and identity, (ii) narrativity, (iii) metanarrative, (iv) interpretation and reality.

Discussion has been framed within the initial argument that narrative therapy’s association with postmodern philosophy does not imply that it necessarily leads people away from reality, but instead offers a means to recognise and engage the geographical and historical contingency of human life. While it has been found that narrative therapy’s employment of externalisation, and other techniques to release hidden meaning and to reveal discursive influence within the texts of people’s lives, is potentially liberating, it was also found that being confronted with the loss of previously secure understandings can be experienced as threatening.

The chapter then moved to argue that narrative therapy offers a means to engage in the intentional structuring of one’s life; much in the same way as Christian liturgy provides arranged opportunities for developing life in-Christ. While narrative therapy invites a broader application of liturgy than the typical ecclesial one, its concern is still the practices associated with living in response to hope in real things beyond present reality. Drawing on Wittgenstein’s revisionist view
of language, Derrida’s approach to textual deconstruction, and Foucault’s insights into discursive context, associated narrative therapeutic theory of practice is discussed. This discussion concludes that while viewing a person from the perspective of multiple languaged subjectivities is constructive in that they are always open to change and hope, it is also limited in that it does not theorise continuity, and so it risks leaving a person decentred and fragmented.

The chapter concluded with discussion about the therapeutic implications of Lyotard’s incredulity towards metanarrative, and Derrida’s interpretative view of reality. This section found that hermeneutical ways of knowing in relationships do not need to threaten trinitarian belief in the reality of God, and that they may actually support people seeking to shape their lives in accord with specific ethics, including those associated with the story of Israel and Christ. Having evaluated narrative therapy’s social constructionist and narrative philosophies in the light of trinitarian theology, I move to consider the person in narrative therapy.
Chapter seven: The person in narrative therapy

Now that narrative therapy’s constructionist and narrative philosophies have been identified and considered from a trinitarian perspective, the purpose of this chapter is to discuss the person in narrative therapy, and correlate this against the trinitarian person. While the study’s aims centre on setting up a correlation with narrative therapy’s philosophy, anthropology, and theory of practice, some practices will also be suggested throughout the discussion.

So far, the correlation has raised important philosophical questions about the production of life itself, and the need to engage these things in the formulation of meaningful therapeutic responses. Perhaps the most striking aspect of narrative therapy’s view of the person is the way it centres on social subjectivity, rather than on individual interiority which is the modernist way, or shared life which is the trinitarian custom. Because of this social orientation, narrative therapy’s practical concern is directed towards people as creators of knowledge and identity, rather than as discovers of these things (Schwandt, 2003). In contrast, the trinitarian embodied person is formed in relationship and through social process, and is available for consideration in each of these three interrelated dimensions.

As if the social basis of the person in narrative therapy does not make discussion about it challenging enough, correlation with the trinitarian person makes the discussion even more complex. This is partly because the social, relational, and embodied perspectives associated with trinitarian anthropology are not usually brought together into one conversation about talk therapy. The discussion is also complex because White and Epston leave a lot unsaid about their agentic subject. While it appears that they assume the presence of a more substantial person, they only directly refer to an “empty” and “decentred” self. This is of concern for the trinitarian thinker, because although narrative therapy helpfully directs enquiry to the social realm that is often neglected in counselling work, doing so implicitly directs enquiry away from direct engagement with interpersonal ethics and the role of embodiment in the manufacture of human subjectivity. Were it not for their innovative introduction of narrativity as a means to theorise personal continuity, the narrative therapeutic person would be cast adrift, vulnerable to the constantly changing tides of culture and language. Indeed, this fluid “postmodern” condition is experienced as an everyday reality by many young people who find themselves unhinged from cherished stories associated with their histories and traditions (Guilfoyle, 2012). Uncoupled, they are left oscillating between contradictory postures, and vulnerable to the ever-shifting social currents.
On the one hand it is positive that narrative therapy foregrounds the social processes responsible for creating identity, and that it seeks to develop personal continuity by assisting people to choose organising narratives from the array that make up their social contexts. On the other hand, it is unfortunate that it resists representing particular stories that may be more likely to result in experiences of well-being than others. In contrast, trinitarian anthropology denotes a particular tradition that offers historically enduring stories of a social God who promises, covenants, and gifts life into existence, as a basis upon which to story identity and structure life in community (Lightcap Meek, 2014). Because this tradition represents particular narratives about God’s loving engagement with the world, it offers a more comprehensive view of a person than the one represented by narrative therapy. Put more specifically, the trinitarian tradition represents the claim that freedom is developed in particular relationships, while narrative therapy represents the view that freedom results from being able to resist any particular way of life.

**Three interrelated domains: social, relational, and embodied.** In Jesus we see the basis of trinitarian anthropology in that he is identified through filial relations with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and he stands as an embodied individual human in relation to others (J. Torrance, 1997). In Jesus, social context, relationality, and physicality come together in the incarnational dynamics between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When we consider that the prime purpose of the incarnation is to engage humankind and its whole ecology of relating, into a life of communion with God, the significance of the whole of human life becomes apparent. As I introduced in chapter two, trinitarian anthropology can be understood in terms of the three dimensions that make up the ecological construct of the trinitarian person. Furthermore, the social, relational, and embodied dimensions are reciprocally related, and so choices to act involve all three dimensions. Put differently, each decision to act influences, and is influenced by, all three spheres (Andersen, 2001).

Like the narrative therapeutic subject, then, the trinitarian subject would be elusive if it was not for the quality of relations that invite it into responsible community participation. More than this, like the psychological subject, the trinitarian subject would be individually centred, if it were not for its ethical commitment to others expressed as openness and vulnerability. Because she strategically delights in being hospitable to the shaping of others, the trinitarian self is neither fixed nor without form, but shaped by loving alterity.

The breadth of the trinitarian account of persons provides a context into which narrative therapy’s expertise with engaging social subjectivity can be located and developed. Therefore, a more complex set of therapeutic considerations emerges from the correlation. While I am keen to draw attention to this broader canvas, doing so must not diminish the value of narrative therapy’s engagement with social process. After all, the trinitarian analogy affirms that creation exists and is
maintained as a gift of a social God. This implies that it is not so much the social orientation of narrative therapy that needs to be redeveloped, but its limited focus. Whereas narrative therapy attempts to address the linguistic and narrative contexts of people’s lives, the trinitarian invitation is to also address the ethical and biological fabric of personal and community life. This broader trinitarian canvas suggests that, as well as storying identity, a therapist needs to assist people to engage the story of other-centred love through developing ethical virtues such as goodness, faithfulness, and hopefulness; and, for those who are inclined to do so, to even inhabit the Christ story as a whole of life shaping habitus.

And so, my thesis for this chapter is that the trinitarian person-in-relation offers an integrative vision of wellbeing that affirms the social orientation of narrative therapy, and also invites its development. This vision, drawn from a conception of God who is both one and three, offers the possibility of centring the de-centred postmodern self on a unifying style of relating. This is a style of relating that develops personal uniqueness in the context of offering hospitality to the difference the other brings. Here equal emphasis can be given to both the particularity of people’s individual lives, and universality associated with participating in life together (Gunton, 1993). Put differently, this approach offers a particular vision of shared life that simultaneously establishes uniquely hospitable individuals. Furthermore, this formulation of a centred hospitable individual seems to mitigate the narrative therapeutic concern that centred selves always assimilate or homogenise otherness. I now turn to evaluate the person in narrative therapy from the social perspective of trinitarian anthropology.

7.1 Domain one: The self as a social achievement

As I proposed earlier, narrative therapy’s narrative and social constructionist theorisations of personal subjectivity represent part of a broad postmodern critique of the individual subject. Amongst other things this critique has resulted in a focus on personal subjectivity falling from favour in both moral and political theory. This change can be observed in fields as diverse as philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and theology. Indeed, the history of modernity is now considered by some to be the history of the invention of the self, and the postmodern turn an emancipation from social, cultural, textual, and religious bondage, see for example Webster (2000) and Taylor (1989).

Subjectivity as de-centred performance. This deconstruction of the subject has taken many forms from the Lacanian emphasis on the subversive character of desire, to Foucault’s accent on disciplinary and sexual subjectivity. In his historical survey of subjectivity, Mansfield (2000) argued that new and diverse theorisations of the subject have come together to form an historical
event in which different orthodoxies vie for status as a definitive theory. And yet, while these are theories that continue to be contested it is not the specifics of the debate that are important here, but the fact that the debate exists, is ongoing, and that narrative therapy has embraced the central notion of a decentred self.

Because of his considerable influence on the theorisation of narrative therapy, Foucault’s part in the deconstruction of the subject is particularly relevant. His stated purpose in deconstructing the subject is freedom, in that he wants to see the individual released from bondage to all forms of power. The “power” Foucault (1988b) referred to is not just monarchical and governmental power, but power as anything that “tends to render immobile and untouchable those things that are offered to us as real, as true, as good” (p. 1). While seeking to free the subject is broadly supported by the trinitarian principle of freedom, my objection to this approach is that it is unnecessarily destructive. Indeed, it has reduced the human subject to an isolated, rational, and wholly responsible agent that does not amount to much (Lyotard, 1984). This devastating impact on the subject is a very high price to pay for liberty, particularly so when compared to the trinitarian concern for freedom that develops, rather than erodes, subjectivity.

It is important to recognise, that while the cost to the now fragmented postmodern subject has been high, at least the social processes involved in the formation of personal identity have been foregrounded in new, helpful ways. In Shotter’s (1998) influential words, the social self can now be recognised as developing because of the “unfolding, living encounters spontaneously occurring between us and the others around us as we live out our lives” (p. 185). Now personal choice and action can be considered, not as isolated representations of fixed inner selves, but as evidence of the contours of relational, cultural, and languaged interpersonal spaces. In the context of narrative therapy, this capacity to consider individuals in their social contexts is constructive and innovative in that it has not been possible based on understandings of people fashioned by reductionist enquiry. I conclude that the role of linguistic process in the construction of social selves has been appropriately liberated, but that a broader conception of the person than one focused on social process alone is invited.

The social turn. White and Epston’s work, along with Foucault (1980), Shotter (1998) and others, represents this postmodern pendulum swing away from therapies based on modernist individualism, and towards post-structuralist sociality. This “swing” has been so extreme in some quarters, including the narrative therapeutic conversation, that the inner life is now considered to be little more than one story among many. Now the preference is to view the [social] self as a “performed self”. This dogmatic view infers that narrative therapy reinterprets phenomena previously considered to represent the dynamics of the psyche, and other features of the natural
world. However, were it not for the exclusivity of the notion of a socially “performed self”, the ease with which it maps onto the trinitarian person-in-relation might imply its uncritical acceptance.

I take this view because I am persuaded by the argument mounted by the theologian Vanhoozer (1997), in a manner resonant with Shotter’s construal, that the individual is not the primary source of identity. However, while White and Epston look exclusively to the linguaged social space that people inhabit for understanding, Vanhoozer also looks to the style of relating that characterises the way individuals engage social space, and how these things shape their embodied lives. This implies that while, for the social constructionist, people are considered empty or de-centred because they only exist in fragmented social spaces, the trinitarian person is centred by the particular quality of her relationships (Watson, 2004). Because both narrative therapy and trinitarian anthropology subscribe to the view that subjectivities are performed rather than fixed, it is appropriate to say they are both concerned with discussing pathways through which a valued sense of self might be developed, without reproducing the individualism of Western culture.

Foucault’s analysis framework. Drawing on Foucault’s work, White (2002) put forward a helpful framework for illuminating these pathways, and I utilise it here as a basis for discussing how both narrative therapeutic and trinitarian persons are performed, and what the goal, or telos, of these performances are.

Ethical substance. As discussed earlier, Foucault’s argument is that whether people recognise it or not, they perform their lives in response to moral hopes and intentions. White (2002) defined these as ethical substance, or “whatever it is about our lives that is our responsibility to manage well” (p. 53). Foucault’s (1994a) survey of various influential ethical substances, suggests that they are moulded according to the dominant philosophies associated with each era. For example, within the age of modernist humanism things such as feelings and deepest desires, the satisfaction of individual need, and the modulation of innate drives are considered valuable enough that they warrant good management. Additionally, for ancient Greeks it was pleasure that needed to be managed in order to become a certain sort of moral agent. While Foucault’s use of the term “ethics” to refer to these things may seem odd, given that these examples of ethical substance relate to individuals and not relationships, he relates ethics to personal and not relational development.

Based on the proposition that people are motivated to manage their lives in relation to discursively inspired hopes and intentions, I observe that the narrative therapist is motivated to assist people to (i) discover their implicitly held ethical substance/s, (ii) evaluate the effects of storying identity around these, and (iii) where desirable, develop alternatives. While the narrative therapist does not take a stand with regard to another person’s choice of ethical substance,
trinitarian thinking represents desire for love as the thing that needs to be managed well (see, for example, J. Smith, 2009).

**Mode of subjectification.** In addition to identifying the role of ethical substance, Foucault draws attention to specific methods, or “modes of subjectification”, that people use to develop ethical substance. For instance, these modes might be keeping divine law, alignment with cosmological order, using rational rule, or even giving one’s existence to pursuing the most beautiful form possible. Whatever specific mode a person conforms her life to, it is by focusing and applying oneself to “the ‘truth’ of who one is that one becomes virtuous” (White, 2002, p. 55). We can see from this that the definition of virtue depends on ethical substance. Again, narrative therapy espouses a relativistic stance when it comes to which modes of subjectification might be appropriate for a specific client. And so, therapeutic enquiry is not directed towards recruiting a client to a specific mode, but instead facilitating choice (White & Epston, 1990). On the other hand, the trinitarian specifies cruciform love as a normative way of being, characterised by virtues such as goodness, self-control, gentleness, and kindness. Foucault goes further, referring to the ascetic practices by which a person might be changed into a specifically shaped moral agent.

**Asceticism.** These “ascetic practices” shape a particular kind of moral self. They are techniques of life that are used in order to recognise oneself as a particular kind of ethical subject. For example, according to C. Rogers (1956) the Western individual is both an organismic self—the self that one naturally is—and one that conforms to the demands and expectations of significant others. In receipt of unconditional positive regard and genuineness offered by others, an organismic self is encouraged to fully emerge. This emergence involves such things as orientating one’s life towards “authentic feelings”, cultivating an “internal locus of control”, and striving to realise one’s innate potential. While Rogers did not refer to his work in terms of “ascetic technique”, the engagement in these kinds of relational activities certainly do shape particular kinds of moral selves. For the trinitarian, ascetic practices include things such as exercising self-control, providing hospitality for the stranger, offering forgiveness, working for justice, treating others as I would like to be treated, and liberating those held captive to harmful behaviours.

