The Social Constructionist Movement in Modern Psychology

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ABSTRACT: Social constructionism views discourse about the world not as a reflection or map of the world but as an artifact of communal interchange. Both as an orientation to knowledge and to the character of psychological constructs, constructionism forms a significant challenge to conventional understandings. Although the roots of constructionist thought may be traced to long-standing debates between empiricist and rationalist schools of thought, constructionism attempts to move beyond the dualism to which both of these traditions are committed and to place knowledge within the process of social interchange. Although the role of psychological explanation is rendered problematic, a fully developed constructionism could furnish a means for understanding the process of science and invites the development of alternative criteria for the evaluation of psychological inquiry.

This article attempts to bring into focus the central contours of a contemporary movement of challenging implication. It would be misleading to say either that the movement is of recent origin or that its proponents are legion. The roots of the movement may properly be traced to earlier eras, and one might prefer to speak of a shared consciousness rather than a movement. However, in its current metamorphosis this emerging body of thought contains implications of substantial significance. Not only are broad vistas of inquiry opened for study, but the foundations of psychological knowledge also are thrown into critical relief. When the implications are fully elaborated, it becomes apparent that the study of social process could become generic for understanding the nature of knowledge itself. Social psychology would not stand, in this case, as a derivative of general psychology. Rather, the latter would be viewed as a form of social process, both the grounds and outcomes of which stand to be elucidated by social inquiry. In similar fashion, epistemological inquiry along with the philosophy of science could both give way, or become subsumed by, social inquiry. These are indeed bold conjectures, and as we shall see, to make good on them may require relinquishing much that is sacred. However,

it is the plausibility of these conjectures that I hope to demonstrate in this article while simultaneously clarifying the contours and origins of the social constructionist movement.[1]

The Social Constructionist Orientation

Social constructionist inquiry is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live. It attempts to articulate common forms of understanding as they now exist, as they have existed in prior historical periods, and as they might exist should creative attention be so directed. At the metatheoretical level most such work manifests one or more of the following assumptions.

1. What we take to be experience of the world does not in itself dictate the terms by which the world is understood. What we take to be knowledge of the world is not a product of induction, or of the building and testing of general hypotheses. The mounting criticism of the positivist–empiricist conception of knowledge has severely damaged the traditional view that scientific theory serves to reflect or map reality in any direct or decontextualized manner (cf. Feyerabend, 1976; Hanson, 1958; Kuhn, 1962/1970; Quine, 1960; Taylor, 1971). How can theoretical categories be induced or derived from observation, it is asked, if the process of identifying observational attributes itself relies on one's possessing categories? How can theoretical categories map or reflect the world if each definition used to link

[1] Although the term *constructivism* is also used in referring to the same movement (cf. Watzlawick, 1984), this term is also used in reference to Piagetian theory, to a form of perceptual theory, and to a significant movement in 20th century art. The term *constructionism* avoids these various confusions and enables a linkage to be retained to Berger and Luckmann's (1966) seminal volume, *The Social Construction of Reality.*

category and observation itself requires a definition? How can words map reality when the major constraints over word usage are furnished by linguistic context? How is it possible to determine whether competing theories refer to the same entities, without reference to some other theory not contained in those under comparison? If each theoretical proposition depends for its intelligibility on an array of related propositions, what aspect of the propositional network would be challenged by a disconfirmation of any single proposition? These and other telling questions have largely gone unanswered, and the lack of answers has left the empirical sciences without a viable logic of justification (Weimer, 1979).

Running counterpoint with this developing doubt has been a steadily intensifying concern with the constraints over understanding engendered by linguistic convention. Wittgenstein's (1963) *Philosophical Investigations* must be viewed as seminal in this regard. By asking such questions as where does an individual feel grief or happiness, could a person have a profound feeling in one second, and can the features of hope be described, Wittgenstein brought into poignant clarity the extent to which the use of mental predicates is convention bound. His work has served to inspire an impressive array of philosophic studies into the linguistic constraints governing the use of such concepts as mind (Ryle, 1949), intention (Anscombe, 1976), sense data (Austin, 1962b), and motivation (Peters, 1958). Such inquiry has also elucidated a variety of important problems created through the reification of the language. In effect, many classic problems both in psychology and philosophy appear to be products of linguistic entanglement; with clarity concerning the nature and functions of the language the problems may often be decomposed.

