

**Relationship gumbo:
Understanding *bricolage*
and the creation of personal relationships
as a definitional process**

A paper presented at the
International Network on Personal Relationships
conference at Miami University, Oxford, OH, June 1997.

Walter John Carl
Department of Communication Studies
105 Becker Communication Studies Building
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, IA 52242-1498
balance@email.unc.edu

ABSTRACT

In this study, I employed an in-depth personal narrative approach with three participants who identified themselves as bisexual or gay to learn whether or not people drew upon symbolic and material resources to continually (re)define their personal relationships. I drew upon Claude Lévi-Strauss's concepts of *bricolage/bricoleur* and the engineer to analyze the personal narratives. Bricolage describes the process of the bricoleur who works with symbolic and material resources from her or his personal experiences, and membership in social communities and larger cultural contexts. Resources are defined broadly as stories, concepts, perceptions, memories, and so forth, by which persons make their world coherent. The bricoleur works with these resources in a concrete, improvisational manner, whereas the engineer progresses in an abstract, formulaic fashion. Each of the participants' narratives presented evidence to suggest that participants acted as bricoleurs and engineers to perform their sexual identity and to (re)create their personal relationships. Acting as bricoleurs, participants continually (re)assembled discursive resources without a specific structure or end in mind. The available resources in their immediate context influenced the forms and ways of relating that eventually emerged through the process of drawing on these resources. Acting as engineers, participants approached these resources with abstract, pre-planned structures that guided the selection of specific resources to accomplish pre-defined ends. The personal narratives also provided examples where there was not sufficient information to determine the manner in which participants drew upon the discursive materials. Further, I problematized a rigid dichotomy between the bricoleur and the engineer. I concluded the paper by discussing the implications of bricolage to future research and scholarship on maintaining and defining personal relationships. Bricolage holds great promise as an analytic perspective because of its emphasis on processes of relating, its broad heuristic scope, and its potential to complement and/or challenge existing scholarship in the areas of communication and personal relationships.

You say that we've got nothing in common
 No common ground to start from
 And we're falling apart

You'll say the world has come between us
 Our lives have come between us
 But I know you just don't care

And I said, "What about Breakfast at Tiffany's?"
 She said, "I think I remember the film,
 And as I recall, I think we both kinda liked it."
 And I said, "Well, that's the one thing we've got."

This excerpt from the popular song "Breakfast at Tiffany's," written and performed by the band Deep Blue Something, illustrates two people who are negotiating the status of their dating relationship. By drawing on their shared experience of watching the romantic movie Breakfast at Tiffany's as a resource in their relational history, the couple attempts to create a common ground to salvage their dating relationship and thus (re)create a particular relational definition. The process of sustaining or fashioning a new definition for a particular relationship can be understood as a creative process in which relaters continually engage. To understand how relationships are (re)defined over time, it is important to understand the process of definition and the concept of "a relationship."

In a recent article of the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, Richard Conville applied the metaphor of *bricolage*, introduced by the structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, to personal relationship scholarship to investigate the problematic concept of a relationship. To do this, Conville examined relationship narratives from three literary texts. These accounts depicted persons-in-relationships and commonly encountered episode types. Furthermore, he argued that the concepts of bricolage and bricoleur highlight creative, improvisational, and processual views of relating and the social-dialogical dimensions of resources used to conduct personal relationships.

My project extends Conville's analysis to explore the utility of bricolage as a lens to understand how relaters (re)define their relationships. Specifically, I sought to understand how relaters work with the bits and pieces of experiences from the distinct, yet interconnected, realms of personal life, social interaction, and cultural membership to engage in the always unfinished, (re)creative business of performing and constructing their personal relationships. To this end, I spoke with three participants over a two-month period of time to record their relationship stories and examined these personal narratives with bricolage as an analytic lens. This methodological approach was informed by a call from Duck, West, & Acitelli (1997, p. 19): "Ask the partners *in depth* about their relationships in a search for narrative themes and take across time assessments of what people are actually *doing* in relationships."

In this paper, I discuss a theoretical framework that highlights the process of defining relationships, present an abridged intellectual history of bricolage and intersections with existing work on creativity and improvisation in personal relationship research, discuss the methodological approach of my study, examine selected narrative episodes of my participants through the lens of bricolage, and then offer tentative conclusions of bricolage as a metaphor to understand how people define and maintain their personal relationships.

The Nature of Definition as a Creative Process

Three key terms are implicated in this research project and all are intricately interconnected and must be understood in relation to each other. These three terms are definition, process, and creation. As one can trace any finger down into the palm of the hand and return back up another finger, we can begin our understanding of any one of the three terms and end up at the others as illustrated by the following statements: definition is a creative process; creation is a process of definition; and a process creates definitions. This section will discuss each of these terms and then explore Claude Lévi-Strauss's concepts of bricoleur and bricolage.

Definition is a creative process

What *is* a relationship? The key word in this question is the verb "is" which brings us into the realm of definitions (Burke, 1966). A definition is the articulation of an essence (Burke, 1945). The essence or substance of a subject purportedly identifies the subject or object's intrinsic nature -- what it is in and of itself. However, the root or etymological history of the words substance and essence include "standing under" or "support," that is, something that is necessarily external to the subject or object. To speak of what something necessarily is (intrinsic), we must speak of what it is not (extrinsic). Kenneth Burke calls this the paradox of substance.

Every time we speak we are confronted with the problem of articulating everything in the universe. In his discussion of terministic screens, Burke (1966) notes that although we need to use definitions, we can not encapsulate everything in our definitions and we necessarily exclude things. When we define, we select one thing out of reality, thus necessarily deflecting other aspects of reality; the definitions we choose reflect the reality that we have selected, as well as the reality we have deflected. The selectivity of definitions has been noted by Duck (1994) in his discussion of Burke: "The choice of terms to emphasize is not determined or dictated by the behavior being explained but is

chosen by the observer/explainer..." (p. 79).

When the two people discuss being "in" a relationship, they implicitly refer to some kind of boundaries or limits so that certain phenomena fall within these boundaries and other phenomena are excluded. This implicit reference exemplifies Burke's argument regarding terministic screens and the paradox of substance argument -- to speak of what something is, we also implicitly (do not) speak of what it is not.

The boundaries implicit in definitions are not static and rigid, but change, or flow, over time. The term "flow" has been used by researchers to describe relationship processes (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), various sensations (e.g., the flow of optimal experience, being in the flow; Csikszentmihalyi, 1991), and states of existence (as in some Eastern thought). I use the term flow initially to connote the image of water *flowing*. This water symbolizes the continuous, fluid, ever-changing flux that the Sophists identified. For the purposes of this project, the flowing water is a metaphor for personal relationships. Water -- for instance, in a river -- flows in a certain pattern, but not necessarily towards any constant particular end-point. The pattern does not remain the same over time; its movement is influenced by surrounding elements such as land, rocks, weather patterns, and weeds. These influences can be thought of as boundaries that create the conditions simultaneously to limit and enable the water to flow in a particular, yet changeable, pattern.

These boundaries refer to what I have previously discussed as a definition. When the land, rocks, weather, or weeds shift, so does the flow of the water; concurrently, the flow of the water over and around the weeds and rocks and land slowly erodes and affects them and changes the shape of the surrounding elements (a dialectical effect of relaters defining the relationship and the relationship defining the relaters). As the relationship and relaters change, the surrounding elements change, just as when the surrounding elements change, the relaters and the relationship changes. So then, the relaters and the definition (which creates, constitutes, bounds, limits and enables "a relationship") are fluid and continually flow; that is, they are in process.

To describe a relationship as "flowing" is not to say that patterns of relating are always smooth and easy business, nor that they are always rapidly moving. Sometimes, the flow becomes stagnant (as in a pool of water), sometimes gentle, calm, and serene (like a babbling brook), other times smooth and consistent (like a steady stream), and still other times rough and wild (like roaring rapids). The point is that whether the water is seemingly stagnant, calm, steady, or rough, a relationship is always flowing, even though we call it "stagnant," "steady," or "rough." This is all to say that the flow is always occurring, it is always *doing* something.

How is definition creative or generative? Let's begin with an example. If Agnés defines her friendship with Rebecca as hanging out together and talking, without sexual overtones, and then Agnés

and Rebecca have a sexual experience with each other, they are confronted with a choice -- a generative opportunity. Agnés can now say that sex is cool with friends, or at least with Rebecca (selecting a boundary that will both include and exclude sexual experiences and others). Alternatively, Agnés can re-define her relationship with Rebecca as say, romantic partners, assuming that this definition includes sexual activities. (Of course another possibility might be that they never to speak to each other again, which would also be a way of defining their relationship.) The point is that Agnés' previous definition becomes unsatisfactory in light of a new experience, and she thus confronts choices (generative opportunities), two of which could be to define sex as part of friendship, or re-define her relationship with Rebecca as a romance, rather than a friendship.

This illustrates the creative process that inheres in defining relationships. We define our world, selecting certain aspects and deflecting others. Those aspects that are deflected are generative, or creative, opportunities that may later give rise to new definitions that include what currently is excluded, as well as exclude certain aspects that were once included. This definitional process is continuously going on as a business that is always, already unfinished (Duck, 1990).

Creation is a process of definition

To say that "creation is a process of definition" is to argue that discourse/language/definitions create, or constitute, experienced reality. The process of naming "defines what it is we recognize as constituting the world and our experiences in it" (Wood, 1992). Drawing on the writings of Mead (1934), Blumer (1969), and Spender (1984), Julia Wood presented sexual harassment as a compelling example of how naming constitutes reality. Wood argued that only in recent years has "sexual harassment" been named. Prior to this time what we now refer to as sexual harassment happened frequently, but it was not experienced as such until it was spoken into a discursive reality and granted the cultural legitimacy that the process of naming, of definition, confers.

In their classic article "Marriage and the Construction of Reality," Berger and Kellner (1964) argued that "the reality of the world is sustained through conversation with significant others" (p. 1) and that each partner's definition of reality must be continually coordinated with the other partner's definitions. Steve Duck (1990, 1994) echoed this concern for a focus on the importance of talk as a continuous way of conducting the "unfinished business" of relating. Duck (1990) emphasized the creative functions of talk when he asserted that talk "actually embodies the relationship and defines it" (p. 21). Gergen (1988) added to this perspective when he highlighted the inherently social nature of discourse; that is, he argued that there is no reality independent of the discourse that constitutes it, and this constitutive process is necessarily a "property of social interchange" (p. 40).

Thus far, I have argued that definition is a creative process and that the creation of reality is inexorably tied to a process of definition. Next, I will consider how a process creates definitions.

Process creates definitions

What does it mean for one to be “in” a relationship? Julia Wood defines personal relationships as “voluntary commitments that are constantly in process and marked by continuing, significant interdependence between particular individuals who are irreplaceable” (1995a, p. 6). This definition recognizes that personal relationships are always in process. Duck (1990) contributed to our understanding of this point as he writes of relationships as unfinished business. By this, Duck meant that relationships are continually changing and evolving -- never remaining static. As Duck and others note, patterns that are created for how people relate with one another will be re-created and transformed over time (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Wood, 1995b). Duck and others (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996; Duck, 1990; Duck, West, & Acitelli, 1997) criticize existing research that views people as being “in” relationships. This “container” view of relationships “depicts relationships as monolithic entities passing along charted pathways and having a constant identity” (Duck, West, & Acitelli, 1997, p. 20). This view (mis)represents relationships as static containers within which individuals exist. This view does not take into account the processual flow that characterizes human relatedness.