Interestingly, or perhaps I should say ironically, while the narrative therapist is formed as a therapist-self through engaging in ascetic practices that are remarkably similar to the Trinitarian ones—including working to free clients from oppressive social systems, challenging violence and injustice, advocating for gender equality and the rights of marginalised groups, and exercising respect for difference—she does not admit to aiming for her clients to be similarly formed. Rather, these ascetic practices are used to encourage client agentic freedom. This stance is based on Foucault’s (1994a) argument that “the care of the self is ethically prior, in that the relationship with
oneself is ontologically prior” (p. 287). And so, while the narrative therapist employs similar ascetic practices to many Christian folk, and others with humanitarian values, the espoused developmental aim, or telos, differs. I say “espoused” because I suspect the form of asceticism that the counsellor actually uses is more influential, or colonising of the client’s ethical substance, than narrative therapeutic theory admits.

Telos. Put most simply, narrative therapy’s espoused horizon—or telos—for development is the freedom to choose one’s own ascetic project. While this freedom from particular obligation does not necessarily preclude care of others, it does not specify it either. If, for example, a man experiences unhappiness in his marriage relationship, White assumed him to be free from any particular ethical obligation, apart from one directed towards himself, to choose how he would like to respond. While the trinitarian ideal involves freedom, freedom is to be used on behalf of a telos of participation in shared life; a life in community where the needs of others are ranked alongside, and perhaps even before, one’s own (Andersen, 2001). This means, for example, that a husband’s experience of happiness must be ranked alongside the needs of his wife and children.

In one sense narrative therapy’s freedom-to-self-determine telos is appropriate for a therapeutic context. This is because there are times within a person’s developmental and healing journey when it is necessary to privilege self-interest. However, from the trinitarian perspective, while self-determination is an appropriate part of the trinitarian asceticism, it is not ultimately an adequate telos for development. I say “ultimately” because in the example of a person suffering mental illness it may not be appropriate to expect that she put the needs of others alongside her own, or to provide hospitality to an other in the same way as a more capable person. In other words, a sense of self as distinct from others is important if healthy—dialogic—communion is to be entered freely, but the overall goal is beyond this. The Christian life invites a teleological perspective in which “eschatology, [sic] is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present” (Moltmann, 1993, p. 16). And so, while agentic freedom is a worthy aim, it does not go far enough because therapy needs to account for self-interest within a more substantial eschatology, one that accounts for community interest and discerns the presence and potential of loving ethical lifestyle in the formation of this (Swinton, 2012).

It will be apparent that a narrative therapist may claim that the norms associated with trinitarian asceticism result from nothing more than the discourses that construct it. Or she could argue that the trinitarian ascetic practices are too demanding for the emotionally fragile and vulnerable people who come for therapy, and so they should be deconstructed on behalf of freedom of choice, and only then chosen if the individual sees fit. I say this because Foucault’s (1970) stated
motivation for deconstructing social systems of constraint is to bring to visibility the assumptions, and associated linguistic process, that construct “humankind” as centred selves. From this perspective, the invitation to participate in cruciform life should be deconstructed, so that the ascetic project it represents may be chosen or rejected, rather than uncritically inherited. This brings us to the crux of the ascetic distinction between the narrative therapeutic and trinitarian positions.

For the narrative therapist, linguistic process proceeds, and will prevail, beyond other notions of reality, including that of human subjectivity. Put differently, the proposition that humans are centred individuals—albeit relationally—may pass away, but the social phenomenon of human language will not. This, of course, is a very different claim than the trinitarian one that loving relational participation constitutes the most significant reality.

**Grounded in relation.** While “person” and “relation” are often referred to as different categories, from a trinitarian perspective they belong together in that “there are no persons without relations; but there are no relations without persons either” (Moltmann, 1981, p. 167). We can construe from this that while trinitarian subjectivity involves social formation and embodied individuality, it is not grounded here but in the quality of relations that a person engages. This is significant because while the trinitarian person is an embodied individual she “cannot be equated with body or consciousness, and it [subjectivity] does not grow out of these two; rather, the person has a body and consciousness” (Volf, 1998a, p. 81). My use of the term “person” relates to the confusing way “person” and “individual” are used within trinitarian literature. While following the Fall humans exist as individuals for whom self-centredness or biological structure takes precedence; this is not how God intends people to live and experience wellbeing. And so, while personality is often understood as “a complex of natural, psychological or moral qualities... centred on the axis of consciousness” (Zizioulas, 1975, p. 406), the invitation of grace is to ground personhood in communion with God and others. Put differently, the narrative therapeutic equation of subjectivity with individuality, albeit socially constructed individuality, is a misrepresentation of God’s intention; that intention is for it to be equated with desire for encounter.

**Therapeutic implications.** The implications of these claims for narrative therapy are considerable. First, while the shift in ethical substance from agency to desire does not imply a disregard for social process, it does indicate that relational ethics need to become a central concern. Second, therapeutic strategies for engaging the embodied and psychological aspects of individuality need to be developed because of the integral part they play in triune ascetic lifestyle, and narrative therapy does not traditionally provide this. While, like narrative therapy, the trinitarian perspective critiques the notion of fixed subjectivity, it does not overlook the role of embodiment. An exclusively social theorisation of people actually implies the erasure of
individuality because they are so transparent that it would be difficult to distinguish them from one another, this implies that personal particularity is necessary for communion (Gunton, 1997). I claim this because individuals who have dissolved into one another are incapable of independent action (Moltmann, 1981). I am arguing, therefore, that an adequate theorisation of individuality must hold together both agency and relational responsibility. In this light, it is appropriate to conclude that White and Epston’s “dissolved and incapable” person does not adequately represent the agentic and relational subjects who are the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit witnessed to in the Christian scriptures. This implies that for both the trinitarian and the community-minded therapist, the purely social subject is not viable.

The trinitarian subject: A self, centred on kindness and hospitality. So far, I have drawn attention to the influence of post-structuralist philosophy upon the theorisation of the narrative therapeutic social subject, and named the deficiencies in this approach when applied to therapy. Foucault’s inspiration is particularly evident in the way the social forces of discourse and power are emphasised in the narrative therapeutic approach, as is the narrativity thesis. I have also argued that trinitarian anthropology is more comprehensive than the narrative therapeutic one, in that it also represents a relational theorisation of both change and continuity. Seen in this light, we can say that while the narrative therapeutic subject is theorised as a site of ongoing change, albeit partially mitigated by narrative continuity, it is unfortunate that on this view she lacks adequate individuality. She is, therefore, particularly vulnerable to competing social currents.

Now, before moving to discuss the trinitarian suggestion that this de-centred post-modern subject be specifically centred on kindness and hospitality, it is important to emphasise that White and Epston’s work is not an exact representation of Foucault’s philosophical stance. I claim this for two reasons: first because White and Epston’s initial engagement with Foucault was only partial, and second, because narrative therapy’s subsequent development demonstrates a variety of responses to Foucault’s influence. On one hand Madigan (1992, 2010) articulated a frequently held perspective that while Foucault’s view of subjectivity implies narrow therapeutic enquiry and limitations for agency, these are not problematic. For others, such as Guilfoyle (2012), something like an agentic subject is necessary in order for Foucault’s constitutional theory to work. This perspective highlights a breadth of concern that runs through the literature (Gergen, 2009; Sampson, 2008). The suggestion that an agentic subject is required resonates with the trinitarian critique that the de-centred narrative therapeutic subject is actually ethically centred.

While this suggestion might be mistaken for a call to return to some form of reductionist individualism, there are good reasons why this is not the case. The trinitarian relational subject is “irreplaceable within the community rather than being delimited as an individual, opposite other
individuals” (Volf, 1998b, p. 83). In other words, through participation in the divine social life, a human subject is opened to both communion and catholicity. By this I mean that trinitarian asceticism—the self and relationship-forming activities that mark a daughter or son of the triune God—involve both hospitable openness to others, and the bearing of others within one’s social constitution. This, therefore, is desire for relationship directed towards participation in hospitable communion, as the ethical substance that needs to be “managed well” (White, 2002, p. 53). Put differently, it is the person-in-relation that is the centre that gives unity, shape, and direction to all of the activity and different social representations of the self in every human person.

**Shared concern for meaning.** The trinitarian promotion of participation in kind and hospitable community is compatible with narrative therapy insofar as they share an interest in things that have meaning for people, and reject measuring people against categories of truthfulness. I argue this, without contradicting my claim that narrative therapy’s treatment of relationality is inadequate. This is because, while the narrativity thesis does not address relations directly, identity narratives always structure events across time according to plots. And these plots have to do with relations between people, such as the hopes people hold for themselves and their communities, keeping children safe, honouring parent trust, failure and achievement, and being good neighbours. Therefore, therapeutic conversation about the narratives that form people’s self-understanding lean towards exploring (i) the things people value in their social and relational lives, (ii) how these relate to their wider purposes, and (iii) how these hopes and wider purposes are represented in particular situations—how ever faintly (Carey, Walther, & Russell, 2009). Based on this, it is fair to say that narrative therapy shares with trinitarian theology an interest in the social and relational formation of meaning.

As I argued earlier, this marks both narrative therapy and trinitarian theology as philosophically orientated towards post-foundationalist ways of knowing. By post-foundationalist I mean holding to the stance that epistemological claims to certainty are always contingent on their context. And by implication, by foundationalist I mean the assumption that it is possible to establish infallible basic beliefs upon a secure foundation of deductive reasoning (Grenz, 1996).

While foundationalist epistemology has been a mainstay of evangelical theology, neo-Barthian theology invites a reconsideration of this stance. Grenz and Franke (2001) argued, in their history of trinitarian theology, for the viability of a post-foundationalist reading of divine and human life that centres on relational meaning, rather than on deductively derived truths. This contention is predicated on the assumption that the triune style of relating represented in the life, death, and resurrection, of Jesus represents the primary ontological category. However, given how prevalent the influence of foundationalism is within the formulation of Christian theological
understanding, I recognise the need to qualify my contention, lest I am misunderstood. I hope that it will now be apparent that in aligning my argument with a post-foundationalist understanding of reality, I am not seeking to deny either the reality of God or the natural world. On the contrary, giving ontological priority to triune relations does not imply a dismissal of anything except the notion of infallible belief based on deductive reasoning, and it affirms relations in a manner that a foundationalist approach cannot. Put differently, trinitarian theology’s epistemology implies the privileging of meaning gained through relational encounter, rather than a denial of natural realities (Lightcap Meek, 2011).

Unifying communion. My presentation of the trinitarian subject, so far, can be summarised by saying that she is a person-in-relation that is primarily, but not exclusively, understood through dialogic enquiry about the ethical substance of her life. I now want to include the proposal that she is centred on a particular set of ascetic practices—a style of relating—that unifies rather than assimilates the diversity of human experience (Volf, 1996). This claim is based on the belief that diversity—the three-ness of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—is unified, not through sharing common essence, but through the quality of relations enjoyed. This relational unity can be contrasted with attempting to unite people through emphasising similarities and by denying difference, or perhaps through abandoning hope that community life can ever healthily cherish difference, and settling for isolation. I want to use the word “communion” to refer to this ethical quality of self-giving relations. This formulation of communion refers to the way individuals are formed in relationships shaped by love as interdependent, co-indwelling, relations. This loving formulation of communion unifies persons-in-relation, and has other potential applications.

When, for example, unity is sought within the field of counselling through respectful enquiry about the hopes and values represented within different methodologies, new understandings can be developed in the vulnerability of mutual concern, and objectifying practices of naming and categorising can be softened. Approached in this way, for example, a psychotherapist may learn from a narrative therapist the value of dialogue with people about the meaning associated with specific responses to traumatic events, see for example Wade’s (1997) paper: Small acts of living: Everyday resistance to violence and other forms of oppression. Additionally, a narrative therapist may learn in dialogue with a psychotherapist the value of enquiring about impact of embodied memory associated with early life experience. Rothschild (2000), for example, promotes the usefulness of working with “body memory” in the treatment of trauma. The goal of unifying dialogue should not be to assimilate or discredit other viewpoints, but “to come to a greater, more holistic and unified understanding of human persons and their social/ecosystemic worlds than is possible through any unitary disciplinary window alone” (Eck, 1996, p. 102).
I hope that in advocating for loving interdependent communion it will not seem as if I am denying the possible value of naming and categorising. I am thinking, for example, of helping people to label certain ways they have been treated—or have treated others—as “wrong”, “illegal”, or “abusive”, or perhaps accepting that a person who suffers from chronic anxiety would benefit from medication. These things are not necessarily incompatible with loving engagement. I say this because sometimes loving engagement might require some painful naming, and even exclusion.

My overall point is that narrative therapy provides a trinitarian-compatible means to discuss the ethical substance of a person’s life in a manner that a diagnostic approach simply cannot hope to achieve. Because of the relationally contoured nature of social space, there are many representations of a person’s life that, in the usual course of “truth” orientated conversation, simply do not get noticed (Gergen, 1994).

Having affirmed its collaborative approach to enquiry, I want to challenge narrative therapy’s assumption that it is necessary to reject all truth-claims because they necessarily inhibit individual freedom. I do this by returning to the point made earlier, that when truth is relational, as it is in the triune life, it does not necessarily occlude, or perpetrate violence, on the particular. In other words, cruciform love is capable of respecting a universal vision of personal wellbeing within the contours of particular social spaces. I claim this because the trinitarian communal space provides for storying history, including the history of one’s life, in a manner that is hospitable towards otherness. It will be apparent that in adopting the view of the multi-storied nature of human life takes place within the larger story of love, I am implying that it is possible to hold more than one “right” reading of history and identity. Indeed, the trinitarian understanding of history does not dominate with one suprahistorical account of time, rather it provides space for many experiences of being found by love, in what Foucault (1984) referred to as instances of episodic time.

