The Varieties of Social Construction

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A review of:

ABSTRACT. A review of eleven volumes in the Sage series, Inquiries in Social Construction, reveals a field that is marked by a great variety of positions, fundamental disagreements, and few common themes. Among the more important of the latter is an emphasis on the discursive constitution of knowledge and the related demystification of scientific authority. Fundamental disagreements exist on the meaning and scope of ‘discourse’. For some, discourse is essentially conversation and its reach more or less unbounded. For others, relationships of power, whether displayed at social or at somatic sites, constitute an irreducible reality beyond discourse.

KEY WORDS: constructionism, discourse, postmodernism, science critique

Psychology is a discipline with fraying boundaries. Many psychologists now find themselves working in fields like artificial intelligence, neuropsychology, organizational studies, vision research—to mention only a few, where their disciplinary affiliation takes second place to their contribution to an interdisciplinary project. It may even become difficult to discern any systematic differences between the contributions of psychologists and those of others with different disciplinary backgrounds.

The label ‘social construction’ describes one such field. It is an area in which the contributions of psychologists mingle with those of sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, literary theorists and many others. Within psychology, those who work in this area are known as social constructionists and often held to espouse a specific doctrine of ‘social constructionism’. As long as one focuses on the contrast between traditional psychological approaches and that of social construction, the attribution of a specific set of theoretical positions to the latter has merit. But once one adopts a wider, cross-disciplinary, perspective, the ‘ism’ in social constructionism becomes virtually impossible to pin down. The background and the goals of those interested in social construction vary enormously. Under these circumstances the addition of an ‘ism’ to social construction can only encourage false expectations.

The Sage series ‘Inquiries in Social Construction’, edited by Kenneth Gergen and John Shotter, reflects the diversity of the field. About 15 titles have been published in this series since the late 1980s, with psychologists constituting a minority among the contributors. However, anyone who does not believe that disciplinary boundaries reflect eternal fissures in the natural world is likely to value the multiplicity of viewpoints and agendas presented
in these volumes. As a whole, the series provides a unique insight into the sorts of issues and concerns that led to the emergence of social construction as a focal interest for an array of scholars and practitioners with quite different backgrounds.

Because the publication dates of the earliest volumes of the series now lie a little too far back to warrant their inclusion in a book review, they will be excluded from explicit consideration here. These are the volumes *Texts of Identity* by Shotter and Gergen, *Rhetoric in the Human Sciences* by Herbert W. Simons, and *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* by Celia Kitzinger. The present review covers the 11 titles published in the series during the five-year period 1990–4. More recent titles are not included.

Most of the books in this series are edited volumes with many contributors. Among the 11 reviewed here, only two, Shotter on *Conversational Realities*, and Edwards and Potter on *Discursive Psychology*, are monographs that develop a sustained position through layers of detailed argument. The fourth and final section of this review is devoted to these volumes.

Because it is hardly possible to do justice to each one of the varied contributions to the edited volumes I limit myself to broad issues that I believe to be of particular interest. In the first section of this review I attempt to provide an overview of the diverse roots of social construction insofar as they are represented in this series. In the second section I focus on the overlapping concerns and common themes that are shared by several of their contributors in spite of the diversity of their backgrounds. In the third section I turn to some of the tensions within social constructionism that become evident when one considers the series as a whole.

Overall, the field lends itself to the image of a loosely knit network. There are clear links among some of the parts, but no two contributors share exactly the same set of concerns and background assumptions. Sometimes the links are quite superficial and even misleading because different contributors will use similar terms in ways that diverge fundamentally from each other.

**Multiple Sources**

The variety of meanings evoked by ‘social construction’ reflect the different paths by which people have arrived at an interest in the topic. For many psychologists that path is likely to have led through what Gergen (in AP) refers to as ‘post-empiricist critique’, that is, a rejection of the discipline’s empiricist foundationalism based on the analyses of post-positivist philosophers like Quine, Kuhn, Feyerabend and others. However, the contributors to this series do not devote much attention to the critique of empiricism. Most of them have either moved beyond this stage or have never had to contend with the dogmas of empiricism. They are interested in the issues
that arise once the ghost of empiricism has been laid to rest. The series as a whole can be taken as a convincing demonstration that there is life after empiricism. Of course, this means that old-fashioned psychologists are likely to experience accessibility problems with some of these texts.

In this respect Constructing the Social, edited by Sarbin and Kitsuse, is probably the least problematical collection in the series. It contains some useful demonstrations of the scope of social constructionist analysis, partly through the use of public documents and partly through the deconstruction of categories that are too often employed naively and simplistically in both popular and professional discourse. In this vein Anderson traces the construction of ‘intelligence’, Hallam that of ‘anxiety’, Wiener and Marcus that of ‘depression’, and Boyle that of ‘sexual dysfunction’. Other contributions deal with categories that straddle the popular–professional boundary, like age, family, drugs and genius. None of these categories represents an innocent description of segments of the natural world. The analysis of what is involved in their construction affords valuable insights into the vast domain of the taken-for-granted that is commonly covered up by routine empirical research.