As an alternative to static views of personal relationships, Duck calls for a more processual view (talking more about “relating” rather than being “in relationships”). To respond to Duck’s call relationship researchers need to develop a fuller understanding of what a process is. Duck (1990, p. 18) defined processes as “transitions between states which are clearly recognized and easily *definable* end-points” (emphasis mine) and identifies time as the essence of a process. Duck also criticized research on relationship processes for focusing too much on the end-points and not enough on the “movement that is continuous” between the end-points (p. 18). But even to talk about end-points is misleading. If a process is characterized by continuous movement and change, then there is no real end. For a fuller appreciation of the continuously flowing nature of a process, we can turn back in time to pay a visit to the Sophists.

The Sophists believed that the world was in a constant state of flux -- pure experience. Definitions are efforts to articulate and give form to this flow of experience. Long before Burke, the Sophists saw definition as an attribution of a thing’s essence, that is, an expression of what a thing is (a positive) and what a thing is not (a negative). There are necessarily processes of inclusion and exclusion in definition because the world is continually changing. The Sophists saw the act of defining

an experience as a deception because a definition masquerades as a complete capturing of a thing's essence, that is, a certainty of what a thing is (and, always being both/and for the Sophists, what a thing is not). Due to the processual flux and inevitable exclusion within definitions, a definition does not capture everything that something is, that is, its essence. For the Sophists, the necessary incompleteness of any definition was something to be valued because it represents an openness, an opportunity, a generative possibility, to the truth of "getting at" or capturing more of what is missing or hidden (the excluded portion) in the definition. Because a definition attempts to capture something which is in flux, definitions (language) must also be continually in flux.

If we understand the nature of a process to be continuous flux, then we are closer to understanding how a process creates definitions. Because we can not get around in our day to day lives if we experience them as in continuous change, we need to make sense of the flux. To do so, we draw lines in the world as a means of boundary control. In short, we define the world. For example, when confronted with the challenge of trying to understand communication in its totality, we realize we cannot do it. In response to this, we draw boundaries around those things that include what we will attempt to study and exclude all the other aspects. As we seek to understand different aspects, we re-draw the lines, we re-define our definitions.

The end-states to which Duck (1990) alluded are those parts that we recognize *only* because we or the contexts in which we exist have defined them. For example, in a model of relationship development, the various stages are recognizable because we have defined them and attached labels, names, to them. What we choose to label depends on personal experiences, membership in social communities, and participation in larger cultural contexts. If we have different personal and familial experiences, grow up in another culture, and so forth, we will draw the lines (name the stages) differently. Conversely, if we draw the lines differently, we will experience the flux differently. Burke (1945, p. 415) makes this argument in A Grammar of Motives: "In sum, one's initial act in choosing where to 'draw the line' by choosing terms that merge or terms that divide has an anticipatory effect upon one's conclusion."

Identifying end states affects not only relaters, but also the views and findings of researchers. Wood and Duck (1995) note that the ways researchers define personal relationships guide how researchers study relationships. For example, if relationships are defined as commercial arrangements that operate according to cost-benefit analysis, as social exchange perspectives argue, then researchers are more prone to select those aspects of relationships that conform to social exchange principles and, simultaneously, to deflect aspects, such as sacrifices and care for others, that do not conform to the definition.

There is a sense that defining stops the flow of relationships, although the Sophists maintain that this a deception. Again, a definition posits an essence: “our relationship is a friendship” -- this is what it *is*. However, this definition is really only decided “tentatively firmly,” that is, it is a working definition; it will always, already change. Decisions are made only for the moment, and this is one reason to think of definitions as flowing. The argument presented in this section, then, is that because a process is characterized by continuous flux, and because humans seek some way to make sense of this flux (ourselves being in flux and not separate from what we perceive as the flux around us), humans create flowing definitions to get around in everyday life. Thus, a process necessarily creates definitions.

These three terms -- process, creation, and definition -- are central to my argument about how people relate. The ways people continually (re)create ways of relating with others shape how they define their various relationships. As I stated before, how a relationship is defined is not limited exclusively to a verbal pronouncement such as “This relationship is a friendship.” Rather, following Gee’s (1989) discussion of “discourse,” how we relate with others is a matter of social practices, that is, combinations of “saying(writing)–doing–being–valuing–believing” (p. 2).

In setting up a framework that emphasizes how people create and define their personal relationships, I want to stress vigorously two points. First, I do not believe that people are independent entities who seek out other independent entities and then relate with them. The discursive formations that construct the self and other are the same forces that construct relationships/ways of relating (Gergen, 1988; Shotter, 1992; Wood, 1992, 1995, 1996). Second, my use of the terms creation and creativity does not imply a vision of individuals engaging in a nice, harmonious activity with unlimited choices for how they want to create a relationship. Rather, my use of creativity recognizes a process where relaters must respond actively to continuously changing situations that are informed by historical givens (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). To explore further the process of how people carry on the everyday business of relating, I will now discuss Lévi-Strauss’s notions of bricoleur and bricolage.

Abridged Intellectual History of Bricolage and the Bricoleur

Working out of a structuralist framework, Claude Lévi-Strauss introduced the term bricolage in his book, The Savage Mind (1966). He used the term to illustrate the manner in which “primitive” people drew upon the raw materials (e.g., trees, animals, and other elements of nature) available to them in their surrounding environments to construct myths. In contrast to the “civilized” engineer, who progresses in a formulaic, methodical manner, the bricoleur is an everyday, improvisational, do-it-yourselfer who draws on materials that happen to be lying around to fashion projects. Previous

anthropological research insisted that “primitive” people acted in illogical and irrational ways, as opposed to the logical, rational Western societies. Lévi-Strauss argued, however, that “primitive” societies operated according to their own legitimate logic, that of bricolage, but distinct from that of the engineer and Western rationality. Lévi-Strauss argued that “it is important not to make the mistake of thinking that these [bricoleur and engineer approaches] are two stages or phases in the evolution of knowledge. Both approaches are equally valid” (p. 22).

Hebdige (1979) cites Hawkes’s (1977) clarification of Lévi-Strauss’s original anthropological definition of bricolage:

[Bricolage] refers to the means by which the non-literate, non-technical mind of so-called ‘primitive’ man responds to the world around him [sic]. The process involves a ‘science of the concrete’ (as opposed to our ‘civilised’ science of the ‘abstract’) which far from lacking logic, in fact carefully and precisely orders, classifies and arranges into structures the *minutiae* of the physical world in all their profusion by means of a ‘logic’ which is not our own. The structures, ‘improvised’ or made up (these are rough translations of the process of *bricoler*) as *ad hoc* responses to an environment, then serve to establish homologies and analogies between the ordering of nature and that of society, and so satisfactorily ‘explain’ the world and make it able to be lived in. (p. 51)

One of Lévi-Strauss’s own characterizations of bricolage is that the bricoleur is engaged in a process of “continual reconstruction from the same materials, it is always earlier ends which are called upon to play the part of means: the signified changes into the signifying and vice versa” (p. 21).

With the exception of any dichotomous distinction between the “civilized” engineer and the “primitive” bricoleur, the initial anthropological characterization of bricolage by Lévi-Strauss has weathered postmodern and post-structuralist critiques of structuralist thought. A post-structuralist scholar, however, might argue that an engineer acts at times like a bricoleur and a bricoleur acts at times like an engineer, thus blurring the dichotomy between the two (L. Grossberg, personal communication, December 4, 1996; Weinstein & Weinstein, 1993). Dick Hebdige (1979) used the notions of bricolage/bricoleur to explain how subcultural styles, such as British punk, are constructed. Additionally, Michel de Certeau (1984) includes bricolage in his discussion of the practices of everyday creativity, specifically “cultural poaching”: “... users make (*bricolent*) innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules” (p. xiv). Hebdige (1979) called attention to the richness of bricolage, noting that systems of meaning “are capable of infinite extension because basic elements can be used in a variety of improvised combinations to generate new meanings within them” (p. 103). The bricoleur “works and plays with the stock” of materials provided by the culture – the bricoleur’s “parts are not standardized or invented; they are appropriated for new uses” (Weinstein & Weinstein, 1993, p. 64).

In his article, “Between Spearheads: *Bricolage* and Relationships,” Richard Conville (1997) applies bricolage/bricoleur to relational communication and examines bricolage and bricoleur through three different literary examples. These three examples illustrate the bricoleur as “relationship maker,” the mundane nature of bricolage, and the bricoleur as “storyteller.” Along with others (e.g., Berger & Kellner, 1964; Dixson & Duck, 1993; Duck, 1994; Gergen, 1988; Shotter, 1992; Wood, 1992, 1995, 1996), Conville argues that relationships come into being and are sustained through discourse and what we know about relationships we learn through discourse. Furthermore, through this everyday discourse, a person-in-relationship “draws upon mundane materials in *ad hoc* fashion and depends on the likes of chance, memory and vigilance to construct relationship stories” (Conville, 1997, p. 21). This quote highlights three facets of bricolage/bricoleur that I will elaborate using Conville’s examples.

Prior to presenting Conville’s examples, however, it is important to note that Conville (1997) uses the term bricolage in diverse ways within his article and differently than Lévi-Strauss (1966) and Hebdige (1979)¹. Lévi-Strauss and Hebdige use bricolage to refer to a process of assembling materials that have no obvious structure or pre-ordained purpose. Conville uses such phrases as “role of the bricoleur” to refer to this same process of assembling materials. Conville reserves the use of the term bricolage to indicate specifically the raw materials upon which bricoleurs draw; Lévi-Strauss and Hebdige simply referred to symbolic and material resources as materials or resources. Further, it is important to note a tension within Conville’s article regarding the language used to describe bricolage. At one time, Conville characterizes bricolage as raw materials that could be individual elements: “... we are reflecting on a significant event or memorable person, and finding there a resource for defining and redefining a relationship” (p. 20). At other times, Conville describes bricolage as a collective totality that bricoleurs carry around with them from one relationship to another: “... falling back on our immediately available and often serendipitous store of materials for conducting interpersonal communication (what we know and what we can do): *bricolage*” (p. 12).

This tension, however, is generative when understood with the analogy of gumbo as bricolage². Gumbo is a cajun dish made up of various individual ingredients: shrimp, sausage, okra, etc. It would not be accurate to say that shrimp is gumbo, or sausage is gumbo; gumbo only comes into being when all of the ingredients are combined together. If there are different ingredients substituted, then the gumbo will be different. At the same time, if someone were to ask “What are the ingredients used to make gumbo?” it is helpful to list the individual ingredients. Rather than an either/or approach to

1 I am indebted to Lawrence Grossberg for clarifying this point.

2 Thanks to D. Soyini Madison for making this gumbo analogy.

Conville's two views on bricolage (bricolage as individual elements and bricolage as a collective totality), a both/and approach seems more generative. That is, it may be helpful to say that 'x' relational experience is an element of one's bricolage as long as it is understood that any one "element/ingredient" can only be talked about as bricolage when it is understood within the context of multiple elements taken together as an interdependent totality.

With the exception of referencing Conville's article, however, I will use bricolage, following Lévi-Strauss and Hebdige, to refer to a process of assembling raw materials, distinct from the approach an engineer employs; and, as Conville does, use bricoleur to refer to a person or group of people who work with symbolic and material resources in an improvisational manner. I make this choice because I feel bricolage refers more to a manner, or way, that people approach the use of symbolic and material resources, rather than the actual resources themselves. An engineer also draws upon symbolic and material resources, but the engineer approaches the resources with a specific, pre-ordained purpose for the materials, or invents new materials for her or his specific end. The abstract, pre-set plan determines what materials will be used, as distinct from the bricoleur drawing on whatever materials are in the immediate area and figuring out the structure along the way.