Social constructionism has been nurtured by the soil of such discontent. It begins with radical doubt in the taken-for-granted world—whether in the sciences or daily life—and in a specialized way acts as a form of social criticism. Constructionism asks one to suspend belief that commonly accepted categories or understandings receive their warrant through observation. Thus, it invites one to challenge the objective basis of conventional knowledge. For example, in Kessler and McKenna's (1978) investigation of the social construction of gender, the attempt is made to break down the seemingly incorrigible fact that there are two genders. By examining the variations in the way differing cultures and subcultural groups understand gender, the referents for the terms *man* and *woman* are obscured. Possibilities are opened for alternative means of understanding gender differences or of abandoning such distinctions altogether. In Averill's (1982) extensive work on emotion one is forced to question the assumption that anger is a biological state of the organism and is invited to consider it as a historically contingent social performance. Sarbin (1984) extended this line of thinking to the entire array of emotional terms. Emotions are not objects "out there" to be studied, ventured Sarbin; emotion terms acquire their meaning not from real-world referents but from their context of usage.

Similar kinds of critiques have been launched against the taken-for-granted character of suicide (Atkinson, 1977), beliefs (Needham, 1972), schizophrenia (Sarbin & Mancuso, 1980), altruism (Gergen & Gergen, 1983), psychological disorder (Garfinkel, 1967), childhood (Kessen, 1979), domestic violence (Greenblat, 1983), menopause (McCrea, 1983), and situational causes (Gergen & Gergen, 1982). In each case, the objective criteria for identifying such "behaviors," "events," or "entities" are shown to be either highly circumscribed by culture, history, or social context or altogether nonexistent.

2. The terms in which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people. From the constructionist position the process of understanding is not automatically driven by the forces of nature, but is the result of an active, cooperative enterprise of persons in relationship. In this light, inquiry is invited into the historical and cultural bases of various forms of world construction. For example, historical investigation has revealed broad historical variations in the concept of the child (Aries, 1962), of romantic love (Averill, 1985), of mother's love (Badinter, 1980), and of self (Verhave & van Hoorne, 1984). In each case constructions of the person or relationships have undergone significant change across time. In certain periods childhood was not considered a specialized phase of development, romantic and maternal love were not components of human makeup, and the self was not viewed as isolated and autonomous. Such changes in conception do not appear to reflect alterations in the objects or entities of concern but seem lodged in historically contingent factors. Ethnographic study yields much the same conclusion. Conceptions of psychological process differ markedly from one culture to another (see Heelas & Lock's 1981 edited volume). Accounts of emotion among the Ifaluk (Lutz, 1982), of identity among the Trobrianders (Lee, 1959), of knowledge among the Illongot (Rosaldo, 1980), and of the self among the Maori (Smith, 1981) all serve as challenges to the ontology of mind in contemporary Western culture. They invite us to consider the social origins of taken-for-granted assumptions about the mind—such as the bifurcation between reason and emotion, the existence of motives and memories, and the symbol system believed to underlie language. They direct our attention to the social, moral, political,

and economic institutions that sustain and are supported by current assumptions about human activity.

Constructionist inquiry has further been directed to the axioms or fundamental propositions underlying descriptions of persons in present-day society (Davis & Todd, 1982; Gergen, 1984a; Ossario, 1978; Semin & Chassein, in press; Shotter & Burton, 1983; Smedslund, 1978). It is first asked whether the folk models of mind within a culture necessarily determine or constrain the conclusions reached within the profession. How can the psychologist step outside cultural understandings and continue to "make sense"? Further, it is asked, are there generic rules governing accounts of human action from which common conventions are derived? Such work is of special interest as it begins to outline the possible constraints over what psychological research can say. If it is possible to isolate propositions or assumptions grounding discourse about persons, then we are furnished with a basis for understanding what psychological theory *must* say if it is to be reasonable or communicable.