The Sarbin and Kitsuse volume also illustrates the deep sociological roots of a social constructionist approach. In their introduction the editors refer to the older work of Schütz and G.H. Mead, as well as the relatively more recent work of Goffman and Garfinkel. For sociologists, social constructionism does not have the connotations of a radical reorientation that it usually has for psychologists. There is, however, an important distinction to be made between what the editors call a ‘strict’ constructionist position and a ‘contextual’ position. The latter is essentially a continuation of the project of the sociology of knowledge and regards constructions as having a basis in specifiable social contexts. ‘Strict’ constructionism, however, would not commit itself to a particular version of a ‘real’ social context and would limit itself to a description of what certain actors do when they construct a social world on their terms. Contextualism appears to be the common form of sociological constructionism, and in fact the Sarbin and Kitsuse volume contains no contributions that exemplify ‘strict’ constructionism.

For anthropologists the topic of social construction tends to have altogether more troubling implications. This emerges very clearly in Constructing Knowledge, edited by Nencel and Pels, which contains papers emanating from a conference on ‘Critical Anthropology’. The very nature of the anthropological project prescribes a concern with ‘otherness’. An anthropologist is supposed to make one culture more intelligible to another. It is hardly surprising that this leads to reflections about the way people, including anthropologists, construct their social worlds. In the post-colonial period it became increasingly difficult to claim a privileged position for the anthropologist’s version of the world as opposed to that of the people being studied. ‘Strict’ constructionism is therefore a serious issue for the con-
tributors to the Nencel and Pels volume. In the words of the editors: ‘Anthropology has reached a stage at which even the critics of academic authority criticize each other’s authority’ (p. 2). The consequences of this state of affairs are not simply destructive, however. This volume contains some of the most illuminating discussions in the entire series of problems of reflexivity and critical commitment in research. These are issues which I will take up in the next section.

A very different group of scholars is represented in Research and Reflexivity, edited by Steier. Many of the contributors to this volume have been active in cybernetics and a number have a background in the natural, rather than the social, sciences. Compared to the previous two volumes, there is a noticeable shift of emphasis from the social component to the construction component in social construction. In fact, there is little reference to ‘social construction’ in this volume, terms like ‘constructivism’ or ‘radical constructivism’ (von Glasersfeld) occurring more often. Although many writers have used the terms ‘constructionism’ and ‘constructivism’ interchangeably, it seems sensible to use the difference between these verbal tokens to reflect the rather profound difference that exists between an essentially individualist and a socially oriented interpretation of the subject–object relationship. In his contribution to this volume Gergen briefly alludes to this difference. At one extreme of this divide we get Glasersfeld’s radical constructivism with its essentially Kantian distinction between an individualized phenomenal world and an unknowable real (read noumenal) world. At the other extreme one might place the post-structuralist abolition of the subject. Between these extremes there are many intermediate positions. Much depends on the importance assigned to language, as Gergen suggests. But it also depends on how ‘language’ is understood. In the Steier volume the biologist Maturana clearly announces that ‘all human activities are operations in language’, but then explains that conversations are ‘specified and defined by some fundamental emotion’. At the very least, this leaves the door wide open to individualist interpretation.

The issue also arises, though less explicitly, in Therapy as Social Construction, edited by MNamee and Gergen. Most of the contributors to this volume are family therapists of long standing who have discovered an affinity with social construction through reflections on their work. As Cechin and other contributors make clear, the ground for this discovery was prepared by the popularity in this group of cybernetic conceptions of interpersonal systems. Working with families in a therapeutic context, it was never difficult to see the interactions of their members as a co-construction. Then, in a crucial step, therapists included themselves in the system and came to believe that, to be effective, therapeutic interventions had to be co-constructions too. From an understanding of individual problems as socially constructed within the family, therapists proceeded to an understanding of the therapeutic process as socially constructed within a unit of which they
were themselves members. One consequence of this shift was a certain
demystification of therapeutic expertise and authority.