Episodic time and concern for the particular. White and Epston’s approach to knowledge implies a different stance to time than the way we might typically think of it. This episodic view of time interprets history in a manner that is radically unhooked from constructive definitions and absolutes. Therefore, when a person refers to an experience, the narrative therapist’s role is to enquire about the meaning of the experience for her, rather than evaluating the experience in terms of commonly accepted—perhaps psychological or religious—accounts of history. Enquiring what, for example, the Russian artist and political activist Pyotr Pavlensky means in 2015 by setting fire to the door of the country’s main security service in Moscow, would no doubt reveal something other than the dominant cultural conclusion that this is the action of an anarchist and an enemy of the state (Rainsford, 2015). However, more careful enquiry may reveal that he is motivated by a concern for human rights, or a concern for Russian society and the development of justice.
Unhooked episodic-time honours what is true for particular groups of people within particular episodes of time, rather than purporting to represent what is universally true or real. For White, and Derrida and others discussed earlier, providing a person with the opportunity to explore particular accounts of their lives is a matter of justice. White’s therapeutic intention, therefore, is to work on behalf of giving voice to things that matter to individual people and groups. These may include the accounts of those who are alienated by the very systems intended to help them, such as hospitals, community agencies, and churches. White’s rationale for emphasising the particular is that it is unacceptable that the oppression of freedom becomes legitimised by the linking of time with *singular* readings of history, even if these readings are motivated by good intentions. For example, while justifications for European colonial activity may include economic and religious development, “Europe colonised and oppressed, destroyed cultures, and imposed its religion, all in the name of its own absolute religion and superior civilization” (Volf, 1996, p. 17). These unfortunate outcomes would not surprise Foucault, who argued that suprahistorical accounts of history *always* legitimise violence. He therefore advocated for unhooking or freeing history from the demands of suprahistorical time. This approach:

> gives rise to three uses [of history] that oppose and correspond to the three Platonic modalities of history. The first is parodic, directed against reality, and opposes the theme of history as reminiscence or recognition; the second is dissociative, directed against identity, and opposes history given as continuity or representative of a tradition; the third is sacrificial, directed against truth, and opposes history as knowledge. They imply a use of history that severs its connection to memory, its metaphysical and anthropological model, and constructs a counter-memory—a transformation of history into a totally different form of time. (Foucault, 1977, p. 160)

While Foucault refers to this formulation of time as “totally different”, and it may be “different” in terms of what is typically assumed about the “truth” of history, it may not be so very different for the many whose experience does not fit with suprahistorical accounts.

The point that I am building towards is that the episodic understanding of time associated with narrative therapy is able to lend some support to the liberation and justice heart of the trinitarian social project. I say “some” because in a manner typical of Foucault, the value of the universal—expressed in this context as supra-historical accounts of history—is dismissed in favour of the particular. This approach, while judged unbalanced by an account of God’s triune life that represents both particular *and* universal is nonetheless valuable in terms of the emphasis it places on representing the vulnerable, marginalised, and those who have lost contact with experiences of hospitality (Gunton, 1993). God’s determination for creation clearly involves a concern for freedom
from oppressive social systems. This is a determination that is brought about by God exercising power and presence in the form of love, not domination (Andersen, 2001).

Here, and most particularly on the margins of dominant accounts of history, the therapeutic relevance of White and Epston’s stance takes on concrete form in terms of trinitarian praxis. Examples of people who might appreciate the freedom to recount their particular experiences may include those involved in writing accounts of herstory, such as the contributors to the Andermahr and Pellicer-Ortin (2013) collection of essays aimed at providing female perspectives on trauma events. Or indigenous people for whom the colonial history of Australia is not experienced as “lucky”, see for example, Pilger (2013). Or for populations who do not experience human development in the same way as the white North American males with whom Erikson (1950, 1959) consulted in the formulation of his influential psychosocial stages of development. This may also be the case for people of faith, such as the contributors to Jamieson’s (2002) study, who find their experience of God inadequately represented by suprahistorical accounts of Christianity that shape parts of church life. Perhaps these people might recognise Foucault’s hope, and welcome his advocacy for listening to people in the terms of an episodic account of time.

In arguing for the value of creating hospitable therapeutic space for particular accounts of people’s lives, I am supported by Wright (2008) who links acts of kindness and hospitality directly to participation in God. He contended that:

Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness... every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or to walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support for one’s fellow human beings... will find its way, through the resurrection power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make. (p. 208)

Foucault’s attempt to safeguard personal particularity, through privileging episodic accounts of history, seems particularly relevant for those committed to participating in the triune life as a social project with a restoration telos.

While it is constructive that narrative therapeutic practice utilises these insights on behalf of justice, it is unfortunate that they are not located in a declared universal account of life, such as the trinitarian one. However, when used with these limitations in mind, an episodic stance towards time, and associated dialogic enquiry, adds important strategies to the trinitarian counsellor’s therapeutic repertoire.

**Ontology: Story or relation.** While the style of relating represented by trinitarian theology potentially safeguards it against the common way universal accounts are prone to overlooking the particular, care still needs to be exercised in the way the trinitarian meta-narrative is represented. As I indicated above, it is common practice for some to refer to the history of God’s engagement with
human kind in terms of one “true” Christian story that chronicles the creation and fall, and the birth, death, resurrection of Jesus, and the eschatological consummation of the new creation to come (Bartholomew & Goheen, 2004). This meta-narrative approach provides a Christocentric hermeneutic through which faith in God’s care, love as a way of life, and hope that all things will one day be renewed may be located. However, this one-story approach also risks the inference that it is the details of the story that are true in a literal sense. I am referring, for example, to the fact that God did not actually create the world in six days, or that the Fall may not be an historical event. When the focus shifts from the meaning within the story to a debate about the details of the story, adherents inevitably lean towards a form of legalism that centres on evaluating people’s ethical participation in the mystical body of Christ as more or less acceptable. On the other hand, when primary emphasis is placed on the hospitable style of relating represented by the stories that give rise to trinitarian thinking, then justice and unity of purpose both become available (Wallace, 2002). As an aside, this is the primary shift in emphasis, from the story to a story, that I referred to in the methodology chapter because it allows for a narrative approach to theological understanding to be used in the construction of a public theology.

I am articulating a vision for centring the de-centred postmodern subject on the ethical ground of participation in the perichoretic life of God. The genius of the trinitarian story is the way it opens space for particular experiences of God’s loving welcome. As such it is appropriate to claim that it is sensitive to both difference and universal agreement because it is based on God’s universal engagement with particular people and communities. This is a relational means to guide people in diverse communities and subsequent generations as they narrate identity in a way that respects, and even develops, personal uniqueness in the context of a shared ethic of love.

This vision, for centring the de-centred postmodern subject on ethical participation, opens the way for utilising narrative therapeutic enquiry about the particularity of people’s lived experience, within the wider context of assisting them to make meaning of their lives and relationships in terms of participation in triune love. Importantly for the counsellor’s ethical commitment to the core values of respect for human dignity, partnership, and autonomy (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2012, 3.1-3.3), centring subjectivity on a particular style of relating is not the same as “stability” associated with independence, or assimilation into a large story (Gunton, 1993). And so, while White and Epston are right to point out that adherence to a common ethical story most often implies exclusionary practices, personal coherence centred on participation in the triune life paradoxically results in freedom. Personal coherence, therefore, brought about by engaging in cruciform love as an ascetic project, is not the same as personal stability purchased with the price of freedom.
Sociality and relationality. The discussion so far has led to the conclusion that White and Epston’s (1990) alignment with an episodic view of time ensures their approach attends to the particularity of people’s lives. It achieves this because it holds to the notion that a person’s identity is multi-storied, rather than adequately represented by one story, and because they recognise that narratives undergo “continuous alteration as interaction progresses... [therefore] self-narratives function much as histories within the society do more generally” (Gergen & Gergen, 1988, p. 37). Based on these things, it is apparent why the development of agency—the freedom and capacity to participate in the conversations that construct identity—has become White and Epston’s central therapeutic focus.

Davies (1991) reasoned that the liberation of choice is a prerequisite to the development of preferred identity stories. This is to say that the loss of agency is a reliable indicator that therapy is required, because experiences of wellbeing are primarily linked to the freedom and capacity to say “this is who I am”, and “this is who I am not” (Drewery & McKenzie, 1999). Because of this, and Foucault’s view that care of the self is ontologically prior, narrative therapeutic conversation is biased towards the intentions people hold for their lives, and not necessarily the lives of others.

My point is that for all of its social orientation, narrative therapy, and its associated practice of developing author-agency, is remarkably individualistic. In contrast, while the trinitarian approach addresses regard for oneself as an important aspect of wellbeing, it does not hold this out as the telos of development. At this point, the trinitarian response to narrative therapy’s individualist orientation is two-fold. First, it affirms author agency for its anti-oppression stance and capacity to develop self-care and self-determination; and second, it invites a different weight to be given to one’s own preferences and needs in relation to those of others. Wellbeing would be better served by understanding that cruciform love—agape—is more than love-as-sacrifice, it also involves equal regard (Browning, 2006; Post, 2002). Equal regard means that while a Christian is sometimes called upon by the demands of love to put her needs and interests second, the ideal for Christian love is loving oneself neither more nor less than the other. On this ethical analysis of Christian love, self-sacrifice is sometimes required, but it is not the ideal.

Subjectivity centred on cruciform love. The claim that the trinitarian subject—a person-in-communion—is centred on participation in agape love implies that problems are ultimately addressed, and awareness and wellbeing developed, through exercising agency on behalf of oneself and others. In the presence of the divine Trinity, “we need to strip down the drab grey of our own self-enclosed selves and cultures and embrace others so that their bright colors, painted on our very selves, will begin to shine” (Gundry & Volf, 1997, p. 60). We are not dealing here with an abstract ethical principle derived from paying attention to the loving life of the Godhead. More specifically,
this goes to the nature of the relationship we share with God. The freedom to give to others is received in the form of God’s care; the confidence that God will look after me when I dare to look after others. And so, it is out of experiencing hospitable communion that Christians seek to open space in their hearts so that the hurting might be included and accepted, as they are (Nolasco, 2011).

This is an orientation of a person’s centre, away from the Western hegemonic conception of an individually structured self, and toward and beyond the post-modern conception of a de-centred self. The trinitarian conception falls somewhere between these two extremes as a dialogically centred self. And so, while this calls for the centering of the de-centred post-modern self, Christian anthropology has always posited that the centre of the self is a self-centred on God, and in Christ as reality. Volf (1996) captured this fact beautifully:

Through faith and baptism the self has been re-made in the image of “the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me,” Paul writes. At the center of the self lies self-giving love. No ‘hegemonic centrality’ closes the self off, guarding its self-same identity and driving out and away whatever threatens its purity. To the contrary, the new center opens the self up, makes it capable and willing to give itself for others and to receive others in itself. On the previous chapter I argued that Paul locates the unity of the church not in the discarnate transcendence of a pure universal spirit, but in the scandalous transcendence of the suffering body of God’s Messiah. Correspondingly, Paul locates the center of the self not in some single and unchangeable – because self-enclosed – ‘essence’, but in self-giving love made possible and patterned on the suffering Messiah. (p. 71)

I am proposing that the trinitarian self is a partially de-centred dialogic self. While I agree with the narrative therapists that the self exists through the many interactions of multiple voices, it is more than this. It is also invited to be centred on responsibility towards self and other. This moral and ethical coherence of the self provides for a basis to discern and embody what is good, albeit a “good” that is expressed through the narrative structure. Taking their lead from Mikhail Bakhtin, Frank Richardson and associates argued that the “I” is constructed through on-going conversation with others and the things they stand for. This dialogic development of the self involves both internalising the voices of others, and the ethical task of evaluating which voices are good to take on as part of one’s inner dialogue. This approach is relevant, because while the dialogic self is permeated by others, it is not completely defined by it. As the “I” takes responsibility for evaluating the moral adequacy of the voices that are available to take from the social and cultural worlds, it becomes ethically centred (Richardson, Rogers, & McCarrol, 1998).

**Alterity.** Of course, a real strength of narrative therapy’s postmodern orientation is its concern for respecting otherness, or alterity. And yet, this is mainly expressed as therapist concern
for the otherness of the client. And this limited alterity does not adequately represent the trinitarian challenge to transform the orbit of the self around egoism into a self-and-other orbit. Because of this I am arguing that practices of engaging the preferences of others need to reshape the existing author-agency practices to include a moral and ethical centre of evaluation. Furthermore, because trinitarian praxis is specifically motivated by the emotional intensity of love for neighbours, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow (Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 10: 18-19), it is not enough to approach altruism out of obligation or self-interest. Loving altruistic action needs to be motivated “at least primarily for the other person’s sake” (Hazo, 1976, p. 18).

Theologically, this is the motivation of love to attend to the call of the other for a loving response, through which love for Christ is also expressed. While this suggestion may sound unnecessarily spiritual in a conversation about therapy, it actually indicates the kind of holism that is typical of trinitarian theology. Tying together care of others with God encounter, is appropriate because the trinitarian quest for theological perspectives always points to the quest for Jesus the Christ—which signifies hope of encounter with the triune God—and this hope is always orientated towards praxis. By this I mean that within the relational orientation of the triune life, both the ethical commitment to otherness, and the metaphysical activity of prayer, come together as praxis. Morrison (2013) argued that this requires adopting a state of “passivity” that “opens the self up to God’s will and works in the innermost part of the human spirit“. This enables, “the ordinary senses of the self to see, hear, and touch the world of the other with greater intensity” (Morrison, p. 2), which infers that when a person experiences safety in God’s safe keeping, concern can be diverted from self to the other. Because “passivity” is typically associated with apathy, it may be clearer to think of this stance in terms of the founder of the Society of Jesus; St. Ignatius of Loyola’s call is to “holy indifference”.

Another way of saying this is that trinitarian praxis, one orientated to both self and other, is itself orientated to the usual orientation of the self-orientated to itself. Orientation to the others can, of course, take many forms, including care in response to need, compassion in response to suffering, sympathy in response to unfair suffering, beneficence on behalf of the well-being of others, companionship in response to the need for attentiveness in the ordinary, and justice-seeking in response to larger patterns of injustice (Post, 2002). Put simply, trinitarian altruism has to do with the loving discovery of the other as other, and the sharing of concern for her welfare. This form of altruism no longer directs agency as if the self is the only centre of value (Post, 2002). Framing altruism as something enabled by opening to God in prayer, and directed towards concern for both self and other, implies that the centred subject is actually a therapeutic subject where the needs and preferences of the other are ranked neither less nor more highly than one’s own.
It is important not to interpret the trinitarian invitation to ethically centre personal subjectivity simplistically. While I am arguing for therapeutic consideration of both the needs of self and other, there are many instances that arise in the context of counselling where the self-interest needs to be prioritised. For example, when circumstance, such as the protracted illness of a family member, has distanced a person from her own needs. When it gets to the stage that the family member is heading towards a physical and emotional melt-down, it may well be the case that putting her own needs above that of the sick family member is entirely in accord with the Christian love ethic. My point is that both people involved have legitimate claims. In situations like these, trinitarian love does not represent a simplistic call for self-denial, but an invitation to engage the complexity of living as persons-in-communion.

It is also important to realise that the development of both author-agency and ethical-agency is time-bound. As such, the various goals associated with therapeutic conversation need to be appropriately sequenced.

