INTRODUCTION TO CONSTRUCTIVIST THEORY

Zechariah arrives at an appointment made for him by the disciplinary board of a midsized, rural university. He is a 19-year-old African American freshman. He has a 17-year-old sister and two younger brothers aged 15 and 13. They have been raised by his mother and his grandmother in a large northeastern city about four hours away from the university. The Christian religion plays an important role in Zechariah’s family’s life, and he was named after the Prophet Zechariah, whose teachings were repeatedly quoted to him during his childhood. Zechariah has been referred for anger management. He disagrees with the referral, believing it reflects a racist university system. However, he plans to cooperate. He is determined to succeed academically and become the first member of his family to graduate from a university. In a brief mental status screen, there were no signs of cognitive confusion, homicidal or suicidal ideation, or impulse control problems.

The postmodern tradition encompasses many different viewpoints rather than providing a unified theory for clinicians to follow. This tradition was influenced by a confluence of approaches, including feminist, humanistic, and systemic (Neimeyer, 2009). What these diverse, constructivist approaches have in common is the belief that individuals are always making meaning from their experiences to understand themselves and the world. To do this, individuals need to impose order on the phenomena they experience. The order they impose helps them understand their experiences and derive meaning from them. In fact, this order, and the emphasis individuals places on certain aspects of their experience, shapes their view of their lives and contributes to both their strengths and their difficulties. This is because the meanings they derive from their experiences represent socially constructed realities rather than an objective reality that holds true for themselves across time, across different individuals, within a culture, or across cultures. While there is an objective world of external stimuli, Zechariah’s meaning making is much more a function of his socially constructed world. While there is no absolute “truth,” social constructions that
stem from dominant social groups and institutions may impose their view of reality on less powerful individuals and groups (Neimeyer, 2009).

You are a relational constructivist. Thus, you believe that it is the conversational exchanges Zechariah has with himself and others that serve as the medium for imposing order on his experiences so that meaning construction can take place. Zechariah is the protagonist within the story of his life, and in order to understand it, Zechariah must talk about it with you. This dyadic dialogue is the process that allows him to construct knowledge for understanding himself, you, and his situation; this meaning creation is mediated by the language used in the dialogue. As he tells you what he is going through at the university, he is engaging in a social performance that is, by its nature, a relational act. You will take a very ideographic approach to helping him. Until Zechariah comes to his appointment, you’ll have no plan about how you will proceed beyond encouraging him to tell his story and intending to fully participate with him in cocreating a healing experience. It is a cocreated experience because who (Zechariah) tells what (his problems with his roommate) to whom (you) when (after a disciplinary board hearing) is highly influential in what story unfolds and the meaning that Zechariah draws from it (Neimeyer, 1995, 2000).

Relational constructivism “emphasizes the primacy of interpersonal relationships and conversational exchanges in human life” (Neimeyer, 2000, p. 216) and seeks to explain that all-important concept, “the self.” You believe that Zechariah maintains a coherent sense of himself through the stories he tells about his past. These “storied selves” are always open to revision as he explores and elaborates on his experiences within conversational exchanges; Zechariah does not have a true self that is knowable or that is real as an entity. His stories are first-person narrations used to (a) integrate his disparate experiences together into a coherent whole, (b) position him in relation to others, and (c) temporarily provide him with fictional coherence for understanding himself. Who in fact is Zechariah? A university student? An African American male? An eldest son? An angry young man? The answer will depend on who he is relating to in any given moment and what type of relational exchange he is engaged in with this other person; even his immediate sense of himself is a process under construction within every interpersonal exchange (Neimeyer, 2000). Thus, whether he experiences himself as a university student, an eldest son, or an angry man depends more on what is functional for him, in the moment, than what is objectively “true” or reality based.

Zechariah is continuously in the process of trying to make meaning from his experiences through exploring and elaborating on them. The past experiences Zechariah is attempting to incorporate within his self-understanding are in fact heterogeneous, complex, and at times contradictory. Thus, many different stories are possible, and no one is more objectively true than another. How will a dialogue proceed? As Zechariah relates his life to you, he will organize his experiences into units that seem meaningful to him in the moment. He may perceive patterns or themes within these experiences as he does so. For example, he may remember many instances in which he helped his younger siblings. The meaning he creates or draws from these stories about himself could include that he is a loving older brother (who he is) who actively seeks to help his siblings (what he does). This understanding of himself, or self-theory, can be considered functional for him if it is plausible within the constraints of his
current day-to-day life, if it offers opportunities for expansion or revision so that it can integrate new experiences, and if it leads to positive mood states.

Does Zechariah need treatment? It depends on whether he has a coherent and life-enhancing narrative guiding him in the moment. To determine if this is the case, consider the following questions: Is he experiencing a lot of positive emotions? Does his current narrative give him an adaptive and coherent view of himself? Is he relating effectively to others? Is he taking actions that support adaptive goals within his family, school, and work environments? Is he able to adaptively accommodate new experiences into his ongoing narrative? If so, then his narrative is life enhancing, and he doesn’t need treatment. On the other hand, if he is experiencing a lot of negative emotions; if he is experiencing a disorganized, negative, incoherent, or overly rigid view of himself; if he is struggling within dysfunctional relationships; if he is unable to take adaptive actions; or if he is unable to be responsive to new experiences, then treatment is indicated.

At this moment in time, Zechariah is defining his identity using a problem-saturated narrative; the problems he has faced as a new student, his roommate’s accusation that he is violent, the behavior of the disciplinary board, and his feelings of oppression and invisibility within society are dominating his view of himself and his world. Other aspects of his experiences, such as his success in his coursework, his happiness at finding African American friends, and the love and respect he receives from his family members, are thin (not well-elaborated) stories that are not experienced as potently at this time as the thick (well-elaborated) story of oppression. If he chooses to participate in treatment, his awareness of these positive experiences and the emotions they evoke could be enhanced through further exploration and elaboration so that they could form powerful counternarratives to the painful one that is currently dominating his constructions. Zechariah would be in charge of any meaning he draws from these treatment experiences, but through attending to his emotional responses (verbal and nonverbal), you would guide him to develop a more life-enhancing narrative (Neimeyer, 1995, 2000), one that gives him more choices for constructive action (Neimeyer, 2009).

THE ROLE OF THE CLINICIAN

Your therapeutic sessions would involve interventions regarding the meaning that Zechariah draws from his experiences (Neimeyer, 2009). It starts with a conversation between Zechariah and you. While his words and actions are going to define how treatment starts, you are not a passive participant in his reality. You need to be fully present as you listen to him and free of any agendas or distractions. You need a “from–to” presence in which you are aware of yourself as an individual as you are relating to him as an individual (Neimeyer, 2009, p. 60). You will be part of his narrative process by asking questions, reflecting on what he’s said, and encouraging him to experience his emotions and bodily sensations more deeply. By doing this, you and Zechariah will be temporarily creating segments of his experience (subplots). These have an assumed beginning and end that punctuate a seemingly linear event, even though no objective linear cause–effect relationships are actually possible (Kelly, 1955).
For example, Zechariah may have found an experience in his morning psychology class confusing. You will encourage him to explore this experience more deeply by helping him recall further details of the class to enable him to consider his actions, thoughts, feelings, and interactions with others from multiple perspectives. Through this process, he will gain deeper meaning from what he experienced. In the moment, he says that a particular statement made by the professor was subtly insulting and “caused” him to feel rejected. Zechariah has worked hard in this class and doesn’t understand why the professor would mistreat him. Fully processing negative emotions plays an integral part in the meaning-making experience of treatment, so Zechariah’s emotion of rejection will be explored fully. You will help him find the meaning he has constructed from the words of the professor. This will not be a passive relating of what occurred in class—you will help him affectively experience what he is relating to you, and you will be aware of your own experiential reaction to what he is relating. You will also help Zechariah look for deeper themes behind this particular story and other stories that he tells you that may play key roles in his overall constructions of his life (Neimeyer, 2009).

Zechariah defines the beginning of this experience as the professor’s comment and the end of it as his feeling of rejection. However, if a different segment of time had been chosen, a different interpretation of cause and effect might have enfolded. For example, based on your questions, you might determine that, due to a faulty alarm clock, Zechariah rushed into class late. This entry disrupted the class discussion. The professor responded by criticizing Zechariah for coming in late. In this way, “the lateness” is now the cause of the rejection, not the professor’s comments. Thus, there is no true linearity that can be used to determine cause and effect, only a perceived linearity.

As Zechariah tells his story, you will try to achieve narrative empathy—where you are attuned to his feelings and thoughts and are engaged in reflecting on and validating his identity as it unfolds. You will be curious and encourage exploration rather than being directive or didactic. His emotions always carry important meaning, and they will be actively explored whenever signs of them, either verbal or nonverbal, emerge in the session. To process his experiences and support meaning construction, you will engage him in three basic processes: articulating his story as fully as possible; elaborating any aspects of it that might be confusing, incomplete, or problematical; and negotiating interpersonal meanings from his experiences that support understanding of his world and his place in it, with a sense of coherence and optimism, and that support an adaptive lifestyle (Neimeyer, 2009).

Both of you are bound in some ways by the language you use while conversing. Treatment can turn its attention to this language, within which the assumptions of the dominant culture are embedded, along with the family or cultural assumptions behind Zechariah’s self-theories; some of these may be guiding him in adaptive ways, but others may be problematic and need to be challenged. For example, a son involved in an incestuous relationship with his father could be labeled an “incest victim,” an “incest survivor,” or a “thrivor despite incest.” Subtle and not-so-subtle changes in language can have a potent impact on the son’s view of himself in relation to others. Thus, Zechariah’s created understanding of his situation may limit him more in exploring options for himself than the external contingencies of the university; therapy seeks to expand his options. If social constructions of the university are oppressive to Zechariah, the therapist may act as an
Constructivist Case Conceptualizations and Treatment Plans

agent for social change. The therapist may help Zechariah modify, reinterpret, or resist cultural stories that are oppressive to him or others (Neimeyer, 2009).

How will you encourage adaptive meaning construction? The overall process will start with you and Zechariah deconstructing his story (taking it from one whole into many parts, such as the setting, characters, and plot) and then elaborating further aspects of it that he may not have fully attended to. This will allow him to draw more meaning from it. There are many techniques you could use in this process. While you listen actively, you will suggest techniques that might resonate with his needs in the moment. As the treatment process is highly collaborative, a technique will never be imposed on Zechariah; he will be asked about whether he wants to try something or not. Techniques developed from many different schools of treatment may prove useful within the spontaneous interactions that unfold during the session. However, the storied-self metaphor can be used to provide practical guidance for encouraging Zechariah in the meaning construction process. This metaphor can be explored and elaborated along three dimensions, including its (a) narrative form and features, (b) points of view and voice, and (c) issues of authorship and audience. Each dimension offers ideas for how your conversation with Zechariah could intervene in the meaning construction process to make more narrative possibilities available. Narratives that don’t open up opportunities for new meaning construction are considered thin and in need of further exploration and expansion; this is called thickening the narrative. The following descriptions of how to use these dimensions in opening up new narrative possibilities for Zechariah, the “author-protagonist,” come from Neimeyer (2000).