3. The degree to which a given form of understanding prevails or is sustained across time is not fundamentally dependent on the empirical validity of the perspective in question, but on the vicissitudes of social processes (e.g., communication, negotiation, conflict, rhetoric). As proposed in this case, perspectives, views, or descriptions of persons can be retained regardless of variations in their actual conduct. Regardless of the stability or repetition of conduct, perspectives may be abandoned as their intelligibility is questioned within the community of interlocutors. Observation of persons, then, is questionable as a corrective or guide to descriptions of persons. Rather, the rules for "what counts as what" are inherently ambiguous, continuously evolving, and free to vary with the predilections of those who use them. On these grounds, one is even led to query the concept of truth. Is the major deployment of the term *truth* primarily a means for warranting one's own position and discrediting contenders for intelligibility (Gergen, 1984b)?

In this vein, Sabini and Silver (1982) have demonstrated how people manage the definition of morality in relationships. Whether an act is defined as envy, flirtaton, or anger floats on a sea of social interchange. Interpretation may be suggested, fastened upon, and abandoned as social relationships unfold across time. In the same way, Mummendey and her colleagues (Mummendey, Bonewasser, Loschper, & Linneweber, 1982) have shown how decisions are reached as to whether an action constitutes aggression. Thus, aggression ceases to exist as a fact in the world and becomes a labeling device for social control. Other investigators (cf. Cantor & Brown, 1981; Harré, 1981; Lalljee, 1981) have discussed social negotiation processes underlying the attribution of causality to persons' actions. Earlier work on self-identity (Gergen, 1977) has focused on the manner in which self-definition is realigned over time as social circumstances are altered. Communications specialists Pearce and Cronen (1980) have outlined a general theory for the negotiation of reality. Others have concentrated on the family (Reiss, 1981) and the media (Adoni & Mane, 1984) as they contribute to prevailing forms of interpretation.

Much this same line of thinking has been increasingly employed by historians and sociologists of science to understand scientific conduct. For example, Mendelsohn (1977) has argued that the epistemological assumptions of modern science were developed largely as a means of gaining social control. Bohme (1977) has discussed the informal rules used within scientific communities to determine what they count as facts. Investigators such as Latour and Woolgar (1979) and Knorr-Cetina (1981) have carried out participant observation in natural science laboratories—much as anthropologists exploring tribal customs. As they contend, what passes for "hard fact" in the natural sciences typically depends on a subtle but potent array of social microprocesses. In effect, the move is from an experiential to a social epistemology (Campbell, 1969; Sullivan, 1984).

4. Forms of negotiated understanding are of critical significance in social life, as they are integrally connected with many other activities in which people engage. Descriptions and explanations of the world themselves constitute forms of social action. As such they are intertwined with the full range of other human activities. The opening, "Hello, how are you?" is typically accompanied by a range of facial expressions, bodily postures, and movements without which the expression could seem artificial, if not aberrant. In the same way, descriptions and explanations form integral parts of various social patterns. They thus serve to sustain and support certain patterns to the exclusion of others. To alter description and explanation is thus to threaten certain actions and invite others. To construct persons in such a way that they possess inherent sin is to invite certain lines of action and not others. Or to treat depression, anxiety, or fear as emotions from which people involuntarily suffer is to have far different implications than to treat them as chosen, selected, or played out as on a stage.

It is in this vein that many investigators have been concerned with the prevailing images or metaphors of human action employed within the field of psychology. Queries have been raised over the broad social implications of viewing persons as machines (Shotter, 1975), as self-contained individuals (Sampson, 1977, 1983), or as economic bar-

gainers in social relations (Wexler, 1983). Attacks have also been levied against the damaging effects on children of the prevailing constructions of the child's mind (Walkerdine, 1984), the sexism implicit in investigation that assumes the superiority of universal principles in moral decision making (Gilligan, 1982), the effects of theories of cognitive mechanism in their implicit unconcern with material circumstances in society (Sampson, 1981), and the anomic effects of psychological assessment in organizations (Hollway, 1984).