**Dynamic personal and therapeutic process.** Based on these considerations, the goal of choosing on behalf of one’s own needs—author-agency—with those of others—ethical-agency—emerges. It appears that this implies a dynamic process of development in that author-agency is a prerequisite for ethical-agency. This dynamic process of development might look like that depicted in Figure 1 below:

*Figure 1. Agentic development*
Conclusions: the social domain. Narrative therapy’s foregrounding of the role of linguistic process in the manufacture of subjectivity is a gift to people living in response to the trinitarian social project. However, trinitarian anthropology invites a broader conception of the person than one focused on social process alone. As it stands, the social project that narrative therapy represents implies a devastating impact on the trinitarian subject. When compared with the action of triune love—love that bestows freedom at the same time as developing subjectivity—narrative therapy’s narrow focus on social process appears to be inadequate.

The second conclusion that has been reached is that while the social constructionist emphasis on individual freedom to choose identity is laudable, this approach is weakened by its inability to advocate for interpersonal ethics. This implies, amongst other things, that an account of the needs of others needs to be brought alongside narrative therapy’s current individualistic orientation. Ultimately this division between the interests of self and other rests in the ontological role narrative therapy gives to linguistic process, rather than in the love of God, as is the case for trinitarian thinking. This implies that the fundamental thing that people need to guard is desire, and not agency; and leads to the further conclusion that the de-centred narrative therapeutic person needs to be centred on the trinitarian ethics of interpersonal love.

Doing so still affirms narrative therapy’s anti-oppression stance, and its capacity to develop agentic self-determination, and it also invites the recognition that wellbeing would be better served by formulating hopes, for oneself and others, in dialogue with others and their communities, histories, and traditions. This implies that one of the counsellor’s tasks is to prioritise listening for love in the midst of the myriad of intentions that constitutes the lives of the client and counsellor. In this way the counsellor can be viewed as an agent of grace offering the client-person experience of hospitality, of holy welcome.

7.2 Domain two: Relational
Because counselling is typically arranged with two people talking about deeply personal matters, it may seem appropriate to assume that the quality of the therapeutic relationship would be considered valuable within the therapeutic process. This assumption, however, reflects the high value humanist approaches place on personal encounter. For example, the inspiration that Rogers’ (1951) seminal work generates is often uncritically accepted as an appropriate benchmark for therapeutic relating in the West. The reality is that different therapeutic approaches place varying emphasis on the role of relationship in the production of wellbeing, and as a contributing factor in therapeutic change. Rather than using humanist hegemony as a measure, the task for this discussion is to consider how
relationship in the narrative therapeutic context aligns with the trinitarian vision of subject-to-subject relating.

Narrative therapy certainly does resonate with some important features of trinitarian relations. On one hand, its revisionist understanding of language implies a deeply respectful stance towards the uniqueness of the client-person’s identity, self-understanding, and hope. Furthermore, because of its sensitivity to the creative power of language, narrative therapy employs therapeutic conversation judiciously in the change process. On the other hand, narrative therapy’s social constructionist theorisation of personhood represents individuals as little more than disembodied centres of language interaction. This formulation limits the work’s ability to imagine the style of deeply personal relational connection that trinitarian theology expects. In the absence of a broader narrative therapeutic vision of interpersonal relating, the following discussion focuses on the therapist-client relationship, and draws conclusions from this about what its stance on relating in other contexts might be.

**Client - therapist relations.** In his *Church Dogmatics* Barth presented his trinitarian ontological presupposition of *analogia fidei*. This analogy is based on, and is compatible with, Bonhoeffer’s *analogia relationis* (for a presentation of this see, for example Green, 1999). Within this analogy, Barth attempted to represent his theological anthropology of *Mitmenschlichkeit*—co-humanity—that is a central feature of his theological anthropology. Barth (1936-61) construed that because humans are accepted freely and unconditionally in Christ, they are primarily called to be neighbourly (for a comprehensive summary of Barth’s concept of analogia fidei, see Hunsinger, 1991). In essence, Barth’s trinitarian call to participate in God, as a concrete form of co-human existence, involves accepting and loving others freely and unconditionally in him (J. Lee, 1969).

In order to consider how this vision of accepting and loving co-human existence might translate to the therapeutic context I look to Martin Buber’s (1958) formulation of subject-to-subject encounter. Using Buber’s formulation as a means to ground Barth’s analogy, it becomes apparent that participation in co-humanity involves the kind of encounter where people are freely and generously greeted as subjects to be known—rather than objects to be used—by people who are also available to be encountered as subjects. When viewed from this perspective, narrative therapy’s respect for the client-person’s subjectivity—albeit a fragmented one—would seem to be particularly appropriate. Indeed, narrative therapy represents an important development from the more objectifying stance that characterises early approaches in Freudian psychoanalysis, Skinner’s behaviourism, Ellis’ cognitive therapy, and the medical models of therapy more generally. One of narrative therapy’s most significant contributions to counselling seems to be its concern to respectfully engage the social subjectivity of others, and its capacity to engage interpersonal power
as a social phenomenon. See for example David Crawley’s (2014) discourse analysis of resistance to religious authority. As well as this strength in working with the social construction of relationships, trinitarian evaluation highlights narrative therapy’s neglect of interpersonal dimensions of relating.

**Limitations to professional relating.** There are, of course, appropriate limitations placed upon relating in the therapeutic context by the professional nature of counselling. Because of these, therapeutic conversation will always imply a relational imbalance. Even taking this into account, narrative therapy’s exclusively social view of relating implies that it has the potential to move a considerable distance towards the trinitarian ideal of subject-to-subject dialogue. Indeed, this is well travelled terrain in the context of more relationally orientated therapeutic approaches, as exemplified in the work of Rogers (1961), Teyber and McClure (2001), and Mearns and Cooper (2005). While narrative therapy’s helpful capacity to critique the politics of power associated with interpersonal counselling is beyond the scope of this study, it needs to be acknowledged. And so, I signal the possible development of interpersonal dimensions of relating with due regard to Drewery’s (2005) call to carefully consider the micro-politics of professional conversation.

As I have already implied, through my affirmation of narrative therapy’s concern for the politics of relating, trinitarian theology’s concern for the mutual sharing of relational presence and intention does not imply that this is an unrestrained style of sharing. Campbell’s (1984) influential thesis is relevant in that he contended people are more likely to be helped through a form of caring that restrains love, and stretches the boundaries that constrain professional care in all of its forms. Campbell referred to this stance using T. S. Eliot’s (1930) words from his poem *Ash Wednesday*, “teach us to care and not to care”. Using an allied example of the nursing professional, Campbell illustrated what he means by “restrained love”:

Thus in the skilled care which the professional nurse offers there may be discerned a form of love. With either an absence or an excess of professional detachment, this love may be lost. But in the delicately balanced relationship I have described as “companionship” there is a personal involvement and a giving, which transcends skill or technique. (p. 51)

Campbell’s proposal of “restrained love” raises important issues for the counselling context. First, the suggestion that love represents a style of relating, that falls between an absence and excess of detachment, is a useful application of the general principle that love cherishes respectful distance between people. This points to the second issue, namely, that love involves a level of personal giving. It is more difficult to align the narrative therapeutic style of relating with restrained love, because it lacks a theorisation of interpersonal dynamics, and a commitment to any particular form of relating apart from social freedom. And so, narrative therapy’s advocacy for restrained love, for
example, would violate its commitment to freedom from all normative systems of wellbeing. While socially constructed life may involve discourses about relating, and even relating in accord with love, interpersonal ethics are not identified as a vital aspect of narrative therapeutic personhood. Put differently, while the person in narrative therapy may relate, she is not necessarily a relational person. When considered from the perspective of the trinitarian affirmation that humans are created in and for relationship, this philosophical neglect of relations is a significant concern (Gunton, 1993).

Narrative therapy’s restrained therapist-self. Narrative therapy’s neglect of interpersonal relationality can be observed in the way therapist relating is shaped. H. Anderson (2005) argued that the appropriate form of narrative therapeutic relating is shaped by positioning the therapist as a “therapist-self”. This infers a “thinner” form of relating than the rich mutuality involved in restrained love, or as illustrated by Buber’s subject-to-subject encounter. However, in spite of these limitations, clients often report experiencing narrative therapeutic conversation as unusually respectful and engaging. Conversation with Michael White, for example, is renowned for the quality of concern experienced by those who consult with him about their lives, and the constructive impact of these experiences (see, for example, Denborough, 2009 for an Australian perspective on White’s legacy). I suggest that this anomaly between theory of practice and client experience of practice can be explained in three ways.

First, as White and Epston (1990) are careful to establish, narrative therapy resists the kind of investigative enquiry associated with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (APA, 2013). Instead, it is directed towards understanding the client-person’s experiences, including her struggles, from the perspective of her cultural, linguistic, and discursive context. For example, a person struggling with “hearing-voices” would be asked if she has a name for what it is she is experiencing, rather than being offered a diagnostic label such as multiple-personality disorder. This kind of enquiry pays particular attention to personal narratives that may not usually get noticed because of their subjugation by more prominent stories. Perhaps a young person becomes known in her family context as not particularly intelligent because she does not excel at exams in the way her older siblings do. This story may occlude others, such as stories that could be told about abilities with art and design, or money management. Because of the care taken to engage people in enquiry about their unique experiences, the meaning they attach to these, and to uncovering subjugated stories, these conversations are often experienced as powerfully affirming in a similar way that experiences of grace might be. The second and third reasons have less to do with narrative therapy itself, and more to do with general therapeutic factors.
As I indicated earlier, a narrative therapist’s professional repertoire may include other counselling modalities, some that are utilised consciously, and some that are present but unrecognised. The therapeutic use of Rogerian (1951, 1956, 1961) core relational conditions of “empathy”, “genuineness”, and “unconditional positive regard” have become so synonymous with counselling that they may appear in a narrative therapist’s work, without attracting attention or critique. It may be, therefore, that a client-person’s experience of the therapist relates to these qualities that are present quite apart from the stance that narrative therapy would invite. I will refer below to empirical evidence that shows that the relational quality is often more significant to clients in terms of healing and growth than other specific therapeutic interventions. It may also be that a multimodal approach has been intentionally adopted. Studies, such as the ones conducted by Norcross (2005) and Norcross and Beutler (2008), suggest that the majority of counsellors prefer some form of modal integration, and that many do not claim to align their practices with only one particular approach, or even philosophy. Indeed, there is growing recognition that human behaviour is so complex that no one theory is comprehensive enough to engage these complexities.

The third explanation for why a person might experience the narrative therapeutic relationship in ways that the espoused therapy does not predict, has to do with the personal presence of the therapist (Wampold, 2001). This is a feature of narrative work that is not well theorised, and indeed cannot be given the exclusively social theorisation of personal subjectivity. It is interesting that studies into counselling in general, such as Corey (2009), frequently establish that clients rate the quality of the therapeutic relationship to be responsible, on average 60%, for of their experience of therapeutic benefit. While these research findings may be dismissed from the social constructionist perspective that only acknowledges the linguistic construction of interpersonal process, from the trinitarian perspective, they are unsurprising. They are unsurprising because to the extent the therapist is available as a loving and accepting subject to be encountered, the work will incarnate more than a social theorisation of subjectivity can recognise or explain.

**Not-knowing stance.** I now return to the specific practice of resisting diagnostic conversation. Framed as not-knowing listening, this stance is perhaps the closest the narrative therapeutic practice comes to representing a preferred style of therapist relating. Drawing Anderson and Goolishian’s (1988; 1992) work, the practice represents a collaborative stance that intends to facilitate the expression of the subjective knowledge people hold about their lives, and through this the development of author-agency. Anderson (1997) said not-knowing:

refers to the attitude and belief that the therapist does not have access to privileged information, can never fully understand another person, always needs to be in the state of
being informed by the other, and always needs to learn more about what has been said or may not have been said. (p. 134)

As far as it goes, this practice is valuable because awareness of the potential extensiveness of interpersonal difference in such things as thinking, feeling, attitudes, hopes, values, and culture, is vital if conversation is to be more than manipulative monologue. If a person were to be accepted for who she is now, and who she would like to become, rather than who the therapist assumes her to be, or would like her to be, respect for difference must be exercised. Not-knowing engagement is designed to assist with this.

In practice, not-knowing implies that the therapist attempts to keep her own knowledge “to one side” in the hope of identifying what Ricoeur (1976) referred to as “surplus of meaning”. This is meaning associated with the client-person’s storied life in her unique context; this may or may not usually get noticed in the face of dominating interpretations. In essence, and as Weingarten (1998) argued, it represents a shift in focus from what the therapist thinks the client-person is telling her, to what the client-person thinks she is saying.

White (2007) contended that it is hazardous for therapists to take a leading role in conversations designed to highlight alternative stories and unique outcomes. This is because taking a lead “risks alienating people who seek consultation”, and “places the therapist at the center of the therapeutic conversation, thus closing the door on possibilities for collaborative inquiry” (p. 220). For this reason, White advocated for a de-centred therapist listening position such as the not-knowing one. While it may appear so:

A not-knowing position does not mean the therapist does not know anything or that the therapist throws away or does not use what she or he already knows. It does not mean the therapist just sits back and does nothing or cannot offer an opinion. It does mean, however, that the therapist’s contributions, whether they are questions, opinions, speculations, or suggestions, are presented in a manner that conveys a tentative posture and portrays respect for and openness to the other and to newness. (H. Anderson, 2005, p. 34)

In summary, tentative and creative therapist contributions are welcomed, but only insofar as they intend the development of client self-expression, and ultimately author-agency.

7.3 Trinitarian evaluation of not-knowing style of relating
Because the development of author-agency—and the use of this to construct preferred identity narratives—is the main narrative therapeutic developmental goal, there is little reason for narrative therapists to question the adequacy of this style of relating, either within the therapeutic context or in the client-person’s world more generally. Put differently, because the narrative therapist assumes
the main thing a client-person needs in support of the development of wellbeing is access to her own subjective knowledge, the need for a more interpersonal style of relating is not apparent.

Evaluating this conception of relating from the trinitarian perspective affirms the sensitivity to difference it communicates, and the need to tread carefully around the socially constructed meaning, but it also raises several concerns. Again, these relate to narrative therapy’s exclusively social ontology and the object-to-object style of relating that this implies. This stance explains and supports narrative therapy’s emphasis on the development of self-interest, and its neglect of the role of considering the wellbeing of others in effective relating.