Although Conville does not explicitly define the concept of a resource, Barnett Pearce (1989) provides a broad, but useful, definition in his discussion of coordinated management of meaning. He argues that people draw on resources to coordinate communication and human action and defines resources as "all those stories, concepts, perceptions, memories, and so forth, by which persons make their world coherent." When discussing the following examples from Conville's article I use bricolage to refer to the resources or raw materials, according to Pearce's definition, upon which bricoleurs draw.

Conville's first example of bricolage/bricoleur reveals the drama of relating. He draws on the writer, James Agee, as an example of a person-in-relationship who was caught in an unanticipated and unprecedented situation that demanded a novel, improvisational response, amidst the stares of others as if "between spearheads." Agee was at a loss for how to respond in this situation; he was required to "perform in a relationship" (p. 10). Conville explains that this "type of episode is one in which we are obliged to act as bricoleurs, i.e., by falling back on our immediately available and often serendipitous store of materials for conducting interpersonal communication (what we know and what we do): *bricolage*" (p. 12).

Conville's second literary example explicates the pedestrian nature of bricolage and identifies everyday life experience as a context and content of bricolage. In his autobiography, Russell Baker (1982) reflected on correspondence with his mother during World War II. In his letters, Baker recounted the daily, mundane events in his life as a way to sustain their relationship. The ordinary experiences that were readily at hand -- the bricolage -- were drawn upon by Baker, acting as a bricoleur, to craft a

connection with his mother despite the physical distance that separated them. Distinct from the exigence of the moment in Agee's situation (episode type), Baker's account spanned long periods of time and "present[s] a particular kind of episode, not uncommon, in which continued contact is vital to the relationship..." (Conville, 1997, p. 16).

Conville's third literary example illustrates the bricoleur as "storyteller." It differs from the first two examples because it shows that the work of the bricoleur can extend over a lifetime and that it can be a matter of life and death. The example centers on writer, Eudora Welty, and her parents. Welty provides an account of her father's death in which her mother had attempted unsuccessfully to save her father's life via a blood transfusion. For over thirty years, Welty's mother blamed herself for her husband's death. Her mother's unsuccessful attempt to save her father's life serves as a significant event that is reflected upon by Welty over and over again as a way of constructing her life story in relation to her mother. Conville argues that this episode type is one where persons-in-relationships "are reflecting on a significant event or memorable person, and finding there a resource for defining and redefining a relationship" (p. 20).

This example also illustrates the dialectical relationship between relaters and relationships (Wood, 1982). When persons-in-relationships reflect on significant events or people, it is not only the relationships that are changed or (re)defined, but also the people themselves. The following analogy helps to (re)articulate this point. When I re-read a book, I often have the experience of noticing different aspects than I did in prior readings. One reason that I notice different aspects of the book, and not others, is due to new experiences that lead me to (re)interpret the book in novel ways. This book analogy suggests that when people reflect on past experiences (re-read the book), both relationships (the book and what it means to the reader) and relaters (the reader of the book) are (re)defined in the process.

Drawing on another example from Welty's book, Conville highlights five characteristics of bricolage/bricoleur. The first three are that the *bricoleur's* work depends on chance (that is, that people stumble upon ways of constructing life stories that make sense to them in particular moments); on memory and the passage of time; and the attentiveness of the bricoleur (that is, events, experiences, and so forth need to be recognized as potential resources so that they can be appropriated to redefine a relationship). The fourth characteristic is that the utility of the leftovers that are lying about and readily available may be questioned at first, but may later reveal their value (that is, an experience that may seem insignificant or irrelevant at first may later be seen as a useful resource to draw upon). Fifth, Conville argues that the work of the bricoleur requires effort and one must learn to "work smart" and develop a heightened sense of the possibilities for various materials.

To conclude his article, Conville articulates four values of bricolage/bricoleur as a means of

understanding relationships. The first value is that the notion of the bricoleur “calls attention to the centrality of process in relationships” (p. 22). Relationships do not just come about *ex nihilo*, nor are they self-sustaining. Rather, relationships are redefined over time through work on them -- the work of bricoleurs. Second, Conville argues that a primary source of bricolage is a “by-product of relational partners’ lived experience” (p. 22). Just as sawing wood creates sawdust as a by-product that can later be used for other ends, past relationship experiences generate symbolic resources as by-products, which can be drawn upon later for the (re)creation of future relationships and/or redefinitions of past or current relationships. The symbolic nature of resources allows for unlimited use; that is, resources are not depleted when one draws upon them. Resources can however take material form as well which can be depleted with use, although Conville did not discuss this in his article. For example, Hebdige (1979) illustrated how British punk subcultural members utilized safety pins to resist dominant cultural trends. Conville’s point however is that even with material objects, it is the symbolic meanings attributed to the material object that can be continually refashioned. Third, bricolage can be seen at the level of the individual (for example, Agee’s location “between spearheads”), the dyad (for example, relational partners creating joint narratives of shared relationship experiences), and larger social groupings (for example, the practices in organizations that construct an organizational culture). Fourth, one’s bricolage is like a “bag of tricks” that may be carried from one relationship experience to others.

Thus far, I have discussed bricolage as a process of constructing myths in “primitive” societies (Lévi-Strauss’s initial anthropological work), as appropriation of symbolic and material resources as acts of resistance to dominant cultural forces (de Certeau’s “cultural poaching” and Hebdige’s work with countercultures), and as the mundane materials drawn upon by the bricoleur in an *ad hoc* fashion which is dependent “on the likes of chance, memory and vigilance” in the construction of relationship stories. Two threads that run throughout all of these conceptions of bricolage/bricoleur are the notions of creativity and improvisation. To elaborate these continuous threads I now turn to the relational-dialectics perspective discussed by Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery in their book Relating: Dialogues and Dialectics.

Creativity and Improvisation: Relational Dialectics Style

The relational-dialectics perspective offered by Baxter and Montgomery (1996) is guided by four central concepts that are common to all dialectical theorists. These are contradiction, change, praxis, and totality. Contradiction is viewed as inherent in social life and, through the dynamic interplay of opposition, contradiction drives change. Rather than conceptualizing binary

contradictions (such as A–B, openness–closedness), Baxter and Montgomery follow Bakhtin’s understanding of multivocality. That is, in any given A–B contradiction there are multiple radiants of meaning (A_1, A_2, \dots, A_n and B_1, B_2, \dots, B_n). Dialectical change is characterized as the ongoing, indeterminate “interplay of stability and flux” (p. 12). Praxis embodies the view that people are social actors and, simultaneously, objects of their own actions. The concept of totality presents the world as “a process of relations or interdependencies”; one phenomenon can only be understood in relation to other phenomena (p. 15). This totality, however, is not necessarily harmonious, but is constituted by multiple, and often conflicting voices.

Baxter and Montgomery’s relational-dialectics variant of the general dialectical perspective is committed to a multivocal, dialogic understanding of relationships and individuals as social entities “constructed in the ongoing interplay of unity and difference” (p. 47). Accordingly, relationships and individuals are in a process of becoming, ongoing and continuous, never remaining static. Relationships are not static containers within which two individual, autonomous beings exist (Duck, West, & Acitelli, 1997). Rather, relating is situated at the nexus of multiple dialogues. Drawing on Bakhtin’s work on the utterance, these dialogues include: the distant already-spoken with the expressed utterance of the present; the immediately prior utterances with the present utterance; the present utterance with the anticipated response of the listener; the present utterance with the anticipated response of the generalized superaddressee -- the superaddressee, similar to Mead’s (1934) generalized other, refers to “a generalized set of normative expectations that lie beyond the immediate situation” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 28). In addition to these four dialogues, the dynamic interplay of unity and difference is realized at the moment of an utterance.

The coordination of these multiple voices requires improvisation, similar to that required in a jazz ensemble. Multiple musicians come together and, in an indeterminate and ongoing fashion, “join in the simultaneous play of ‘the already existing’ with the ‘new and unrepeatable’” (p. 131). In a similar way that an interlocutor is informed by the multiple “voices” of past utterances and the anticipated response of the listener and superaddressee, bricoleurs draw on the raw materials left over (the already existing) as these are viewed in relation to the project at hand (the new and unrepeatable). The already existing provides the resources to improvise the new and unrepeatable which, in turn, flows into another pattern of the already existing. This continuous movement back and forth between the new and unrepeatable and the already existing exemplify the processual nature of relating and the concept of relationship flow.

The related notions of the superaddressee and Mead’s (1934) symbolic interactionism further illuminate the social nature of the “already existing” and the “new and unrepeatable.” Mead is helpful here because he identified interconnections among mind, self, and society. Mind is the ability

to use significant symbols that are meaningful to a whole social community. According to Mead, society pre-exists the individual and the self is formed through communication with others in that society; this is “how society gets into an individual.” The self, Mead argues, is made up of two complementary processes, the “I” and the “me.” The me and the I work together in a dialectical relationship to one another; the me is a social monitor that analyzes and evaluates behavior, whereas the I is that aspect of self that is novel, that gives a sense of freedom and initiative. Mead (1934) writes, “the attitudes of the others which one assumes as affecting his [or her] own conduct constitute the ‘me,’ and that is something that is there, but the response to it is as yet not given” (176). As I appropriate this passage from Mead’s work, the me refers to that part of the self that is already existing while the I refers to that part that is not yet discovered and whose actions may be unanticipated. At a fundamental level there is a creative, generative tension between that which is already existing and that which is novel, between the me and the I, between that which is (being) and that which could be (becoming).

Following Mead’s analysis of relationships between the individual and society, Julia Wood drew on the basic tenets of symbolic interactionism to theorize the nexus of individuals, created in interaction through the significant symbols of a particular society, and the relational dyad. In her germinal discussion of relational culture, Wood (1982) looked at the “privately transacted system of understandings that coordinate attitudes, actions and identities of participants in a relationship” (p. 76). As the individuals in a given relationship sculpt their unique definitions of relational culture, the culture they create acts back upon them, therefore, and must be understood dialectically. Relationship cultures establish ever-fluctuating definitional boundaries that serve to enable certain types of experiences while limiting others (Wood, 1982).

Extending the discussion of relational culture, Fitch (1995) directed attention to junctures between the relational dyad and larger communal culture. She cited both de Certeau’s (1984) suggestion that “cultural members appropriate resources, both symbolic and material, to create identities and otherwise carry on everyday business” and Baxter’s (1993) extension of this poaching metaphor, that relations engage in “tactical uses of cultural templates of relating (such as ‘love,’ ‘commitment,’ ‘intimacy,’ and playful transformation of cultural forms)” to construct unique relational identities (Fitch, 1995, p. 13). Fitch explained how cultural resources are commandeered in the creation of a particular relational definition: “When a song takes on relational significance for a couple, it is a communicative resource appropriated (in de Certeau’s [1984] words, ‘poached’) from the culture and put to the creative/symbolic use of evoking their shared history and unique bond. In a sense, the cultural becomes personal” (Fitch, 1995, p. 11). Fitch argued that there may exist limited cultural patterns for how members define relational culture and that, in form, relational culture may not be as unique to the particular dyad as was previously theorized. In support of this argument, Fitch cited research on

“marital types”: “The variations worked out by couples are therefore not unique to them, but reflect a limited number of possible orientations to common issues and definitional parameters within marriage (such as self-disclosure, expression of affection, interdependence, and gender roles)” (p. 17).