Narrative form and features is a structure for understanding Zechariah’s autobiographical account that includes articulating details of the setting (where), the characterization (who), the plot (what), the themes (why), and the goals (purpose) of the narrative. The setting emerges from a step-by-step account of what is going on during a particular aspect of his history and indicates the where and when of a segment of experience. You will help Zechariah recall as many details of the setting as possible, and you will accent the meaning he is attaching to them so that he can explore his constructions more thoroughly.

Characterization refers to defining who the actors are within the story as well as the hypothetical intentions of these individuals as told by the narrator. While Zechariah may be sure he understands his roommate’s motivation, you may help him explore alternative possibilities. Individuals often have complex intentions. By considering these possibilities, Zechariah will add greater psychological depth to his story. This process may leave Zechariah with a deeper insight into other people. Zechariah’s own intentions can also be examined in this way, and you may offer metaphors or other methods for helping him understand his own complex internal experiences. Finally, this work will help Zechariah see how his “self” and “other” constructions are interrelated within his story.

Helping Zechariah articulate the plot of his story, or what happened in a certain episode (or subplot) of his story, will be used to increase his awareness of all the actions that occurred and the order in which they occurred. Inadequate understanding of events will interfere with Zechariah’s having a coherent sense of his identity. If he is having trouble recalling details of a subplot, you will help him vividly reexperience it. Through this, he will be guided to fill in gaps in the story. For example, Zechariah may have aspects of himself that he has kept secret from others in an attempt to separate himself from trauma, negative
experiences, or some disliked or disowned behavior on his part. You will help him clarify the meaning of these parts of himself in a more self-affirming and accepting way. Similarly, he may be confused because aspects of his experience are directing him to behave in contradictory ways. You will help him clarify these confusing experiences, negotiate meaning that takes all of them into account, and develop a plan of action that directs him in a life-affirming way. You will then help him consider how each part of the experience helps him understand what has happened.

The wherefore of the narrative is the well-defined, if fictional, goals that you will help Zechariah set for himself. These goals are future oriented and will reflect positive actions that he could take to sustain himself in living within a coherent self-understanding while he relates adaptively to others. While in fact no particular goal represents the reality of how he “should” be, these goals represent possibilities that are open to him. They may also include attempts to seek social validation for his new positive self-constructions. While these goals may be satisfying to him or designed to satisfy the university’s disciplinary board, success in treatment is never based on goal attainment per se, as his life is an ongoing process of construction without a knowable endpoint. Goals are successful if they set Zechariah on a forward-moving narrative into the future.

As Zechariah relates his narrative to you, there is both an intrapersonal and an interpersonal focus. The intrapersonal focus is highlighted by the point of view and voice of the narrative. Zechariah can choose from five different points of view in telling his story. In the first, he can be engaged in an interior monologue, where he is providing an uncensored, free-flowing description of his experiences as they spontaneously occur to him. Second, he may be engaged in a dramatic monologue, where he is attempting to explicitly persuade the listener of his point of view. Third, he may be engaged in a letter narrative, which, like the internal monologue, is a form of self-exploration. However, in writing the letter, it is more organized and less free floating. The writer assumes that the reader of the letter will form a response to it, therefore, the narrative needs to be made clear to this potential other. Fourth, Zechariah could relate his narrative in the style of a detached autobiography, where he tries to show objectivity in examining his life. Finally, in anonymous narration, Zechariah could articulate the viewpoints of more than one character within the story. In this way, the story wouldn’t have an “I” focus.

In telling the story, the voice Zechariah chooses to use may provide clues to the meaning he has been drawing from it. For example, does he use a pleading voice, as if telling himself that he has done the best he could? Does he use a condemning tone of voice where he blames himself for what has happened? Zechariah has many voices within himself. If only one can be heard, he risks ignoring important aspects of himself in constructing his identity.

Why is Zechariah choosing to mention some details of his story but not others? How is this intended to influence you? Storytelling is an interactive process with reciprocal influence between the teller (author) and the listener (audience). From this perspective, it has an interpersonal focus. Zechariah is implicitly or explicitly bringing you in as a listener and participant in how he decides to tell you his story and in how he decides which of his heterogeneous experiences to share with you. In addition, the very language he uses in talking about himself is influenced by his social context. The culture Zechariah lives in provides the language that he can use to try to understand his experiences and that he can use to
reshape his experiences. You will help Zechariah understand how languaging (the using of words to describe experience) is a process that occurs in the context of one person communicating to another. The language an individual uses implicitly or explicitly punctuates experience and thus can bias the individual’s construction of meaning from a story. Zechariah may need new words to use in developing a more functional meaning from aspects of his story or to use in plotting an alternative narrative.

In summary, many techniques, performed orally or in writing, can help Zechariah deconstruct a problem-saturated narrative and begin creating a more life-enhancing one. The process of deconstruction will provide Zechariah with new possibilities for how he can think, feel, or behave as he reconstructs a new life story. At the end of treatment, Zechariah will be telling his story in a more life-enhancing manner. What will that reflect? His stories about himself will include self-acceptance, validation, and continuity. He will have positioned himself in a positive way in relation to others. He will have active, positive ways of connecting to the social world that receive positive validation from others. His new story will be able to guide him toward achieving his goals as a student and loving family member. You will have validated any constructive changes Zechariah made in how he sees himself, how he sees his place in the world, and how he interacts with others. However, strong, health-seeking identities are best validated by significant others in his life beyond the treatment setting. Thus, you will have helped him determine if, how, and when he will document any new aspects of himself in his interactions with other people. You will have supported Zechariah in developing his own idiosyncratic meanings from the patterns he has punctuated in his life, as recognition of his uniqueness is primary in your view of him. The healthy meanings he has constructed will lead him to goal-directed and health-discovering behavior, thoughts, and emotions. You will have helped relieve him of personal and social constructions that have constrained or oppressed him (Neimeyer, 2009). How long will treatment be? Each session will end with a consideration of its value and whether the client feels another consultation would be of value (Neimeyer, 1995, 2000).

CASE APPLICATION: INTEGRATING THE DOMAIN OF SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

Zechariah’s case will now be examined in more detail. While there are many domains of human complexity that could provide insights into his constructions of himself, others, and his situation, the domain of socioeconomic status has been selected to integrate within a constructivist case conceptualization and treatment plan.

Interview With Zechariah (Z) From a Constructivist Perspective

C: (handing Z a copy of the report) Here is the disciplinary board report. I thought you would want to see it. (long pause while Z reads through the document) I found it very confusing. You’ve got an outstanding academic record for your first semester here—a 4.0. To me, this means you must be a disciplined, high-achieving young man. Yet, the board describes you as impulsive and angry.
Z: (tightly gripping the report, calmly but with intensity) This is all racist bullshit. What’s wrong with everybody here? (loudly and firmly) I got angry a few times at the hearing because my roommate was lying about me. That doesn’t make me an angry person. (pause) I could tell the moment I walked in that the board had pre-judged me and found me guilty.

C: What told you that?

Z: (matter-of-factly) There were ten of them all sitting across from me and just staring at me throughout the hearing—all wearing fancy suits. I was wearing my church clothes, but they were from Kmart; I doubt those people ever needed to shop at Kmart.

C: You felt their clothes set them apart from you. It was hard to imagine that people who were so much wealthier than you would treat you fairly. Was there anything else?

Z: (angrily) I was separated by a stupid screen from my roommate. My lawyer warned me about this in advance (pause) but, I . . . (choked up)

C: The screen hit you hard. What did it mean to you?

Z: (angrily) It was saying I was set apart—invisible. He was free to accuse me of anything, and . . . (pause) Henry—my roommate—told the board that he was so scared of me, he couldn’t testify if he saw me, (pause, hands on chair, knuckles white) and they let him get away with it.

C: It was an ordeal, painful, and it felt rigged against you.

Z: (intently) I had to sit there and listen to all this testimony where he insisted I’d been threatening him from day one. I could see his hands on the table because the screen wasn’t very large. He was clutching a Bible like he was some pious man. The panel questioned him gently as if he was on the brink of a breakdown. When it was my turn, I asked him if it wasn’t true that I tried over and over to befriend him; he just kept muttering I was just trying to intimidate him. (voice getting louder) I asked him if it wasn’t true that I was hardly ever in the room except to sleep. He said that was because I was always off drinking. (fists pounding the side of the chair) I wasn’t out drinking. I was in the library studying, but he assumes everything bad he can about me.

C: Why does he do that?

Z: (intently, looking down) He’s a racist, pure and simple. (looking up, sarcastically) Are you one of those people who believes racism is a thing of the past?

C: The world, including this campus, is still filled with stories of oppression, pain, and suffering. (pause) I’m sorry these stories are still being created. Every student has a right to feel welcomed and respected here.

Z: (quietly) I dreamed of a university being like that, ever since I was little. I can still remember my mother taking me downtown to walk around the public library every
Saturday—it was huge. She would say that universities were full of buildings like this and, one day, I could go if I worked hard enough. I was so excited. I did work hard, and I got here. That first day started out joyfully. But, now . . . (pause)

C: Thinking of a university was exhilarating, (pause) but something went seriously wrong.

Z: (intently) I knew I was headed for a challenge coming here.

C: (pause) What do you mean by “challenge”?

Z: (ironically) I’ve grown up around African Americans. Looking at the brochures this school sent me, I saw nothing but White faces. I knew I would be an outsider here. I wanted to go to Hampton University in Virginia. It’s a private school for African Americans (pause), but this is a public school, and the tuition is much lower. I could see the look in my mom’s eyes as we sat at the kitchen table looking at my acceptance to both schools. She didn’t have to say anything; there was pride, but there was . . . (pause; tearing up)

C: (softly) You needed . . . (pause) your family needed to put the cost first?

Z: Yeah, (pause) this place gave me the most money, and I really needed to go where the money was. (long pause where he is looking at his hands thoughtfully) I knew it wouldn’t be easy, but I was not prepared for that fool Henry. When I first saw this skinny White kid moving into my room, I honestly just couldn’t believe it. I assumed I’d be rooming with a brother. Henry couldn’t even look at me when I greeted him. He had these two heavy suitcases. They looked too heavy for him; he’s such a small guy. I came over and took one and swung it up on his bed. I wasted my breath all weekend being friendly.

C: You tried to help him and reach out, but he didn’t understand the meaning of what you were trying to do even though you did obvious things like helping with his suitcase.