The McNamee and Gergen volume illustrates both the promise and the
problems associated with this development. On the level of practice, one
must surely welcome the open questioning of what Lynn Hoffman delicately
refers to as ‘the paradoxes of power’ besetting traditional family therapy,
a method which, as she puts it, ‘had a one-way mirror built into its core’
(p. 15). The theoretical yield of this apparent change of heart is, however,
rather meagre. A chapter by Gergen and Kaye that advocates a transcending
of the narrative form is an exception in a volume containing several
contributions which, more than any others in the series, conjure up an image
of old wine in new bottles. In Efran and Clarfield’s interpretation, to cite an
extreme example, constructivism becomes as American as apple pie:

In our interpretation, the constructivist framework insists that (1) everyone has
personal preferences, (2) people are entitled to express those preferences, and
(3) such choices should not be ‘disguised’ as objective truths or realities. For us,
‘truth’ is a set of opinions widely shared. As Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.
asserted, ‘What is true is what I can’t help believing.’ (p. 201)

A very different world opens up in the two volumes devoted to the topic
of postmodernism, Psychology and Postmodernism, edited by Kvale, and
After Postmodernism, edited by Simons and Billig. Many of the contribu-
tions to these volumes show a strong influence from recent trends in cultural
studies and continental European philosophy. Deeper down there are roots in
the philosophy of irrationalism, marxism and phenomenology. But this is not
the ‘phenomenology’ that became known to American psychologists after it
was ‘co-opted by humanistic psychologists’ (Deetz in AP). It is a critical
phenomenology for which the subject is not a concrete individual, but, in
Deetz’s formulation, ‘a structuring possibility which precedes the individual
who takes it on as his/her own. Only on the basis of the structuring
possibility can the individual have the experience at all’ (p. 190). From this
point of view, the version of ‘social construction’ which treats it as a product
of negotiation among individuals with independent experiences had better be
called ‘negotiated order’. This version lacks the profoundly critical thrust of
approaches that emphasize the priority of constitutive practices.

Critique is certainly the name of the game for most of the contributors to
these two volumes, not least the critique of postmodernism itself. According
to Kvale, ‘psychology is a child of modernity’, and therefore the notion of a
postmodern psychology is a contradiction in terms. Others are not so sure.
Lather, a feminist, thinks that ‘one does not need to agree with all of what
the poststructuralists say in order to learn from them’ (P&P, p. 89). For
many psychologists, of course, the likelihood of learning anything from
people who do no recognizable ‘empirical work’ will seem remote. They are
Kvale’s children of modernism who have learned to see themselves essen-
tially as technicians providing value-free ‘objective’ knowledge. The con-
tributors to the two collections circling around postmodernism, however, are committed to a different conception of the pursuit of knowledge, one that privileges critical reflection on proclaimed certainties. A serious engagement with such an approach would seem to be required if psychology is to cease resembling ‘an intellectual second-hand store’ (Kvale) and become a significant contributor to the intellectual life of the times (Gergen in P&P).

A critical stance is also what unites the contributors to the Power/Gender volume, edited by Radtke and Stam. The title is a play on Foucault’s notion of power/knowledge, and all the contributors do indeed address the connection between power and gender relationships. However, apart from the editors, only two of them follow a line of analysis that owes anything to Foucault. Karlene Faith offers a sympathetic yet critical dissection of Foucault’s notion of ‘resistance’ and the dangers of romanticizing marginality. Kerfoot and Knights provide a useful account of the way in which some prominent French feminists have avoided the trap of gender essentialism. The contrast between these contributions and some others in this volume is stark. There are some prize examples of both gender essentialism and unreconstructed empiricism. But that is merely a reflection of the enormous range of difference within existing attempts to conceptualize power and gender, let alone their interrelationship. If the range of positions represented in this volume is broader than in most of the others, there are also more specific hypotheses on offer. And that is one feature about whose value even empiricists and postmodernists might actually agree.

Major Issues

With the enormous variety of backgrounds, interests and agendas to be found among the contributors to this series one might wonder whether there are any threads at all that might serve to tie them together. In fact, there are a number of themes and issues that recur in several of the volumes. Some of these are of fundamental importance, and it is to them that this section of the review is devoted. Of course, there is more than one way of cutting this cake, and other readers might well identify different sets of significant issues.

The first of these issues is quite extensively discussed in a volume of the series that has not yet been introduced. This is Everyday Understanding, edited by Semin and Gergen, and the issue concerns the relationship between scientific and lay understanding in the human/social sciences. Of course, this also involves the question of scientific authority and its basis. According to the traditional view, that authority rests on the value-free, objective nature of scientific knowledge, guaranteed by the rules of scientific procedure. But belief in the possibility of such a privileged kind of
knowledge rests on various assumptions, among which two are particularly important. First, there is the commitment to a rigid dualism of subject and object. The roots of this commitment lie deep in the modern western tradition regarding primary and secondary qualities, the privileged position of the individual observer, and so on. Second, there is the equally deeply rooted belief in ‘the mind as a mirror of nature’, to use Rorty’s celebrated phrase. In combination, these assumptions lead to a view of cognition as reflecting a world of independent objects through a process of representation that can be more or less accurate. Scientific knowledge affords the most object-adequate cognition attainable under current conditions of technical progress and is therefore superior to lay knowledge.

