

12-1-1997

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ARTICLE *in* THEORY & PSYCHOLOGY · DECEMBER 1997

Impact Factor: 0.7 · DOI: 10.1177/0959354397076001

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## **The Place of the Psyche in a Constructed World**

*Kenneth J. Gergen*

Interest in the family of ideas loosely labeled "social constructionist" has burgeoned within recent years, and now spans the full range of the social sciences and humanities. Constructionist scholarship has been devoted to understanding the generation, transformation, and suppression of what we take to be objective knowledge; exploring the literary and rhetorical devices by which meaning is achieved and rendered compelling; illuminating the ideological and valuational freightings of the unremarkable or taken for granted; documenting the implications of world construction for the distribution of power; gaining an appreciation of the processes of relationship from which senses of the real and the good are achieved; comprehending the historical roots and vicissitudes of various forms of understanding; and exploring the range and variability in human intelligibility across cultures. It is to charting the course of this work that I devoted much of my book, *Realities and Relationships* (Gergen, 1994). Yet, while provoking lively interest across the academic sphere, psychologists themselves have been relatively resistant to joining the constructionist dialogues. Social constructionism is virtually absent from the common discussions of mental functioning and dysfunction within the field.

There are many reasons for the general insularity of psychological science from this intellectual watershed. Certainly among the most important is what many take to be a fundamental antagonism between the psychological and constructionist projects. Within traditional psychology, mental processes are not only the chief subject of inquiry, but serve as the critical fulcrum for explaining human action. For social constructionism, in contrast, the chief locus of understanding is not in "the psyche" but in social relationships. All that psychology traces to mental origins, constructionists might wish to explain through micro social process. If the psychological project were fully vindicated, there would be no explanatory remainder, a world of human action for which social constructionism would be a necessary adjunct. The reverse seems equally as plausible: the vindication of constructionism would portend the end of psychology.

However, this dolorous conclusion is not wholly inevitable. It is favored primarily by a realist metaphysics and a correspondence view of language, both of which sustain a view of science in which there is a single, knowable reality, and in which theories compete for explanatory and predictive superiority. It is this view of science that, historically, has fostered a recurring pattern of internecine antagonism, in which behaviorism functioned to eradicate mentalism, and cognitivism has since served to silence behaviorist voices. However, constructionist scholars are not typically drawn either to a realist metaphysics or a correspondence theory of language. For the constructionist there is no justification for foundational enunciations of the real; whatever we take to be essential is an outcome of social interchange. Theories cannot

be falsified by virtue of their correspondence with something else called "the real," but only within the conventions of particular enclaves of meaning. Thus constructionists establish no transcendent grounds for eliminating any theoretical formulation. Thus, to eradicate a theoretical perspective would not only be tantamount to losing a mode of human intelligibility (along with related social practices), but to silence a community of meaning making. Within a constructionist metaphysics it would be virtually impossible to locate grounds for such suppression, and indeed many would argue that there is implicit in constructionism a strong pluralist ethic (see, for example, Sampson, 1993).

Given a constructionist metatheory, how are we then to view professional investments in psychological research, as well as mental health practices, public policy advisories, and other practices based on ontologies of mental process? If not eradication, what role is the ontology of the mind to play in a constructionist orientation to human action? Or conversely, what place is there in psychology for social constructionism? It is here that the constructionist concern with the pragmatics of language usage becomes paramount. For the constructionist language serves neither as a picture or a map of what is the case; rather (following Wittgenstein, 1953), it acquires its meaning from its use within human interchange (which usages may also include a "game of reality positing.") From this standpoint, any analysis of scientific or scholarly accounts of the world would primarily (though not exclusively) be concerned with the uses to which such languages are put. Within what kinds of relationships do they play an important role, and what are the repercussions of particular forms of language use for those who directly or indirectly participate in these relationships? There can be no canonical slate of criteria for evaluating such appraisals, as various communities will share different concerns, which may themselves change with time and circumstance. And too, the way such questions are addressed and answered must itself be viewed as a byproduct of a community, neither lodged within nor answered with respect to "the real," but reflecting community investments and conventions of the time. This is scarcely to discredit such inquiry; one can scarcely do more than raise questions of the real and the good within particular traditions. Rather, it is to open scholarly and scientific discourse to the full range of relevant communities (see also Feyerabend, 1978), without granting any community an ultimate "grounds of assessment" by virtue of which other voices may be silenced.

Within this context I wish to consider three major orientations to psychological inquiry as informed by constructionist metatheory. These orientations may be distinguished in terms of their evaluative posture. The specific attempt will be first to delineate the logics of these prevailing and emerging orientations, and then to inquire into their potentials. We have, then, a two-tiered analysis, first treating psychological inquiry from contrasting constructionist standpoints, and then reflecting on the standpoints themselves. The first of these orientations, which emphasizes denaturalization, reflection and democratization, is at once the most fully developed within the constructionist arena and the most fully critical of existing psychological scholarship. At the same time its positive potentials for psychology have not been

sufficiently addressed. The second orientation, revitalization and enrichment, is far more positive in its orientation to psychological inquiry. Although it is the least developed, its elaboration seems critical to the future of the discipline. Finally, I wish to explore constructionist efforts to remove certain problematic features from the compendium of mental predicates, and to reconstruct the discourse in more promising ways. This social reconstructive effort has dramatically accelerated in recent years, but its internal tensions and broader ramifications have not heretofore been addressed. Through this analysis, we may emerge with a more variegated understanding of the relationship between psychological and constructionist endeavors, an appreciation of affinities and interdependencies of traditional and constructionist approaches to psychology, and an enhanced sense of humility regarding all adventures in making meaning.