Social Constructionism in Historical Perspective

The significance of the constructionist movement is more fully appreciated against the backdrop of history. Although a full treatment of the relevant background is beyond the scope of this article, it does prove useful to understand constructionism in relation to two major and competing intellectual traditions. These traditions can largely be distinguished in terms of basic epistemological orientations or models of knowledge. On the one hand, thinkers such as Locke, Hume, the Mills, and various logical empiricists in the present century have traced the source of knowledge (as mental representation) to events in the real world. Knowledge copies (or should ideally copy) the contours of the world. This *exogenic perspective* (Gergen, 1982) thus tends to view knowledge as a pawn to nature. Proper knowledge maps or mirrors the actualities of the real world. In contrast, philosophers such as Spinoza, Kant, Nietzsche, and various phenomenologists have tended to adopt an *endogenic perspective* regarding the origins of knowledge. In this case, knowledge depends on processes (sometimes viewed as innate) endemic to the organism. Humans harbor inherent tendencies, it is said, to think, categorize, or process information, and it is these tendencies (rather than features of the world in itself) that are of paramount importance in fashioning knowledge.

The exogenic–endogenic antinomy has also played a major role in the history of psychological theory. As I have outlined elsewhere (Gergen, 1982), early German theorists often wrestled in vain with means of cementing the two perspectives. The attempt of classical psychophysical research to plot the precise relationship between external and internal worlds is but one case in point. As psychology developed in the United States, guided as it was by both pragmatist and positivist philosophy, it took on a strong exogenic character. Behaviorism (along with neobehaviorism) placed (and continues to place) the major determinants of human activity in the environment. If the organism is to adapt successfully, it is claimed, its knowledge must adequately represent or reflect that environment. Until recently the en-

dogenic perspective failed to flourish on American soil. A handful of Gestalt psychologists, with their emphasis on autochthonous tendencies of perceptual organization, and a stalwart band of phenomenologists virtually prevented the orientation from otherwise perishing.

Yet, within the past two decades we have witnessed what appears to be a major reversal in emphasis. The endogenic perspective has returned in full force in the guise of cognitive psychology. The seeds for this evolution in social psychology were planted by Kurt Lewin, whose central concern with the psychological field was essentially a holdover from continental rationalism. In the hands of his students this emphasis reinstituted itself in such concepts as social (as opposed to physical) reality (Festinger, 1954), the social comparison process (Festinger, 1954), motivated perception (Pepitone, 1949), emotions as perceived (Schachter, 1964), and cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). The centrality of this work in social psychology also served to hone the sensibilities of subsequent generations of researchers. Concerns with logical inference, cognitive schemata, information storage and retrieval, and cognitive heuristics have all extended the Lewinian premise: Human action is critically dependent on the cognitive processing of information, that is, on the world as cognized rather than the world as it is. Of course, much the same shift in explanatory emphasis has taken place within psychology more generally. The contours of the "cognitive revolution" are widely recognized.

Yet, it is my view that in spite of the richness of conceptualization and the profundity of its heritage, the endogenic perspective has not yet achieved full ascendency—nor can it in principle. There is much to be said on this account, but again a brief sketch is necessitated. First, cognitivism has not yet—neither in social psychology nor in psychology more generally—overturned the exogenic perspective because the exogenic perspective forms the metatheoretical basis of the science itself. That is, the contemporary conception of psychological science is a by-product of empiricist or exogenic philosophy—committed as it has been to rendering an account of objective knowledge of the world. The experimental psychologist thus sets out to employ methods for establishing objective knowledge about cognitive processes. To the extent that the investigator claims to achieve an accurate representation of the world (thus rendering support for exogenics), it threatens the view that it is the world as represented (cognized) rather than the world in itself which is of importance. In seeking objective truth (that which is true independent of subjective appraisal) the cognitive researcher thus denigrates the importance of the very processes he or she seeks to elucidate. The exogenic

basis of the scientific activity undermines the validity of the endogenic theories under examination.