Several contributors to the Semin and Gergen as well as other volumes question this conclusion because they reject the assumptions on which it is based. This rejection can have different sources. It can be based on a phenomenological critique of the subject–object dichotomy, as in Giorgi’s chapter (in EU), or on a humanistic respect for actors’ descriptions of their own actions (Groeben in EU). The humanistically motivated critique of expert authority also informs several contributions in some of the other volumes. But humanism is not social constructionism. It retains the individualism that underlies the traditional view and even sharpens it. Although human individuals are granted the status of privileged objects, they remain essentially independent and their relationship to each other is conceptualized in terms of a subject–object split.

The social constructionist critique of expert authority has a different basis. Knowledge-generating practices are regarded as necessarily social practices and knowledge, therefore, as a co-achievement. Language occupies a position of prime importance among these practices. It does not represent a previously existing objective world but constitutes such a world. Any known world is therefore always a co-constituted world, and the manner of its constitution depends on discursive relationships. In these fundamental respects scientific and lay knowledge do not differ. Moreover, in the human sciences, scientific and lay discursive practices must impinge on each other. In order to obtain information from or about their human subjects/objects practitioners of these sciences must interact with them, must communicate with them, and that entails a certain reliance on the categories of lay discourse.

The profound implications of this are illustrated by the example of personality research discussed by Semin (in EU). There has been debate about whether the robust structure of personality factors emerging in this research should be interpreted as a property of persons, a property of language or a property of cognition (implicit personality theory). In the past, such debate was often short-circuited by an appeal to the metaphysics of objectivism: the structure is a property of persons because the relevant
semantic structure as well as implicit personality theory can both be assumed to reflect what persons objectively are. But there is another way of resolving the issue: historically and culturally, certain ways of talking about human individuals are put at our disposal. Laypeople use these ways of talking as resources in the shifting situations of everyday life. Personality psychologists use these same resources in order to construct ‘idealized abstractions capturing decontextualized semantic relationships’ (Semin). Of course, these abstractions may eventually become part of the resources available to laypeople in their everyday interaction with each other—‘extrovert’ is an example. But the decontextualized abstractions of personality research are not a form of knowledge that is inherently superior to the contextually deployed tokens of the layperson. Different norms of discursive practice apply in each case, but it makes no sense to describe this difference in terms of degrees of accuracy in the representation of some constant object.

The twin themes of the discursive construction of knowledge and the ‘demystification’ of scientific authority are elaborated in several different ways in these volumes. Some treatments emphasize the contrast between the way knowledge is deployed in everyday situations and the ideals which have governed its construction in traditional psychology. Others focus on the dependence of scientific practice on lay discourse. The dependence of scientific formulations on lay traditions is usually hidden, and it is the ‘unconcealing’ (Steier) of this hidden dependence which leads to the demystification of scientific practice. For example, Smedslund (in EU) develops an analysis of psychological concepts (which he has more fully presented elsewhere) that shows how they incorporate tacitly known social rules. Hallam (in CS) demonstrates the dependence of scientific psychological models of causality on lay beliefs about the location of psychological causes in the individual.

This kind of reflexivity regarding scientific psychology (and other social sciences) also leads to a remodelling of the research process which may take quite practical forms. Once the dependence of scientific knowledge on lay understanding is fully recognized, it becomes impossible to believe in the value of research performed upon human objects. Instead, research becomes an activity engaged in with human subjects. The results of this activity constitute a co-production, or co-construction, in which all the participants play an active role. Gergen (in R&R) refers to this as a ‘participatory method’ of research; Groeben (in EU) speaks of the need for ‘establishing a consensus-in-dialogue with the subject of research’. A few examples of such research can be found in these volumes, for instance, Jorgenson (in R&R), Fine (in PG), Lutz (in EU). Others, notably in Research and Reflexivity, search for a reconceptualization of research. Thus, von Foerster explores the link between objectivism and irresponsible authority and opposes this to a participatory conception for which ethical concerns are intrinsic to the
research process. Steier analyses the participatory research process in terms of the different kinds of ‘mirroring’ and translating that it involves.

Different research practices, for many contributors, are linked to different knowledge goals. The ideal of scientific knowledge as abstract and decontextualized is rejected as a modernist illusion. That kind of knowledge, the prerogative of a special class of experts, is a knowledge not of situations, but of essences assumed to cause situations. Experts on memory, on attitudes, on personality, and so on, believe that their work has led, or at least will lead, to a better understanding of the *nature* of memory, of attitude, of personality. But many of the authors represented in these volumes do not believe that there is any such nature to be discovered. They regard the explanation of phenomena in terms of universally effective essence as a futile exercise dependent on unsupportable assumptions. If knowledge is a co-production of specific participants in a discursive interaction, its cumulation must be conceptualized in a different way. Traditionally, knowledge became cumulative when experts structured knowledge-generating situations (e.g. experiments) in such a way as to extract information about supposed universals. With the collapse of faith in this process, knowledge from different sources, different situations, must be linked in a different manner. Instead of one universally true story we now get a high value placed on the juxtaposition and affirmation of several versions of the story, of ‘perspectival’ knowledge that does not privilege one particular account.