Z: (softly) He barely answered me when I asked him questions, but I was cool with it. I told myself he was shy and kept trying. On Sunday morning, I saw he was reading the Bible. Being a regular churchgoer myself, I tried to talk with him about Jesus, but (pause) he was so rigid. I’m a Baptist Christian, and he doesn’t think I’m going to heaven. He thinks only people from his church hear the true word of God and the rest of us are damned. (pause; intently) Jesus saved us all, (pause) but I was respectful and just waved as I left. I prayed hard on it in church, but I just couldn’t feel any spiritual connection to him. (sounding sad and looking up at C)

C: You still sound sad about it. You kept reaching out to him. You tried hard to build the foundation for a friendship, but there was nothing to build. Even talking about God left the room feeling empty of understanding.

Z: (sadly) Yeah, it was an empty room, and I felt lonely, so I wrote letters to my sister and brothers to help myself. It all slammed down fast the next day. I came back in the room, just out of the shower, and saw him hiding his money underneath his
mattress. This really hurt. The day before I was talking about God with him and telling him how much Jesus was in my life, yet he thought I'd steal. I was so mad I walked out as soon as I could grab my clothes.

C: You tried to share your soul with him, but he rejected the chance to know you, holding on fast to his false image of you.

Z: I didn’t come back until five p.m. By then I was chilled out and tried another time to get through to him. (pause) The Prophet Zechariah had a tough job trying to get the tribe of Israelites back to the word of God after they lost their way, so I thought surely I had the strength to move this one White boy. I decided not to tell him what I saw. I just invited him to go to dinner. He said no, not even looking up from the computer screen. At that moment, I wanted to just move out to an apartment, but I had no money for it. (shaking his head) That would have settled the whole thing. But I had to stay.

C: Lack of money kept you feeling trapped.

Z: (sadly) Yeah, you got it. No matter what I said, he couldn’t hear me. I was raised to speak the truth to my neighbor—that’s from Zechariah 8:16. It’s a tough standard to always speak the truth, but I work at it every day. I told the truth to the disciplinary board, but they were deaf to me. Henry is the problem. (emphatically) Not me. Henry. I have never been, and never will be, violent. I am following the path of Jesus Christ.

C: Violence has no place in your story. It’s crafted around a deep and sincere faith in God. I can hear your strength of purpose.

Z: (intently) Thank you for understanding that violence thing is a lie. (pause) I decided I would forgive my roommate for his ignorance but stay away from him. I set out to find some brothers. It’s a big place; they had to be somewhere.

C: You were looking for friends, so you persisted, like you persist with your schoolwork. You recognized Henry wasn’t going to be a friend, and you moved on.

Z: (smiling) I was lucky and found a group of brothers hanging out in the cafeteria. They’ve been on campus since last year—they got it right away what was happening.

C: I can see that it was a relief to find people who understood what was happening.

Z: (emphatically) They understood how bad I felt inside and reached out to help. It started with a party to welcome me. Then, we went to the mall, and they helped me buy some posters to hang in my room. I didn’t bring anything but my clothes. Henry had signs of himself everywhere. The posters would rid my side of its emptiness. They would make me visible.

C: That’s a really important theme in your life, wanting to be visible, to leave your mark.

Z: (intently) I was tired of feeling ignored, like the space only belonged to him and he could decide if I was in the room or not. To be fair, he never told me to get out.

C: The way he talked to you and the way he didn’t talk to you seemed to say, “Stay out.”
Z: (softly) You got it. (smiling) Well, we hung the posters when I knew Henry would be in class. (seriously) I’ll give him that, (pause) he does go to class.

C: He’s really hurt you, but you still try to be fair to him. (pause) In the report, Henry accused you of hanging up posters to scare him out of the room.

Z: (seriously) They were pictures of my heroes—Reverend Martin Luther King, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Malcolm X. I figured that seeing those posters every day would remind me to be strong and fight injustice in my own way. I did wonder how Henry would react to my being visible—I pretended to read when he walked in. He just flipped out and ran. I started laughing, (pause) it was just so crazy, but I’m not laughing now.

C: I’m puzzled by why you were watching for his reaction. (pause) Did you expect something to go wrong?

Z: (sheepishly) I knew that Henry was ignorant and wouldn’t understand the words on the posters. (long pause)

C: What did they say?

Z: (intently) Dr. King was saying, “A man can’t ride your back unless it’s bent.”

C: What did that mean to you?

Z: (seriously) That my roommate, or other people, could insult me and try to degrade me but they couldn’t succeed if I didn’t let them.

C: That’s a powerful message. It’s self-affirming that others can’t take away who you are. (long pause) What about the others?

Z: (forcefully) W. E. B. Du Bois was saying, “Now is the accepted time, not tomorrow, not some more convenient season . . .”

C: What does that mean to you?

Z: (calmly) I needed to study and listen hard and learn as much as I could as this was my time. (pause) It was the Malcolm X poster I was watching his face about. I knew, in my heart, that I should have bought a different one. (looking up, sheepishly) Malcolm X has his fist raised high. (pause) I guess my anger took over and left the forgiveness behind when I picked that poster.

C: He rejected you in a lot of painful ways. You had a right to feel angry. But, the quote?

Z: (intently) “Be peaceful, be courteous, obey the law, respect everyone; but if someone puts his hand on you, send him to the cemetery.”

C: Maybe it was the cemetery part that bothered him. (both Z and C are chuckling)

Z: (serious again) Malcolm has inspired me my whole life. I regret using him that way to scare my roommate. It was just supposed to shock him for a second. It made me
feel sick inside when I saw, at the hearing, that the fool’s hand was actually shaking. He really is scared of me, and it hurts. I am not dangerous.

C: You have many parts of yourself, (pause) but they all seem to contain religious convictions and following the path of peace, not violence. Your interactions with Henry have contained anger because his constructions of you involve preconceived, negative beliefs. Henry knows very little of the Zechariah you have striven to be all your life. That particular poster carried with it potent negative meaning for Henry because his constructions of African Americans appeared full of fear.

Z: (angrily) He thinks we’re all violent. To me, the poster meant I should continue living my life as my family taught me to live it and, if someone tried to keep me down, I should fight for my right to live as I choose; I was strong, not invisible.

C: The report said something about you threatening to kill him.

Z: (sadly) That night, the brothers and I were going out for dinner, but I realized I left my wallet, so I rushed back upstairs and found Henry looking through my chest of drawers. I told him off the same way I’ve told off my younger brothers and sister anytime they got into my stuff. (angrily) Sure, I used a strong voice and strong words, but he had no business going through my drawers. My lawyer pointed that out at the hearing.

C: Did he say what he was up to?

Z: (snorting) He was looking for guns and drugs. He decided my friends and I were some kind of gang, and he was looking for evidence to bring to the police.

C: Did he admit this at the hearing?

Z: (angrily) Yes, but he justified it by saying he didn’t know where else I could get the money to be here. I got a presidential scholarship, and I got it from my hard work all through school. I earned my way here, and it wasn’t easy. I’m buying all my books used so I can send part of my scholarship money home to help my sick grandmother. (looking down tearfully)

C: Even though you worked hard to get here and need the money, you send some of it to those you love.

Z: (firmly) My family would do anything for me, and I would do anything for them.

C: When you began talking of your family, love was shining in your face, but then the light went out.

Z: (sadly) His accusation that I didn’t earn my way really hurt. My family didn’t have much. But what we have, we earned through hard work. My mother works two jobs, one cleaning an apartment building during the day and one cleaning a department store at night. She comes home exhausted, but she always found time to ask me about my schoolwork. My grandmother should have retired, but we just can’t afford for her to stop working. It hurts me to know she’s working when her arthritis is so bad.
C: Your family story is full of self-sacrifice and love. (pause) When you talked about your grandmother’s arthritis, I could see the pain in your face.

Z: (looking down) My grandmother should be seeing a doctor now. My mom says she’s so worried about me that she can’t sleep. She can’t go to the doctor because we owe him too much money. My sister told me the emergency room was really rude to my mom last weekend, saying my grandmother wasn’t an emergency case and shouldn’t be there. Nobody wants to help us. Most folks just don’t have the time for us or care what happens to us. We don’t count to them. (firmly) I say we do count.

C: Your grandmother, such a wonderful and self-sacrificing individual, needs health care, and she’s not getting it. That’s an ugly theme that keeps resurfacing, that the world is treating your family like they are invisible even though they are good, hard-working people who deserve everyone’s respect.

Z: (firmly) I wasn’t going to be invisible at that board hearing. My lawyer told me not to say much, but I just couldn’t sit there and say nothing—maybe I did yell. I have rights like everyone else. (softly) That’s what the student handbook says anyway.

C: I understand why you didn’t want to be invisible. How would the board be able to tell you had the righteous anger of a wrongly accused person rather than the anger of a young man who was out of control?

Z: (strongly) Shouldn’t my record in my classes count for anything? This report has only one line about my good grades. Everything else is how they’re judging me based on one night. Yes, I lost my cool that night and yelled my lungs out at him. Still, I never touched Henry and had no intention of ever touching him. (sadly) He claims to be a man of God, yet he lied about me. (reading from the report) “He threatened to kill me.” Maybe I said those words, but he took it all wrong. How could he not get that?

C: You were both there and heard the same words, yet you each took very different meaning from them.

Z: (frustratedly) I’ve said those same words to my friends, my brothers, and my sister all the time. Man, why did he make such a big deal about it? I was staying out of his face. Why couldn’t he stay out of mine? All they need to do is give me a new roommate. I don’t need anything else. I don’t need to be here.

C: I hear you, and I have to say that I agree. I have to write a report to the board about whether I think you’re a danger to others or not. (Z frowns) I will be saying that you’re a credit to the university and we’re very lucky to have you here.

Z: (long pause) Thank you, I appreciate that.

C: I don’t know what they will do in response. They might just drop their demand that you come here. They might not. Would an appointment next week be useful to you?

Z: (firmly) I don’t think so. But, I need this degree, so I’ll come back if they insist. (pause) It has been a relief in a way to talk to you. I don’t want to worry my family about this.
C: You talked a number of times of having rights like everyone else. I just want you to know that you have the same right as every other student on this campus to come here and talk about racism on this campus, the stress of worrying about your grandmother, or wanting to figure out a career for yourself after graduation. The Counseling Center is free to all students here.

Z: (calmly) I'll definitely be back if the disciplinary board tells me it's required. If they don't, (pause) I'll think about what you said and let you know. I like the idea of taking advantage of a service that's free to me, especially when at home every service comes at such a high price.

C: I'll be here if you decide to talk some more.

Constructivist Case Conceptualization of Zechariah: Assumption-Based Style

Zechariah understands his referral to the Counseling Center through the lens of four major life stories, one involving his mother and feelings of love and hope, one involving his African American friends at the university and feelings of understanding and acceptance, one involving his roommate Henry and feelings of rejection and spiritual pain, and one involving the university’s disciplinary board and feelings of anger and impotence. Within each of these stories, Zechariah is creating a storied self that is influenced by who is listening to the story, the details that Zechariah uses to punctuate the story, and the meaning that Zechariah derives from telling the story; he has no real self, just a constantly emerging sense of someone who wants to be visible to other people. At this time, the meaning that Zechariah is drawing from his stories is that he is a hardworking student, a loyal friend, a loving brother and son, and a deeply religious man. In sharp contrast, in the story told by Henry to the disciplinary board, Zechariah is a thief, drug dealer, drunk, and dangerous young man who should be thrown off campus. These stories are vastly discrepant. Neither represents an objective reality. Both were cocreated between the teller (Zechariah, Henry) and the listener (clinician, disciplinary board). Zechariah can achieve his goals of gaining a college degree and helping his family out of poverty only if he cocreates a functional reality for himself that can guide him in adaptive ways to achieve these goals.