Nor, would it seem, can cognitivism ultimately achieve hegemony in psychological discourse. This may be anticipated in part by the example furnished by the history of the philosophy of knowledge. This history has been one of continuous and unresolved disputation between exogenic (or empiricist, in this context) and endogenic (rationalist, idealist, phenomenological) thinkers. Essentially, the history of the philosophy of knowledge can largely be written in terms of a continuous series of pendulum swings. We have witnessed the conflict between Plato's pure forms of knowledge versus Aristotle's concern with the role of sensory experience; between the authority granted to experience by Bacon, Locke, and Hume versus the rational capacities granted to the mind by Descartes, Spinoza, and Kant; between the emphasis placed by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche on will and passion in the generation of knowledge, and the attempts of logical positivists to ground all knowledge in observables. What is to prevent the same historical trajectory in psychology? We have most recently witnessed in the cognitive revolution a shift from an exogenic to an endogenic perspective. As the inherent flaws of cognitivism are once again revealed in future psychological work, are we again to anticipate a return to some form of (suitably enlightened) environmentalism? (Gibsonian affordance theory [Gibson, 1979] may already be foreshadowing the new swing.) And such problems are sure to emerge. For example, when cognitivism is extended to its natural conclusion it reverts into an unhappy and unacceptable solipsism. And, cognitivism remains perennially unable to resolve such thorny problems as the origin of ideas or concepts and the manner in which cognitions influence behavior (cf. Gergen, 1985). Compelling explanations for how cognitions could either be "built up" from experience or genetically programmed remain to be fashioned. Nor have theorists been able to solve the Cartesian dilemma of explaining how "mind stuff" can influence or dictate discrete bodily movements.

It is against this backdrop that one can appreciate the emergence of social constructionism. Rather than recapitulating yet again the movement of the pendulum, the challenge (for many) has been to transcend the traditional subject–object dualism and all its attendant problems (cf. Rorty, 1979) and to develop a new framework of analysis based on an alternative (nonempiricist) theory of the functioning and potentials of science. This movement begins in earnest when one challenges the concept of knowledge as mental representation. Given the myriad of insolubles to which such a concept gives rise, one is moved to consider what passes as knowledge in human affairs. At least one major candidate is that of linguistic rendering. We generally count as knowledge that which is represented in linguistic propositions—stored in books, journals, floppy disks, and the like. These renderings, to continue an earlier theme, are constituents of social practices. From this perspective, knowledge is not something people possess somewhere in their heads, but rather, something people do together. Languages are essentially shared activities. Indeed, until the sounds or markings come to be shared within a community, it is inappropriate to speak of language at all. In effect, we may cease inquiry into the psychological basis of language (which account would inevitably form but a subtext or miniature language) and focus on the performative use of language in human affairs.[2]

As we have seen, analyses of the social constructionist variety have been devoted to such broad topics as gender, aggression, mind, causality, person, self, child, motivation, emotion, morality, and so on. Typically the concern has been with the language forms that pervade the society, the means by which they are negotiated, and their implications for other ranges of social activity. In such endeavors social psychologists begin to join hands, as well, with a new range of disciplines. Rather than looking toward the natural sciences and experimental psychology for kinship, an affinity is rapidly sensed with a range of what may be termed *interpretive disciplines,* that is, disciplines chiefly concerned with rendering accounts of human meaning systems (cf. Rabinow & Sullivan, 1979). On the most immediate level, social constructionist inquiry is conjoined with ethnomethodological work (cf. Garfinkel, 1967; Psathas, 1979) with its emphasis on the methods employed by persons to render the world sensible, and with much dramaturgical analysis (cf. Goffman, 1959; Sarbin & Scheibe, 1983) and its focus on the strategic deployment of social conduct. Similarly, treatments of the social basis of scientific knowledge, including the history and sociology of knowledge, become relevant (Knorr, Krohn, & Whitley, 1981; Knorr-Cetina & Mulkay, 1983). Anthropological inquiry acquires a renewed interest for psychology. Of special interest is the work of symbolic anthropologists concerned with the construction of the world, including persons, developed in non-Western cultures (cf. Geertz, 1973; Shweder & Miller, 1985). Similarly, psychology gains a temporal dimension as its analyses become articulated with historical research in the