But it is not only research that is restructured by the demystification of expert authority, the practice of psychotherapy undergoes an analogous fate, as indicated in the *Therapy as Social Construction* volume. Gergen and Kaye put this quite succinctly: ‘There is no justification outside the narrow community of like-minded therapists for battering the client’s complex and richly detailed life into a single, pre-formulated narrative’ (p. 174). But what contribution can a therapist stripped of authority make to the therapeutic process? If everything, including the client’s complaint, is discursively constructed, exactly how does therapeutic discourse differ from other kinds of discourse? The answers to such questions remain quite general. Several authors emphasize the need to promote variety and flexibility of description in the therapeutic context, but it is not altogether clear how therapeutic effects are actually produced. As Sass (in P&P) points out, the client’s belief in the veridicality of particular interpretations and narratives surely affects their therapeutic effectiveness. The therapist may believe that there is no truth beyond the fluctuating understandings emerging within the therapeutic context, but will the communication of this to clients result in the amelioration of their problems? Therapeutic authority is not only arrogantly claimed, it is also eagerly conferred by those on whom it is exercised. Help-seekers may even have good reason to collude in the construction of asymmetrical power relationships in a therapeutic context.
Tensions: Is Discourse Everything?

So far, I have concentrated on a complex of interconnected common themes that run through these volumes. It is time to turn to the tensions, sometimes incipient, sometimes explicit, that exist among the various contributions. Some of these tensions simply arise from the fact that many of the contributors are far from being signed-up members of the social constructionist or postmodernist clubs. Because, to a greater or lesser extent, they have retained traditional assumptions, there are conflicts between them and other contributors whose rejection of these assumptions is more complete. Rather than elaborate on the description of such conflicts given in the previous section, I want to move on to the disagreements that arise among those whose rejection of traditional positions is quite profound. What is it that divides these authors? As in the case of their commonalities, a complex of interconnected themes can, I think, be identified.

Some of the feminist authors provide perhaps the best entry into the relevant issues. Patti Lather (in P&P), for example, goes straight to the heart of the matter when she maintains that ‘postmodern theories of language, subjectivity and power profoundly challenge the discourse of emancipation on several fronts’ (p. 98). There seems to be an inherent tension between the critical stance that seeks to undermine traditional authority by exposing its socially constructed foundations and the emancipatory stance that seeks to promote an agenda of social justice, individual freedom, or whatever. The relativistic implications of treating all knowledge as locally constructed seem to forbid the privileging of any agenda, whether it be that of authoritarian objectivism or that of emancipation. In the end it is not even clear why anyone should prefer the discourse of social construction to that of traditional empiricism. Social constructionism and, even more so, postmodernism appear to be potentially self-destructive weapons. The attempts at coming to terms with this paradox reveal deep divisions among the contributors to these volumes.

A very small number seem to be quite content embracing a thoroughgoing relativism—what Kvale (in P&P) characterizes as ‘an attitude of tolerant indifference’ or ‘happy nihilism’. But most are unable to leave matters there. One or two make use of a distinction, due to the philosopher Roy Bhaskar, between the principles of epistemic relativity and judgemental relativity. The former states that knowledge is socially constructed and therefore there is no trans-historical truth or rationality; the latter maintains that there can be no rational grounds for preferring one set of beliefs to another. One may be an epistemic relativist without embracing judgemental relativity. But how does one accomplish this feat? Here the paths divide.

One group of authors, and I count the editors of this series among them, appear to find certain moral demands embedded in the very nature of discourse. People construct their lives in discourse, and so removing threats
to the openness and multiplicity of discourse is life-enhancing. The traditional methodological and metatheoretical orthodoxy of the discipline of psychology constitutes just such a threat and should therefore be opposed. But among those points of view which do not claim a monopoly on the path to the truth, which do not prejudge the nature of reality, tolerance must be the order of the day. A thousand flowers may bloom, provided none of them is of a type that threatens to take over the entire field, if left unchecked. This is a relatively gentle, hopeful variety of social constructionism, which I want to call the light version in order to contrast it with another, dark, version.

Quite a few contributors to these volumes recognize the importance of non-discursive aspects of human relationships. Most often, these aspects are subsumed under the category of power. The manifestations of power may range all the way from limitations placed on people’s actions and experiences to the infliction of pain and suffering. But in any case, power cannot be reduced to ‘mere’ discourse, at least not according to ‘dark’ social constructionism. In the lighter versions there is little or no reference to the problems of power, and if they are alluded to, they are treated as effects of discourse. Problems of power, if recognized at all, are embedded in essentially discursive relationships, whereas in ‘dark’ social constructionism discourse is embedded in relations of power. Those authors who adopt Foucault’s conjunction of ‘power/knowledge’ also find themselves on the ‘dark’ side because of their recognition that talk and text are inseparable from manifestations of power.