When Zechariah arrived at the university, he was living his dream of being the first member of his family to attend college. This story started in the public library when he was a little boy, when his mother showed him all the books and began to tell him what a college was all about. As Zechariah punctuated this story during the interview, it included details such as his love of books and the escape reading could bring from life in an impoverished neighborhood. Another character in this story was his hardworking mother, who worked two jobs to care for her children but who always found the time to ask Zechariah about school and check in on his homework. Another was his grandmother, who had bad arthritis and should retire, but instead kept working to help the family stay housed and fed. The last main characters were his three younger siblings, who looked up to him as he smiled down at them, their proud older brother. The plot of this story concerns a loving family
struggling to make ends meet as the adults struggle with minimum-wage jobs, a lack of higher education, and no medical care. Zechariah wants the plot to end with details that include his graduation from college, his being hired for a good job after graduation, his being able to move his family out of the slums, and his being able to help his younger siblings go to college. The emotions he feels during this story are love and hope for a better life. The meaning that Zechariah is currently drawing from this story, as he awaits the final decision of the disciplinary board, is that the university is full of racists who will do whatever it takes to smash his dreams and hold his family down. He is willing to attend the Counseling Center to try to prevent his expulsion from this university even though he denies all charges against him.

The story of the university as a haven from poverty and pain began to go wrong almost immediately. In Zechariah’s original story, he would attend a private, African American college where he would be surrounded by brothers and sisters who would understand his life context. Unfortunately, the cost of a private education was impossible. A public university offered him a presidential scholarship based on his excellent high school record. While wary, Zechariah understood that for the sake of his family, he needed to rewrite the plot of his education and attend this predominantly White school. While knowing in advance that the school had few African Americans, Zechariah was shocked to discover that the new character in his life, his roommate, was to be a White, skinny, fundamentalist Christian—not a fellow African American, a brother. Trying to embrace this new person within his storyline of a four-year dream ride, Zechariah took one of Henry’s suitcases and swung it up on the bed for him. Zechariah punctuated the story at this point as one where, despite his first sense of shock, he reached out to be friendly and include Henry in his dream ride. Henry’s version of that same first moment in the plot of move-in day is likely to begin at a very different point. After trudging to his room, carrying suitcases that were too heavy for him, Henry was suddenly confronted by a large, African American male, the last person Henry imagined he would be rooming with at a predominantly White school. As if this weren’t frightening enough, this intimidating young man grabbed one of his suitcases without saying a word first. Sure, Zechariah put the suitcase on Henry’s bed, but his intent had been to show Henry just how much bigger and stronger he was, and Henry felt fear of Zechariah for the first time. Neither young man was writing the story he originally planned about his first day with a new roommate, but just how differently they were punctuating the events that followed would set the stage for further, more serious cultural miscommunications.

Sunday morning, their second day at the university, Zechariah and Henry had the opportunity to begin the second chapter of their mutual story. As always, this was to be a coconstruction between the two of them; again they would punctuate different aspects of it and draw very different meanings from it. For Zechariah, the story started with a feeling of happiness to see that Henry was reading a Bible in bed. Zechariah’s family was deeply religious, and he himself had been named after the Prophet Zechariah. In trying to begin this story with Henry, Zechariah joyfully told him that he was a Baptist and that perhaps the two of them could talk about the words of Jesus Christ together. Zechariah wanted to find a mutual connection with Henry, something they both cared about that could serve as the basis for a real friendship. Whether intending to be insulting or not, Henry indicated to Zechariah that they weren’t going to be talking about Jesus Christ together because only
members of his church truly understood those words; only members of his church would be going to heaven. Zechariah didn’t know what to make of Henry and his beliefs. As a member of a minority group, he had often been treated as if he was invisible to White people. Now, despite Zechariah’s deep faith, Henry was telling him that he was invisible to God. Rather than expressing the pain he felt at these comments, he waved good-bye and went to church. He prayed hard but couldn’t find any way to make a spiritual connection with Henry. For Henry, the fact that Zechariah could wave good-bye, after hearing that he was going to hell, may have further reinforced his belief that Zechariah was not the deeply spiritual man he professed to be. Perhaps, through years of being told that no one else was going to heaven, Henry had become inured to the reactions of the alleged damned. At this point in their mutual story, neither young man could understand the other.

The third chapter of the story involving Zechariah and Henry continued its downward path of misunderstanding. Zechariah accidentally came upon Henry hiding his money under his bed mattress. How Henry justified this behavior is unknown, as Zechariah never asked him about it. Within Zechariah’s narrative, Henry was calling him a thief and once again showing a complete disregard for the Christian heritage that was so much a part of Zechariah’s upbringing. Filled with anger but controlling himself, Zechariah left the dorm without Henry ever being aware he had been caught in this behavior. Zechariah went across campus in search of brothers, other African American men, who could create stories with him that were less perplexing than the ones that kept occurring between Henry and him. He found them in the cafeteria, and with relief, shared his story involving Henry and his intense feeling of invisibility. Zechariah and his brothers shared stories. They all had been part of plots where their character was victimized by racism. Sharing these stories recharged Zechariah’s feelings of hope that he could succeed at the university despite racism and oppressive experiences.

Zechariah and his brothers set to work creating a story where he would not be invisible in his own dorm room. They helped him purchase, and hang in his dorm room, posters with inspirational messages from W. E. B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, and the Reverend Martin Luther King. The meaning Zechariah drew from this experience was of loyalty from his friends and strength and persistence from strong African American heroes who had faced their own oppression head on. Each poster punctuated part of the African American experience. From differing perspectives, each underscored that through determination, hard work, and defending their rights as human beings, African Americans would overcome racism. Zechariah intended to see these posters each day as a reminder of his cultural strengths and a reminder that he was not invisible. However, a voice of anger continued to exert some influence on Zechariah, and he chose a poster of Malcolm X that was intended to disturb Henry: “Be peaceful, be courteous, obey the law, respect everyone; but if someone puts his hand on you, send him to the cemetery.” While Zechariah was a deeply spiritual young man, part of him knew Henry would find this poster intimidating, and part of him could not resist. Henry was shocked by Malcolm’s words, just as Zechariah had hoped he would be. However, Zechariah had only wanted to shock Henry in the moment; he never intended that Henry should fear him.

The final chapter of Zechariah and Henry’s mutual story occurred within the context of a disciplinary board hearing. Zechariah was filled with righteous indignation and anger that he
had been accused of violent behavior by Henry. Watching the members of the disciplinary board, Zechariah noted that all of the characters looked alike; they were White, dressed in expensive clothes, and looking hostile and disbelieving as he told his story. They didn’t seem to consider his excellent attendance and GPA of 4.0 as a sign that Henry was casting him as the wrong character in the story. Zechariah understood himself to be the character making continuously friendly gestures toward Henry that were being continuously rejected. The story Henry told the disciplinary board was shocking to Zechariah. Henry was casting him as a dark character. He alleged that Zechariah was on campus to sell drugs, not get an education; his brothers were gang members, not real college students. Even more shocking to Zechariah was how Henry’s hands were clutching a Bible so tightly that his knuckles were white. The meaning Zechariah drew from Henry’s posture was that Henry actually believed he was dangerous; all Zechariah’s acts of friendliness and religiosity had been invisible to Henry.

What was the crux of Henry’s story plot of violence? The night Zechariah came back to the room to find Henry searching through his possessions, Zechariah yelled his lungs out at Henry. Both men include the yelling in their stories of that night; however, the meanings they draw from it are highly divergent. Zechariah was merely angry and vented this anger in threats he never intended to carry out. This mirrored his behavior back home when he had caught his siblings invading his privacy. Zechariah was both infuriated and perplexed that Henry could actually take these threats seriously; he had never laid hands on Henry or any of Henry’s things. While having a lawyer with him who punctuated Henry’s culpability in searching through Zechariah’s possessions, the board made a decision that Zechariah considered only a racist reality could explain. Zechariah was mandated into anger management treatment at the Counseling Center as a condition for staying at the university. Zechariah felt angry and impotent. It should have been Henry mandated into treatment for his racism and paranoid intrusiveness. However, the board members made their judgments based on Henry’s point of view.

Zechariah is determined to graduate from college, so he attended an appointment at the Counseling Center despite feeling that racism, not justice, had triumphed at the disciplinary hearing. He has met a new character in his college story, a clinician who has no difficulty seeing his strengths of hard work, persistence, friendliness, spirituality, and deep connection to family. The clinician has some power to influence the disciplinary board and intends to tell them that Zechariah is not a danger to others and that the university is lucky to have him in attendance. Zechariah is not violent and has many strengths. Should he attend appointments with the clinician? He is under a lot of pressure to succeed, as his family is counting on him to be the one to draw them all out of poverty. He also has many family concerns weighing on him due to his grandmother’s ill health and his family’s inability to afford health insurance. Attending sessions at the Counseling Center could serve as a window of opportunity for Zechariah to step out of invisibility on campus, receive social support in the face of the racism on campus, and gain allies in activism to reduce racism on campus—without incurring any financial burdens on himself or his family. Zechariah is the protagonist of his own life story. It is his decision whether he will use his referral to the Counseling Center as an opportunity to gain deserved social support or if he will rely on his own, myriad strengths to bring the plot of his education to an exciting conclusion at his graduation ceremony.
Constructivist Treatment Plan: Assumption-Based Style

Treatment Plan Overview. Zechariah may not return to treatment if the disciplinary board does not mandate it. He has many strengths and can successfully graduate from college using only his brothers on campus and his family at home as social support. The following plan was developed in case he decides to take advantage of the opportunity to receive further support from the Counseling Center. (This treatment plan follows the problem format.)

PROBLEM: Zechariah has been accused of violent behavior and faces disciplinary charges at the university.

LONG-TERM GOAL 1: Zechariah will re-story what happened between him and Henry to develop further meaning from it that will reduce his feelings of rejection and spiritual pain.

Short-Term Goals
1. Zechariah will recall his thoughts about sharing a room with a stranger rather than his siblings when he first came to college.
2. Zechariah will retell his story of attending a White college, sharing a room, and meeting Henry and more fully explore the details that relate to his family’s poverty.
3. Zechariah will retell his story of his first impressions of Henry, including additional details that might indicate Henry’s socioeconomic status.
4. Zechariah will pray about what happened between him and Henry, searching for additional details that can help him draw meaning from how two young men, both deeply spiritual, could have been involved in such a destructive narrative.
5. Zechariah will involve his brothers on campus in developing a story for using their determination and persistence to be positive role models for academic success on campus.
6. Zechariah will decide whether including the clinician in the retelling and expanding of his story with Henry would support his spiritual healing and help him move forward on his academic goals.