### **Denaturalization, Reflection and Democratization**

There are reasons other than hegemonic threat for the failure of most psychologists to join the broader dialogues on the social constitution of knowledge. Among them is surely the critical posture of much constructionist scholarship to date - an impulse that seems aimed at dismantling the authority of psychological science. Further, because of the restricted forms of argumentation within the empirical wing of psychology, with rare exception (cf. Held, 1995), its denizens have been at a loss to answer these assaults. Neither insights into methodology and statistics, nor recourse to "established fact" - favored moves within traditional empiricist argumentation - count as legitimate rejoinders to forms of constructionist critique. Yet, critical constructionism is not "all of a piece;" differing arguments are at stake. In order to appreciate the force of these critical efforts, along with their potentials and shortcomings, it is important to distinguish among them. Although convergent, they rest on three distinct lines of reasoning: ideological unmasking, rhetorical deconstruction, and social analysis.

In the case of ideological unmasking, constructionist critics point to the societal ramifications of psychology's modes of describing and explaining human action. As professional accounts are disseminated within the culture, bearing the stamp of scientific authority, so do they inform people's actions and instruct social policy. In Foucault's (1980) terms, there is a close relationship between claims to knowledge and cultural power. Given the capacity of the profession to generate multiple and diverse accounts of the person, choices in description and explanation are thus matters of moral and political consequence. Within this context professional psychology becomes a prime target of critique, criticism exacerbated further by the profession's seemingly disingenuous claims to value neutrality. Thus, constructionist scholars have variously set out to demonstrate the ways in which existing psychological accounts (and the practices which they sustain), lend themselves to broadening governmental control (Rose, 1990), destroying democratic foundations (1984), promoting narcissism (Wallach and Wallach, 1983), championing individualist ideology (Sampson, 1977; Fowers and Richardson, 1996), eroding community (Bellah et al, 1985; Sampson, 1977), fostering racism (Jones, 1991),

sustaining the patriarchal order (Hare-Mustin and Marecek, 1988; M. Gergen, 1988; Morawski, 1994), contributing to western colonialism (Gergen, Gulerce, Lock, and Misra, 1996), and more.

This form of critique contrasts sharply with literary and rhetorical deconstruction. Representing a convergence of developments within Continental semiotics, post-structural literary theory, and rhetorical studies, it is reasoned in this case that all sensible propositions about persons are lodged within broader systems of meaning. In large measure, the intelligibility of any proposition is derived from its placement within this system as opposed to its referential relationship to non-linguistic occurrences (e.g. My ability to construct intelligible sentences about the nature of "love" depends primarily on a textual history as opposed to observations of "the phenomenon itself.") Rhetoricians add importantly to this concern with the textually driven character of psychological discourse by demonstrating the manner in which such discourse is constrained or fashioned by its function in social interchange. Here it is argued that descriptions and explanations of mental life are importantly dependent on the demands placed on the rhetor to achieve intelligibility ("to persuade") a particular audience (e.g. The language required to render "love" intelligible to a child, as opposed to a romantic partner, a priest, or a New Guinea tribesman would be radically different). In this case, intelligibility is often traced to various rhetorical tropes, such as narrative or metaphor. For example, regardless of "the data," in giving an account of human development the investigator cannot escape the demands of "proper story telling."

In this context of argument, the problem of professional psychology does not lie in its discursive commitments per se, but in its claims to objective grounding for such commitments. Truth claims, it is reasoned, operate to silence competing voices; the discourse of objectivity and political totalitarianism are allied. The constructionist critic thus functions to unmask the literary and rhetorical strategies responsible for the sensibility (objectivity, intelligibility, felicity) of propositions about the mental world. An early example of such unmasking is provided by Smedslund's (1978) attempted to demonstrate that most experimental hypotheses in psychology are non-falsifiable inasmuch as falsifications are linguistically incoherent. Similarly, I have argued that all propositions relating mental predicates to an external world (either stimulus or response) are circular; their intelligibility rests on implicit tautologies (Gergen, 1987, see also Wallach and Wallach, 1994). More broadly, scholars have variously argued that theories of the mind grow not from observation (inductively) but are derived from prevailing metaphors (see, for example, Gigerenzer, 1996; Soyland, 1994) and on cultural conventions of narrative or story telling (Sarbin, 1986; Gergen and Gergen, 1986). They have variously explored how "the facts" cognitive dysfunction ("irrationality") are created through rhetorical tropes (Lopes, 1991), how the APA Publication Manual sustains implicit assumptions about human action (Bazerman, 1988), and such manuals circumscribe forms of communication and relationships - both within the profession and between the profession and the culture at large (Budge and Katz, 1995).

A third logic of constructionist critique, the social-analytic, is stimulated by significant developments within the sociology of knowledge and the history of science. Here scholars have been particularly concerned with the ways in which social processes shape the profession's assumptions about its subject matter, its methodologies, and ultimately its conclusions regarding the nature of the world (see, for example, Kuhn, 1962; Latour and Woolgar, 1979). For psychology, the significant argument is that it is through social negotiation that investigators determine the grounding assumptions within which research will occur. Once the grounding assumptions (paradigms) have gained consensus, then all interpretations of evidence will necessarily serve as support; paradigms are not thus "tested" against fact; they determine what will be counted as fact. Informed by these developments, the critical analyst shares the previously voiced concerns with the unwarranted and totalitarian claims of scientific psychology to accurate and objective readings of the mind. Unmasking the social processes intrinsic to the production of "scientific truth" serves the additional function of challenging longstanding boundaries within the discipline. Because of traditional commitments to truth through method, there are strong tendencies for the sub-disciplines to become insulated and self-serving, thus absenting themselves from broader dialogic engagement - both within the academy and the society more generally. Social critique thus serves as a catalyst for broader interchange.