**Monologue and dialogue.** When a person’s agentic freedom is limited—as is often the case when people begin counselling—the value of not-knowing listening is clear. This is because in order to create space for the expression of the client-person’s knowledge and insight about her life, it will be necessary for the counsellor to similarly confine her agency, strength of presence, and the representation of the opinions and needs of others. However, the trinitarian vision of dialogic relating ultimately represents a more equal style, both within the therapeutic dyad and in community relationships more generally. The trinitarian invitation, therefore, is to recognise that personal development involves a dynamic shift from monologue towards dialogue relating. These dynamics can be represented graphically in this way (See Figure 2 below):

![Figure 2. Transition from monologic to dialogic relating](image)

Another way to illustrate the development of the therapeutic style of relating from not-knowing towards more robust relating, is via the horse whisperer metaphor (Evans, 1996; Sudekum Trotter, 2012). The role of a horse whisperer includes approaching a frightened horse in a manner that does not perpetrate further domination, so as to invite it into a more trusting relationship; that is, the aim is more robust relating. “Whispering” can be viewed as an act of hospitality that is
classically represented in the story recorded in Genesis (18, 1-15). Here Abraham and Sarah welcome three angelic visitors at the oak of Mamre. This is the story that is said to have inspired Rublev’s (1408-1425) icon of the Holy Trinity. Rublev arranges the three guests as hosts, seated around a dining table so that space is maintained for further guests to join and participate in the communion experience. This perichoretic welcome is the place of mutual vulnerability which, as Yong (2008) argued, inspires personal and social change, in inevitable and concrete form such as repentance and restitution.

The mutuality of trinitarian dialogue requires more engagement from the therapist’s subjectivity than the narrative therapeutic “therapist-self” allows. At the very least, a move towards a more dialogic style of relating might involve the use of not-knowing along with what Guilfoyle (2003) referred to as “special speaking arrangements”. These include such things as continuous communication about the therapist’s practices, and her intentions for the use of these practices. In this way, mutuality is enhanced, and the inherent power imbalances involved in the sociocultural construction of therapy receive the necessary re-balance. I make these suggestions on the basis that the version of conversation typically associated with narrative therapy differs from the trinitarian view of dialogue that involves the Three knowing each other fully.

**Two versions of dialogue.** Much of the difficulty associated with discussing relationality in the narrative therapeutic context seems to relate to different uses of the word “dialogue”. Without appreciating this, what is written about narrative therapy’s collaborative and dialogical conversation can be confusing. As an example, Anderson (2005) argued that her style of narrative therapeutic relating qualifies as dialogue in that “[e]ach member partakes in the development of meaning as he or she interacts with, responds to, and mediates with the other to grasp meaning” and this involves “immersing oneself in the other’s horizon” (p. 499). While this may seem like a standard description of dialogue, her underlying assumptions are formulated in the conversational terms of Bernstein (1983). This approach leads her to consider it possible to engage in dialogue through “immerse[ing] oneself in the other’s horizon” without sharing mutuality. This is in contrast to the trinitarian relational view of dialogue that requires mutual immersion in both party’s horizons; and implies that while narrative therapy represents a significant step away from the monologue of diagnostic conversation associated with modern psychology, it is not subject-to-subject dialogue.

Russian literary theorist and philosopher of language Mikhail Bakhtin’s formulation of dialogue is helpful for the specificity it offers. In keeping with Buber’s assessment, Bakhtin (1984) considered the use of language, in situations where a single intention dominates, to be monologic, as opposed to dialogic. Whether it is the therapist or client-person’s intention that dominates, the monologic outcome is the same, and in the case of not-knowing conversation, it is the client-
person’s intentions that dominate. While we might be accustomed to expect the client’s intentions to dominate the therapeutic conversation, and so overlook the relational imbalance that this implies, Bakhtin’s salient point holds. This is that where single intentions dominate, “the genuine interaction of consciousness’s is impossible, and thus genuine dialogue is impossible as well” (p. 81).

To put this another way, dialogic participation involves both parties to a conversation having the freedom to represent their interests, “merely having a voice is not sufficient if that voice must speak in a register that is alien to its own specificity, and in so doing lose its own desires and interests” (Sampson, 1993, pp. 10-11). While these insights are most often deployed in support of practices such as not-knowing ones, they equally apply in support of the therapist person’s voice. This analysis leads to the conclusion that both people’s intentions need to find space on their own terms, if an interaction is to be considered dialogic. In practice this looks something like the opportunity for both parties to be present and authentic in making their responses to one another, rather than attempting to act out of a role. The problem with this assessment, from the narrative therapeutic perspective, is that there is no meta-narrative benchmark to provide a definition of authentic. Therefore, the narrative of narrative therapy becomes the benchmark, and on this basis therapist-relating is considered adequately authentic.

I conclude, along with Madigan and Epston (1998), that while narrative therapy constitutes a welcome advance towards the theorisation of postmodern collaborative therapy, it cannot be considered dialogic in the manner of Buber, Bakhtin, or Sampson. Based on the similarities between their representations of dialogue and the trinitarian one, it is appropriate to say that further development of narrative therapy’s “thin” form of relating is invited. However, in order for this reconsideration to be made possible, relational ethics need to be engaged.

**Encountering things ex-discourse.** So far, I have argued that if relating is to be considered truly dialogic it must be mutual, and involve more personal presence and authenticity in conversational exchanges. While trinitarian theology affirms the social constructionist thesis that all knowledge is mediated by language, and therefore a conversational version of dialogue, it also insists on a fuller view of dialogue. But this insistence carries with it an affirmation of relational ethics. I say this because while the trinitarian contention for a specific version of dialogue can be viewed as one among many equally valid places to locate the work, it infers more than this. The added inference is that as well as representing a historical tradition, it also represents a claim to a better—or even best—way to arrange therapeutic relationships. While it would be much more straightforward for me to walk past this issue, doing so would overlook an important consideration that is central to the trinitarian view of personal wellbeing. This is the consideration that trinitarian theology affirms the existence of real—ex-discourse—things.
While one of these “real” things is the trinitarian relational ontology already introduced, “real” things also include embodied experience and drives—including self-preservation, sexual intimacy, and attachment—psychological process, cognitive function, and relational presence, including God’s. My point is that these things also exert influence, through the words used to understand them, and the trinitarian perspective further invites therapeutic engagement with these things. I make this claim mindful that nothing can be considered purely “ex-discourse” because these things are always subject to social influence, which is also “real”. It is, therefore, appropriate to say that our experience of ex-discourse things is always “diffuse and indeterminate” (Harre & Gillette, 1994, p. 150).

The point that I have built towards is that while narrative therapeutic relating is confined to considering socially constructed meaning, and the narration of this, trinitarian relating also involves “listening” to the full range of human experience. For example, a narrative therapeutic response might be shaped like this: “Your expression of concern supports [or perhaps undermines] the way I prefer to understand myself.” A response that is more in keeping with the trinitarian view will be shaped to engage both discursive and ex-discursive things: “I appreciate your support for the steps I am taking, and I feel comforted by your presence and care”. It may even be that communication is transacted without the use of words; an example of this is a non-verbal therapeutic expression of shock or grief. I am not implying that the words and meaning related to these experiences are more than discursively constructed, but that dialogue must include the experience of things ex-discourse.

**Embrace instead of exclusion.** All things considered, it seems that narrative therapy avoids a full and rich version of dialogue, and in doing so it betrays an underlying individualism through weakening the therapist’s role and undermining mutuality (Wallace, 2002). The basis of this avoidance is a strict adherence to a social-constructionist view of relating. It is clear that narrative therapy’s focus on engaging a person’s socially constructed uniqueness is valuable. This is because therapy typically overlooks the social dimension of human life, and doing so inadvertently diminishes this important aspect of personal uniqueness. However, adhering exclusively to the social approach is extremely limiting because it overlooks the significance of both embodied individuality and relationality. A more trinitarian response might be to seek to cherish personal uniqueness through exercising the embrace of love. This embrace of love is derived from the otherness-in-relation style of relating of the Father, Son, and Spirit. According to Gunton (1993), this form of relating achieves even more than protecting particularity, it cherishes it through giving due weight to both the particular and the universal. From this perspective, it is apparent that while not-knowing relating gives weight to the particular, it does so at the expense of the universal. In the therapeutic context, the universal includes things like the impact of the therapist’s own cherished
values, and the guidance of professional knowledge on its own terms, and commonly shared stories that have become influential in history and tradition, such as the trinitarian ones. These universal things might actually be the same things as those referred to above as real—“ex-discourse”—things. By giving due weight to the particular and the universal, the trinitarian story again safeguards the particular without resorting to a version of exclusion.

The trinitarian story’s advocacy for embrace, as opposed to exclusion, is a riskier approach. This risk is associated with a dilemma about how to appropriately weight the emphasis that is given to individual and universal concerns. While narrative therapy attempts to legislate the withholding of the universal, this is not really a valid dichotomy, because life is a journey that must be lived. Traveling this journey, according to Pembroke (2002), involves living in genuine openness to alternative opinions and worldviews, while at the same time not giving away cherished personal differences, such as the seriousness of the struggle of truth and justice. This is both the risk and the challenge associated with the trinitarian invitation to participate in the dialogic embrace of love.

**Conclusions: relational domain.** It has emerged that narrative therapy resonates with some important features of trinitarian relations. This resonance, based on its revisionist understanding of language, implies a deeply respectful stance towards the uniqueness of individual identity and hope. Furthermore, narrative therapy represents an important sensitivity to the power of language.

However, because narrative therapy views people as little more than centres of language interaction, interpersonal relating and the development of virtues that this involves, is beyond its therapeutic scope. Hence it has been concluded that narrative therapy needs to move away from object-subject relating, and towards the trinitarian ideal of subject-to-subject dialogue. Unless it does this it will remain fundamentally self-centred. In summary, the trinitarian vision of wellbeing requires ethical development, as well as agentic development. Put differently, this implies a shift from monologue towards dialogue, and so relating to, and about, a full range of human experience including the embodied experience of being human. Narrative therapy, however, is renowned for the way it objectifies the body, and therefore diminishes its role in the dialogic style of relating that trinitarian theology invites.

**7.4 Domain three: Embodied individuality**

When viewed from the perspective of the incarnational centre of social trinitarian theology, narrative therapy’s treatment of embodiment is problematic because it suggests a dualism that separates the social dimension of life from the biological one. From the incarnational perspective this is inappropriate in that the destiny of creation as imago Dei is affirmed by the eternal Son becoming human (McDougall, 2005). In this way humans are affirmed as a part of God’s social life and the natural world. As I have already argued, social constructionism is to be commended for the
focus it brings to historical, cultural, and community aspects of human life, and for the way this orientation opens therapeutic conversation to include talk about things such as the contingency of interpretation, hope, values, ethics, story, and spirituality. However, this bias towards the social implies a neglect of relationality, and natural world realities of human life, such as the desire to run and enjoy familiar breeze on the face, the value of offering a hug to a sad child, the physical value in communicating welcome with food and a warm fire, breathing deeply to be reminded at some unfathomable level that one’s body holds a measure of wisdom, and communicating using physicality as well as words. My interest here is to consider how narrative therapeutic practice might be advanced if it more fully engages the embodied sphere of human communication and life, or at least partnered with a therapeutic approach that is familiar with the therapeutic value of these things.

**The diminished social constructionist body.** While it is persuasive and helpful that narrative therapy insists that human subjectivity involves power play, language-games, and narrativity, the postmodern assertion that subjectivity is centred here unfortunately diminishes appreciation for human life. Eco-feminist Spretnak (1997) observed:

> [w]hen deconstructive postmodernists conclude that there is nothing to life but arbitrary social construction and utter groundlessness, they continue and intensify the diminished conceptualization of the human that was begun by Renaissance humanism, the scientific revolution, and the Enlightenment. These foundational movements of modernity cumulatively framed the human story apart from the larger unfolding story of the earth community. Deconstructive postmodernists shrink the human story even further, insisting that it is entirely a matter of power plays and language games. (p. 433)

These influences are unmistakably present in narrative therapy. They are illustrated in many places; one sees it, for example, in the claims made by White and Epston (1990), Madigan (2003), and White (2004, 2007) that the practice rightly resists framing humans as part of a larger story, such as a meaningful part of the natural world. I conclude that elevating the importance of relating on a social and linguistic level, while shunning subjectivity associated with the material world, resonates with a collection of ancient religions I referred to earlier as Gnostic (Parker, 1992). This is not to say that the way the body is interpreted by individuals in their historical and cultural contexts is not of interest to social constructionists, (see, for example, Butler, 1990). It does imply that third-person observation does not equate to an adequate interest in the embodied nature of human enterprise.

In contrast, early trinitarian theologians went to considerable lengths to address what they refer to as “gnostic heresies” by affirming both the divinity and humanity of Jesus (Athanasius,
In this manner they sought to affirm both the importance of spirituality and the sacredness of everyday life including work well done, the provision of good food and rest, and the practical value of caring. As discussed earlier, second century (CE) bishop of Gaul, Saint Irenaeus, developed a whole-person affirming view of the imago Dei in response to the proposal by Marcion that salvation relates only to the soul and spirit (Irenaeus, 1996). However, this holistic approach is not the one adopted by narrative therapy. I will first explore narrative therapy’s object-body stance, and then discuss the trinitarian invitation to think in terms of a subject-body.

Observation and the object-body. That social constructionism would relate to the body as something to be observed, seen, and manipulated from the outside is unsurprising given the value placed on vision and observation within Western epistemological method. In what I want to refer to as the objectivist tradition, the West has privileged vision as a way of knowing, and in a related manner diminished the value of other senses (Sampson, 1996). Plato and Aristotle both commend the virtue of vision, and their work contributes to the underpinning of the Western philosophical tradition. Later, Descartes built his whole philosophical framework on the visual metaphor of the “mind’s eye” as a trustworthy base for human understanding (Levin, 1985). This vision-centric approach is now clearly evident in the scientific traditions that were spawned in the Enlightenment era, where third-person spectator validation of observable phenomena is required.

While it may appear as if social constructionism represents a very different approach to knowing than the objectivist one—because it looks out to the synthesis between things rather than to individual detail—they actually both share an interest in observation. Where constructionism and objectivism differ is in terms of the rationale they each give for how the world is formed; it is not their vision-centric orientation. While objectivism assumes a pre-existing world, and therefore the need to discover it, constructionism assumes the world exists as a result of cultural, historical, and social process (Sampson, 1996). And so, while constructionism can be seen as advancing the reductionist and individualist orientation of objectivism, in that it looks to history, culture, and community, it still relates to the body as an object to be observed, rather than as a subject to be encountered. Before I go on to discuss the trinitarian invitation to move beyond observation as a way of knowing, through encountering the body as a subject-body to be known in relationship, I need to refer to the way the phenomenological movement also seeks to return the subjectivity of the body to prominence.