LONG-TERM GOAL 2: Zechariah will re-story his experiences of being invisible to reduce his feelings of impotence and anger.

Short-Term Goals
1. Zechariah will explore developing a story where he reduces his feelings of invisibility on campus by becoming active in student groups.
2. Zechariah will attend an NAACP meeting and consider what meaning he might draw from becoming part of a national group in support of African American rights.
3. Zechariah will meet with one professor a week to discuss his future goals and increase his visibility as a successful student so that he can get effective mentoring on campus.

4. Zechariah will meet one new student from a minority group that is not African American to explore issues of invisibility on campus.

5. Zechariah will consider his personal story of being invisible due to coming from a poor family and consider whether he can draw any new meaning from this story based on the details he punctuated in earlier goals.

6. Zechariah will decide whether cocreating a story with the clinician about how to end his invisibility would support his positive growth.

LONG-TERM GOAL 3: Zechariah will re-story what is happening between him and his family members to deepen the meaning he draws from it and enhance his feelings of hope and love.

Short-Term Goals

1. Zechariah will call his mother and share about his experiences with Henry at the disciplinary board hearing and hear her perspective on Henry, how he himself should process it, and what meaning they can draw from it together.

2. Zechariah will talk to each of his siblings in turn about his experiences with Henry at levels they can understand to put racism into a context that won’t negatively affect their self-constructions.

3. Zechariah will talk to his grandmother and share about his experiences with Henry at the disciplinary board hearing and hear her perspective on Henry, how he himself should process it, and what meaning they can draw from it together.

4. Zechariah will talk to his brothers on campus and share about his experiences with Henry at the disciplinary board hearing and hear their perspective on Henry, how he himself should process it, and what meaning they can draw from it together.

5. Zechariah will talk to his minister at school and share about his experiences with Henry at the disciplinary board hearing and hear his perspective on Henry, how he himself should process it, and what meaning they can draw from it together.

6. Zechariah will talk to the clinician and share all the additional story elements that have developed through his reaching out for social support and decide whether attending sessions to discuss this further would be of value to him.

7. Other goals will be developed if needed to move Zechariah forward in developing constructive meaning from his experiences with Henry and the disciplinary board.
Constructivist Case Conceptualization of Zechariah: Symptom-Based Style

Zechariah is feeling depressed, confused, angry, and alienated as a result of negative experiences he has had at the university—particularly the discrimination and oppression he’s experienced in interacting with his roommate and the university disciplinary board. He came to the university filled with excitement and hope that, in this setting, he could achieve academic success and begin his family’s journey out of poverty. His self-constructions were filled with the love of his family, strong spiritual beliefs, and pride in his African American heritage. Now, he is prey to strongly contrasting emotions that flicker back and forth in his self-constructions as he attempts to adjust his dreams of university life with his perceived reality of the recent past. Zechariah is currently relating a problem-saturated narrative in a voice of rejection. Dominating his story are constructions of himself as an “other” functioning on the margins of dominant society. While his negative emotions are running painfully deep at this time, he has a contemplative voice that allows him to easily attune to alternative aspects of his experience; this voice can serve as a powerful ally within a treatment relationship. In addition, Zechariah has found positive and adaptive meaning from his religion, his family, and his academic achievements in the past. This bodes well for his being able to coconstruct a new and more life-enhancing narrative to propel him toward an adaptive future free of poverty.

Zechariah feels depressed; however, this reflects a profound change in his emotional state. His narrative of life at the university began with exhilaration at his being the first member of his family to study at the university level. As a young child, his mother had started him on a future-oriented narrative in which, through educational achievement, he could enter a world filled with large buildings and books; it was to be a way out of poverty for him and his younger siblings. Zechariah began working hard then, and continues to work hard now, on his goal of becoming well educated so that he will be prepared to succeed financially. While poverty and racism have served as anchors dragging his family down in the past, the voice that predominated after he gained the prestigious presidential scholarship was confident and hopeful that he was finally on the road out of poverty and invisibility and that he would be able to bring his family along with him.

Zechariah became increasingly confused and disappointed as interactions with his roommate indicated that they would not be “brothers” interacting within an evolving, joint subplot of academic success. Rather, Henry seemed determined to coconstruct a stable narrative that was replete with negative racial stereotypes and that actively ignored counternarratives presented by Zechariah’s open and friendly behavior and deeply expressed religious beliefs. None of his efforts, such as his reaching out for Henry’s suitcase, inviting him to meals, or engaging him in discussions of scriptures, showed any sign of influencing Henry’s constructions of their relationship; in telling about this, Zechariah’s narrative voice begins to lack confidence. Throughout his life, Zechariah had been forced to interact within oppressive relationships, and these had always left him with feelings of invisibility and marginalization. He had hoped to escape into a more uplifting reality when he went off to school. Given a free choice, he would have gone to Hampton University, a private school for African Americans; in this context, he would have had the freedom to be surrounded by people of his own race and not have “race” made an issue throughout his day-to-day life. However, poverty served to deny him this context of acceptance. He needed to put his personal desires
aside and take the larger scholarship offered by a primarily White, public university. Here, he expected to continue facing invisibility as an African American. However, in a voice of dejection, he relates that he hadn’t expected to face it in his new home—his dormitory room; in past constructions, home had always been a context of acceptance and love.

Zechariah struggled with deep feelings of anger and disappointment as Henry continued to reject his overtures of friendship. He had assumed his interactions as a roommate would fit the pattern of his interactions as a loving son, grandson, and older brother. Thus, what he was experiencing was doubly upsetting to him. However, Zechariah tried to find meaning from these experiences that could hold angry constructions at bay. He explained Henry’s behavior to himself through a lens of forgiveness and kindness; he assumed that Henry’s behavior was the result of shyness or poor social skills. Zechariah had wanted to be like his namesake, the Prophet Zechariah, and lead Henry out of ignorance and into friendship. Such a self-construction became untenable once Henry’s behavior deteriorated from subtly rejecting to overtly insulting. The day Henry hid money underneath his mattress and seemed, from Zechariah’s perspective, to be degrading his spiritual beliefs was the day that a plot of oppression and racism seemed fully formed between them; Zechariah’s constructions of their relationship now came through only with voices of anger and disappointment.

However, Zechariah did not want to passively accept a stable story dominated by these negative emotions. He sought out other African American students, hoping that in finding support for his past constructions of pride in his African American heritage, acts of racism would stop dominating his university constructions. When Zechariah was able to share his feelings of anger and disappointment with these students, they reciprocated with their own stories of racism on campus; Zechariah’s sense of invisibility as an individual was lessened. They actively sought to help Zechariah regain his feelings of hope and optimism. They helped him purchase, and hang in his dorm room, posters with inspirational messages from W. E. B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, and the Reverend Martin Luther King. The meaning Zechariah drew from this experience was of loyalty from his friends and strength and persistence from strong African American heroes who had faced their own oppression head on. In addition, the posters served to make him feel visible in his room and to have a sense of ownership of it; his experienced value as a human being increased. However, a voice of anger continued to exert some influence on Zechariah, and he chose a poster of Malcolm X that was intended to disturb Henry.

Zechariah was satisfied with the changes his posters brought to the dorm room, but this mood quickly shifted back to anger once he experienced the poisonous construction Henry drew from all of them. Ignorant of African American culture, and perhaps with a determination to maintain a stable sense of reality for himself, Henry appeared to draw meaning from these posters that reinforced and deepened his negative stereotypes of African Americans. Within this reality, the posters represented threats to his safety, and he became highly fearful of Zechariah. Henry then took actions that seemed justified to him—he searched through Zechariah’s belongings in search of illegal drugs and weapons. Zechariah caught Henry in the act. Responding in the justifiable anger of the moment, Zechariah threatened Henry using the same strong language and nonverbal behavior that he had often used before in dealing with his own friends and siblings. However, having grown up in an extremely restricted religious community and seeming to have no positive constructions of African
Americans, Henry took this outburst of anger as representing a serious intent to harm him; he reported Zechariah to the disciplinary board. Poverty continued to exert a powerful influence on the plot of this story. With more money, Zechariah could have moved out of the dorm room. However, he was trapped by his straitened circumstances in a stable and hostile reality with Henry. The themes of poverty and racism once again dominated Zechariah’s narratives of himself, his family, and the world; the voice of discouragement predominated within his storytelling.

Zechariah’s constructions of reality were dominated by feelings of fear as he faced the disciplinary board. He feared that his grandmother’s health was in serious jeopardy, as money she needed for medicine was being spent on his defense. He was also fearful that his dream of a future free of poverty would end if he was expelled from the university. While his family emphasized spirituality and loving relationships as more important than worldly goods, Zechariah was deeply conscious of the benefits affluence could bring in terms of access to higher-quality medical care, housing, and educational resources for his family. This made the personal sacrifice of having to suppress his anger and accommodate to the disciplinary board’s view of reality one he was willing to try to make. However, the harshness of the setting and the behavior of his roommate and the board members served to make the plot seem stacked against him. Based on Zechariah’s story, it appears as if his roommate’s White privilege did carry weight at the university, as most roommate disputes are settled at the residence hall level. This same privilege may have been in Henry’s favor at the hearing. Despite his fears, Zechariah made some attempts to defend his view of reality, and this may have made some positive impact as, while the board seemed supportive of Henry, Zechariah was mandated into treatment rather than expelled.

Zechariah attended his appointment at the Counseling Center feeling very alienated by his referral for anger management. Despite this, Zechariah has within him a voice of rationality that allows him to easily become aware of possibilities for more positive meaning construction. At this time, Zechariah’s life narrative as an African American, freshman male is heterogeneous and full of conflicting positive and negative emotions. He has segmented his university experiences in a manner that highlights themes of invisibility and racism; past experiences, since childhood, have supported the strength of these themes in his meaning construction. However, he has shown significant resilience in building narratives that are future oriented, hope enhancing, and filled with themes of family love and religious conviction, despite the often desperate financial circumstances in which he and his family find themselves. Zechariah doesn’t need anger management. However, he might profit from support in navigating the prejudices and stereotypes of others who might serve as barriers to his educational success. His willingness to consider appointments at the Counseling Center as a resource open to all students, rather than as a place he is mandated to go, may provide a window of opportunity for him to profit from treatment at this time. While a coconstructed treatment narrative may still contain racist or oppressive segments within it, the meanings that he draws from them would hopefully no longer be destructive to his continued pursuit of achieving a bachelor’s degree, supporting his siblings in attending a university, and using the money he makes as a university graduate to help his family out of poverty. The disciplinary board holds a lot of power over Zechariah. The treatment relationship might be a powerful tool for removing this barrier to Zechariah’s achievement of his life-enhancing goals.
Constructivist Treatment Plan: Symptom-Based Style

_Treatment Plan Overview._ Zechariah was sent to the Counseling Center for help with anger management. He does not need help in this regard, as he has a deep well of positive emotions, adaptive thoughts, and behaviors that he has drawn on in continuing to construct his life story as a successful student. However, the Counseling Center and the treatment relationship might be a resource that he can use, without negative impact to his family, for support in being successful within an environment where he has experienced oppression for his lack of financial resources and his African American heritage. These goals will be offered to Zechariah within a collaborative framework, and if they represent what is meaningful to him, they will be worked on simultaneously. (This plan follows the _problem format._)

**PROBLEM:** Zechariah has developed a problem-saturated narrative based on negative interactions he had with his roommate and the university disciplinary board.