Enmeshed in the discursive realm, the symbolic resources, and the meanings attributed to material resources, that relaters draw upon are thoroughly social and change as relaters interact with larger cultural trends and as those trends are affected by individual and collective actions. For example, personal relationship researchers (Prusank, Duran, & DeLillo, 1993) argued that a new vision of personal relationships, which they labeled Vision III, has emerged in the 1980s and early 1990s from popular women’s magazines that stress equality, the importance of relationship knowledge to sustaining relationships, and the mutual interdependence of people in relationships. This Vision III is distinct from previous visions. Vision I which prevailed in the 1950s and 1960s, emphasized, among other things, taking care of one’s relational partner, while Vision II which dominated in the 1960s and 1970s stressed vigorously taking care of one’s self.

By focusing on the nexus of the relational dyad and larger culture, it becomes clearer how persons-in-relationships act as bricoleurs when appropriating symbolic and material resources in the process of (re)defining and thus (re)creating their personal relationships. Relational definitions (or “relationships”) evolve over time, in part, due to the tension of the already existing and the new and unrepeatable. At one time and place, ways of relating may be novel, but subsequently some become patterned and taken-for-granted. As by-products of these ways of relating, materials become available in the service of the creation of new ways of relating. This motion of relating is continuous and always, already unfinished.

So far, I reviewed an abridged intellectual tradition of bricolage from Lévi-Strauss’s original anthropological understandings through popular culture analysis and into personal relationship research. Then, through the lens of the relational-dialectics perspective, I discussed creativity and improvisation as prominent themes embodied by the bricolage perspective. Next, I will briefly explain the methodology I employed to study how relaters act as bricoleurs to define and create their personal relationships.

Personal Narratives as a Methodological Approach

In my discussion of Conville’s work above, I noted that he relied on literary character’s narratives to demonstrate the work of the bricoleur. Rather than focusing on literary characters as a source of data, my study focused on the personal narratives of actual persons-in-relationships. This focus required an alternative to the methodological approach employed by Conville. The particular

avenue I took involved a collage of qualitative methods, including personal narratives, in-depth interviews, conversations, and shared experiences. In this section, I briefly discuss qualitative research approaches in general; explain the two month interview process, including how I selected and contacted participants; present biographies for each of my three participants; and describe my method of interpretive analysis.

In her work with elderly Jewish people, Barbara Meyerhoff (1978) illustrated how these Eastern European migrants create a sense of continuity and identity after being abandoned by their progeny and living amidst a culture that marginalizes their experiences. Meyerhoff invokes the bricolage perspective to detail how these people weave meaningful coherence into their lives by improvising new meanings and definitions for traditional Sabbath ceremonies and secular holidays. Meyerhoff situated her work within a rich tradition of qualitative approaches that privileges a view of subjects as:

active participants in their own history [who] provide their own sharp, insistent definitions of themselves and explanations for their destiny, past and future. They are then knowing actors in a historical drama they script, rather than subjects in someone else's study. They 'make' themselves, sometimes even 'make themselves up'... (p. 100).

In general, qualitative approaches to the study of personal relationships strive for what Bakhtin calls "depth of insight" rather than "accuracy of knowledge" (Todorov, 1984). Bakhtin argued that "the object of the human sciences is *expressive and speaking being*. Such a being never coincides with itself, that is why it is inexhaustible in its meaning and signification" (p. 24). Under the broad rubric of qualitative approaches is a personal narrative approach that captures the multiple expressions of speaking beings.

Personal narratives enjoy a rich tradition in qualitative work among various disciplines, from literary studies to anthropology to folklore (Langellier, 1989). Within communication studies, Walter Fisher advanced a narrative theory that argued humans are essentially storytelling animals (Fisher, 1987; Wood, 1997). That is, people make sense of their lives by crafting compelling narratives from both mundane and extraordinary events. Specific to my study, a personal narrative approach offered simultaneously (1) an opportunity for participants to construct and present coherent identities as they narrated their relationship experiences, (2) a fertile resource to analyze whether participants drew on symbolic and material resources to create their personal relationships, and (3) insight into how they accomplished this, if they did.

Process of Methodological Approach

I conducted in-depth interviews and conversations and I shared experiences with three participants (Sandy, Adrian, and Sebastian) who identified themselves as bisexual or gay. I solicited participants through a snowball sampling technique. That is, I asked friends of mine who identified themselves as bisexual/queer to refer me to other people in the bisexual/queer community who might be interested in participating in my study. Through snowball sampling I contacted my first two participants. I contacted my third participant through a community gay, lesbian, and bisexual organization.

I met with each participant six times over a two-month period. I staggered the times that I met with participants so that just as I was concluding the two-month sequence with one participant I was starting the process with another participant. Over the course of six meetings, the participants narrated stories about their personal relationships from parents and other family members to friends and work associates to intimate lovers and dating partners. I audio-tape recorded and transcribed these interactions, reviewing the transcriptions with my participants for accuracy.

Katherine Borland (1991) illustrates the importance of showing transcripts of interviews to participants and checking researchers' interpretations with the participants' interpretations. In oral narrative research, Borland asserts, there may be conflicting interpretations and, if so, these should be identified and explored. Borland argues that this approach views participants as collaborators in the research process, may contribute to new ways of understanding material to both researchers and participants, and provides a check so that researchers do not simply analyze data that confirms prior predispositions.

My method of analyzing the interview transcripts flows directly from bricolage as an analytic lens. In their creative efforts, bricoleurs are social actors who are attentive to and draw upon the resources in their environment (see pp. 13–14 for characteristics of the bricoleur). Bricolage as an analytic perspective represents a point of intersection between two established intellectual traditions, phenomenology and hermeneutics (Watson & Watson-Franke, 1985). Although there are substantial criticisms of both phenomenology and hermeneutics, and even inconsistencies between them, I present those aspects that converge with the bricolage perspective and my method of analysis.

A phenomenological perspective, according to Husserl (1931), takes as its starting point the perspective of the conscious human being who lives in a world that she or he constructs through a process of perception and interpretation. Husserl argued that humans live naturally and spontaneously while going about their everyday lives and generally accept this world as given, taken-for-granted. That is, people generally believe that their everyday life as experienced is actually "out there" and

rarely challenge its taken-for-granted status. At various times, however, humans engage in self-reflection where their everyday activities are not seen as given, but rather intended as given. That is, the person sees how she or he is complicit with activity in the life world and is an active participant who sustains her beliefs that make up consciousness in her or his world (Watson & Watson-Franke, 1985).

Gadamer (1975) developed a hermeneutic point of view that reflects a dialectical process between the interpreter and the text. The texts for my project were participants' personal narratives and my field notes. Gadamer explained that there is a continuous process of dialogical questioning between the interpreter and text. That is, the interpreter comes to the text with certain questions which are continually refined based on how the text reveals itself and poses its own questions to the interpreter (Watson & Watson-Franke, 1985). For Gadamer, true understanding of the nature of the text is never fully achieved, or achievable. Rather, the aim of hermeneutics is "to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 263).

One primary question I asked of my transcripts and field notes was whether they presented evidence that my participants and I acted as bricoleurs who drew upon materials to create personal relationships. That is, is the bricolage/bricoleur perspective helpful in understanding how people create their personal relationships? Equally important was the question of whether the transcripts and field notes provided evidence that people do not act as bricoleurs and whether the bricolage/bricoleur perspective is not helpful to understand this creative process of relating? Subordinate questions that I asked include: What are examples of bricolage as they reveal themselves in the participants' personal narratives? What are the sources of the symbolic and material resources? What functions do the symbolic and material resources serve in individuals efforts to make sense of themselves and their relationships?

To answer these questions I read the interview transcripts multiple times, often while listening to the audio-taped recordings. On my first reading, I noted instances where each participant drew on symbolic and material resources in their personal narratives. On my second reading of the transcripts and field notes, I looked for themes that recurred throughout the narratives. For my third reading, I recorded places where participants acted as bricoleurs, as engineers, and places where there was not enough information to determine how a participant drew on resources. Additionally, I noted examples that problematized any rigid dichotomy between bricoleur and engineer activity. For a fourth reading I noted the multiple social sites where participants drew on resources. These social sites include families, relational dyads, work environments, and social communities.

My analysis revealed three different themes that illustrate ways participants draw on symbolic and material resources. I grouped these inductively derived themes into broad categories to

show how participants performed as bricoleurs and engineers. These themes are performing/disguising identity; (re)creating relationships; and sense-making. The themes bleed into one another and thus overlap. For example, Sandy made sense of her parents' negative responses to homosexuality and this contributed to her decision to disguise her bisexual identity from them. I do not advance these as the themes or activities of bricoleurs. Rather, they are useful constructions that emerged at the time of my analysis as one way to organize and make sense of the numerous instances of bricoleurs at work.

In the next section of this paper, I will present selected narrative episodes to illustrate how personal narratives can be analyzed through the lens of bricolage to understand how relaters engage in definitional and maintenance processes.

Bricoleurs at Work: Narrative Episodes

Above, I discussed the personal narrative approach that I employed to better understand how people, acting as bricoleurs, creatively draw on symbolic and material resources to sculpt personal relationships. Personal narratives are stories that people create to make sense of their lives by drawing on both mundane and extraordinary phenomena. Based on my analysis of our in-depth interviews, with three participants in this project, I noted examples of how participants drew on symbolic and material resources to act as bricoleurs or engineers within and among multiple social sites. These social sites include families, relational dyads, work environments, and social communities. Remembering the call issued by Duck, West, and Acitelli (1997, p. 19) to focus on "what people are actually *doing* in relationships," I focused on how participants performed as bricoleurs.

My concentration on how participants worked with raw materials to (re)construct relational definitions within their personal narratives allowed me to draw on participants' stories and my field notes, constructing my own interpretation along the way, and thus performing as a bricoleur myself. Although the bits and pieces were taken verbatim from the interview transcripts (with the exception of minor grammatical editing for ease of reading), the excerpts that compose each narrative did not necessarily follow in the sequential order in which I present them. The excerpts were taken from within larger narratives that spanned six different meetings. To ensure that these narrative episodes are representative of the larger narratives and fair to the participants' relationship stories, I asked each participant to edit the narrative episode that I constructed for her or him.

My interpretations revealed three different themes that illustrate ways participants draw on symbolic and material resources. These inductively derived themes reveal how participants performed as bricoleurs in broad categories. Throughout the flowing narrative of this chapter I stop along the way to analyze the narrative episodes and to illustrate examples of how participants acted as bricoleurs

and engineers and to problematize rigid dichotomies between the two.

Bricoleurs Working Narrative Style

From texts, I derived three broad categories, or themes, that illustrate participants working with symbolic and material resources: performing/disguising identity; (re)creating relationships; and sense-making. Each theme contains excerpts drawn from the participants' narratives (indicated by italics) and from my field notes (indicated by SMALL CAPS).

Performing/disguising sexual identities

It's all sort of an act you're playing, but I mean, it's necessary. You can't -- everyone can't have a job in a coffee house where they can do whatever they want and be just like they are around their friends. I don't know.

– Sandy

The first theme I identified regarding how relaters maintain relational definitions is performing/disguising sexual identities. I illustrate this with Sandy's narrative about her efforts to disguise her bisexual identity from her parents. Sandy is an Asian-American female in her early-twenties who recently graduated from college. She was born in the Midwest and moved to the South prior to her teenage years. Sandy was raised in the Catholic faith and it has been only within the past year that she chose to identify herself as bisexual. She is not out to her parents and actively conceals her bisexual identity from them. Remarking on her bisexual identity, Sandy stated that "I like being in the middle, because I can hedge. Choose either way." Sandy is playful about her relationships and life's contradictions, and, although she sometimes journals, she does not stop to "think about my [Sandy's] philosophies [of relationships] very much. I just kinda go along. I think I have them, but I never thought about it, you know. Well I have thought about it, 'cause I know what I've written down." Sandy goes on to say:

Well, when I was dating a girl my senior year of college, I told them [Sandy's parents] and they freaked out and it was a thing and ever since then we haven't really gotten along the same way. But um, when I started dating Darnell, actually that was what helped it and now, ever since then, we've been pretty good. Because they think I'm back to normal. So, anything that goes against that I don't talk about because it will make them upset. And it's not really worth it.