Phenomenology. In contrast to the visual observer metaphor that represents seeking to know the body from the outside, the phenomenologically experienced body is sought from the inside. This move is in keeping with Nietzsche’s attempt to reclaim body knowing distinguished between the “body of scientific observation” and the “body we experience” (Levin, 1985, p. 35).
Many others, including Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, have formulated parallel distinctions (Jay, 1993; Levin, 1985). While the phenomenological challenge to the object-body approach encourages a return to the body as a subject, unfortunately this is as a pre-existing, and therefore individual body. And so while phenomenology appropriately engages the embodied nature of communication, it still supports the Western exclusionary practices of individualism and foundationalism because it—like objectivism—overlooks the formative influences of culture, history, community, and relationality. On the other hand, while constructionism engages the social sphere, it fails to engage the embodied nature of communication (Sampson, 1996). Trinitarian anthropology has a role to play here, because it calls for a both/and approach; it posits a person who recognises both the role of culture, language and discourse, on the one hand, and embodied experience in the development of awareness, on the other. Before going on to develop this proposal I need to justify my claim that narrative therapy represents a constructionist object-body.

**The narrative therapeutic object-body.** As I have established, for social constructionists the human subject is centred on culture, language, and discourse as constituent parts of social life. Henriques (1984) captured this thesis saying that, “the subject itself is the effect of a production, caught in the mutually constitutive web of social practices, discourses and subjectivity; its reality is the tissue of social relations” (p. 117). This implies that while narrative therapy is concerned with discourses about the object-body, it is unfortunately not concerned with the embodied nature of discourse. I will support this view by referring to the influential work of feminist constructionist philosopher, Judith Butler (1990).

Proponents of objectivism posit that individual differences—such as personality, sex, and gender—contain extra-discursive elements, such as the ones that lead us to differentiate between male and female bodies. When, from this perspective, the cultural shaping of men and women is acknowledged, it is in terms of messages being written onto these “natural” male and female bodies, rather than in terms of a body’s capacity to speak on behalf of its own authority. However, constructionists like Butler see this differently. They favour the position according to which there are no natural independent bodies, just socially shaped ones. The constructionist body, therefore, “is not sexed in any significant sense prior to its determination within a discourse through which it becomes invested with an “idea” of natural or essential sex” (Butler, 1990, p. 92). This may sound like a peculiar claim to people steeped in the objectivist view, and for Christian folk whose theology has been—unwittingly—developed in relation to these discourses. However, it is not the constructionist claim that the body is shaped by culture that I take issue with, but the suggestion that the body is a passive recipient of these forces.
We need to be careful not to read Butler saying that she denies the body’s physical presence or role; instead her argument about the basis of gender and sexuality reflects Derrida’s (1979) seminal claim that “nothing exists outside the text” (p. xxiv). Therefore, her view appears to be that the body does exist, but it exists as a “blank canvas”. Butler’s blank-canvas argument centres on the claim that it is naive to refer to anything extra-discourse, bodies included, because they are always formed by the very discourses they are trying to free themselves from. Put differently, social conditioning is impossible to shake off because objects are always already shaped by an initial discursive act that guides the way an object is approached.

Consistent with this, narrative therapy considers enquiry about the natural world, including embodiment, to be useful, but only insofar as it provides insight into the shaping effects of social processes that are written onto it. Therefore, the body emerges in both constructionism and narrative therapy merely as an object-body that is inscribed through a social process, but cannot respond apart from ways that are dictated by the inscription. While trinitarian theology invites narrative therapy to maintain its interest in the social formation of bodily response, it also invites the recognition that bodily response is shaped by the body. This looks something like recognising both the contingency of all knowing and the way knowledge is influenced by embodied process. These bodily processes might include memories of formative relationships, feeling and emotion, body expression including sighs, deep breaths, the tilt of the head, and the shape of the mouth when speaking, tiredness, movements related to excitement and dismay, embodied wisdom, and hormonal processes that influence many things including attraction, the desire for procreation, and energy levels. Put most simply, trinitarian theology suggests that a mixture of both nurture and nature inspires human action, not just nurture as narrative therapy argues. Before I further detail the trinitarian objection to this stance, I will refer to Butler’s theorisation of bodily inscription as an example.

**Bodily inscription.** As far as it goes, Butler’s argument that embodiment plays an important role in apprehending and reproducing the effects of discursive subjectivity is valuable. If it were not for the body, the subjectifying influences of discourse would be fleeting, in a similar way to electricity that only flows while the switch is turned to on. If this were the case, as soon as a person moves from being subject to a particular social position, perhaps one that disallowed women from engaging in Christian leadership, the subjectification would cease, and she would be theoretically free to act differently. This is, of course, too simplistic because the personal experience of many people suggests that the effects of certain subjectivities are often “carried” for years. Davies (1991) offered a deeply personal example of experiencing the impact and invitation to act in accord with discourses that she concluded were “inscribed” upon her body years before. During the
presentation of a seminar in Sydney, Australia, on the Anglican Church’s resistance to woman holding positions of leadership, Davies reported becoming aware of a forgotten sensation that something was wrong with her body. This was a wrongness that she reported was particularly associated with her female genitals. The difference in this experience of wrongness, as compared to when she experienced the sensation earlier in her life, was that she now recognised the experience as fundamental to the Anglican discourse, and not to her body. And so, the notion of bodily inscription offers a useful means to theorise the way that subjectivities originating in social relations become “written” into our bodies in such a manner that they can appear to be “natural” to them.

In this powerful way, the body is considered relevant to a narrative therapeutic account of the person, but only insomuch as it offers a means to engage the influence of discourse across time and context, and to account for the decisions people make with regard to them. We might think of the effects of bodily inscription in a similar manner to the way grooves pressed by vehicle tires into a grassy field guide subsequent vehicle wheels to move along a similar path.

**Social subjectivity expressed through object-bodies.** White (1997, 2004) seemed to agree with Butler’s social account of the body, insomuch as he also avoided naturalistic explanations for why people act the way they do. As I argue below, White even adopted a more conservative approach to acknowledging the body than either Butler or Foucault. Having said this, in his last writing on the subject before his untimely death in 2008, White appears to indicate a moderated stance. Indeed, a new posture can be detected. He now hints at an agentic-self that may act in limited defiance of social prescription through personal, unique, self-generated “intentional” acts (White, 2007).

While we may assume that these later comments reference the person’s individual capacity to push back against social control and oppression, they are still likely to represent an extension of his earlier theory that social subjectivity is constituted and expressed through the individual across time. Critically, White remains careful in his later work not to allow an extra-discursive self to favour any particular subject position, such as those associated with particular male or female behaviours. White’s motivation for adopting this extreme stance is political, in that he aims to privilege the social and narrative accounts of people’s lives because, in his assessment, the social sciences are inappropriately dominated by naturalistic accounts of human action.

White and Epston’s single-minded emphasis on social life translates into practices in which even when people tell stories about themselves that are illustrated with bodily references there is a consistent reluctance to acknowledge these on their own terms. Examples might include, “When she was so mean to me, I felt my blood pressure rising” . . . “He is not very understanding of me when I have my period” . . . or “My body-image has always been a problem for me”. When these kinds of
references are acknowledged within narrative therapeutic practice it is on behalf of discourse analysis, and there is little evidence of enquiry about what the body might know, or even desire, apart from the manner in which it has been inscribed to respond by discourse. This socially formed individual, therefore, inhabits a socially constructed object-body, and not a subject-body that is capable of independent expression. Foucault helpfully referred to the object-body as an “individual self himself”. With this in mind I now turn to consider Foucault’s socially formed individual.

**Foucault’s socially formed individual.** Foucault’s writing on this subject is notoriously difficult to understand, because his deconstructive stance towards all systems of thought inclines him away from presenting his ideas as coherent formulations. As an example of this, Foucault (1994a) indicated that resistance is *produced* rather than *chosen* as power acts on the individual, simultaneously he offered the notion of the resisting “individual self himself”. It is clear, however, that this is an individual that is wholly social:

I am now interested in how the subject constitutes itself in an active fashion through practices of the self, these practices are nevertheless not something invented by the individual self himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group. (Foucault, p. 291)

Guilfoyle (2014) argued that Foucault does not so much intend denying a creative self-directing subject, but rather his political preference is to highlight the way truth, power, and self all work together. This is a helpful observation because it suggests that the social bias I have highlighted may result more in notions of a self-governing human subject being simply *overlooked*, rather than *dismissed*. In a similar way, Allen (2000) argued that:

Foucault’s aim is not to get rid of the concept of subjectivity altogether; instead he sets aside any conception of the subject as constituent in order that he might better understand how the subject is constituted in this particular cultural and historical milieu. (p. 122)

Veyne (2010) cast some light on these contradictions through reminding us that as well as subscribing to the social constructionist position, Foucault is Nietzschean in his analysis of power. This may explain why his “active body” subject appears more capable than the social constructionist position typically allows for. Foucault’s tentative acknowledgement of an extra-discursive subject is important because, as Guilfoyle (2014) argued, his theorisation of power only seems to work if the subject is active and “corporeally empowered with their capacities and energies” (pp. 107-108). This said, it is clear that social constructionism does not provide the conceptual resources to advance this theorisation of the embodied individual much further. It is also
clear that White does not offer any substantial leadership to address this conclusion. Thus, narrative therapy is left wanting.

And so, while Foucault’s individual may be more “alive and powerful” than some of his critics claim, White’s (2007) stance is clear in that he is adamant that these kinds of statements are “out of phase” with the main thrust of Foucault’s constructionist work (p. 61). All things considered, I conclude, along with Hoy (1999), that both Foucault and White do not represent a form of embodiment that is capable of inventing or expressing new forms of subjectivity.

It is valuable to recognise, here, that while Foucault and White have not been able to influence the development of narrative therapy’s acknowledgement or theorisation of the embodied individual very far at all, more recent narrative therapeutic literature is replete with references to unique, resourceful and wise selves (Guilfoyle, 2012). Conversation following White and Epston’s seminal work has spread, evolved, and changed into practice expressions that are perhaps more accurately referred to as collaborative, solution-focused, and narrative therapies. Chang and Nyland (2013) summarised some of these developmental threads in Narrative and solution-focused therapies: A twenty-year retrospective, and G. Combs and Freedman (2012) offered a similar survey in Narrative, poststructuralism, and social justice: Current practices in narrative therapy. However, while it has now become increasingly difficult to speak of narrative therapy as a coherent whole (Wallis, Burns, & Capdevila, 2010), there is little evidence that the theorisation of the object-body has been advanced very far beyond White and Epston’s seminal expression.

While it is important to note that feminist critiques of narrative therapy do engage the problematic dismissal of the body, these have not influenced the practice of narrative therapy to a large extent. Notably, those with a feminist agenda, such as Oksala (2011) and Battersby (1998), defend the importance of metaphysical enquiry in the light of the linguistic turn. Some, for example Brown, Weber, and Serena (2008), even critique narrative therapy directly, and suggest addressing women’s conformity to gender scripts through a combination of feminist and narrative approaches. These developments are positive when viewed in the light of the trinitarian call for the body to be robustly engaged as a site of both change and continuity, and the trinitarian invitation is for narrative therapy to also develop meaningful responses to this analysis.

I argued earlier that the trinitarian stance invites an ethical centring of the de-centred narrative therapeutic individual. I am now contending that in order to facilitate engagement in such a life, narrative therapy’s inadequate acknowledgement of the body needs to be re-imagined. By this I do not mean to imply a return to an individual who is centred on embodiment, but the formulation of one for whom embodiment is integral to participation in other-centred community life. In order to do this, I now look, with the help of Sampson, Bakhtin, and Bourdieu, to the
proposal that the notion of a subject-body better represents the trinitarian analogy of the body as a mediator of reality between personal agents and social structures.

Subject-bodies. As I indicated above, while trinitarian anthropology affirms the role of embodiment, and the social forces associated with culture and language, it does not centre the person in either of these domains, but in cruciform relationship. Now, I want to argue that while this ethical life is not centred on embodiment, its role is integral to it. I do this by returning to my now familiar point that important aspects of the ideal form of relating are expressed in the idea of dialogue, and by arguing that dialogue is an embodied process. Within perichoretic relating, a person is formed in the dialogic give and take of reciprocity, both from and towards a relational centre outside the individual (Volf, 1998b). In order to explain these dialogic dynamics, Bakhtinian scholar Sullivan (2007) even uses words that are typically associated with perichoretic relating. He said that parties to dialogue engage in “contact and interpenetration” (Sullivan, 2007, p. 109). Triune dialogue ethically shapes this interpenetration with the will to intend the good of the other.

Sampson’s (1996, 2008) insight into dialogic process is particularly helpful for the nuance it brings to theorising dialogue as a part of the embodied character of human life. While his work is predicated on the Jewish ethic of unconditional kindness, and this is motivated by legal imperative rather than the freedom associated with triune grace (Shepherd, 2009), it nonetheless represents both the trinitarian elements of openness to interpenetration and mutual ethical intention. The point I am making, with the aid of Sampson, is that embodiment is fundamental to dialogic encounter, and through dialogic encounter object-bodies are transformed into subject-bodies. I mean by this that through being encountered by someone who is personally open and ethically motivated towards the recipient’s good, the recipient is free to give unique expression to her own memory, wisdom, and desire for encounter. This infers that the flow of interpersonal power is not just one way from social context toward object-bodies—as narrative therapy seems to suggest—but also back as bodily presence influences social process. I am referring to the fundamentally embodied character of human enterprise; this means that “we are socialized into both a linguistic and a bodily community of practices such that what we say and the embodied quality of how we say it are simultaneously engendered and inextricably intertwined” (Sampson, 1996, p. 609). This view of intertwined social and embodied processes implies that while we might speak of embodiment and social life as two separate categories, they are much more intertwined than this.

Feminist theologian Moltmann-Wendel (1995) supported this view with the argument that trinitarian theology represents the body as subject, and accordingly it is more appropriate to say that “I am my body” rather than “I have a body”:
In so far as, when I reflect on the essence of subjectivity, I find it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity is merely one with the existence as a body and that of the world, and because the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world. (p. 261)

In a word, subjectivity and embodiment are inseparable. While this embodied subject-body is the trinitarian ideal in the light of which I am evaluating narrative therapy’s object-body, the merit of this may not be immediately apparent to narrative therapists because Western people are still haunted by Descartes’ claim that Cogito, ergo sum. One of the ways this disturbance manifests is through people shutting off to their bodies without considering it a problem. The relevant trinitarian point to be made here is that bodily estrangement makes it difficult to engage in practices of love, because disembodiment is ultimately loveless (Moltmann-Wendel, 1995). In so much as narrative therapy represents this Western disembodiment, it needs repair. The incarnational response to this is to find ways to be open to body knowledge. Loving touch, for example, is a potent means to redevelop a body-centred sense of self. The overall purpose of developing dialogic relationships with our embodied lives is to “cultivate a relational rather than manipulative engagement with the world” (Lightcap Meek, 2011, p. 113). This is to say that there is an intrinsic connection between living embodied lives and engaging in mutual relationships.