The social critique in psychology gained early sustenance from both ethnomethodological explorations of the social negotiation of factuality - for example, of suicide (Garfinkel, 1967) and gender (Kessler and McKenna, 1978) - and labeling theories of deviance (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977). Investigators have since gone on to explore the social construction of a large array of "mental processes," including cognitive processes (Coulter, 1979), anger (Averill, 1982), emotion (Harre, 1986), schizophrenia (Sarbin and Mancuso, 1980), child development (Bradley, 1989), sexuality (Tiefer, 1992), anorexia and bulimia (Gordon, 1990), and depression (Wiener and Marcus, 1994). This line of critique has also been augmented by broad-ranging scholarship attempting to locate the historical and cultural contexts within which assumptions about psychological processes emerge. In the case of historical work, scholars have variously been concerned with the social contexts giving rise, for example, to people's constructions of foul and fragrant smells (Corbin, 1986), mental development (Kirschner, 1996), multiple personality disorder (Hacking, 1995), boredom (Spacks, 1995), and the subject in psychological research (Danziger, 1995).<sup>1</sup> Cultural anthropologists have explored the cultural embeddedness of various conceptions of the mind (see, for example, Heelas and Lock, 1981; Lutz, 1988; Bruner, 1990). In effect, by tracing taken for granted beliefs about the mind to local circumstances, the linked presumptions in the science of a "universal subject matter," singular methodology, and universal generalization are all placed in jeopardy.

At the outset, these three lines of critical scholarship (often working in tandem) pose a formidable threat to traditional empirical psychology. With the empirical grounding for professional truth claims undermined, so is the rationale for traditional research, along with the profession's claims to authority within the culture more generally.

Further, the critics themselves have often contributed to the sense of an impending elimination of psychological inquiry. The titles of works edited by Parker and his colleagues, for example, *Deconstructing social psychology* (Parker and Shotter, 1990), and *Deconstructing psychopathology* (Parker, et al., 1995) are apposite. However, such a funereal conclusion is without warrant. As earlier proposed, there is nothing within constructionist premises that necessarily argue for the elimination of any form of discourse. While constructionist critiques may often appear nihilistic, there is no means by which they themselves can be grounded or legitimated. They too fall victim to their own modes of critique; their accounts are inevitably freighted with ethical and ideological implications, forged within the conventions of writing, designed for rhetorical advantage, and their "objects of criticism" constructed within and for a particular community. The objects of their criticism are no less constructed than the traditional objects of research, nor do their moral claims rest on transcendental foundations.

There is more: Even by constructionist standards, a rationale for empirical research can be generated. One of the central arguments within constructionist metatheory is that language is not mimetic: That is, it fails to function as a picture or map of an independent world. Rather, it is reasoned, language operates performatively and constitutively; it is employed by communities of interlocutors for purposes of carrying out their relationships - including the local constitution of the real and the good. As I have argued elsewhere (Gergen, 1994), such a view does not obliterate empirical science; it simply removes its privilege of claiming truth beyond community. There is nothing in constructionist arguments, for example, that would call for an end to medical research. The constructionist would simply point out that its ontological categories along with the identification of "sickness" and "cure" must not be viewed as transcendently accurate, but as byproducts of historically and culturally located, ideologically invested conversation, serving particular social functions. In the same way, psychologists may properly employ conceptions of mental process in empirical research, and indeed such research may be used to supplement processes of prediction within other sectors of the culture (for example, prediction of voting patterns, juror's preferences, or the rate of suicide). The constructionist claim is chiefly that there is no foundation for the addendum "is true" to the language used in these endeavors. Secondly constructionism invites discussion of the political/ethical messages carried by the methods of research themselves (see, for example, Morawski, 1988).

As we find, the critical voice of the constructionist should not be viewed as liquidating. Rather, these lines of critical scholarship serve the useful functions of denaturalization and democratization. In their denaturalizing the "objects of research," along with methodologies, research reports, statistics, and resulting practices, critical inquiry first invites an appropriate humility. They function to curb the presumptuous claims to unbridled generality, truth beyond culture and history, and fact without interpretation, which have generated broad skepticism within the culture more generally, and yielded scorn more globally from those failing to share the premises. Simultaneously, such critiques function as a continuous invitation to the



psychologist to avoid the blinders of the singular explanation, and to expand the range of interpretive possibilities available to the profession and the culture. All that seems "clearly the case," could be otherwise. We shall return to this issue shortly.

In addition to the advantages of denaturalization, these forms of critique also favor a pluralist politics, both within the profession and with respect to the profession's relationship to its many publics. They operate to "level the playing field" within the profession, for example offering humanists, phenomenologists, feminists, and the spiritual, the same right to reason and results as behaviorists and cognitivists. They also open the profession to multiple voices from the culture more generally. Where psychology had largely been deaf to ethical and ideological misgivings concerning its conceptions, methods, and societal effects, critical scholarship welcomes such inquiry into the professional forum. This pluralization of voices is especially important, inasmuch as the assumptions of empirical psychology offer no means of self-examination save through their own premises. Finally, efforts to denaturalize and democratize invite a dialogic relationship between the profession and its many publics, forms of interchange that should not only serve to render professional work more intelligible, but enhance the applicability of professional work for the public good. In effect, when its threatening rhetoric is removed, we find constructionist critique serves to strengthen psychological inquiry in significant degree.