I think it was hard to figure out what was really true, because my parents really didn't want me to like women. So I started getting doubts and thinking about well, you know, is this really me, or is this like something I'm going through, or just my friends. And like my parents said, "You dated guys in high school and you used to have long hair." That's what my Mom's always saying, "You used to have long hair." As if that would make a difference, I don't know. And I started wondering if they were

right. But I thought it really didn't matter, why things happen or if they don't, if I just kinda go with the flow instead of trying to find a beginning and an end point of where things happened. I think that I find women attractive, and I don't know why, or if it's always been true. I don't know. I think there's been certain things when I was little that maybe, but I never really thought about it. I mean I never really, really knew when I was little, or anything like that.

But it was just hard, because I was at home and she [Sandy's girlfriend at the time] would call once in a while, and my Mom would say, "Oh Katrina's on the phone. Who is that?" You know. Cause I'd never mentioned a Katrina before. And I'm trying to explain who she is with -- this 26 year old woman that I met and she works, you know, you don't meet that just around school. So, "Oh, she's a girl in my class." You know. And they don't ask too many questions, so they took that, I guess. It was nerve-wracking for me to think what if they found out, or what if this or that.

I have to call them every week and that's one of those things. We talk every week my parents. I had to talk with them tonight, just kind of saying "Hey, nothing's new." That's one of those things where you don't tell them anything of certain points of your life [about] what's going on because they don't really want to hear it.

I think my parents are the only people I really hide everything from. I don't tell them about things I do in my free time. Who I spend it with, for the most part, unless it's something -- If I do anything with a guy I tell them, because it'll -- "Oh, that's great! That's really nice!" And they'll think it's wonderful. They know I've had sex, but they don't know about sex I'm having [now], or anything like that.

I generally tell them about most people in my life. By changing the details. Like Tina. Explaining Tina. Well, it is true, but I met her through Brad. And Brad is a friend of hers, but they met in the gay youth group and I told them that they met in the computer lab. I don't know, things like that. Katrina at first was, what, 27 now, but she was 25 at the time, and working up in the biotechnology business. I said, "Oh yeah, she's in some class of mine." Something like that. "Oh yeah, they live in my hall." All these people I talk about. I don't say, "Oh yeah, I met them at the gay club." No, just class. I tell my parents I met them in one of my classes.

WHEN HER PARENTS FOUND OUT THAT SHE WAS DATING A WOMAN, THEY HAD HER COME HOME TO TALK ABOUT IT. AND SO HER MOM ASKS, SHE SAID, "SO, SANDY, HAVE YOU HAD SEX WITH A MAN?" AND SANDY REPLIES, "DO YOU REALLY WANT ME TO ANSWER THAT?" AND THEN APPARENTLY HER MOM ASKED ABOUT HAVING SEX WITH A WOMAN, AND SHE SAID THAT SHE NEVER VOLUNTEERS THE INFORMATION, BUT IF SHE'S ASKED, SHE'S GOING TO TELL THE TRUTH ABOUT IT. AND THEN THIS IS WHERE, IF SHE'S TAKEN BY SURPRISE OR SOMETHING, SHE'LL TELL THE TRUTH, BECAUSE SHE ADMITS SHE'S NOT A GOOD LIAR. SHE SAID IF THEY DON'T WANT TO KNOW THE TRUTH, THEN THEY SHOULDN'T ASK, CAUSE SHE'S GOING TO TELL IT TO THEM. AND SHE JUST DOESN'T WANT TO TRY TO HIDE ANY MORE, AND IT MAKES HER FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE TO HAVE TO DO THAT. SHE'S SAYING THAT -- REFERRING TO SEXUAL ORIENTATION -- THAT "IT'S PART OF WHO I AM," AND IF SHE WENT BACK HOME, SHE "COULDN'T BE TOTALLY ME."

Over two years ago Sandy's parents found out she was dating a woman and they "freaked." Her parents thought it was just a phase that Sandy was going through, but Sandy did not agree. Her parents were not willing to talk about it with her so Sandy just stopped telling them about it. At the time of my study, Sandy talked with her parents on the phone every week and they asked about Sandy's personal life, but they only wanted to hear about part of it, that part that conforms to their view of Sandy as "heterosexual."

Heterosexual norms for relating stipulate that a woman dates a man, and women are only friends with other women. Since her parents did not accept her dating relationships with women,

Sandy maintained the relationship with her parents by changing the details of her personal life and highlighting her interactions with males so that her experiences conformed to the views her parents desire.

The above episode is an example of bricolage because Sandy assembled together a set of concrete practices available in her immediate environment (i.e., highlighting stories to her parents about her male friends, changing details about how she met her gay friends, not telling her parents about certain parts of her life) to disguise her sexual identity. Sandy was not following a carefully laid out plan containing abstract principles that guided her actions, but she acted in an improvisational manner, drawing on and subtly altering those concrete practices of relating in which she already engaged. A bricoleur, then, “makes do” with the available concrete resources at hand in order to fashion a particular relationship. The materials that are lying about shape the bricoleur’s form and ways of relating.

Adrian, my second participant, also concealed her sexual identity from her parents. Adrian is a Caucasian woman in her late-twenties who grew up in a rural, Southern town. She identifies herself as gay because she does not like the negative connotations of the term lesbian. Adrian was involved in one significant long-term dating relationship, maintains a small, but tight, circle of friends, and is very close to her family, although she is not out to them. At one point in her life she resolved never to tell her family about her sexual orientation saying that “I’d [Adrian] take it to the grave with me” although she can now envision a day when she would discuss this with them. I would characterize Adrian as articulate and insightful, yet reserved and soft-spoken. Here is a narrative episode based on excerpts from her personal narrative.

Her name is Dina. She’s from my hometown. My parents know this girl. So I’ve asked about her before, because she’s a lot older than me. I think she’s 36. And I’ve asked them before if they knew her, cause they’ve written articles and things about her in the local newspaper, you know, back home. Cause she’s a -- I think a psychologist now. She has a Ph.D. in something like that, counselling or something. But she’s done very well for herself. She’s a really good person. But I’ve asked them just in conversation, did they know who that was. She’s like, “Oh yeah, that’s so-and-so’s daughter, you know, blah, blah, blah.” But I don’t think they have a very high opinion of her, because they know that she’s gay. So that was kind of frustrating to realize that, you know, that’s just my assumption, but some things are pretty obvious. I mean because the girl has done no wrong, you know. I mean she’s gone to school, she’s made a name for herself, she’s very -- actually she’s a professor. And there’s no reason why these people wouldn’t like her, or like what she’s done or anything like that. But they just don’t have a very high opinion of her at all. And I just kinda feel like it’s because they know, you know.

...of course they [Adrian’s parents] don’t know about me. They don’t know that I’m gay. That’s my choice. That’s the way I choose for it to be right now. And they have never really been -- I say I’m really close to them, and I really am -- but there’s a whole lot about me that they don’t know. So I keep that certain distance from them, and I’ve always wondered why, you know. And there for a while I

guess when I was about, probably about three or four years ago, they used to really pressure me about "Do you even date anybody? Do you see anybody? We don't hear you talk about anybody special or anything." And it just really got on my nerves. At the time I just had a lot going on. I was in school, and it's just like -- I don't need this. I talked to my Mom about it and told her, "Look, you know. I appreciate your concern and everything, but when there is someone, you'll be the first to know. Actually you'll be the second. But until that point, lay off." And she's done a really good job as far as backing off. So, it's not really come up since then, but I think, I don't know.

Marcia, who's the person that I used to be with, we were together for, we were together for like five years, but we lived together for almost seven. And I think the more time that goes by, the more that they're kind of realizing what may be actually going on. Even though they won't talk about it. So, I'm not going to bring it up. But I've changed a lot in the way that I think about that, because it used to be that I'd hold in, or I told other people that I'd die before they ever found out about that. I'd take it to the grave with me. They would never know. But I don't really feel that way anymore. I'm pretty much to the point that if they ask, I'll tell them. I haven't gotten to that point where I'm just gonna come right out and say, "Whether you want to know it or not, this is the way it is." But it's a process and it's -- I'm sure it's not that far away. Yeah, so they've pretty much stopped -- just don't talk about me seeing anyone.

I'm upset and uncomfortable with the fact that she [Adrian's mother] may not be happy with something that I'm doing, but it doesn't keep me from doing it, you know what I mean? Some people are different, some people will change their whole life just to be what their parents want them to be. Which is one of the bigger conflicts that I have with my ex [Marcia]. That's what she was doing. And I couldn't deal with that. I couldn't just be there whenever she wanted me to be, and then when her parents came around I was totally something different. So that's where a lot of our problems came from.

I mean, like Marcia, you know -- she used to take some of her guy friends home with her to portray as boyfriends. Even though some of them were gay. But her parents didn't know the difference. But she would do that. And I have never done that. I'll never start doing that. I don't ever want to give a -- well, I don't want to give them a false sense of security, you know what I mean? That yeah, this is the man I'm dating, and maybe we'll get married. I don't want to do that to them. So, they know that I've pretty much never taken anybody home to meet them on that kind of level. So I don't think that they expect it like they used to. So I think that, I guess now they wouldn't be as surprised as they would have been before. It wouldn't, I don't think it would kill them now, but I think it would have before. So, I think we've both, well we've all grown a lot in the last six, seven years. Cause they had a hard time letting go of me, because I was the youngest. They still do, but they're better about it. My Mom was mad that I moved up here. She was very upset about it. I don't know. I think it's hard for them to admit to themselves that I am as independent as I am. You know, and I really, I need them to an extent, but not like they want to be needed, you know. But I also said, too, that I'll tell them if they ask. But see, there will come another step, where I'll just want to tell them, then they won't have to ask.

Adrian: She [Marcia, Adrian's ex-girlfriend] would take me home to her parents house, you know, things like that. Or we'd go visit for various reasons, not just to take me there to introduce me, but just for various reasons. Because they lived so close to my parents. So a lot of times we'd go for the day and we'd stop off with both. Because my parents really liked her and then her parents really liked me. So, you know, it was just all big one happy family. But that went on for I guess about two years.

Walter: Can, can I interrupt you for a second? When you went home to her place, how would you all -- how did you all act?

Adrian: As friends.

Walter: As friends.

Adrian: Never anything more. Still to this day. Of course she's a whole different story, cause when she was 18 she was still in high school, she was kind of seeing her best friend, which was a girl. They were at her parents' house and they were in her bedroom and her mother walked in. I mean they weren't doing anything major, but I think they were like kissing on the bed or something like that. And her mother walked in. And that has like scarred her for life, because it made her father physically ill. And he said things like, "You know you're killing me. Why are you doing this to me?" And even though that happened, they still don't know. It's very weird. I mean it's like they know, but they don't want to know. Or they're in serious denial, I don't know. They don't talk about it. It's like something that never happened. They just brushed it under the rug and went on. And, you know, told her she could never see her friend again. Of course they did, but --

So when Marcia and I got together, we spent a lot of our time with Tom and Richy (who are boyfriends). Like years. When we went on vacation, they went too. It was like it was always the foursome. Whenever you needed a date, like to a company function or something, that's who you took. And it was always paired off; it was Marcia and Richy and me and Tom. But they used to joke about that a lot. Marcia was going to marry Richy, and I was going to marry Tom. We were going to get this huge house and split it in half and they'd live in one side and we'd live in the other. And nobody would ever have to know. That was when I was much younger. It was a nice thought, but I wouldn't do that.