‘Dark’ social constructionism tends to privilege two non-discursive locations as the sites at which power becomes manifest. They are the human body and the structures of society. For these authors the body is a tangible presence whose productivity and whose pain are implicated in, but not reducible to, discursive constructions. By contrast, when ‘light’ social constructionists mention the body at all, they are apt to do so through references to ‘embodiment’, an aspect of a discursively constructed personal identity.

The structures of society have a non-discursive reality for other authors, often, but not invariably, those influenced by Marxism. Where ‘light’ social constructionists emphasize the ongoing construction of meaning in present dialogue, these authors emphasize the dependence of current patterns of interaction on rigid power structures established in the past and protected from change by countless institutionalized practices and textual conventions. Local discourse is seen as an instantiation of pervasive power structures and therefore as an unpromising site for producing an improvement in the human condition. Indeed, from this point of view, the postmodernist embrace of multiple perspectives may seem to be little more than an expression of classical liberal values (Ravn in R&R), or a conveniently ‘palatable radicalism’ (Cloud in AP).

All varieties of social constructionism will see knowledge and under-
standing as existing within social relationships. But they do not all construct these social relationships in the same way. At one extreme are those versions which privilege macro-social structures in a way that is strongly reminiscent of the sociology of knowledge. At the other extreme are the versions which focus on the micro-social level, either concretely, by privileging everyday talk, or metaphorically, by treating all social life as a ‘conversation’. Occupying a position between these extremes are authors who try to come to grips with the relationship between these levels. It is here that there seems to be the greatest need for further reflection. Among the professional groups represented in these volumes, it seems that the anthropologists, presumably because their work is situated at the margins of the macro- and the micro-social, have been particularly articulate in confronting these issues. Lemaire (in CK), for example, makes the crucial observation that both the subject and the object of anthropological knowledge have been produced by ‘the world historical process’. They are also part of this process. Perhaps less obviously, this is also true of the subject–object relationships constituting other forms of knowledge. But many contributors to these volumes do not seem as ready as the critical anthropologists to accept such a position or its reflexive implications.

The Reach of Conversation

In this section I want to review the two volumes in the series that are not edited collections of papers, namely Discursive Psychology, by Derek Edwards and Jonathan Potter, and Conversational Realities, by John Shotter. These works, as well as the closely related Collective Remembering, edited by Middleton and Edwards, share a very fundamental starting-point: they break with the deeply rooted conviction that the individual must be the basic unit of any kind of psychology. Scientific psychology has always unquestioningly accepted the culturally grounded belief that processes like thinking and remembering are attributes of individuals. Indeed, the notion of psychological processes that are not features of individual minds is apt to strike both the level-headed layperson and the psychologist as bizarre. It may even evoke spectres like spiritualism, the group mind, and so on. Yet a psychology that is not a psychology of individuals is precisely what the authors of these volumes try to develop. They do so by locating psychological phenomena in the interpersonal space of the conversation.

The collection, Collective Remembering, provides the easiest entry into this line of thought. When psychologists attempt to shed light on the nature of human memory they tend to forget that it is first of all an abstraction, an inference. No one observes memory directly. What we observe is the phenomenon of remembering, and we infer that this phenomenon is a manifestation of some intra-personal entity, called memory, at work. This
inference seems plausible enough, as long as we restrict ourselves to situations in which remembering is carried out by individuals who are on their own. Most experiments on memory deliberately create such a situation. But outside psychological experiments individuals are usually not on their own when they remember. They ‘remember together’, in the editors’ phrase, help each other to recollect, make contributions to a shared memory, elaborate an account in which they all participate. Human societies also institutionalize remembering in the form of commemoration. The collective memory may then serve obviously political purposes, but even on less formal occasions memories may take the shape they do because of their rhetorical function. In other words, remembering is very much a social activity whose course and outcome depend heavily on the situation in which it takes place.

Many of the contributors to the Collective Remembering volume provide specific illustrations of these general points made by the editors. Michael Billig, for example, observes family members jointly recollecting. Others explore the shaping of memory by organizational and occupational contexts. Several studies analyse the biases that operated in the way in which specific historical figures (Abraham Lincoln, Ronald Reagan and Lev Vygotsky) have been remembered. In a more theoretical vein, the volume’s editors outline their discourse-analytic approach to memory which reverses traditional assumptions about the relationship between communication and cognition. Instead of explaining the communication of memories in terms of personal cognitive competence they try to account for people’s versions of past events in terms of the circumstances under which these versions are produced.