### **Revitalization and Enrichment**

As I have argued, there is nothing within a constructionist metatheory that necessarily militates against empirical work in psychology. By the same token, constructionism itself does not prohibit the entry of any term into the lexicon of mental life. In this sense, critics of constructionism who complain of its tendencies to denigrate or obliterate the self (Osbeck, 1993; Harre and Krausz, 1996), or agency and uniqueness (Fisher, 1995), or to privilege the social over the material (Michael, 1996), mistake the metatheoretical orientation for a foundational ontology. Constructionist metatheory neither denies nor affirms the existence of any such "entities" or "processes." The question is not the existence of the putative referents of various explanatory or descriptive terms; constructionism simply obviates issues of fundamental ontology in favor of questions about interpretive functioning within communities. In the same way, psychology's traditional discourses of cognition, emotion, motivation, and mental disorder and the like, are not antagonistic to constructionist metatheory. Rather, for the constructionist, these are simply representative forms of constructing the person within an evolving professional community, forms that bear a close and interdependent relationship with common modes of discourse within contemporary culture (see for example, Cushman, 1995).

For the professional psychologist, mental discourses have a high degree of communicative utility. Indeed, without shared discourses of this kind there would be nothing to intelligibly call "a profession." However, given the legitimacy of a tradition valued by its constituents in this way, constructionist metatheory does invite a range of provocative deliberations. Among them, what forms of psychological

discourse are to be favored, and for what purposes? For whom are these languages useful and for what kinds of projects? Do current investments primarily benefit the constituents of the professional community; are they possibly injurious to the recipients of such designations? To the extent that professional discourse is appropriated by the culture, what kinds of policies, institutions, or individual actions are favored? What forms of cultural life are rendered invisible or obliterated? And, given the potential of such discourses to contribute to societal transformation, what new or revived forms of discourse are invited?

It is in this domain of dialogue that we locate a second major orientation to psychological inquiry favored by a constructionist standpoint. While deliberations on the utility of current pursuits is essential, constructionism also frees the investigator to suspend the taken for granted ontologies of the profession. The impetus toward univocality ("unified psychology") is modulated. With the bounds of interpretation thus expanded, the scholar is invited to explore the penumbra of emerging intelligibility, forms of possible but unrealized articulation. I am not speaking here of a myopic accumulation of "psychobabble," but rather, of the careful and caring development of psychological discourse keyed to specific cultural (moral/political) ends. If psychological language is used by persons for carrying on cultural life, then new forms of language invite alternative futures. Alternative conceptions of mental may favor forms of life more promising to many people than the currently obvious and unquestioned. In this case the scholar abandons the problematic role of describing "what is the case," and sets out to forge languages favoring what may become. Detached observation gives way to what we may view as a poetic activism.

Yet, while constructionism removes the weight of existing ontologies, movement into meaning can scarcely proceed outside the traditions of any community. A discourse created outside the textual histories of any culture would not only fail to communicate, there would be no practices to which it was relevant. No cultural work would be achieved. It is in this respect that so much of the discourse generated within isolated academic enclaves is elsewhere discredited as "mere jargon." In effect, the construction of new meanings must draw from extant traditions without duplicating them. It is useful here to consider the potentials for discursive enrichment as drawing first on traditions within the home culture (historical archeology) and second, on alterior traditions (cultural exegesis).

At the outset, the challenge of discursive enrichment places a premium on sustaining the various traditions in psychology that have otherwise been suppressed by the dominant discourses. For example, the humanist tradition has been largely ignored within the major texts of the profession. Yet, while problematic in its dualism and its individualism, the demise of the humanist language of intention serves as a threat to cherished cultural institutions (e.g. democracy, ethics). Similarly, while phenomenological theory was virtually obliterated with the early rise of behaviorism, abandoning the language of subjective experience removes from the culture a significant reason for valuing human life. The resuscitation of these languages in terms of contemporary theoretical and cultural dialogues - humanist on the one hand

(see for example, Rychlak, 1988), and phenomenological on the other (see for example, Polkinghorne, 1988) - seems a highly valuable undertaking. Similarly, a vital expansion of resources is represented in the attempt by psychologists to revive the hermeneutical tradition (cf. Messer, Sass, and Woolfolk, 1988; Addison and Packer, 1989), once essential to the very concept of psychology as a *Geisteswissenschaft*. Hermeneutical deliberations serve the valuable function of thwarting the modes of depersonalization so common to the empirical research tradition.

I find much to be credited, as well, in work that draws from our traditions in such a way as to expand the range of "valuing discourse." The psychological profession has been so captivated by the instrumentalist ethos and its emphasis on problem solving, that its primary offering to the culture has been a discourse of deficit (Gergen, 1994, Chpt. 6). The massive and ever-expanding terminologies of mental illness, for example, all function as means of placing social identity at risk. As the discourse is placed into action, it discredits, divides and distances. Vitally needed, then, are discourses inviting people into more valued modes of being, ways of constructing self and others that add to the sense of well-being and human welfare. Among the important contributions of this kind I would place early attempts to reconstruct women's psychology in a more empowering register (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, et al. 1986), Lifton's (1993) conception of the protean self as a source of resilience, Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) construction of the "flow" experience, and the emerging interest in wisdom (Sternberg, 1990). In spite of their realist predilections, in each case the theorists draw from traditions outside the mechanistic - and sustain and enrich languages that invest persons with special gifts, potentials and powers.