**LONG-TERM GOAL 1:** Zechariah will reduce his feelings of depression by coconstructing a new reality with the clinician about how life at the university differed from his prior expectations.

**Short-Term Goals**

1. Zechariah will discuss with the clinician the reactions that each of his family members had when he told them he had been admitted to the university.
2. Zechariah will discuss with the clinician the reactions that his neighbors and fellow church members had when they talked with him about his acceptance to a university.
3. Zechariah will discuss with the clinician in detail the joyful story he had coconstructed with his family about what life was going to be like the first day he arrived on campus.
4. Zechariah will take notes during the day about anything positive that he sees or that happens that fits within the joyful story he coconstructed prior to his arrival on campus.
5. Zechariah will discuss these positive story details with the clinician and consider the meaning they have for him as he works to build a new narrative about achieving his goal of a joy-filled university education.
6. Zechariah will meet with his brothers at the university and discuss these positive story details with them and ask them to tell him about anything positive they have seen or experienced on campus.
7. Zechariah will consider the meaning that these positive experiences have for him as he considers whether his initial joyful story has some validity for guiding his life at this time.
8. Other goals will be developed if Zechariah still feels depressed when he thinks about his educational goals.
LONG-TERM GOAL 2: Zechariah will reduce his feelings of confusion by coconstructing a new reality with the clinician regarding how to interact within the faith community and the academic community.

Short-Term Goals

1. Zechariah will make an appointment with a minister of his own faith and discuss with the minister his confusion over Henry’s story that only members of his particular sect of Christianity will go to Heaven.

2. Zechariah will discuss with the minister how he could become a familiar and accepted member of the minister’s congregation.

3. Zechariah will discuss with the clinician his experiences in working with the minister to coconstruct a religious community for himself at the university.

4. Zechariah will make an appointment with one of his college professors and work with this professor to construct a clear narrative about the expectations that faculty on campus have of students.

5. Zechariah will discuss with the clinician his experiences in working with the faculty member to coconstruct a clear role for himself within the university community.

6. Other goals will be developed as needed to help Zechariah feel clear about the expectations that faculty have for students on campus.

LONG-TERM GOAL 3: Zechariah will reduce his feelings of anger by coconstructing a new reality with the clinician about how to interact with individuals who may have negative stereotypes of African Americans.

1. Zechariah will observe students he sees each day who are not African American and take notes on the signs he sees that one of them might share with him a friendly and caring attitude toward others.

2. Zechariah will discuss with the clinician how he might begin a story of potential friendship with this other caring student.

3. Zechariah will approach this student and try to initiate a narrative of being a new student at the university who is trying to develop a social network with others.

4. Zechariah will discuss with the clinician the success or lack of success he had with this potential friend and what details he has that support his belief that this encounter was a beginning of a friendship narrative or a blind corner that requires a new effort.

5. Zechariah will discuss his efforts to engage with a non–African American student with his brothers at the university and listen to details about the experiences they may have had in doing similar things.
6. Zechariah will discuss with his brothers the clubs they might consider joining together on campus so that none of them will be the only African American in the club and so that they can demonstrate, just by participating together, that not all African Americans are alike.

7. Zechariah will discuss with the clinician his experiences of trying to develop positive narratives of his interactions with students who are not African American and expand the details within his narratives to include the individual characteristics of these students.

8. Other goals will be developed if needed so that Zechariah feels satisfied, rather than angry, about his experiences with students on campus who are not African American.

LONG-TERM GOAL 4: Zechariah will reduce his feelings of fear by coconstructing a new reality with the clinician about how to be successful at the university following his experience with the disciplinary board.

1. Zechariah will discuss with the clinician his fear of losing his opportunity to get a university education if the disciplinary board continues to perceive him as violent and how he might restore their views of him.

2. Zechariah will consider whether a further meeting with his attorney might be needed to ensure that his right to an education at the university is upheld.

3. Zechariah will contact his family and discuss his grandmother’s condition and whether her health is improving or deteriorating.

4. Zechariah will further develop a story of how he can emotionally support his grandmother and his family while maintaining academic success at college.

5. Zechariah will develop a detailed emergency plan for how he will leave the university to visit his grandmother, if needed, while following appropriate university policies for unplanned absences.

6. Other goals will be developed if needed to make certain that Zechariah feels confident he has taken the best precautions he can to ensure his educational success while maintaining his family connections.

LONG-TERM GOAL 5: Zechariah will reduce his feelings of alienation by coconstructing a new reality with the clinician about himself as a visible member of the university community.

1. Zechariah will come to each of his classes with a thoughtful question to ask about the material to be covered that day, and he will ask the question before, during, or after class to begin establishing his visibility with each of his professors.

2. Zechariah will take notes of these exchanges in terms of how he perceived the professor to react to his questions and what details he has that support his perceptions.
3. Zechariah will discuss his notes with the clinician and construct a narrative of how the experience was for him and whether continuing this pattern of intentional interactions with faculty members will increase his feelings of visibility on campus.

4. Zechariah will ask a question himself, or respond to a question from the professor, in each of his classes to begin establishing with the other students in his classes the reality that he is a well-prepared and articulate student who is visible and deserving of their respect.

5. Zechariah will discuss these experiences with the clinician and develop other goals for increasing his feelings of visibility on campus if needed.

PRACTICE CASE FOR STUDENT CONCEPTUALIZATION:
INTEGRATING THE DOMAIN OF VIOLENCE

It is time to do a constructivist analysis of Josephina. There are many domains of complexity that might provide insights into her behavior. You’re asked to integrate the domain of violence into your constructivist conceptualization and treatment plan.

Information Received From Brief Intake

Josephina is a 17-year-old Mexican American mother; she was born in the United States. She has been married to Roberto, a 25-year-old Mexican male, for 13 months; they met three months before their marriage. He is a distant relative who had just emigrated, illegally, from Mexico. They have a son, Carlos, who is 16 months old. The family has been living in a small home in a rural area for the past year. They moved to this area from New Mexico, where Josephina’s father owns a small store, due to the promise of agricultural work. Both Josephina and Roberto worked picking a variety of crops on a local farm until Carlos was born. At that point, Josephina stayed home to care for him. Josephina was referred for treatment by child protective services (CPS) following her physical abuse of Carlos. Roberto suddenly left the family and has not been heard from since CPS began its investigation two weeks ago. At this time, Carlos is in foster care.

During a brief mental status exam, Josephina showed signs of significant depression and anxiety, although there were no indications of suicidal or homicidal ideation or severe psychopathology. Josephina became completely overcome as the clinician reviewed the limits of confidentiality and said that CPS would be expecting regular reports on her progress in treatment to determine when and if it was safe to return Carlos to her care. CPS has selected you as Josephina’s clinician; she had no say in the matter.

Interview With Josephina (J) From a Constructivist Perspective

C: Welcome to my office. (pause) As you know, your CPS caseworker thinks that you need help with your parenting skills. (long pause) I would appreciate it if you would
tell me about yourself and what you consider it important for us to talk about. (J is looking down and clutching something hanging from her neck) I see that something important is hanging from your neck.

J: (looking up and down quickly; softly) Yes, it is important.

C: (long pause) Can you tell me what meaning it holds for you?

J: (whispering) It helps to protect me. (tearing up) You will think I’m bad like those other people do.

C: What people?

J: (hopelessly) Those people at CPS who say how dangerous I am to my son. But this rosary brings me close to the Virgin, Guadalupe—I need to be a mother like her. I pray to her every day asking for help.

C: Your Catholic faith is very important to you. (J nods) Can you tell me how the Virgin is helping you?

J: (tears flowing down her face, whispering) I am praying to her, but since I’ve been condemned as a child abuser, I haven’t felt her presence.

C: “Child abuser.” (pause) Those are harsh words.

J: (anxiously) It’s my duty to be a good mother. I do try, but Carlos cries and cries no matter how tired I am. (pause) He doesn’t want to stop. Carlos was a small baby, and the doctor explained that this is why he cries so much. I don’t really understand it exactly, because my little cousins didn’t cry so much. (very anxiously) The doctors and nurses were very cold and rude to me, so I was afraid to ask them any more questions.

C: You want to understand why Carlos seems so difficult to take care of, but you feel alone in figuring it out.

J: (deadpan) His crying makes Roberto very angry because he needs his sleep after working hard all day. Roberto told me only a terrible mother could make her son so unhappy.

C: Your face looks very pale and sad as you say this. (long pause)

J: (painfully) I was just remembering . . . (pause; deadpan) Never mind; it isn’t important.

C: I can see in your face that it is important. (long pause) Could you tell me?

J: (whispering) Roberto hits me for being a bad mother and making his son cry.

C: You make him cry?

J: Roberto thinks a good mother keeps her son happy, so it’s my fault that Carlos cries. (desperately) I always tried hard to get Carlos to sleep before Roberto came home, but (sadly) Roberto drinks after work and then makes so much noise he always wakes Carlos up. I tried so many things that didn’t work. (whispering) A few weeks
ago, my hairbrush was close by. I thought it couldn’t hurt Carlos if I just took my hairbrush and struck him lightly on his feet—just as a sign of my disapproval, not to hurt him. His eyes went very wide, and he quieted down quickly. I thought it was a safe way to handle him.

C: How often did you strike him?

J: (whispering) At first, I just struck him lightly, just once and he stopped crying. (long pause; looking down) The second night, I don’t know why, but the first strike didn’t work and I hit him a second time—just to keep him quiet because Roberto was drunk, and . . . (long pause)

C: You were afraid Roberto would beat you.

J: (anxious) Not beat, no. Just hit me with his belt a few times. (looking down)

C: It hurts your body and your mind when he strikes you with his belt.

J: (sad) Yes, and now, I have done this same thing to Carlos, but (pause; in a rush) last week Carlos was crying so much I just couldn’t stand it and then I noticed a look on his face—he looked like Roberto. (deadpan) I knew I would have to be strict, or he would grow to be a bad man like his father.

C: Since Carlos looked like Roberto, you feared he might hurt others, like his father hurt you, if you didn’t raise him properly. (pause) Is a mother supposed to be strict?