This approach is much more fully worked out in Edwards and Potter’s Discursive Psychology, a book that is constructed as an extended argument with the cognitivism of mainstream memory and attribution research. In the course of this argument the authors develop a very powerful critique of the methodological paradigm that predominates in these areas. They point out that certain presuppositions of cognitivism have been built into its methods. Typically, memory and attribution research utilizes decontextualized materials, often consisting of bits of written text that are unsuited and unmotivated, and in which the experimental subject has no stake. Such disinterested recall or attribution is recognized as being far removed from the conditions under which these processes occur in everyday life, but the artificiality of the experimental situations is justified by the goal of studying the processes as such, unimpeded by complicating or disturbing situational factors. Clearly, this is a methodology based upon the presupposition that cognitive performances are essentially intra-individual events having no intrinsic connection with the social situations in which they take place.

Another consequence of this pervasive bias is to be found in the prevailing split between research on memory and social psychological
research on attribution. This split only makes sense if it is taken for granted that the description of representations of the world and attributional inferences are essentially separate processes. But Edwards and Potter point out that this separation is a methodological artifact that depends on the position of ‘epistemological privilege’ assumed by the experimenter. In memory experiments there is an unambiguously true description of what it is that the subject has to remember, and the experimenter is in possession of that truth. What is at issue is the subject’s accuracy in approximating a known input. Studies of attribution also work with a known input but ask questions about processes of inference under conditions where the complication of unreliable memory can be disregarded. Both types of research sidestep the key feature of remembering and attributing outside the psychological laboratory, namely that the true version of events is usually hard to establish unambiguously. In everyday situations people’s recollections are produced as factual descriptions, but these are hardly ever free of attributional implications. This is because recollection is generally undertaken by people who have a stake in the version of past events that is accepted as true. Typically, there is no analogue of the all-knowing experimenter in everyday life, only more or less contested claims about remembering ‘the facts’.

Here we encounter a fundamental difference in the methodological implications of social constructionism and traditional objectivism. Because the latter presupposes the existence of one objective truth, accurate renderings of that truth are never problematic—they are simply the truth and require no further explanation. Inaccurate versions as well as inferences from the known facts, on the other hand, do require explanation, and research is directed at providing these. In other words, the traditional approach is based on a fundamental asymmetry between one singularly true version of ‘the facts’ and all departures from it. Discursive psychology, and social constructionist approaches in general, however, insist on treating factual representations and departures from them as equally problematical. Because there is no singular knowable true version, all apparently factual products require explanation. They have to be treated as situated claims, and much of the research effort of discursive psychology has gone into the analysis of techniques of fact construction in real-life situations. Edwards and Potter present extensive practical demonstrations of the applications of their analytic methods to the records of specific public events. While these are worthy of careful attention, the authors emphasize that they wish discursive psychology to be taken as ‘a viable perspective on psychological life rather than just a mode of empirical analysis’ (DP, p. 153).

Discursive Psychology provides a monograph-length illustration of the revolutionary research implications of a social constructionist position and therefore occupies a position of special importance among the volumes in this series. It will be of particular interest to active researchers because of its sustained engagement with mainstream work and its detailed exposition of
the practical face of social constructionism. Edwards and Potter do not wish to trash traditional research inspired by cognitivism and replace it with research on the discursive construction of accounts. But they point out, correctly in my opinion, that their analysis raises serious questions about how the results of traditional research should be understood. They do not pursue these questions in this volume, and their juxtaposition of experimental and real-life situations, though rhetorically effective, may oversimplify the issue. If human cognition is always part of a socially situated performance, then its interpretation will indeed vary with the nature of the social occasion. But there are a great variety of such occasions, and there are many relationships of similarity and contrast among them. Although the experimental situations favoured by psychologists may be grossly different from the real-life situations favoured by Edwards and Potter, they may not be so remote from other real-life situations. The formalized interactions that take place in a bureaucratic context, for example, may call for cognitive performances that resemble those required in many experimental situations. There is no more reason to essentialize ‘discourse’ than there is for essentializing ‘cognition’.

Similar questions arise in connection with the second monograph-length study in the series, John Shotter’s Conversational Realities. This book occupies a special place because of its attempt ‘to give voice to many topics covered by other books in this series on social constructionism’ (p. vi). Unlike all the other books in the series, Shotter’s volume attempts, in some sense, to speak for the series as a whole. In view of the extremely varied nature of the contributions, as well as the repeated emphasis on the value of differences in point of view, this might seem to be an impossible undertaking. However, Shotter clarifies his intentions by insisting that his book should not be read as an exposition of a theoretical position claimed to be true. In view of his postmodernist rejection of objectivism, such a claim would indeed be self-contradictory. What he offers instead is ‘an instructive account’, a set of ‘verbal resources for use in accounting for, and for making sense of, our everyday conversational activities’ (p. 10). Such an account ‘cannot be judged as to its truth or falsity, for it is not formulated so as to be amenable to evidential support; it can only be judged practically, as to whether it is instructive or not’ (p. 113). Considering these intentions, it would obviously be unfair to take issue with the ambiguities and apparent inconsistencies of a text that is committed to values other than those of precision, logical coherence and systematicity. It is more appropriate to identify a few of the resources or ‘tools’ on offer.