Other work disposed toward the positive register is more directly informed by constructionist metatheory. Here scholars are less likely to delineate a specific mode of psychological being, as they are to argue for expanding possibilities of constructing self and others. For example, Averill and Nunley (1992), in a volume intended for a non-academic readership, argue for the possibility of leading an "emotionally creative" life, one that takes into account the socially grounded character of emotional expression. In their volume, *Constructing the Life Course* Gubrium, Holstein and Buckholdt (1994) abandon the traditional view of epigenetic trajectories of development, and explore the possibilities for collaborative construction of individual futures. This same orientation toward the creative use of construction now pervades a large domain of therapeutic theory and practice (see for example, White and Epston, 1990; Weingarten, 1991; McNamee and Gergen, 1993; Anderson, 1996).

These are but a sampling of illustrations of the way in which scholars can draw from existing cultural dialogues to crystallize ontologies of the person, intelligibilities that are more fully "actionable" than the formalisms of the academy, and which explicitly carry with them implications for cultural transformation. The potentials for such poetic activism have scarcely been explored. Spiritual traditions, for example, are enormously important within the culture, but have been generally eliminated from the

psychologist's vocabulary. Further, the range of actionable vocabulary and narrative should be enriched by anterior traditions, from textual histories beyond the West. Slowly we begin to realize the potentials of Indian writings on the mind (see for example, Paranjpe, 1984), Confucianist conceptions of self (Tu Wei-ming, 1985), and Mestizo concepts of the person and mental health (Ramirez, 1983). This process of cross-fertilization is but in a fledgling state, and much to be welcomed from a constructionist perspective.

As we see, the second orientation to psychological inquiry favored by constructionism stresses the resuscitation and refurbishment of psychological intelligibilities for purposes of augmenting the discursive resources of the culture. The attempt, then, is to enrich psychology in ways that may favor positive transformations of society. Yet, in the same way that we found limits to constructionist critique, a reflexive moment is also required in the present case. Three issues demand particular attention. At the outset, the present proposal may smack of the disingenuous. If constructionism abolishes all foundations or ultimate warrants for propositions about persons, the critic may advance, then wouldn't subsequent attempts to "describe and explain" - as in the above - stand empty ("mere words"), or worse, operate as forms of propaganda? Why should the psychologist engage in such efforts? And, what difference would there be between the psychologist's pronouncements on "flow," "protean potentials," "wisdom" and the like and the priest's accounts of god or the spiritual life? In reply, there would be little reason for the constructionist scholar to plump for these intelligibilities on any foundational grounds. The accounts of the person would not be favored because they "are true," but rather, because as intelligible interpretations they offer significant options for action. The theorist need not suffer the loss of confidence, nor the self-loathing accompanying duplicity, any more in speaking of "psychological process" than in calling a "foul ball" at a baseball game, or declaring child molesting evil within his/her community. Confidence and the sense of authenticity are born of communal participation as opposed to grounding in "the true," or "the real." In this sense psychological theory is no more or less true than spiritualism or physics. Cultural intelligibilities sprout in many soils. However, the tradition of mental accounting is a rich and significant one, in many ways pivotal for the major institutions of the West. The importance of considered, creative and communal attention to its further elaboration can scarcely be overestimated.

The second problem concerns the problematic traces of pragmatism implied by the present arguments, and most pointedly the instrumentalist interpretation of pragmatism. As I have argued, constructionism invites the scholar to consider the societal utility of psychological theory, and bring into being conceptions favoring certain social ends as opposed to others. This would seem to thrust the theorist into the role of grand strategist, attempting to provide tools to the society for constructing itself in the image favored by the theorist. The theorist functions instrumentally to create desirable effects in the social world. Yet, while allying itself with the pragmatist tradition, the instrumentalist conception of the pragmatic is not a congenial companion to constructionism. The instrumentalist view is largely an

outgrowth of individualism, and most particularly, the assumption that individuals are rational and autonomous decision makers operating to achieve their personal goals. However, constructionism not only fails to objectify the person as a rational agent, but when its conceptual implications are extended it favors a view of human action quite at odds with the traditional view. Although we shall treat this view shortly, the important point in this context is to appreciate the difference between a constructionist and an instrumentalist concept of the pragmatic. Constructionism's particular emphasis is on meaningful action embedded not within individual minds but within more extended patterns of interchange. Thus, meaningful action is always consequential in the sense of bearing an interdependent relationship between what preceded and what follows. By virtue of convention, one's actions thus sustain and/or suppress that which has been, and simultaneously function to create a present with future ramifications. Precisely what these "ramifications" are is open to continuous negotiation, which negotiation itself functions pragmatically in this more relational sense (see also Botschner, 1995).

Finally, the critic might locate within these proposals a "transformationist bias," that is, a continuous championing of the new, the expanded and the revolutionary as opposed to the accepted, the traditional, and secure. Surely this is the dominant subtext of the above. However, this bias must be seen against the backdrop of the current context, both intellectual and cultural. To the extent that western psychology is largely a child of cultural modernism (Gergen, 1991), and cultural modernism has achieved broad ascendancy - its premises now grounding most of the culture's major institutions - then a psychology that simply contributes to the status quo has little to offer the culture. It functions as an elfin voice in a mighty chorus. Constructionism itself is not antithetical to tradition; indeed, tradition is essential to the construction of all meaning. However, to the extent that one wishes to participate in a profession that plays a significant role in augmenting or expanding or augmenting the culture's resources, constructionist arguments can lend strong support. In effect, there seems less to be gained in the present era through duplication of longstanding intelligibilities as opposed to catalytic conceptualization.