Adrian: And I've always wondered, which he [Adrian's father] would disapprove of the most. If I married a black man, or if I was gay. I've always wondered about that. It's kind of a lose/lose situation, but, you know, it isn't that he had to choose one. I really don't know. That's where he's kinda hard to read. Now you can understand why they don't know. Cause, I mean, when they start throwing out threats at you like that --

Walter: What would happen if you went home with a black lesbian?

Adrian: Oh that would be interesting. I wouldn't -- they'd probably take my last name away from me or something. I don't think that -- and this is kinda sad to say -- but I know my father. But I do not think that he is emotionally stable enough to handle something like that. I really don't. I think that he would come to be an old bitter man and I'd guarantee that he'd never speak to me again. I just -- I don't think -- and he has a really big heart, he really does.

That's the one thing about my family, too, if they ever found out, I don't -- the last thing I ever want from them is to be tolerated. I don't want that from them. I'd rather them disown me and hate me for the rest of my life than to tolerate me, and let me be around. You know what I mean? I couldn't ever stand that. Cause I don't want that from anybody. I'd rather be alone for the rest of my life, than to think that people are doing me a favor by letting me be their friend. I'm kinda stubborn about things like that.

It's amazing how three children [Adrian and her two sisters] can grow up in the same household and turn out so differently. I've always been amazed at that. I think that's where they have a problem, too, the way that I turned out is because they look and think, "Why aren't you like these two? You know, these two are just identical. Why are you so far outfield?" No, they make it a point to tell me that they're proud of me, and that sort of thing. I believe that. But it's all, I think it's all conditional. It's all based on certain criteria. So if they had the whole picture, they wouldn't be telling me all those things.

The “whole picture” Adrian’s parents did not have was about her sexual identity. Adrian has decided not to tell her family about being gay, even to lie outright to her sister when she directly asked Adrian, because she felt her parents could not handle it. Adrian doubted her parents could deal with the truth based on how they reacted to stories about gay people in the past. The foregoing narrative opened with such a story about a woman, Dina, who grew up in Adrian’s neighborhood. When her mother heard this story, she had a negative reaction to it. Based on her mother’s response to the story, and other similar responses to stories about gay people, Adrian decided not to tell her mom about her sexual orientation. This part of the episode represents an example of “testing the waters,” that is, trying to figure out certain information by assessing people’s responses to stories about related situations. In this case, the story of the “neighborhood girl gone gay,” and her mother’s reaction to it, became a piece of information in Adrian’s personal experience upon which she drew to decide whether or not to tell her parents about her sexual orientation.

This “testing the waters” example also surfaced in Sandy’s narratives. In her case, Sandy was attentive to her parents’ response to Birdcage, a movie released to popular audiences with prominent gay themes. Based on her parents’ response to the movie, Sandy gained more information about how they felt about the gay community. Just as sawing a piece of wood generates the by-product of sawdust which can be used for other ends, Sandy’s and Adrian’s parents’ responses generated by-products that their daughter used to fashion relationships. Drawing on these by-products of lived experience, then, can shape choices not only of what to do and say, but also what not to do and say. That is, because Adrian’s parents had such a strong negative reaction to the story about Dina and to other similar stories, Adrian chose not to tell her parents about her sexual orientation.

In both of these examples, Sandy and Adrian drew on mundane experiences to fashion relationships with their parents. In both cases, their parents’ responses were minor, but concrete indications of their feelings about homosexuality. Collecting these and other minor threads of evidence informs a coherent portrayal of their parents’ views. Neither Sandy nor Adrian operated from an abstract formula to decide whether their parents might not be accepting of homosexuality, but they both intertwined mundane, concrete threads of evidence to improvise ways of relating with their parents. Furthermore, Sandy and Adrian did not work from abstract principles that led them to interpret their parents’ responses in a particular way, like an engineer might. Rather, Sandy and Adrian as bricoleurs recognized their parents’ response to the stories in their immediate environment and tucked it away with all the other threads of evidence that suggested ways to relate with their parents.

Adrian’s narrative also featured numerous examples of performing/disguising sexual identity. For example, she and Marcia performed as friends for Marcia’s parents during visits home, when they

were really dating partners. Another way of stating this is that Adrian and Marcia performed heterosexuality for Marcia's parents. Marcia and Adrian also performed being straight when Adrian went to social events for her job. The normal routine for such company functions is to bring a heterosexual significant other. Drawing on this knowledge, they asked two of their gay male friends to accompany them to maintain their disguise. Another example in Adrian's narrative presented Marcia strategically bringing men home with her to ward off her parents' suspicion about her sexuality. Adrian used the story about Marcia bringing men home to decide that she would not do the same thing with her parents. This story generated for Adrian a by-product, information that was drawn on to guide her own relationships with her parents. Similar to, yet distinct from, the discussion of "testing the waters," Adrian drew on knowledge gleaned from observing another to guide her actions, specifically to decide what not to do.

These two narrative episodes illustrate how Sandy acted as a bricoleur by assembling materials in her immediate experience, in this case, concrete practices, to fashion a relationship with her parents. Additionally, I illustrated how Adrian drew upon resources, cultural scripts of heterosexuality, in order to disguise her sexual identity. I also provided examples of bricoleurs "testing the waters" and gaining knowledge about one's own actions, feelings, and identity by observing others. The next two narrative episodes illustrate how symbolic resources are used to (re)create relationships.

(Re)creating relationships

I rebelled against my parents, I had a couple of dismal relationships, and as a result of that, I became closer to my family. And distant from everyone else.

– Sebastian

Both narrative episodes are drawn from interactions with my third participant, Sebastian. Sebastian is in his early-twenties and of Mediterranean descent. He is currently taking classes towards his undergraduate degree. He identifies himself as gay and has been out since entering college, although lately he seems to be "nosediving" back into the closet such that "... I [Sebastian] stand with the closet door open, looking out." His family is very supportive of his sexual identity, especially because his mother is lesbian, although he did not learn of his mother's sexual orientation until he was 18. His mother never spoke positively or negatively about homosexuality; one's sexual orientation was a personal decision. I would characterize Sebastian as a person who is highly self-aware and deliberate regarding how he relates with others. For example, after our first meeting where we reviewed the consent form and briefly discussed the significant people in his life, he said that the answer to all my questions was easy: "... I rebelled against my parents. I had a couple of dismal

relationships, and as a result of that, I became closer to my family. And distant from everyone else.”

In this narrative episode, Sebastian explained how he (re)defined his relationship with his first long-term boyfriend, Tripp.

They [Sebastian’s parents] did come to the realization that I’m more or less gonna do whatever I want to do, and there’s no point in trying to tell me to do otherwise. And, I think when I got into my first major relationship, that had a lot to do with, the fact that it was to cut off ties to my parents, which is what I did. I was very much in a rebellion stage. I was, declaring my independence. My relationship with him [Tripp] facilitated my breaking my ties with my parents. And, and, trying to, to um, go about things independently of them.

Essentially I was trying to create a married situation, is the best way I can think of to say it. And I intended to do that very quickly. I intended to establish a household I suppose, if that makes any sense. Which, granted, I did succeed in doing for a while.

Yeah, sometime in late April he [Tripp] asked me to marry him, which I just thought was a very odd concept, a concept of two guys getting married. The thought of my saying, “Oh, this is my husband” just doesn’t, I mean it just doesn’t see-, feel right. I mean, on an intellectual level, yeah, it makes perfect sense. And it’s very reasonable. But um, I don’t feel it, if that makes sense. It’s not something, I mean yeah, I can picture two men in tuxedos standing in and saying “I do.” But I just don’t, understand, not understand it, I understand it completely. It just seems, strikes me as odd, or something off.

And being the way that I am, and the way I was raised it would have probably been more or less an engagement, marriage, and the typical line. I probably wouldn’t be much of one to swing, so to speak, if I had been straight. But in any event, I didn’t take the idea of a relationship with a man seriously, or two men having a relationship. Um, he obviously did.

I think a lot of that had more to do with my preconceptions of what a relationship should be, I guess. As best I can tell I’m very much the type that if I had been straight I probably would have taken a very conventional, orthodox path. You know, meeting some woman, getting married. There’s an excellent chance that I would probably have held off until I was actually married to, to do anything. You know, had children, had a life, or whatever. Just the typical all-American type, I suppose. For lack of a better word. But uh, you know the typical path down through family life. Um, probably would have been divorced someday by my wife because I work too much or something like that. But, you know, would have been very much that type of thing. And obviously that wasn’t going to happen. So, I think that I was having a lot of problems through that whole period of time like I said before due to the fact that I was gay at all. I still have some problems with that. Um, so I think that, that was in a sense a way of getting as close to my ideal as I could get with the cards I’d been dealt.

It was just the upbringing I guess. My brother and my sister are very much the same way. They’re gonna get married, they’re gonna have children and they’re gonna get married with the intent of being with someone all their life. My family was the type -- let’s say for example, that you don’t wonder whether you are going to go to college. It was just like the natural state of the -- being that you were going to go, you know, your life is very clearly marked out so to speak, regardless of what you’re actually going to end up doing. You’re gonna go to college very shortly after you’re gonna get married and have children in your mid-twenties and so on. Just the very typical view of how things are going to be. The normal view so to speak. There’s another word for it, the traditional, that’s it. Yeah the traditional view of, of the family, so that was what I was brought up in and that’s where that came from, I guess.

And that being my first major relationship and the first relationship that I was living with someone, it just seemed natural for me. There is no better way for me to explain it I guess. At the time it wasn’t something I questioned. That was just the way things were, I suppose. Um, and like I said before, if that had been an actual marriage to a woman that’s probably very much how I would have

conducted things, just as one would be expected. It's not necessarily as I would wish to have things go, if that makes sense. And chances are if I had been straight and had gone to that I would have very much had the traditional role in mind. I probably would not be the way I am now where I think of the relationship of as like two partners. I would have probably had a very traditional picture of the female and the male role and how that would go about happening.

The way I would go about conducting a relationship has changed dramatically, I guess. How I moved from that was by observing a lot of people in relationships and that, most of that happened since I had went into a relationship with Tripp. That really moved me away from the traditional model of a dominant and passive partner, to the model that I'm at now, I suppose.

And the relationships that I have liked, which unfortunately have been my shorter relationships, had been much closer to a real partnership of equals. You know the matter of who's the stronger within the relationship? I very much go towards the idea that both should be strong. I take the word partner very literally. It's a two-way street in every sense of the word. And um, I guess you can hardly have a two-way, it wouldn't be a very effective two-way street if both individuals were weak, you know. I don't want a daddy and I don't want a child. And this is something that's of course gone through an evolution and something that I've, you know, very firmly come to only maybe in the past year I guess. Um, that I've really been able to put all this into words I suppose and been aware of what I'm looking for and what I want. Um, I would want the other people to be very stable and very secure within themselves and within their own lives. And then combine those as a way of sharing their two lives together if that makes any sense. Not, not one of them leaning on top of the other one. I see a lot of people, and I especially see this in a lot of possessive relationships, and, I've seen it from both sides, you know, where people take their self worth from the other individual. And that, I've seen that from both people who tend to be passive and people who tend to be dominant. And that's something I'm not interested in at all. If that makes any sense.