J: (emphatically) No, my mother was loving—and the Virgin was too. (whispering) I am so ashamed. (pause) But I was desperate. I thought maybe if I was just consistent, and struck him on the feet every time he started to cry, but . . . (long pause) then I noticed how bad his feet looked, (pause) and I did stop. I did, (pause) but it was too late; there had already been a report.

C: Is there anyone who can help you?

J: I did try to ask the doctor once what to do, but he was in a big hurry, and he said Carlos was just teething. (pause) He had no time to help me; others were waiting.

C: You realized you needed help. You asked the doctor, but he didn’t give you the help you needed. (J is crying) Did you try reaching out to your parents for advice?

J: (sadly) I did try once to call my mother when I first came back from the hospital. I was so tired, and Carlos seemed to do nothing but cry. My father answered the phone and asked so coldly what I wanted. (pause) I tried to explain that I didn’t know what to do. He hung up, saying, “Go ask your husband.” But I can’t ask him. He would just get mad.

C: What about another relative?

J: (listlessly) I know my godmother would help, but she doesn’t have a phone. I wrote her a letter, but it was so hard to write down what was happening. She misunderstood me. She just wrote back saying my parents really miss me and if I can just act
like a good woman they will forgive me. (sadly) They won’t forgive. They will hear about me being a child abuser, and that will be the end.

C: The end? What does that mean?

J: (sadly) They will be done with me. I’ve really hurt Carlos. My father would be so angry. What kind of a mother hurts her child? (stares blindly ahead)

C: You look lost. (J nods) Has there been a time when you were not lost and people weren’t calling you a child abuser?

J: (whispering) It’s been a long, long time. The day of my quinceañera, last year—that was my last day as a good person. (long pause) I was so excited. All my teachers noticed me smiling. I worked hard in school but was always quiet. I tried so hard to be a humble and sweet girl like my mother. But, on that day, I couldn’t keep my mind on my schoolwork. I kept thinking about all the food I helped my mother prepare and all the relatives who were coming to see me.

C: You were feeling excited. What did you think of yourself?

J: (calmly) I was a good girl. I know that. I always helped my mother and any relatives who needed me. I helped a lot of my cousins with their schoolwork. I wanted to be just like my mother, but . . . (pause)

C: But . . . (pause)

J: (softly) I wanted to be as warm and kind as her. I learned all of her special recipes. But, ever since I was very little, I was interested in healing. We had a female healer, a curandera, in our town who everyone used instead of the doctors at the hospital, who were very cold and disrespectful to us. (smiling) Whenever anyone in the family was sick, she would come with candles and a special cross she would put over the head of the sick person. She would use herbs to brew special medicine and pray to God with special invocations. (earnestly) I wanted to be like her. I felt like God had chosen me to be a healer, but I also wanted to go on to medical school to learn everything else I could. I wouldn’t have been like the doctors at the hospital. (her voice like a thread) I would have treated my people with respect like the curandera. I would have known her healing, and . . . (sobs into her hands while still clutching her rosary)

C: (long pause) That rosary must have tremendous meaning for you. Your knuckles are white from your painful grip on it.

J: (softly) It is the special rosary I got at my quinceañera. I use it to pray to God and call out to Guadalupe to help me.

C: Before your quinceañera you had images of yourself as a good woman like your mother—kind, caring—and you were going to take this caring even further to become a curandera and help your people when they were sick. (pause) How did God choose you?
J: (confidently) I could feel it. When I was with the curandera, she would look me in the eyes, and I felt a strong pulse coming into me. I would dream of being a healer that night. This was God’s message to me. I worked so hard in school to try to make it come true. But instead, I . . . (looks desperately at C)

C: Pain is overwhelming you. (J nods) You feel you had a destiny that you and your family would have been proud of, one in which you would help your people. The self you see now you define as a bad woman. That self doesn’t make sense to me because I have heard your deep commitment to helping others.

J: (painfully, choking) Quick, so quick, everything changed. (pause) While the priest was blessing me, I knelt on a pillow with my name on it. My godmother knew of my dream to be a healer, and she had embroidered my name and special symbols she had created herself to give more power to my dreams. As I knelt there, with this rosary on for the first time, I was surrounded by God and the love of my family. (softly) My father changed my shoes to show the family I was now a woman. He had tears in his eyes, tears of pride. (pause) He looked like a thundercloud as he said good-bye after I married Roberto. All pride was gone.

C: Quickly, so quickly, things changed. (long pause) How did it happen?

J: (in a tight, high-pitched voice) I think the party went to my head. I had nothing to drink, but I felt giddy with all the attention I got. I was wearing a tiara in my hair, a fancy necklace, and earrings to go with the beautiful gown my mother had sewn for me. (pause; sadly) I sound so selfish.

C: It was a very important day full of meaning. It made sense to be excited.

J: (intently) My father was supposed to lead me in a dance, but some children spilled punch all over him. He was laughing and saying he must change when Roberto strode over, took my hand, and said he would dance with me. I was so surprised he wanted to dance with me. He was a cousin from Mexico who had just arrived in the USA. My father had a letter from his father that he was coming, and so of course he was invited to my party. He was so tall and so attractive. (long pause) My hand tingled in his. At the end of the dance, he whispered in my ear to meet him outside the house. (long pause; painfully) I said no, but he just laughed.

C: Why did he laugh?

J: (sadly) He could tell what kind of a woman I was. (pause; intently) I really just thought about a romantic walk outside and (pause) maybe a kiss good-night. I have some friends at school who date. I knew dating wasn’t for me, but their stories excited me.

C: You knew you shouldn’t go on a date, but he danced with you at your quinceañera. He was family, so you believed he was a good man.

J: (intently) I did think that. My father let him take my hand. I just assumed he was good.

C: What would your father have said if he heard Roberto whispering to you?
J: (emphatically) He would have sent him out of the house. He would’ve been angry. I knew it was a little bit wrong, but I never expected . . . (long pause; whispering) It is all my fault. I shouldn’t have let it happen.

C: What was your fault?

J: (long pause; tearfully) I had sex with Roberto like a bad woman.

C: You look confused. (J nods and looks blank; long pause) What happened?

J: (fearfully) I got scared right away. Roberto smelled of alcohol. I knew he was older than me and would be offered a drink, but I had never seen a man drunk before. I tried to pull away from him, but he was much stronger. I can’t . . . (wracked with sobs)

C: It is very traumatic for you to remember this.

J: I was supposed to be pure until I married. On that first night of being a woman, I lost my chastity. (pause) I have no excuse for my immoral behavior.

C: Roberto was so much older than you. He had been a man for years. He should have known better. He should have treated you with respect.

J: (long pause) Now that you say that, (pause) yes, he should have listened to me. I told him I wanted to go back in the house as soon as I smelled the alcohol, but he ignored this and my trying to push him away. He pulled my clothes up. (long pause; woe-fully) It is still my fault.

C: The meaning that comes through for me is different. This was your special night and your first night as a woman. You didn’t have experience making adult decisions. You made a mistake by trusting your honor to a relative you didn’t know well.

J: (sincerely) He looked so handsome I assumed he was good.

C: A young woman mistake. (long pause) Did you tell your family what happened?

J: (desperately) How could I? I would have taken away all their pride in me. It happened anyway, but at least they had three more months to love me.

C: What happened when they found out?

J: (whispering) They were deeply ashamed. My father is a gentle man, but he struck me. He had never done it before. Then he left the house for a few days. When he came back, he would not talk to me. My mother prayed with me every day. Then the letter came from Roberto’s father in Mexico; my father had written him about me. They both agreed that we must marry. Roberto did not want to, but it was that or return to Mexico. He only had a counterfeit work visa, and my father knew that. (weeping)

C: Your pain is so intense—the meaning of the events so destructive—that you stopped viewing yourself as a good person, even though you have done so many good things.

J: (softly) I don’t seem like such a wicked person when I hear my story from your lips. But nothing can change the evil of what I have done to my son.
C: The good is still in you, despite the mistakes you have made. You did hurt Carlos; the injuries were serious.

J: (sadly) I know. I am ashamed that I let things go that way.

C: Under the law, you did abuse him. Yet, you are a young mother whose husband beats her, whose family lives far away, whose young son needs a lot of care. This is a reality where many things can go wrong.

J: (sadly) I will keep praying.

C: Your deep faith and your prayers to the Virgin are all important starting points. But, an important part of your story is your deep attachment to family. You need other people to help you with being a good mother. If your father knew that you did not consent to have sex with Roberto, if he knew that Roberto beats you, might he change his view of how you fit in his family? (long pause) Might he at least forgive you enough to take you back home where your family can help you with Carlos?

J: (anxiously) I don’t know. I would be afraid to ask. What if he says no? (long pause) I don’t know how to start, but I want my son back home. I want to be his mother.

C: Would you like to come back tomorrow and talk more about this?

J: (softly) I will keep praying, (pause) and yes, I will come back tomorrow.

Exercises for Developing a Case Conceptualization of Josephina

**Exercise 1 (four-page maximum)**

**GOAL:** To verify that you have a clear understanding of constructivist theory.

**STYLE:** An integrative essay addressing Parts A through C.

**NEED HELP?** Review this chapter (pages 389–395).

A. Develop a concise overview of all the assumptions of constructivist theory (the theory’s hypotheses about key dimensions in understanding how clients change; think broadly, abstractly) as an introduction to the rest of this exercise.

B. Develop a thorough description of how each of these assumptions is used to understand a client’s progression through the change process in paragraphs that provide specific examples to fully explain each assumption.

C. Conclude your essay by describing the role of the clinician in helping the client change (consultant, doctor, educator, helper), the major approach taken to treatment, and common treatment techniques. Provide enough specific examples to clarify what is distinctive about this approach.

**Exercise 2 (five-page maximum)**

**GOAL:** To aid the application of constructivist theory to Josephina.

**STYLE:** A separate sentence outline for each section, A through E.

**NEED HELP?** Review this chapter (pages 389–395).
A. Create a list of Josephina's weaknesses (concerns, issues, problems, symptoms, skill deficits, treatment barriers).

B. Create a list of Josephina's strengths (strong points, positive features, successes, skills, factors facilitating change).

C. Write a brief synopsis of each of Josephina's main life stories.
   1. For each synopsis, illustrate each component of the narrative, including the setting (where), the characterization (who), the plot (what), the themes (why), the goals (purpose) of the narrative, and the voice in which the story is told.
   2. For each synopsis, highlight areas of the story that are confusing, incomplete, problematic, and/or tied to negative emotion.
      a. Discuss how these might be related to one or more of Josephina's weaknesses.
      b. What types of deconstruction of the story might be valuable in aiding Josephina in developing more adaptive meaning from these troubling experiences?
   3. For each synopsis, highlight areas of the story that are complete, tied to positive emotions, and/or related to positive meaning construction.
      a. Discuss how these might be related to one or more of Josephina's strengths.
      b. What type of further attention to, or elaboration of, these positive aspects of her story might open up possibilities for new interpersonal meanings within the development of a life-enhancing narrative?