### **The Social Reconstruction of the Mind**

There is a third orientation to psychological theorizing advanced by constructionist writings, an orientation to which the preceding arguments serve as important antecedents. As we have seen, significant criticism has been directed toward traditional psychology for its implicit support of individualist ideology and institutions. As it is variously reasoned, tracing human action to psychological sources sustains a view of persons as fundamentally isolated, self-gratifying, and self-sufficient. From the traditional standpoint, relationships are artificial byproducts of otherwise autonomously functioning individuals; the social is secondary to and derivative of the personal. As such conceptions are played out in cultural life, critics argue, they naturalize alienation, self-absorption, and a conflict of all against all. Coupled with this critique, however, is the second logic developed above, namely that a major aim of scholarship from the constructionist standpoint should be the

enrichment of cultural resources. In particular, through the development of new ontologies, alternative and possibly more promising avenues of action within the culture may be opened. As these lines of argument are compounded, they conduce to investments in reconceptualizing the individual in other than individualistic terms.

There are many forms which such reconceptualization might take - ecological, social structural, and social evolutionary among them. However, specifically invited by social constructionist metatheory, is the social reconstitution of the individual. That is, within the many dialogues making up the constructionist movement, the social is given primacy over the individual. Significant attention is given, for example, to language, dialogue, negotiation, social pragmatics, conversational positioning, ritual, cultural practice, and the distribution of power. As earlier advanced, constructionist theorists are scarcely obliged to reconstitute a constructionist metatheory in their scientific/scholarly accounts of the world or persons. In this respect the metatheory dictates nothing. However, because constructionist metatheory implies an alternative to the individualized conception of human action, there is good reason for exploring its potentials in developing more social or relational accounts of the person. In effect, the third constructionist orientation to the psychological world is to reconstitute it as a domain of the social.

Of course, attempts to conceptualize the individual as a social actor have long been fixtures on the intellectual landscape (see Burkitt's 1991 review). Current constructionist attempts must be viewed as extensions of this tradition. At the same time, there are important differences among current theorists, differences with respect to their affinity to central constructionist tenets. For analytic purposes it is useful to consider a continuum of conceptualizations, varying in terms of their congeniality with traditional individualism and its close alliance with empiricist metaphysics as opposed to the primacy of relationship implicit within constructionist writings. Let us first consider the more conservative pole. Characterized by a deep respect for existing traditions, we find conceptualizations of the social self which 1) place a strong emphasis on specifically psychological states or processes, 2) presume the reality of their subject matter (beyond cultural premises), 3) rely on or attempt to establish foundations for further exploration and understanding, 4) treat the language of analysis as correspondent with nature, and the concomitant role of the scientist/scholar as informant to the culture, and 5) treat the scientific/scholarly effort as politically/ideologically neutral. For purposes of comparison and evaluation, let us first consider social reconceptualizations retaining such traditional tendencies.

### **Individuals as Cultural Carriers**

The nativist-environmentalist binary, around which most of the major debates in psychology have revolved over the century, furnishes the germinating context for the one of the most important attempts at socially reconstituting the self. That persons are influenced by their cultural surrounds has virtually served as a theoretical truism for psychology. This was most obviously the case during the hegemony of behaviorism, but even the nativistically oriented cognitivists have been unable - lest they sink on

the shoals of solipsism - to abandon this conceptual mooring. Yet, the manner in which social reconstructions of the individual have extended this tradition form a dramatic disjunction with both behaviorist and cognitivist formulations. In both these cases the strong presumption prevails that the individual is endowed with certain psychological structures or processes. For the behaviorist the environment may stimulate or inform the internal conditions; for cognitivists the external conditions provide raw resources for cognitive appropriation. In neither case is the mental fundament itself produced, extinguished or transformed. It is precisely this move that characterizes a range of recent attempts at social reconstitution. As it is variously reasoned, it is not the self-contained individual who precedes culture, but the culture that establishes the basic character of psychological functioning.

Not only does this family of attempts benefit from the environmentalist tradition, but in most cases significant linkages are forged with theories from psychology's past. For example, Bruner's highly influential work (1990) draws sustenance from Vygotsky, Bartlett, Mead, and a host of other significant psychological figures in proposing that "it is culture, not biology, that shapes human life and the human mind, that gives meaning to action by situating its underlying intentional states in an interpretive system." (p. 34) In contrast, James Gee (1992) squeezes support from myriad linguistic and cognitive contributions to argue that "the individual interprets experience by forming 'folk theories,' which together with nonlinguistic modules of the mind, cause the person to talk and act in certain ways..." (p. 104) Related attempts to "socialize" the self have drawn significantly from George Kelly (Neimeyer and Neimeyer, 1985), Freud (Freeman, 1993), and object relations theory (Mitchell, 1993).

For illustrative purposes, let us consider Harre and Gillett's (1994) comprehensive account of the individual as cultural carrier. Although specifically disavowing dualism, the hypothetico-deductive program, and laboratory experimentation, the volume rapidly moves on to discuss the nature of psychological states and conditions. "Concepts," we learn, are "the basis of thinking, and are expressed by words." (p.21) Further, "we must learn to see the mind as the meeting point of a wide range of structuring influences..." (p. 22) The authors then proceed to describe processes of thought, "cognitive systems that can cope with the complexity and variety of real-world experiences..." (p. 79), the individual as an agent of his/her actions, experience, and perception. The reality of these various processes is never in question, nor is their function in dealing with "the world as it really is...not just as one might wish it to be." (p. 49) Further, a full chapter ("Discourse and the Brain") is devoted to linking these mental processes to neural networks. Discussion of brain function serves the additional function of lodging the analysis in "established knowledge," that is, giving it foundations. It is the avowed effort of the volume to establish the basis for a "second cognitive revolution." That the analysis is attempting to illuminate the truth of human functioning is a supposition never subjected to reflective scrutiny. Throughout, the authors position their own discourse as truth carrying, with the reader interpellated as unenlightened audience. Nor is the volume viewed as ideologically invested. Its primary aim is to inform the reader of the nature of human

action, to "make the main tenets and some of the research results of discursive psychology easily available." (p. viii).