In this narrative episode, Sebastian described his desire to create a relationship with Tripp in order to (re)create a relationship with his parents, specifically, one that was more independent of them. That is, Sebastian formulated a strategy to create a new relationship with his parents (Baxter, 1988; Baxter & Simon, 1993). Canary and Stafford (1992) define maintenance strategies as "communication approaches people use to sustain desired relational definitions" (p. 243). Strategy can also be understood as the coordination of appropriate means with a desired end. Baxter and Simon (1993) detailed ways relaters employ strategies to sustain a particular quality of a relationship -- for example, relationship satisfaction -- in the presence of ongoing dialectical tensions and flux. In this narrative episode, a primary dialectic at play is autonomy-connection. Sebastian's strategy was to use his relationship with Tripp to rebel against his parents. To accomplish his objective, Sebastian drew on cultural views that "establishing a household" is a sign of maturity and being an adult, something that would clearly distinguish himself as autonomous from his parents. Even though he was aware at the time that two men getting married was not something that felt right to him, this marriage model was what he knew to draw upon. He labeled his relationship with Tripp using the language he had at his disposal. Thus, Sebastian drew on the cultural script of the "all-American" marriage to fashion his relationship with Tripp, which was subsequently used as a strategy to establish autonomy from his parents.

When I asked where he learned this script, Sebastian identified the source as his familial upbringing. The force of the script so permeated his life that it was seen as natural, a given, to the point he took it for granted while growing up. He even acknowledged that the script did not work for him, but that it was the best he could do “with the cards he had been dealt.”

Rather than performing as a bricoleur, Sebastian’s narrative suggests that he operated as an engineer. The following statements, “Essentially I was trying to create a married situation...,” “I intended to establish a household...,” “...had more to do with my preconceptions of what a relationship should be...,” and “Just the typical all-American type, I suppose,” all indicate that Sebastian was working from abstract models to guide his activities. The language used to characterize his relationships with Tripp and his own parents suggest that he methodically designed a plan that was guided by abstract principles of what constituted “a household,” “a marriage,” and “the typical all-American type.” Acting as an engineer, Sebastian still drew on resources, such as scripts (“the typical all-American type”) and experiences from his family (“It was just the upbringing I guess”) to create his relationships. This illustrates the value of following Lévi-Strauss’s view of bricolage as a process of improvisational assemblage, rather than Conville’s view of bricolage as the raw materials themselves. As this example illustrates, resources are drawn upon by both bricoleurs and engineers. To describe the process of drawing on resources itself, it may be helpful to label this the activity of humans as interpretive beings, using such language as “encoding/decoding” (Hall, 1980).

One comment in this episode suggests that it is not helpful to maintain a rigid distinction between the engineer and the bricoleur. Sebastian said that his quasi-marriage relationship with Tripp was “... in a sense a way of getting as close to my ideal as I could get with the cards I’d been dealt.” Clearly, Sebastian embraced an abstract ideal, but his reference to “the cards I’d been dealt” suggests that he did take into account the concrete materials in his immediate environment when he fashioned his relationships with his parents and Tripp. The language used, however, gives priority to the abstract, ideal model into which Sebastian fitted his world (his experiences, parents, and Tripp).

There is further evidence in this episode that problematizes the bricoleur-engineer dichotomy. Part of the “given” Sebastian learned from his family (and larger cultural influences to be sure) included the “traditional” model of the dominant-passive relationship. Sebastian drew on common roles of a father (dominance) and a child (passiveness) to define this kind of relationship that he no longer wanted: “I don’t want a daddy and I don’t want a child.” He continued, “...and I especially see this [dominant-passive model] in a lot of possessive relationships... How I moved from that [model] was by observing a lot of people in relationships....” After his own personal experience with Tripp and observing other relationships that he did not want to emulate, Sebastian created a new model for the way he “go[es] about conducting relationships.” In this example, Sebastian operated from the

dominant–passive model in his relationship with Tripp, but found this unsatisfying because both “people take their self worth from the other individual.” He then generated a new model of equality based on his own experiences and observations of others in possessive relationships. In this sense he charted a future trajectory, based on equality and partnership, for the way he would like subsequent relationships to operate. In order to generate this new model, Sebastian was attentive to bits and pieces of his own experiences and observations of others, much like a bricoleur. In this example, then, it seems that Sebastian moved back and forth between the bricoleur’s “continual reconstruction” of concrete experiences and the engineer’s abstract reasoning. Based on my understanding of Lévi-Strauss’s view of bricolage, I do not know how he would characterize the activity in this example. Lévi-Strauss (1966) commented that:

The difference [between the bricoleur and the engineer] is therefore less absolute than it might appear. It remains a real one, however, in that the engineer is always trying to make his way out of and go beyond the constraints imposed by a particular state of civilization while the ‘bricoleur’ by inclination or necessity always remains within them. (p. 19)

Lévi-Strauss further argued that “it is important not to make the mistake of thinking that these [bricoleur and engineer approaches] are two stages or phases in the evolution of knowledge. Both approaches are equally valid” (p. 22). It is tempting to argue that bricolage serves as complementary or an alternative understanding of how people relate in their relationships to the view, posited by social cognitive/constructivist approaches to interpersonal communication, that people follow abstract cognitive schemata. However, I do not have the background nor space to argue, for example, that a cognitive approach to relationships constructs people more like engineers rather than bricoleurs. In Chapter 5, I discuss how future extensions of research on bricolage could address how the perspective of the bricoleur relates to views of relationships offered by other theoretical perspectives more traditionally understood in communication and personal relationships. Presently, however, I return to another narrative episode concerning Sebastian and Tripp.

Once Sebastian realized that his relationship with Tripp was not working as he had intended, he decided to (re)create his relationship with Tripp. His first attempt at (re)creating his relationship was to avoid Tripp. Also at this time, Sebastian was becoming interested in someone else, Rick. The following narrative episode tells this story.

When it comes to relationships, the better they are, the more boring they tend to be to explain to someone else.

– Sebastian

Both of the relationships [with Tripp and Rick], more so the first one with Tripp than the second one [Rick], were extremely difficult relationships. And extremely stressful, and they were sort of a full time affair, in a sense. I worked a lot during those relationships. I worked probably that entire time. I worked at least forty-five hours a week at any given time, but during at least a several month period while I was seeing Tripp it was up to around 80, 85, 90 hours a week. So, between the two there really wasn't much time for anything else. And Tripp, well actually I would say both of them, sort of preferred it that way. Although, it wasn't something that I was really all that conscious of until afterwards. Tripp more so because he was just very obsessive and [for] various other reasons it was not a very wise or positive relationship at all.

That sort of really solidified, like I said, my desire, for the time being, not to be very social. Although I mean I go out quite often, but at the same time, I keep people sort of at arm's length in a sense. I mean, I go out to clubs and I hang out in cafes a lot, but people that I tend to see a lot in cafes or that I tend to see in clubs on a regular basis I don't see anywhere else. Where if I do, it might, for a few people, have been on the path to us becoming good friends. But I sort of cut it off after about a week or two. Usually nothing really conscious; just I lose interest in calling them. I lose interest in hanging out with them so, I just don't.

A lot of what I was doing at that time was sort of escaping everything so I didn't have to think about it, because I still did want to be with Tripp at that time [even though Sebastian was becoming interested in Rick]. God knows why in hindsight. But at the time, I was still disturbed enough to want to be with Tripp. That was one of the reasons why I worked half of second and all of third shift and then slept during the day, so basically I never saw anyone but myself and Rick, which I did not see much either because he worked in the afternoon when I was working and he was around when I was sleeping. And the only reason I didn't take active steps to end it [with Tripp] earlier other than, I mean, I approached it a couple of times, but I didn't get much of a positive response.

'Cause that was a big part of why I was working so many hours. Because by working a lot of hours I didn't have to be around him. If that makes any sense. I realized that, I think, much later. But I think that was a big part of why I was doing that. And that was the easiest way not to be around him. That was just the easiest way to do it. Without just saying I don't want to be around you. And I ended up doing that again later with Rick. Basically the same thing, which is something that I'd learn to do again if I didn't want to be around someone. I could have told him to go away and I never would have seen them again, but, which I had done a couple times since then, but that's not where I was at the time.

[Later on,] I leased a town house, mainly to have more room more than anything else. So, it's easier to avoid someone the more room you have in your living environment. Because I was already very certain that I did not want to be in this relationship [with Rick] anymore. As far as I was concerned we weren't in a relationship anymore. Like I said, I was really escapist and most of what I did at that time [was] to keep my mind occupied. And also designed to keep my social interactions with people practically non-existent. I had stopped going out again.

In a similar manner to Sandy using her weekly phone conversations to disguise her sexual identity from her parents, Sebastian used an everyday routine, his work schedule, to refashion his relationship with Tripp. By working extra hours, he was able to avoid Tripp after Tripp did not respond positively to Sebastian's break-up attempts. The example of Sebastian using his work schedule to avoid Tripp also typifies a relationship strategy (Baxter & Simon, 1993). Sebastian referred back to this strategy in order to fashion subsequent relationships, as illustrated in this comment: "And I ended up doing that [strategy of avoiding Tripp] again later with Rick. Basically the same thing, which is something that I'd learn to do again if I didn't want to be around someone." That

is, employing this relationship strategy (avoiding Tripp by working more hours) generated, as a by-product, an experience upon which to draw for subsequent relating. This example illustrates Conville's (1997) point about the portability of lived experiences: that one's collections of symbolic resources, or "bag of tricks" (or bricolage in Conville's framework) could be transported among relationships, so that something one learned in one relationship could be drawn upon in another relationship. Furthermore, this example supports Conville's assertion that the "bricoleur as relationship maker" draws upon symbolic resources from mundane, everyday experiences and contexts for the purposes of everyday interaction. In this case, Sebastian's routine experience of working extra hours for the purpose of everyday maintenance of his relationship.

Along with his desire to avoid Tripp, Sebastian also sought to reduce his social interactions with others, to keep them "at arm's length." Sebastian achieved this by not investing enough in the relationships to move them past the acquaintance level, another relationship strategy. To formulate this strategy, Sebastian drew upon social definitions of what it means to be an acquaintance and not perform any activities that would advance relationships beyond this point. The definitions for what it means to be "an acquaintance" and behaviors that are considered appropriate are defined by a particular social community (Wood, 1995a). How people make sense of "a relationship," along with how people come to define their own identity and that of others, is illustrated in the next section by all three participants' experiences within and between the gay and straight communities.

There is, however, no strong evidence in this narrative episode to suggest that Sebastian acted as a bricoleur or an engineer. Although I do argue he drew upon resources from his own experiences and applied them to subsequent relationships, and that he implicitly drew upon social definitions for what it means to be an acquaintance to determine how to keep people at "arm's length," these are general actions of humans as interpretive beings. Further information may reveal that Sebastian acted more like a bricoleur or an engineer, but the evidence available in this episode does not allow an analysis of that sort. Judgment of whether Sebastian acted as a bricoleur, engineer, or both could be made if more information were available about how he assembled the symbolic materials together to fashion his relationship with Tripp. I present this episode as a point of reference to clarify examples of bricolage (with the case of Sandy and Adrian) and activities of the engineer (with the prior episode of Sebastian).

With Sebastian's narrative episodes I have shown how he acted as an engineer to create a "married" relationship with Tripp. To do this, he drew on abstract, cultural scripts of the all-American family and applied them to his particular situation. Sebastian, employing a relationship strategy, used his relationship with Tripp as a way to rebel against, and establish autonomy from, his parents. The strategy became an element of his relationship repertoire, or "bag of tricks," which can be

transported from one relationship to another. The dominant-passive model Sebastian initially adopted to guide his relationship with Tripp was shaped by his family and larger social forces, thus illustrating sources of symbolic resources.