D. Discuss how problem saturated Josephina's life narrative is at this time, considering her storied self, her relationships to others, her view of her situation and past trauma, any negative emotions, any maladaptive goals, and her level of rigidity or difficulty in accommodating new experiences and integrating them into her ongoing narrative.

E. Discuss how resilient Josephina's life narrative is at this time, considering her storied self, her relationships to others, her view of her situation and positive experiences, any positive emotions, any adaptive goals, and her level of flexibility or ease in accommodating new experiences and integrating them into her ongoing narrative.

**Exercise 3 (six-page maximum)**

**GOAL:** To develop an understanding of Josephina, her family, and her situation using the domain of violence.

**STYLE:** A separate sentence outline for each section, A through J.

**NEED HELP?** Refer to Chapter 2 (pages 92–102).
A. Assess the risk factors for engaging in violence and the protective factors discouraging violence that are currently in place for Josephina, considering the following questions:

1. What adverse childhood events has Josephina been exposed to in the past? Consider events such as living with a drug addict; having divorced parents; severe family disruption, such as repeated moves or homelessness; having a parent who was depressed or mentally ill; living with someone who committed suicide or attempted to commit suicide; living with someone who committed a serious crime or went to prison; being physically, sexually, or emotionally abused or neglected; and witnessing violence.

2. What adverse adult events has Josephina been exposed to? Consider events such as living with a drug addict; severe family disruption; living with someone who is depressed or mentally ill; living with someone who committed or attempted to commit suicide; living with someone who committed a serious crime or went to prison; being physically, sexually, or emotionally abused; or witnessing violence or living in fear of violence.

3. What internal factors are within Josephina that might be protective against violence? Consider whether she has the ability to control impulses, set limits on her own behavior, regulate emotions, engage in reflective problem-solving, or understand the emotions and behaviors of others.

4. Did the long-term social network and environment during Josephina’s childhood support or constrain violence? Consider whether there were traumatic, ambivalent, or nonexistent emotional bonds versus positive emotional bonds; the level of family violence; the level of family toleration for violence as a problem-solving strategy; positive or negative school or neighborhood experiences; and religious background.

5. Are there currently environmental supports or constraints on violence from Josephina’s family relationships, peer relationships, educational attainment, vocation, current neighborhood, or current religious beliefs?

6. Are there any immediate eliciting or triggering factors that might serve to justify a violent or prosocial response or make it more likely? Consider such things as the presence or absence of a weapon, the level of alcohol or drug use, the level of frustration or anger, and the encouragement or discouragement of violence from others in Josephina’s life.

B. Assess Josephina’s exposure to violence across her life span. Consider the following:

1. Types of exposure (direct, indirect)

2. Frequency of exposure
3. Severity of incidents

4. Josephina’s role in the exposure (witness, victim, perpetrator, victim-perpetrator)

5. Current impact of the violence exposure in terms of emotional, cognitive, physical, and social functioning

C. Assess Josephina’s worldview, whether violence plays a generalized or circumscribed role in it, and whether it is currently generating or promoting violence or generating or promoting prosocial behavior.

D. Assess Josephina’s danger and that of others within her environment at this time. Consider whether—and if so, how—safety could be enhanced in both the immediate and the longer term; include careful consideration of the characteristics of the perpetrator of the violence in Josephina’s life. On a scale of 1 to 10, how dangerous is Josephina’s environment at this time? On a scale of 1 to 10, how much control of this danger does she have?

E. Assess Josephina’s safety and that of others within her personal, social, and cultural worlds.

F. Assess the overall psychological and physical impact of violence on Josephina and others in her life, evaluating whether or not there are more forces supporting violence or supporting nonviolence and determining Josephina’s prognosis in terms of her being able to live a life free of violence at this time.

G. What is your current knowledge of the impact of violence and neglect on individuals and their families?

1. How many courses have you taken that give you background on the impact of neglect, violence, and trauma on the physical and emotional welfare of clients?

2. How many workshops have you taken that give you background on the impact of neglect, violence, and trauma on the physical and emotional welfare of clients?

3. What professional experiences have you had that give you background on the impact of neglect, violence, and trauma on the physical and emotional welfare of clients?

4. What personal experiences have you had that give you background on the impact of neglect, violence, and trauma on the physical and emotional welfare of clients?

5. What cohort effects might influence the worldview of individuals with a background of neglect, violence, and trauma as to what is important in the world, how people communicate, and what is rewarded and punished in this world?

H. What is your current level of awareness of issues relevant to Josephina as an individual who comes from a violent or neglectful background?
1. Discuss your stereotypes of neglectful and violent lifestyles and whether these might influence your view of Josephina at this time.

2. Discuss your past experiences or exposure to violence and neglect and how these might influence your view of Josephina at this time.

3. Discuss your stereotypes of good romantic relationships and stereotypes of good parent–child relationships and whether these might influence your view of Josephina at this time.

4. Discuss experiences you have had that could support your effective work with Josephina as well as experiences you have had that might lead to negative bias or marginalization of Josephina’s point of view or current situation.

I. What skills do you have or can you develop in working with clients from violent or neglectful backgrounds?

1. What skills do you currently have that will be of value in working with Josephina?

2. What skills do you feel it would be important to develop to work effectively with Josephina?

3. What can you do to increase the likelihood of a positive outcome with Josephina?

J. What action steps can you take?

1. What can you do to prepare yourself to be more skilled in working with Josephina?

2. Discuss any biases in the treatment approach you have chosen for Josephina in terms of its neglect of appropriate interventions or inclusion of inappropriate interventions for individuals who were victims or perpetrators of violence.

3. How might you structure the treatment environment to increase the likelihood of a positive outcome with Josephina?

4. What processes of treatment might you change to make them more welcoming to Josephina or another client from a violent or neglectful background?

**Exercise 4 (seven-page maximum)**

**GOAL:** To help you integrate your knowledge of constructivist theory and violence issues into an in-depth conceptualization of Josephina (who she is and why she does what she does).

**STYLE:** An integrated essay consisting of a premise, supportive details, and conclusions following a carefully planned organizational style.

**NEED HELP?** Review Chapter 1 (pages 1–7) and Chapter 2 (pages 92–102).
Constructivist Case Conceptualizations and Treatment Plans

STEP 1: Consider what style you should use to organize your constructivist understanding of Josephina. This style should (a) support you in providing a comprehensive and clear understanding of her story and how life enhancing it is and (b) support language she might find persuasive as a mandated referral for child abuse.

STEP 2: Develop your concise premise (overview, preliminary or explanatory statements, proposition, thesis statement, theory-driven introduction, hypotheses, summary, concluding causal statements) that explains Josephina’s story as a wife and new mother who has lost a sense of who she is outside of a violent and abusive story. If you have trouble with Step 2, remember that it should be an integration of the key ideas of Exercises 2 and 3 and that it should (a) provide a basis for Josephina’s long-term goals, (b) be grounded in constructivist theory and sensitive to issues of violence, and (c) highlight the strengths Josephina brings to constructivist treatment.

STEP 3: Develop your supporting material (a detailed case analysis of strengths and weaknesses, supplying data to support an introductory premise) from a constructivist perspective, incorporating within each paragraph a deep understanding of Josephina, a young woman whose storied self includes being both a victim and a perpetrator of violence. If you have trouble with Step 3, consider the information you’ll need to include in order to (a) support the development of short-term goals, (b) be grounded in a constructivist perspective and sensitive to violence issues, and (c) integrate an understanding of the strengths Josephina brings to the coconstruction of a new and coherent storied self.

STEP 4: Develop your conclusions and broad treatment recommendations, including (a) Josephina’s overall level of functioning, (b) anything facilitating or serving as a barrier to her constructing a more life-enhancing narrative at this time, and (c) her basic needs in the construction of a life-enhancing narrative, being careful to consider what you said in Parts H and J of Exercise 3 (be concise and general).

Exercise 5 (four-page maximum)

GOAL: To develop an individualized, theory-driven action plan for Josephina that considers her strengths and is sensitive to issues of violence.

STYLE: A sentence outline consisting of long- and short-term goals.


STEP 1: Develop your treatment plan overview, being careful to consider what you said in Parts H and J of Exercise 3 to try to prevent any negative bias in your treatment plan and to ensure that you adapt your treatment approach to Josephina’s unique needs as an individual.
STEP 2: Develop long-term (major, large, ambitious, comprehensive, broad) goals that ideally Josephina will reach by the termination of treatment and that will create an adaptive, violence-free narrative for her and Carlos. If you have trouble with Step 2, reread your premise and support topic sentences for ideas, paying careful attention to how they could be transformed into goals for deconstructing or reconstructing Josephina’s stories (use the style of Exercise 4).

STEP 3: Develop short-term (small, brief, encapsulated, specific, measurable) goals that Josephina and you can expect to see accomplished within a few weeks and that you can use to chart Josephina’s progress in integrating new experiences into her prior stories of herself, instill hope for change, and plan time-effective treatment sessions. If you have trouble with Step 3, reread your support paragraphs, looking for ideas to transform into goals that (a) might help Josephina in the deconstruction and then reconstruction of her storied self and are sensitive to violence issues, (b) would enhance factors facilitating or decrease barriers to her parenting effectively at this time, (c) would utilize her strengths in developing new adaptive meaning from her life stories whenever possible, and (d) are individualized to Josephina as both a victim and a perpetrator of violence rather than generic.

Exercise 6
GOAL: To critique constructivist treatment in the case of Josephina.
STYLE: Answer Questions A through E in essay form or discuss them in a group format.

A. What are the strengths and weaknesses of constructivist treatment for Josephina (a young mother cut off from extended family who is both a victim and a perpetrator of violence)?

B. Discuss the pros and cons of using family systems treatment with Josephina and her family of origin. Comparing this approach to your constructivist one, which do you believe has the most utility for helping Josephina at this moment, considering the facts of this case? How would it alter your decision if you entered Josephina’s story when she first recognized she was pregnant?

C. What role does Josephina’s Mexican American heritage play in her current situation? Discuss in detail how it might be adding risk factors for violence and/or protective factors that would support a nonviolent outcome.

D. You have an ethical responsibility as a mandated reporter to do your utmost to ensure Carlos’s safety, and you do not have a parallel responsibility to Josephina. Considering this, discuss how safe Carlos would be, in the short run, if you used constructivist treatment with his mother. Do the risks increase or decrease in the long run, and why or why not? How might you tailor your treatment plan to assess safety issues, session by session, within a constructivist framework?
E. What would be your personal challenges in providing effective treatment to someone who has abused an infant? Do the facts of Josephina’s case change these challenges in any way? Is there anything about this case that might make it difficult for you to provide treatment, considering her gender, Mexican American heritage, and religious background?

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Books and Articles


Videos


Websites

- Society for Constructivism in the Human Sciences. https://sites.google.com/site/constructingworlds/