These varying attempts to conceptualize individual process as derivative of social process represent an important step toward refiguring psychology's conception of the person. And, while many constructionists find this explanatory orientation still too conservative, its very resonance with the preceding tradition may serve as its most important rhetorical asset. The views are innovative, but not radically disruptive; they invite existing intelligibilities and skills into dialogue rather than undermining them; they are collaborative rather than condemning. Is there reason, then, for seeking alternatives to the metaphor of individual as cultural carrier? Many would argue affirmatively. By their very familiarity, such orientations run the risk of full absorption into the existing traditions. They too easily become candidates for empirical evaluation, with such assessment implicitly reinforcing a dualist metaphysics that must, in the end, eschew these very conceptions. For the metaphysics of empirical assessment presumes the existence of a scientist who can claim truth beyond culture, comprehension beyond "folk psychology," universality rather than historicity. If these theories of mind as cultural carrier are candidates for truth, then they must in the end, necessarily be falsified.

This is not the only reason for pressing the boundaries of intelligibility past the view of persons as cultural carriers. On the conceptual level, these views leave difficult problems unanswered. The paramount question, as to how cultural understandings can be acquired by the individual, remains theoretically intractable. As I have argued elsewhere (Gergen, 1994, Chpt.5), the problem is insoluble in principle. If mental process reflects social process, then the acquisition of the social must proceed without benefit of mental processing. If mental process is required in order to understand the social, then the mental must precede the social. The social view of the individual collapses. Further, many constructionists find such accounts insufficiently reflexive, not only by virtue of the hierarchies created in their claims to authority, but in their insensitivity to the ethical and political implications of their work. Alternative revisionings of the person are thus invited.

### **Individuals as Culturally Immersed**

A second and smaller family of social reconstitucionalists is less obviously linked to the traditional assumptions of the field. Focal attention shifts in this case from expositions of psychological process itself to characterizing self within ongoing relationships, from internal residues of cultural experience to ongoing social process from which individual functioning cannot be extricated. In such accounts, the self-other (individual/culture) binary is virtually destroyed. For theorists of this stripe, traditional psychology offers few conceptual resources (selected offerings of Harry Stack Sullivan and of Vygotsky notwithstanding); other traditions must be located. For example, Edward Sampson draws significantly from both Wittgenstein (1953) and Bakhtin (1981, 1986) in arguing that "all meaning, including the meaning of one's self, is rooted in the social process and must be seen as an ongoing



accomplishment of that process. Neither meaning nor self is a precondition for social interaction; rather, these emerge from and are sustained by conversations occurring between people." (p.99) In his development of a "rhetorically responsive" view of human action, Shotter (1993) expands the range of relevant contributions to include Vico, Valosinov and Garfinkel. Shotter is concerned with the way "responsive meanings are always first 'sensed' or 'felt' from within a conversation, ...and amenable to yet further responsive (sensible) development"." (p.180).

In this context, Hermans and Kempen's (1993) volume, *The dialogical self*, meaning as movement, provides an instructive contrast to the Harre and Gillett analysis. The extensive accounts of mental process in the latter work can be compared with the sotto voce analysis of mind in Hermans and Kempen. For example, for these authors, emotions are "rhetorical actions," and agency is a byproduct of participation in a dialogic relationship. This more sparing account of mental process is a congenial companion to muted realism. The authors are also sensitized to the function of metaphor in guiding their theoretical account (pgs. 8-10), acknowledging that their discussion of mental process is based on the metaphor of the narrative (Chpt. 2). Eschewing the attempt to furnish foundations, they propose that "The main purpose of this work is to bring together two familiar concepts, dialogue and self, and combine them in such a way that a more extended view of the possibilities of the mind becomes visible."(p.xx) And, while occasionally weaving data into their analysis, their use of evidence is not intended to finalize the discussion. Rather, "we want to present some empirical explorations that serve as illustration of our more extensive theoretical and conceptual discussions." (p.xx)

Hermans and Kempen do little to articulate the social/political consequences of their account; they are far more invested in the contribution their work makes to the academic community than to the more general ethos of politics. More telling here are Sampson's (1993) and Shotter's (1993a) societal sensitivity. Sampson's analysis is specifically dedicated to a "celebration of the other," and the potential of such a formulation for undermining power and reducing suppression. Shotter (1993a) is deeply concerned with the political dimension of everyday interaction, and with using psychology to give marginal voices a broader space of expression.

### **The Relational Constitution of Self**

Although a dramatic contrast to traditional psychological theorizing, and substantially more congenial with constructionist metatheory, there is yet a third orientation more radical than cultural immersion formulations. As indicated, constructionist metatheory traces ontological posits to language, and language to processes of relationship. By implication, all that may be said about mental process is derived from relational process. If this view is pressed to its extreme, one is invited to explore a terrain of theoretical intelligibility in which mental predicates never function referentially, and social process serves as the essential fulcrum of explanation. That is, we may envision the elimination of psychological states and conditions as explanations for action, and the reconstitution of psychological

predicates within the sphere of social process. Such a possibility is made particularly salient by the kinds of historical and cultural inquiries into conceptions of the mental discussed above. If one accepts the historical and cultural relativity of psychological discourse suggested by these writings, then one resists resting a contemporary formulation on particular presumptions about psychological functioning. More bluntly, one might resist reconstituting the individual as a social being in the fashion of the preceding accounts, as they attempt to ground themselves in universal or transcultural ontologies of the mind.