Because embodiment is a richly felt sense, it is deeply personal and absorbs, and in turn permeates the social, cultural, and geographic contours of one’s life. For this reason, being in dialogic relationship with one’s embodied life is essential to dialogic engagement with others, and vice versa. It is, therefore, essential to wellbeing and flourishing. On the basis of this view of the body as subject, narrative therapeutic conversation needs to find ways to engage the embodied quality of how things are said—such as the way our smile, mouth, lips, voice, and breathing patterns form the words we speak, and how people stand and move within our social lives—as well as the discursive quality of what is said. Therefore, quite apart from the re-storying aims of narrative therapy, simply engaging in embodied dialogic conversation promises to effect important transformation. This is transformation that complements narrative transformation.

Subject-body dialogue and habitus. The insights offered by Bakhtin, Liapunov, and Holquist (1993), and others, into the dialogic formation of subjectivity assumes a body that is capable of expression apart from discursive inscription. This theorisation supports my earlier point that that personal life involves two sites of subjectivity—namely, interpersonal subject-to-subject relating and intrapersonal subject-to-subject relating. Bakhtin et al. argued that these two dialogic relationships involve two “I” positions. First, an I-for-you subject who enters, and is formed through, interpersonal dialogue. And second, an I-for-myself; the realm of private thoughts, internal
debates, and contradictory positions. It is also “the centre from which my performed act and my self-activity of affirming and acknowledging any value come forth or issue” (Bakhtin et al., p. 60). It is here within the I-for-myself dialogue that plans of action are formulated, and subsequently engage between various internal “I-positions”.

Furthermore, various I-positions often represent significant figures in a person’s relational history that hold varied, and often-contradictory, perspectives. This is the insight that object relations theory refers to; see for example Gomaz (1997) and Huprich, Auerbach, Porcerelli, and Bupp (2016). A woman may, for example, engage in an internal dialogue about a concern and whether to risk speaking to a friend about this. I-for-myself dialogue may begin with, “Yes, go on, you can trust her, she may be able to support you”, in a manner resonant with her mother’s generous and encouraging role in her earlier life. Another “I” position may then respond—again internally—in a manner typical of her experience of her father. This response might be, “Careful now, you know how it can hurt if you give too much of yourself away”. Through internal dialogue like this, a person is able to come to decisions. When healthy, the I-for-myself is coherent and flexible, permeable to others, mysterious, and hopeful about future developments. This is to say that Bakhtin presumed “a sense of integrity and unity to the self that exists amongst its multiplicity of dialogues (i.e., taking responsibility for action, and relating action to an integral self)” (Sullivan, 2007, p. 108).

Based on formulations resulting from internal dialogue, dialogue with others may follow, and this may, in turn, cause further I-for-myself dialogue. Perhaps dialogue with another person might introduce the reminder that the woman’s friend is particularly busy at work, which leads to further internal dialogue. These I-for-myself and I-for-others dialogic movements are constantly interrelating in a dance of forming, and being formed. Drawing on the child’s experience of a mother’s love, Bakhtin, Holquist, and Liapunov (1990) illustrated:

In fact, as soon as a human being begins to experience himself from within, he at once meets with acts of recognition and love that come to him from outside—from his mother, from others who are close to him. The child receives all initial determinations of himself and of his body from his mother’s lips and from the lips of those who are close to him. …The words of a loving human being are the first and most authoritative words about him; they are the words that for the first time determine his personality from outside, the words that come to meet his indistinct inner sensation of himself. (pp. 49-50)

Upon entering the frontier space between, people are vulnerable to one other because it is always inhabited as public space. And so, entering communication is, as Rahner (1961b) observed, always an engagement with an ethical project of some sort. More than this, used as a social barrier
the body transmits the kind of person one is, and the sort of relationships that are sought. And so, even bodily communication can be understood as social performance and ethical action (see McFadyen, 1990, pp. 92-97). This all suggests that how communication space is entered matters because it too has real effects in people’s lives.

In the light of these political, ethical, and embodied considerations, dialogic communication is to be commended because it always aims to centre on the freedom of the other (Gergen, 2006). Similarly, Moltmann (1985) observed that God’s dialogue with the natural world is always on behalf of both creating and re-forming it. This is, according to McFadyen (1990):

The undistorted form of relation through which undistorted personal identities may be formed, as one becomes a person only by intending others as persons and by being so intended by others. It is therefore a structure of reciprocating intentions, a mutual co-intending. (p. 116)

I conclude that dialogic encounter is both the frontier of ourselves where we acquire our defining uniqueness and the place of social transformation. Responding to God’s invitation to become a person-for-others inevitably involves embodied dialogic encounter. I argue this because people are formed and re-formed, not in direct response to this invitation, but through dialogic engagement between the I-in-myself and the call. Dialogic engagement that forms people as persons-for-others, therefore, involves the sharing of personal presence that celebrates the mystery of the other, and intends her wellbeing.

Open to the presence and influence of others. This theorisation of the trinitarian person-for-others is, of course, based on a different conception of God than one grounded in metaphysics patterned on philosophy or science. Wallace (2002) drew on Heidegger (1969) to argue that in order to develop new modes of human existence based on self-giving love, it is critical for theology to shift from the universal god of philosophy to the personal God of biblical faith. The personal God of the biblical narratives is unlike the sterile God of the onto-theological tradition in that a personal God can be wrestled with, struggled against, and enjoyed. In distinguishing God in this way, however, I am not arguing for a binary between understanding theology either in universal or in privatised terms, but a unified view that holds both. This is a way of understanding God as one centred on emancipatory intent that is developed using the tools borrowed from critical social theory for recovering the biblical models for human transformation (Wallace, 2002). This trinitarian conception of God is as a being-in-communion who is both individual and centred on relationships characterised by freedom (Gunton, 1993). It is inappropriate, therefore, to speak of humans in either social, relational, or individual terms as if these are discrete categories. As with the unity of the Trinity, living covenant lives of love requires that the private and universal domains of
a person’s life are reciprocally related, and this infers that there is something uniquely individual and universally shared about each person.

This style of open reciprocity implies moving into others and them moving into me, in a manner similar to the movement of interpenetration associated with perichoretic participation (Volf, 1998b). However, the possibility also exists, and indeed it is the experience of many, that such openness can be abused with devastating results for a person’s sense of wellbeing. It is critical, therefore, to develop a Christian imagination, so that healthy relational responses may be discerned and engaged (J. Smith, 2009). This is an imagination that needs to be disciplined by listening to the heart of what the Christian scriptures actually communicate about the world we live in, and not one that is disciplined first and foremost by scientific or philosophical method. In the light of this call, narrative therapy is valuable because it offers a means of exposing the manner in which existing imaginations have been shaped, and of choosing who it is appropriate to let penetrate our imaginations in the future. The perichoretic person, then, is not shaped by just any social intentions and relational movement, but by those associated with love. Through hospitable—that is, dialogic—address, then, the perichoretic-self is opened to being enriched by, and enriching the otherness of the other. Zizioulas (1985) contended that:

In and through this communion a person affirms his own identity and his particularity….. The person is the horizon within which the truth of existence is revealed, not as simple nature subject to individualization and recombination but as a unique image of the whole ‘catholicity’ of being. (p. 106)

Positioning the body as the mediator of “reality between agents and structures, as both subject and object to the self” (Fiddes, 2010, p. 264), offers a means of overcoming the subject-object dualism that is visible in narrative therapy. Relating to the body as mediator, rather than as an object that is passive apart from its compliance to social forces, or as the boundary of a self-enclosed individual, the body can be viewed as the means by which a person engages the surrounding world. Now, just as the body is “taught” by social and relational interaction, the body can be re-taught to respond in preferred ways. Mauss (1979 [1935]) argued that the capacity to relate in certain ways, such as hospitably, can be learned in a similar way that the art of throwing a ball can. This is to say, in a similar manner to Aristotle, that we are trained in the life of virtue. In this way virtue becomes a habit. That is, we have a readiness to act in a virtuous manner when the situation calls for it. The therapeutic implications of this become obvious now. For example, the embodied stance associated with avoiding trust that was learned in the hands of betrayal, can be taught discernment and dependence.
7.5 Summary

In this correlation of the person in narrative therapy with the trinitarian analogy of an embodied person in relational and social context a number of things have emerged. First, narrative therapy’s appreciation of the embodied character of human life is the weakest of the three aspects of personhood represented within trinitarian anthropology. Another way to put this is that the manner in which narrative therapy represents a dualist separation of body and spirit contradicts the incarnational heart of social trinitarian theology. Second, social constructionist and narrative philosophies are responsible for reducing embodiment to a poor reflection of the trinitarian ideal. While on the one hand trinitarian thinking affirms the thick and rich fabric of human physicality as an integral part of God’s relational creation, on the other hand narrative therapy reduces this to something like a blank-canvas upon which social process writes. Third, while narrative therapy’s emphasis on linguistic bodily inscription is valuable, in that it offers a social alternative to the more common individualistic explanations for human agency, it needs to recognise that the body is a site of continuity as well as change. This infers that therapeutic conversation must be structured to “listen” more purposefully to the embodied nature of discourse, as well as the discursive shape of the body. Amongst other things, this will involve finding ways to take seriously the embodied quality of how things are said, as well as the discursive quality of what is said. Doing this opens to the possibility of developing subject-to-subject dialogic encounter, because dialogue is an embodied as well as a linguistic process. This is vital, not only for its own sake, but as a basis for theorising the ethical life of love that trinitarian theology implies.

Now that the correlation of the six aspects of narrative therapeutic philosophy and theory of practice is complete I move to conclude the study with a summary of findings, and discussion about limitations and opportunities for further research associated with this thesis.
Chapter eight: Conclusions

The purpose of this final chapter is to draw together the various threads of the thesis, to clearly state the main findings, and to identify limitations and opportunities for future research. The chapter begins with a reiteration of the study’s aims, context, methodology, and theoretical positioning, before moving to summarise the main findings that emerged from the three discussion chapters.

The thesis has two aims. The first is to evaluate key philosophies and theories of practice associated with narrative therapy as expressions of the social project implied by the trinitarian analogy. This aim is primarily directed towards the development of professional counsellor practice. The secondary aim is directed towards pastoral counsellors, and considers what contributions narrative therapy might make to communities engaged in the trinitarian social project. Because these aims are focused towards both professional and pastoral counsellors, two allied approaches to relating the Christian sources to practice have been necessary. I have been saying about the bigger picture of human destiny that the Christ story is the story, and that everyone—of good will—has been included in this. When it comes to public theology—specifically to the conversation with narrative therapists—I recognise that in talking with people who do not share this faith position it is inappropriate and ultimately counterproductive to claim a privileged position for the Christian worldview. Rather, I am offering narrative therapists one perspective alongside others. Because the thesis is aimed in two directions I have, in a sense, been riding two horses throughout the discussion. Therefore, one of the key tasks of this concluding chapter is to make it very clear which are the messages for narrative counsellors, and which are for pastoral counsellors.

Three observations led to the development of these research aims. First, professional counsellors are not always good at linking practices with the implicit assumptions about human wellbeing that they represent. Second, identifying, clarifying, and declaring counsellor anthropological presuppositions seems to support the development of purposeful ethical practice. And third, the trinitarian analogy of wellbeing provides an example of a rich source of relational ethics that may enhance narrative therapy. Following a summary of what has been said in each chapter, I will review these findings.

8.1 Methodology

I have used mutual critical correlation to construct a public theology, and by this means discussion has been directed towards both narrative and also to pastoral counsellors who are interested in hearing. This approach provides for looking to the stories of Israel and the church as sources of
ethics, and for those who wish to do so, as plots with which to develop personal identity as people in-Christ. This approach to theological source material is orientated towards both the thesis’ overall aim as a lens in its engagement with narrative therapists, and its secondary aim as the lens for Christians when it comes to considering broad questions about human existence.

As a hermeneutical approach, critical correlation validates the theologically disclosive capacity of life experience as well as theory. Furthermore, critical correlation’s compatibility with practice-theory-practice unity, indicates that it is an approach that is capable of engaging changing contexts and bringing these into dialogue with people’s hopes and values, such as faith in God. Through dialogues, such as these, critical correlation is capable of developing accessible and defensible contributions to public life that draw on theological sources, without necessarily requiring belief in God.

With these things in mind, I set up a dialogue between questions and answers associated with narrative therapy and trinitarian thinking. While this methodology potentially provides for two-way critique, I have used it to direct most of the analysis towards narrative therapy’s philosophy and theory of practice. The review that has moved towards trinitarian thinking is confined to reconsidering the way the fundamentals of Christian belief are interpreted in this new era—not to question core belief.

In terms of method, four steps have been followed. First, six aspects of narrative therapy’s philosophy and theory of practice were identified and articulated. Second, relevant theological principles were reformulated. Third, the six aspects of narrative therapy were critically analysed in the light of the relevant theological principles. And fourth, reformulations were developed as a result of the analysis.

8.2 Trinitarian thinking

In the first of two theoretical positioning chapters I introduced a neo-orthodox trinitarian theology, and set this against a brief history of the development and significance of this way of thinking. My particular interest has been to articulate an analogy of persons, both divine and human. This analogy—one that is based on the story of Christ—offers a view of the human person centred on the person of Jesus. As such, all aspects of human wellbeing are understood to result from ethical engagement in the terms of the trinitarian social project. I argued that this is an ethical engagement in practices of love expressed in things such as self-giving concern for others, vulnerable personal presence, and working for justice and reconciliation. I mean by this that people are invited to live in ways that result in them becoming who they already are in-Christ, embodied social persons united by participation in cruciform relations.
8.3 Narrative therapy
This second of two theory chapters introduced narrative therapy. This discussion engages with narrative therapy’s philosophies and theories of practice in sufficient detail to enable consideration in the light of the trinitarian analogy. Developed over the last three decades, narrative therapy seeks to be a respectful and non-blaming approach to therapy and community work. People are assumed to live and interpret their lives through stories that are constructed within socially shaped communities of conversation. Drawing on a variety of postmodern philosophies, most notably social constructionism and narrativity, narrative therapists view people as interdependent social entities, rather than as individual interior ones.

A central aim of narrative therapy is to develop personal agency or, in other words, to provide people with the opportunity to shape their lives according to ethics and values they have chosen, rather than ones imposed upon them. The chapter highlighted that the narrative therapeutic process involves searching for marginalised stories about past experiences and future hopes, and that as underground channels of power these conversations can lead to change. Rather than attempting to diagnose people on the basis of truthfulness, narrative therapy is interested in dialogue about life-likeness. It is also interested in providing people with webs of meaning and connectedness to other people, and their cherished hopes and values. I now turn to the findings, beginning with a consideration of the therapeutic aims of narrative therapy.