The major resource which Shotter offers is an ontology according to which ‘conversational activity’ is ‘foundational’. But what is conversational activity? It is spoken talk, not written text. The latter is a rather decontextualized form of communication often used to produce fictions and imagined realities that are apt to entrap people in false certainties. The true
nature of conversation is said to be falsified if it is reduced to predictable structures, norms or even laws, for these render invisible the essential openness and ‘dilemmatic’ nature of conversation. Shotter insists on the ‘hurly-burly’, the ever-contested quality of everyday conversation. It is this aspect of the world he elevates to a privileged ontological position, in sharp opposition to those who award this status to the mind of the individual observer or to economic and social institutions. Talk of mental processes is relegated to the realm of rhetoric and textual myth-making. The reality of knowledge is, however, recognized. But instead of the traditional ‘knowing how’ and ‘knowing that’, the emphasis is placed on a ‘third kind of knowing’, which is practical–moral in character. This aspect of Shotter’s position is much more fully developed in some of his other publications, but it is significant in the present context in that it provides the background for his assertion that conversation generates moral requirements.

Quite clearly, Shotter’s ontology is a dualistic one, based upon the contrast between the qualities of openness, fluidity, being in process, unboundedness and the qualities of being closed, bounded, structured and predictable. The former express ‘life’, the latter are manifestations of ‘entrapment’. Although this sounds like a species of latter-day romanticism, it should not be underestimated as a counterfoil to the complacent rationalism which dominates the discipline.

In terms of the previous distinction between ‘light’ and ‘dark’ varieties of social constructionism, Shotter’s version is perhaps the lightest of the light. It is true that he regards conversational realities as fundamentally ‘contested’, but there is no indication that this refers to anything beyond talk. As Roy Bhaskar cryptically observes in his too brief afterword, appended to the book, ‘being imprisoned involves more than the negotiation of meanings’ (p. 187). There is simply no place in Shotter’s account for the realities of power exercised upon the body. In this respect at least there is little to distinguish his account from that of the cognitivists.

That leads me to raise a final question which has relevance not only for Shotter’s book, but for many of the other contributions to the series as well. How should we understand the relationship of the social constructionist perspective to mainstream psychology? Most obviously, constructionism functions as critique. Its value at that level can hardly be doubted. Given the predominance of an anti-intellectual tradition within the discipline during the last half century, the kind of foundationalist critique which constructionism offers represents a salutary development. If it encourages a modicum of reflexivity and leads to a little less dogmatism, it will have justified its existence. Some would be content to limit the role of constructionism to that of the persistent gadfly.

The question is whether constructionism has another, more positive, contribution to make. On a practical level the answer seems to be an unambiguous yes, in light of the encouragement of a more participatory style
of research, or examples of innovative programmes of work, such as that of Edwards and Potter in the present series. At a theoretical level matters become more complicated. A major reason for this, and the only one I will consider here, lies in the tradition of discourse with which constructionism has to contend. Because constructionism began as critique, and retains critique as a major goal, it often remains curiously dependent on that against which it defines itself. One contributor (Söderqvist in R&R), citing Rorty, describes this relationship as ‘parasitic’. (As constructionism becomes more accepted, Gergen’s term ‘symbiotic’ may better describe the relationship.) This dependence manifests itself in two ways, which could be described as two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, the content of what is presented as a novel perspective turns out, on closer inspection, to be much closer to traditional viewpoints than the mode of presentation had led one to expect—the old wine in new bottles phenomenon. On the other hand, traditional categories are used in new contexts without close inspection of the conceptual baggage that is being imported. Shotter, for example, makes much use of contrasts between what is ‘real’, ‘genuine’, even ‘true’, and what is ‘fictional’, ‘illusory’ and ‘counterfeit’. Such wholesale borrowing from the vocabulary of objectivism may serve a rhetorical purpose, but it also perpetuates a certain dependency.

The challenge facing social constructionism arises out of the predicament of the critic who wishes to develop a truly alternative agenda while still tied to the tradition by ties both visible and invisible. One should not underestimate the magnitude of this challenge. Yet the volumes of this series do contain several items that constitute significant steps in the direction of developing an alternative discourse that is no longer dependent on the parent. The two monographs provide examples. Among the edited volumes, those contributions which draw on the work of Foucault seem to be particularly promising in this regard. But even without this dimension, the series provides an invaluable resource for anyone who believes that psychology can no longer afford to isolate itself from current intellectual trends.

Note

1. In the following review book titles are often referred to in abbreviated form, e.g. AP for After Postmodernism.

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