An opening to a de-psychologized account of human action is forged within contemporary discourse analysis. In many of these writings, the analyst does not presume the ontology implied by discursive conventions, including the ontology of mind. In Potter and Wetherell's (1987) ground breaking work, for example, the concept of "attitude" is shorn of mental referents, and is used to index positional claims within social intercourse. Billig's (1990) essay on memory focuses on the way in which people negotiate the past as a replacement for the traditional emphasis on inner processes of memory. Or as Shotter (1990) proposes, memory is a "social institution."<sup>3</sup> Edwards and Potter's *Discursive Psychology* represents a significant attempt to replace cognitive with discursive processes in explaining human interchange. Stenner and Eccleston's (1994) account of the "textualization of being" also resonates with this line of argument.

Perhaps the most fully explicit attempt to wed this form of theorizing to a constructionist metatheory has been my own (especially Gergen, 1994). While owing an enormous debt to the preceding works, the attempt in this case has been to place the primary emphasis on relational pattern more generally. Thus, while focally concerned with discourse, the attempt is to theorize more fully enriched patterns of relational performance (including bodily activities of the participants, along with various objects, ornaments, and physical settings necessary to render these performances intelligible). In this sense, discourse is often central to the analysis, but spoken or written language does not exhaust the spectrum of concerns. Further, on this account, psychological terms are not exclusively used in processes of personal attribution (i.e. constative), but are often critical elements of performance itself (performative).

To clarify, consider the case of emotion. Emotion terms (e.g. anger, love, depression) may serve as key elements of conversation, and the attribution of emotions to self and others of primary significance in social interchange. I have found it more useful, however, to consider emotional performances more holistically (Gergen, 1994, pgs.210-235). This means viewing linguistic expressions as possible but not essential components of actions that may require patterns of gesture, gaze, bodily orientation (and possibly physical artifacts or a locale) to achieve their intelligibility. Here my initial debt is largely to Averill's (1982) work on emotional performances. However, the attempt is to press beyond the individual performance to consider the patterns of interchange within which the performance is embedded, and without which it would constitute cultural nonsense. The term "relational scenario" thus indexes reiterative

patterns of interchange (lived narratives) in which "psychological performances" play an integral role. Thus, for example, the performance of anger (complete with discourse, facial expressions, postural configurations) is typically embedded within a scenario in which a preceding affront may be required for its expression to acquire meaning; the performance of anger also sets the stage for the subsequent occurrence of an apology or a defense; and if an apology is offered; a favored response to an apology within the western scenario is forgiveness. At that juncture the scenario may be terminated. All the actions making up the sequence, from affront to forgiveness, require each other to achieve legitimacy. This form of analysis also applies to other forms of psychological performance (see for example, Gergen, 1994a, for a relational account of memory).

Unlike much discourse analysis (and the bulk of conversation analysis) this account does not place a strong emphasis on evidential grounds. The goal of truth is eschewed, and objectivity as the research desideratum is replaced with intelligibility. This does not eliminate my positioning of the reader as "unknowing," but it does render my account vulnerable as "knowing." In effect, the intelligibility of the account cannot be achieved without the assent of the reader. Further, most discursive analysis is terminated in the act of representation; similar to traditional research, the action implications (if any) are left for the reader to determine. Consistent with constructionist metatheory, and its emphasis on the use-value of language, my own attempt has been increasingly to press past the printed page to locate or develop relevant cultural practices. For example, if certain emotional scenarios are inimical to the participants' well-being, how can they intelligibly alter the familiar course of action? The attempt, then, is to extend the use-value of the theoretical discourse to patterns of daily life (see, for example, McNamee and Gergen, in press). And while much (but not all) discursive work is politically neutral, the present account is explicitly set against individualist ideology and related practices.

While these attempts to reconstitute the self as relational are more radical than the preceding alternatives, in the end we must also recognize their limitations. On the one hand, many scholars find them sufficiently dislocating that grafting them to more recognized (and professionally acceptable) pursuits is prohibited. On the other extreme, the more sociologically inclined argue that such accounts are far too micro-social. One may indeed reinscribe "the mind" as a collective phenomenon, arguing that reason, memory and the like are broadly distributed within organizations or cultures (see for example, Douglas, 1986). Still others will find these orientations far too elitist. The analyses are intelligible only to an academically privileged. Finally, the strong emphasis on relationships is viewed as inimical to the important values inherent in the individualist tradition (e.g. democracy, humanism, equality). Insufficient attention has been given to the positive character of the tradition that is otherwise placed in jeopardy.

## **In Conclusion**

As we find, far from eliminating psychological inquiry, social constructionism

functions generatively to expand and enrich its potentials. At the outset, the constructionist impetus toward denaturalization and reflection not only invites the scholar to see how his/her work contributes to the moral and political fabric of the culture, but to open the field to a broader range of intelligibility. Favored in particular, are forms of dialogue that linking the discipline with its cultural surrounds, mutually transforming intelligibilities in such a way that the discipline plays a more vital role in the society. Constructionist ideas also invite the scholar to consider the potentials in resuscitating and enriching the compendium of mental discourse. Given a keen concern with the moral and political context, the scholar engages in a forms of theoretical poetics that open the culture to new, forgotten or otherwise suppressed intelligibilities, and thus, new alternatives for action. Finally, we have seen how constructionist dialogues can stimulate the development of social alternatives to the traditional conception of the self-contained individual. In significant respects, these revisionings of the person are intended as resources for societal change. There is no necessary antagonism between constructionism and psychological inquiry. Rather, informed by constructionist metatheory, there is reason to believe that psychology can play a far more vital role within society than heretofore.

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