8.4 Narrative therapy’s aims
The findings that result from discussing narrative therapy’s aims are framed by the initial conclusion that seeking to assist people to re-narrate identity according to ethical hope is open—in a general sense—to the trinitarian project’s hope to engage people in the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as a social project. However, it was also found that while trinitarian theology sketches a clear vision of healthy relating, narrative therapy leaves the shaping of ethical intentions to the subjective choice of the individual. This means that the narrative therapist is restrained from involving a person’s community in choices about her future, and from representing any particular ethical telos for development herself.

The conclusion was reached that while narrative therapy’s restraint from advocating for specific ethical systems is appropriate in terms of counsellor commitment to preserve and develop client freedom of choice, when viewed from the trinitarian perspective this is a limitation. It is a limitation because while restraining the basis of choice to an individual’s desire does not necessarily contradict the trinitarian telos for human development, it is inappropriately haphazard. Furthermore, narrative therapy’s relativistic ethical position was found to be more of a limitation
than a weakness in that assisting people to choose their version of “the good” inevitably turns them in the general direction of God.

It was found that narrative therapy’s ethical relativism relates to the form of justice adopted by White and Epston. This philosophical approach to justice differs from one associated with relational ethics—such as the trinitarian one—in that it attempts to distil from history a story of pure and uncompromised good news. While this is not typically viewed as problematic by the professional counselling community, it was found to be at variance with the trinitarian position because it represents an ethical horizon-without-expectation. This means that narrative therapy assumes that specific ethical orientations, such as those relating to trinitarian thinking, can never be reached if justice is to be maintained. This is unfortunate because this approach leaves individuals and communities unhooked from common agreement about the relative merits of various histories and traditions. It is also unfortunate because the relational nature of trinitarian hope actually cherishes rather than threatens personal uniqueness. It was found that this is because the relational structure of the incarnation creates space for the infinite to enter into the experience of finite beings. The identification of this implies that it is not always necessary to assume that the universal perpetrates violence on the particular.

Based on these things, the conclusion was reached that too much is given up if counsellors settle for narrative therapy’s philosophical approach to abstracted ethics. This is because while White and Epston’s approach and the Christian story can both account for violence, narrative therapy cannot account for the goodness, such as peace and desire for justice, that can come from relationally orientated ethics. Understanding the work of the incarnation as the inclusion of human life in the personal life of God, and locating narrative practice within this kind of ethical approach, opens the way for counsellors to embrace narrative therapy’s concern for the politics of language and identity, and to work with individuals and their communities towards specific ethical horizons.

In summary, the discussion about the therapeutic aims of narrative therapy found that even with White and Epston’s philosophical approach to ethics intact it enacts part of the trinitarian missional concern for personal and community wellbeing. It also found that through partnerships, such as this one between narrative therapeutic practices and the specific horizon of identity formation in-Christ, more intentional and community minded counselling practices may be developed. This is to say that such partnerships demonstrate that it is possible to bring together the symphony of the triune story and the melody of narrative therapy, in a manner that is of some advantage to both professional and pastoral counsellors.
8.5 Narrative therapy’s engagement with postmodern thinking

This chapter found that contrary to the view held by some evangelical Christians, narrative therapy’s association with postmodern philosophy does not imply that it necessarily leads people away from reality, and that it offers a means to recognise and engage the geographical and historical contingency of human life. Put another way, rather than denying reality—as some fear—experiences of narrative therapeutic conversation actually lead to knowing reality differently. This is because like trinitarian thinking, narrative therapy views people as searchers of reality beyond the present moment. These insights led to the conclusion that the major difference between the postmodern philosophy associated with narrative therapy and trinitarian faith is a matter of the quality of ethical hope, not quantity.

Social and linguistic formation of knowledge and identity. It was established that narrative therapy’s challenge to the view that things can be known directly, is associated with a revisionist approach to language. This implies that narrative therapy’s criteria for assessing the truth of something resides in the culture, language, and conversational conventions that give it meaning, not in the thing itself. This view of truth leads to a shift in the typical focus of therapeutic enquiry from depth or description, and identifies narrative therapy as epistemologically constructionist. Narrative therapy is constructionist in that it seeks understanding through examining synthesised experiences, and not through atomised ones. It was found that a trinitarian understanding of life can also be viewed as constructionist, in that the stories of God’s engagement with the world provide frameworks for interpreting the detail of people’s lives. Externalising conversation was discussed as an aid to this form of enquiry, and it was concluded that the deconstructive actions associated with this form of conversation are potentially supportive of the liberation and justice impetus associated with the trinitarian analogy.

While it was found that narrative therapy’s employment of externalisation and other techniques to release hidden meaning is potentially liberating, it was also found that being confronted with the loss of previously secure understandings can be experienced as threatening. Based on this, the conclusion was reached that counsellors need to exercise discernment if these techniques are to result in wellbeing and not harm. There is clearly an important difference between deconstructing the things people hold to be real, and those less central things.

Therapy and ethics. It will be of interest to both professional and pastoral counsellors that narrative therapy is theoretically open to developing religious conversations. It was found that this is because narrative therapy theorises language as always open to others, and by implication a person’s life is always open to the cultural sources—including those considered religious. This finding shifts therapeutic conversation from enquiry into whether ethics are influential in a person’s
life, to enquiring whether they are legitimate and helpful. While religious conversation can be contentious for some counsellors, theoretically narrative therapy is open to it. It was also found that narrative therapy’s openness is conditional on religious cultural sources not being told as single story lines of “real truths”. In other words, narrative therapy is able to assist a person to story identity as a person-in-Christ, as long as this is understood as a group of multi-layered and complex narratives that represent God’s loving initiative in people’s lives.

Narrativity. While it was difficult to identify direct links between trinitarian anthropology and the narrativity thesis, it was found that the doctrine of the incarnation, like the narrativity thesis, places emphasis on the contextual shape of relating and knowing. It was also found that narrative therapists, trinitarian thinkers, and many others agree that personal identity is shaped to a significant degree by dominant cultural stories. Based on these things, the conclusion was reached that narrative therapy is well suited to facilitating engagement between people’s actual life experience and their hopes and intentions.

Metanarrative, interpretation, and reality. The conclusion was reached that Lyotard’s expression of incredulity towards metanarratives is not intended to discredit either their existence or role in the successful organisation of life. Instead, he means to challenge claims that any one telling of a story adequately represents reality. It was found that narrative therapy shares this concern to expose the exclusivity of totalising accounts of history, so that room is made for the accounts of others—particularly individual ones—to be heard and valued.

The conclusion was reached that belief in God is only threatened by narrative therapy if it is belief based on objectivity, and this is not the case for trinitarian thinking. Neither narrative therapy nor trinitarian thinking abandon the quest for the “right” interpretation, just knowing things with certainty. Giving up claims to objectivity opens space for resting belief on diversity, and potentially on the conviction of the Holy Spirit. This approach simply offers a different basis for “kerygmatic boldness” about the truth of the Gospel. In conclusion, narrative therapy’s incredulity towards metanarratives does not need to be viewed as a threat to faith, it can even be embraced on the basis that its concern for diversity reflects the multiplicity associated with creation.

8.6 The person in narrative therapy

It emerged that the most striking aspect of narrative therapy’s view of the person is the way it centres on social subjectivity. It also emerged that while the trinitarian person is subject to social process, as an embodied person she is also subject to relations. Because she strategically delights in being hospitable to the shaping of others, the trinitarian self is neither fixed nor without form, but shaped by loving alterity. It was found that on the one hand it is positive that narrative therapy
foregrounds the social processes responsible for shaping identity; on the other hand, it is unfortunate that it resists representing particular stories that may be more likely to result in experiences of wellbeing than others. Whereas narrative therapy attempts to address the linguistic and narrative contexts of people’s lives, the trinitarian invitation is to also address the ethical and biological fabric of personal and community life. In conclusion, it was found that it is not so much the social orientation of narrative therapy that needs to be redeveloped, but its limited focus.

**The social self.** Because narrative therapy represents the postmodern deconstruction of the centred subject, the person in narrative therapy has been reduced to an isolated, rational, and wholly responsible agent that does not amount to much. When considered in the light of the trinitarian concern for freedom that is exercised in a manner that develops rather than erodes subjectivity, narrative therapy was found to have paid a very high price for personal freedom. Rather than an empty self, the trinitarian person is centred on the particular quality of relationships.

In spite of this cost, narrative therapy’s episodic theorisation of time was found to lend some support to the liberation and justice heart of the trinitarian social project. Put another way, narrative therapy is well suited to representing the vulnerable, those marginalised, and those who have lost contact with experiences of hospitality. However, the way this approach emphasises the particularity of a person’s life and avoids universal accounts was judged unbalanced from a trinitarian perspective that accents both the particular and the universal. It was found that for all of its social orientation narrative therapy is remarkably individualistic. The theoretical basis for this paradox between social orientation and individualism was found to be Foucault’s view that the self is ontologically prior. In contrast to this stance, while trinitarian thinking also considers regard for oneself as an important aspect of wellbeing, it does not hold this out as the telos of development. This finding implies that while the aim of developing author-agency is appropriate, equal concern for the needs of others is also invited—a stance that was referred to as ethical-agency. In conclusion, while it is constructive that narrative therapeutic practice advocates for those on the margins of society, this concern needs to be located in a universal account of life—such as the trinitarian one—that offers relational ethics in place of philosophical ones.

**The relational self.** It was found that narrative therapy resonates with some important features of trinitarian relations. On one hand, its revisionist understanding of language implies a deeply respectful stance towards the uniqueness of the client-person’s identity, self-understanding, and hope. Furthermore, because of its sensitivity to the creative power of language, narrative therapy employs therapeutic conversation judiciously in the change process.

However, while socially constructed life may involve discourses about relating, and even relating in accord with love, interpersonal ethics are not identified as a vital aspect of narrative
therapeutic personhood. Put differently, while the person implied by narrative therapy may relate, she is not necessarily a relational person. When considered from the perspective of the trinitarian affirmation that humans are created in and for relationship, this neglect is a significant concern. The trinitarian analogy invites the recognition that personal development involves a dynamic shift from monologue towards dialogue relating. This kind of development requires more engagement from the therapist’s subjectivity than the narrative therapeutic “therapist-self” is capable of offering.

It was also found that it is necessary to carefully define the use of the word “dialogue”. This is because narrative therapists do not necessarily associate dialogue with mutual sharing; whereas trinitarian thinkers contend that dialogue is destroyed when one party’s intentions dominate a conversation. Furthermore, trinitarian dialogue involves a fuller range of human experience than the narrative therapist acknowledges. It was concluded that while narrative therapeutic conversation and its vision of wellbeing constitutes a welcome advance towards therapeutic dialogue, it cannot be considered dialogic in the manner of the trinitarian analogy.

**Embodied individuality.** When viewed from the perspective of the incarnational centre of trinitarian theology, narrative therapy’s treatment of embodiment is problematic. Its theorisation of an object-body contradicts the holism associated with the incarnation, by dualistically separating the social dimension of life from the biological one. This separation renders the kind of relations implied by the trinitarian analogy impossible. Furthermore, narrative therapy’s bias towards the social not only implies a neglect of relationality, but of the natural world realities of human life. Two findings supported this conclusion.

First, the form of social constructionism associated with narrative therapy relates to the body as something to be observed, rather than as a subject to be known. This implies that while narrative therapy is concerned with discourses about the object-body, it is unfortunately not concerned with the embodied nature of discourse. This implies that when narrative therapy does enquire about embodiment, and the natural world more generally, it does this as a source of insight into the shaping effects of social processes, and not to hear from these things on their own terms.

Second, in order to be able to follow the trinitarian invitation to ethically centre the socially de-centred self, dialogue needs to be understood as an integral part of the embodied character of human life. Traditionally, narrative therapists fail to recognise this and, by implication, that dialogue is an intrapersonal and an interpersonal process. It was concluded that in order to engage the body as a subject, narrative therapeutic conversation would need to find ways to engage the embodied character of *how* things are said, as well as the discursive quality of *what* is being said.
8.7 Limitations and opportunities for further research

In this concluding section I draw attention to two limitations of the thesis, and relate these to opportunities for further research. The two limitations are: (1) the thesis’ limited consideration of therapeutic practices, (2) most of the critique as directed towards narrative therapy and therefore not the way trinitarian thinking is translated into practice.

**One: Limited consideration of therapeutic practices.** As the introduction specifies, the thesis’ scope of enquiry is focused on narrative therapy’s philosophies and theory of practice, and not directly towards practice. While limiting the breadth of enquiry in this way is constructive in that it has supported in-depth enquiry into the underlying anthropological assumptions of narrative therapy, it also means that the practice-theory-practice spiral that the methodology implies is incomplete. That is, the thesis stops short of developing comprehensive practice responses to the findings.

Herein lies an opportunity for further research into the exact nature of the practices that the thesis’ findings imply. Because of narrative therapy’s bias towards the social nature of people, opportunities for researching the practice implications of the relational and embodied individual domains of personhood are particularly evident. An appropriate response to this limitation may be to take up where the thesis stops through a series of journal articles.

**Two: One-way travel on a two-way street.** In setting up the thesis I took care to establish the view that Christian understanding can be viewed as an assimilation of insight derived from faith and cultural contexts. I argued on this basis for a form of correlation that seeks to facilitate culture finding answers to questions raised by faith, and faith finding answers to questions raised by culture. While this does not imply that it is appropriate to use cultural sources to question fundamental Christian beliefs, it does suggest that it is valuable to look to cultural sources for assistance to reinterpret aspects of Christian doctrine for different contexts and eras. Put another way, my use of critical correlation as a two-way street has more questions and answers traveling from faith towards culture, than it does from culture towards faith.

I wish to highlight two perspectives with regard to this. One, while it may be fruitful for a researcher to use narrative therapy to critique the way trinitarian thinking is currently translated into social practice, doing so in a substantial manner is beyond the scope of this study. And two, I recognise that while I have espoused the importance of dialogic relating, at times the discussion has been shaped more like a monologue than a dialogue. While these limitations are justifiable in terms of the aims and methodological commitments of the thesis, nonetheless the potential remains for individuals and groups to utilise narrative therapeutic conversation to constructively align lifestyle with faith-based hopes and values.
An exploration of how narrative therapeutic conversation may be used to assist people to deconstruct both cultural and faith sources that constructs their Christian life and identity so that these may be more purposefully redeveloped. Again I suggest journal articulates as a suitable way to take up these lines of enquiry.
References


65-78.