However, this script became unsatisfactory, and, based on his experiences with Tripp and observations of other relationships, Sebastian explicitly set out to chart a new trajectory to guide future relationships. His new model was based on a model of partnership and equality. When formulating this new model, Sebastian drew on common roles of a father (dominance) and a child (passiveness) to define the kind of relationship that he did not want, as well as to define what he did want, a partnership based upon equality. The ways that Sebastian created a new relationship model based on equality problematizes any rigid distinction between the bricoleur and the engineer. Further, the example of Sebastian avoiding Tripp reveals where further information is needed to be able to determine whether or not a person was acting like a bricoleur. These narrative episodes also illustrated that symbolic resources can be composed of mundane experiences, such as routinely working extra hours, and used for everyday maintenance strategies, in this case, avoidance.

Tentative Conclusions of Bricolage as an Analytic Perspective

In this paper, I discussed examples from narrative episodes that demonstrated general processes of relaters drawing on symbolic and material resources to (re)define their personal relationships. I showed how participants acted as bricoleurs, continually (re)assembling discursive resources without a specific structure or end in mind. The available resources in their immediate context influenced the forms and ways of relating that eventually emerged through the process of drawing on these resources. Participants acted also as engineers, approaching these resources with abstract, pre-planned structures that guided selection of specific resources to accomplish pre-defined ends. I also presented examples where there was not sufficient information in the narrative episodes to determine the manner in which participants drew upon the discursive materials. Further, I problematized a rigid dichotomy between the bricoleur and the engineer.

Personal narratives serve as a rich source of information regarding individual and joint stories about people's relationship histories. The bricoleur/bricolage perspective provides an analytic framework to examine relationship narratives, guiding researchers of personal relationships to understand processes of creativity and improvisation in relating. In so doing, it perhaps complements and/or challenges theoretical understandings that represent people as relating exclusively from abstract, cognitive schemata. Therefore, I would like to see connections made between bricolage and other theoretical perspectives. For example, how might bricolage complement and/or challenge social

cognition/constructivist perspectives? I made implicit and, at times, explicit connections in my analysis of the narrative episodes by using the language of some cognitive schemata, most notably, scripts. I argued that people drew on scripts of relating that served to guide their actions. One example was the script of the good marriage that Sebastian used in his relationship with Tripp.

Do scripts and other cognitive schemata count as discursive resources? Are people who are cognitively complex more adept bricoleurs? Since, as Conville (1997) argued, knowledge about symbolic resources is relationship knowledge, does knowing about an individual's or social community's symbolic and material resources contribute to larger understandings about one's cognitive maps of meaning? Rather than complementing social cognitive perspectives, however, bricolage might also radically challenge them by arguing that people, more often than not, work from their concrete experiences, improvising ways of relating as they go, and do not act from such abstract schemata.

Additionally, analyzing narratives with the perspective of bricolage highlights the multiple social and discursive sources of the resources upon which relaters draw. These social sites include the family, relational dyad, friendship networks, social communities, and larger cultural contexts. Further, the context and content of the resources that relaters draw upon is often everyday and mundane, areas often overlooked by scholars of communication and personal relationships.

The bricolage perspective also encourages processual views of relating. English-speakers, at least in the United States, seem to privilege nouning over verbing when talking about how people interact with one another, a focus on relationships rather than relating. Furthermore, people describe themselves as being "in relationships" such that the relationship is static, containing the person. The bricolage/bricoleur perspective invites relationship researchers to focus on notions of motion and process in relating because it is only in the activity of the bricoleur, *drawing* on the resources, that constitutes bricolage. Bricolage is a process of improvisational assemblage; the bricoleur working without a specific end or abstract structure in mind, but a logic and structure emerges based on the available resources. Research that posits linear developmental models (e.g., Knapp, 1978) seem to operate more from the processes of the engineer, rather than the unfinished, (re)articulating processes of the bricoleur.

Because of its emphasis on process, its broad heuristic scope, and its potential to complement and/or challenge existing scholarship, I feel that bricolage holds great promise as an analytical lens to understand notions of motion and creativity in personal relating.

References

- Baker, R. (1982). Growing up. New York: The New American Library.
- Bartholomew, K. (1993). From childhood to adult relationships: Attachment theory and research. In S. W. Duck (Ed.), Learning about relationships [understanding relationship processes, 2], (pp. 30–62). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Baxter, L. A. (1988). A dialectical perspective on communication strategies in relationship development. In S. W. Duck (Ed.), A handbook of personal relationships, (pp. 257–273). New York: John Wiley.
- Baxter, L. A. (1993). The social side of personal relationships: A dialectical perspective. In S. W. Duck (Ed.), Understanding relationship processes, 3: Social context and relationships, (pp. 139–165). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Baxter, L. A. and Montgomery, B. M. (1996). Relating: Dialogues and dialectics. New York: Guilford Press.
- Baxter, L. A. and Simon, E. P. (1993). Relationship maintenance strategies and dialectical contradictions in personal relationships. Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 10, 225–242.
- Berger, P. & Kellner, H. (1964). Marriage and the construction of reality. Diogenes, 46, 1–24.
- Blair, C., Brown, J. R., & Baxter, L. A. (1994). Disciplining the feminine. Quarterly Journal of Speech, 80, 383–409.
- Blumer, H. (1969). Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Borland, K. (1991). “That’s not what I said”: Interpretive conflict in oral narrative research. In S. B. Gluck and D. Patai (Eds.), Women’s words: The feminist practice of oral history (pp. 63–75). New York: Routledge.
- Burke, K. (1945). A grammar of motives. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Burke, K. (1966). Language as symbolic action. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Canary, D. & Stafford, L. (1992). Relational maintenance, strategies, and equity in marriage. Communication Monographs, 59, 243–267.
- Conquergood, D. (1995). Beyond the text: Toward a performative cultural politics. Paper presented at the “Future of the Field” Performance Studies Conference, New York University, NY.
- Conville, R. L. (1988). Relational transitions: An inquiry into their structure and function. Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 5, 423–437.
- Conville, R. L. (1997). Between spearheads: Bricolage and relationships. Manuscript accepted for publication.
- Crawford, L. (1996). Personal ethnography. Communication Monographs, 63, 158–170.
- Csikszentmihalyi M. (1991). Flow: The psychology of optimal experience. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers.
- de Certeau, M. (1984). The practice of everyday life. (S. Rendall, Trans.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dixson, M. & Duck, S. (1993). Understanding relationship processes: Uncovering the human search for meaning. In S. W. Duck (Ed.), Understanding relationship processes, 1: Individuals in relationships (pp. 175–206). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Duck, S. W. (1990). Relationships as unfinished business: Out of the frying pan and into the 1990s. Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 7, 5–24.
- Duck, S. (1994). Meaningful relationships: Talking, sense, and relating. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Duck, S. & Pond, K. (1989). Friends, romans, countrymen, lend me your retrospections: Rhetoric and reality in personal relationships. In C. Hendrick (Ed.), Close relationships (pp. 17–38). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Duck, S., West, L. & Acitelli, L. (1997). Sewing the field: The tapestry of relationships in life and research. In S. W. Duck (Ed.), Handbook of personal relationships (2nd ed., pp. 1–27). New York: Wiley.

- Fisher, W. R. (1987). Human communication as narration: Toward a philosophy of reason, value, and action. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.
- Fitch, K. L. (1995, November). "A cold glass of beer at bath time:" A closer look at relational codes in culture. Paper presented at the meeting of the Speech Communication Association, San Antonio, TX.
- Gadamer, H. (1989). Truth and method (2nd, Rev. Ed., J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Trans.). New York: Continuum.
- Gee, J. P. (1989). Literacy, discourse, and linguistics: Introduction. Journal of Education, 171, pp. 1–13.
- Gergen, K. J. (1988). Feminist critique and science and the challenge of social epistemology. In M. M. Gergen (Ed.), Feminist thought and the structure of knowledge, (pp. 27–48). New York: New York University Press.
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, and P. Willis (Eds.), Culture, media, language, (pp. 128–140). London: Hutchinson.
- Hawkes, T. (1977). Structuralism and semiotics. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hebdige, D. (1979). Subculture: The meaning of style. London: Routledge.
- Husserl, E. (1931). Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology (W. R. Boyce Gibson, Trans.). New York: Macmillan.
- Knapp, M. (1978). Social intercourse: From greeting to goodbye. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Kramarae, C. (1996). Classified information: Race, class, and (always) gender. In J. T. Wood (Ed.), Gendered relationships (pp. 20–38). Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company.
- Langellier, K. M. (1989). Personal narratives: Perspectives on theory and research. Text and Performance Quarterly, 9, 243–276.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1966). The savage mind. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lugones, M. (1994). Playfulness, "world"-traveling, and loving perception. In D. Soyini Madison (Ed.), The woman that I am: The literature and culture of contemporary women of color (pp. 626–638). New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). Mind, self and society. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Meyerhoff, B. (1978). Number our days. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Meyerhoff, B. (1982). Life history among the elderly: Performance, visibility, and re-membering. In J. Ruby (Ed.), A crack in the mirror (pp. 99–117). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Pearce, W. B. (1989). Communication and the human condition. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Prusank, D. T., Duran, R. L., & DeLillo, D. A. (1993). Interpersonal relationships in women's magazines: Dating and relating in the 1970s and 1980s. Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 10, 307–320.
- Shotter, J. (1992). What is a "personal" relationship? A rhetorical-responsive account of "unfinished business." In J. H. Harvey, T. L. Orbuch, & A. L. Weber (Eds.), Attributions, accounts, and close relationships (pp. 19–39). New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Spender, D. (1984). Defining reality: A powerful tool. In C. Kramarae, M. Schultz, & W. O'Barr (Eds.), Language and Power (pp. 9–22). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Spitzack, C. & Carter, K. (1987). Women in communication studies: A typology for revision. Quarterly Journal of Speech, 73, 401–423.
- Todorov, T. (1984). Mikhail Bakhtin: The dialogical principle (W. Godzich, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1981.)
- Watson, L. C. & Watson-Franke, M. (1985). Interpreting life histories: An anthropological inquiry. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Weinstein, D. & Weinstein, M. A. (1993). Postmodern(ized) Simmel. London: Routledge.

- West, J. T. (1995). Understanding how the dynamics of ideology influence violence between intimates. In S. W. Duck and J. T. Wood (Eds.) Understanding relationship processes, 5: Confronting relationship challenges, (pp. 129-149). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Wood, J. T. (1982). Communication and relational culture: Bases for the study of human relationships. Communication Quarterly, 30, 75-83.
- Wood, J. T. (1992). Telling our stories: Narratives as a basis for theorizing sexual harassment. Journal of Applied Communication Research, 20, 349-362.
- Wood, J. T. (1993). Enlarging conceptual boundaries: A critique of research in interpersonal communication. In S. P. Bowen and N. J. Wyatt (eds.), Transforming visions: Feminist critiques of speech communication (pp. 19-50). New Jersey: Ablex.
- Wood, J. T. (1995a). Relational communication: Continuity and change in personal relationships. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Wood, J. T. (1995b). Feminist scholarship and the study of relationships. Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 12, 103-120.
- Wood, J. T. (1996). Gender, relationships, and communication. In J. T. Wood (Ed.), Gendered relationships (pp. 3-19). Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.
- Wood, J. T. (1997). Communication theories in action: An introduction. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Wood, J. T. and Duck, S. W. (1995). Off the beaten track: New shores for relationship research. In J. T. Wood and S. W. Duck (eds.) Understanding relationship processes, 6: Understudied relationships (pp. 1-21). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.