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[2] If the emphasis is shifted, much cognitive research becomes relevant to constructionist pursuits. Research on social prototypes, implied personality theory, attributional schemata, the concept of intelligence, and the like do not, from the present standpoint, inform us about another world—namely, an internal, cognitive one. Rather they might elucidate the nature of social discourse and thus raise interesting questions about the function of such terms in scientific and social life.

constructionist mode (Nowell-Smith, 1977; White, 1978). And, psychology stands to gain much by opening consideration on literary theory, including accounts of metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), narratology (Genette, 1980), and the deconstruction of meaning (Culler, 1982). Such work informs as to the means by which various linguistic figures or tropes serve to organize or guide the attempt to "describe" reality.

Constructionism and the Problematics of Psychological Explanation

Thus far we have considered grounding assumptions of the constructionist orientation, along with its historical roots and contemporary emergence. It remains now to touch upon the implications of constructionism both for the character of psychological inquiry and for the nature of science more generally. With regard to psychology the implications are far reaching, and many years will be required before they are fully explored. To appreciate the arguments at issue consider the typical constructionist analysis of psychological processes or mechanisms. In Averill's (1982) hands the concept of anger is largely cut away from a deterministic physiology and becomes a form of social role; anger as a term thus does not refer to a mental state but constitutes part of the role itself. In a related analysis (Mills, 1940), doubt is cast on the concept of motivation as a primal power capable of moving people to action, and the focus shifts to people's talk about their motives and its social implications. The mind (Coulter, 1979) becomes a form of social myth; the self-concept (Gergen, 1985) is removed from the head and placed within the sphere of social discourse. In each case, then, what have been taken by one segment of the profession or another as "facts about the nature of the psychological realm" are suspended; each concept (emotion, motive, etc.) is cut away from an ontological base within the head and is made a constituent of social process. In agreement with Wittgenstein's (1963) later analyses, one ceases to view mental predicates as possessing a syntactic relationship with a world of mental events; rather, as Austin (1962a) and other post-Wittgensteinians have proposed, such terms are cashed out in terms of the social practices in which they function.

From this perspective, then, all psychological theorizing and the full range of concepts that form the grounds for research become problematic as potential reflectors of an internal reality and become themselves matters of analytic interest. Professional agreements become suspect; normalized beliefs become targets of demystification; "the truth" about mental life is rendered curious. Or, in a slightly different light, the contemporary views of the profession on matters of cognition, motivation, perception, information processing, and the like become candidates for historical and cross-cultural comparison. From the constructionist perspective they often constitute a form of ethnopsychology, historically and culturally situated, institutionally useful, normatively sustained, and subject to deterioration and decay as social history unfolds.

As is clear, constructionism will inevitably confront strong resistance within psychology more generally. It forms a potential challenge to traditional knowledge claims; psychological research itself is placed in the uncomfortable position of a research object. Yet for social analysts the shift is one of heady proportion. No longer would social inquiry confront the threat of becoming a derivative enterprise—merely elaborating the social implications of more fundamental psychological processes. Rather, what is taken to be psychological process at the very outset becomes a derivative of social interchange. The explanatory locus of human action shifts from the interior region of the mind to the processes and structure of human interaction. The question "why" is answered not with a psychological state or process but with consideration of persons in relationship. Few are prepared for such a wrenching, conceptual dislocation. However, for the innovative, adventurous and resilient, the horizons are exciting indeed.

Constructionism and the Character of Science

Although many will find it difficult to relinquish the use of psychological mechanisms, structures, and processes as major explanatory vehicles, this loss may be coupled with a challenge of no small consequence. The challenge is essentially that of grappling with a new conception of knowledge. To appreciate the point it should be realized that problems inherent in both the endo- and exogenic orientations are also deeply engrained in the contemporary conception of scientific knowledge and its acquisition. In particular, the empiricist assumptions that form the undergirding rationale for research in psychology (and virtually all contemporary science) are drawn chiefly from the exogenic intellectual tradition. This orientation, with its emphasis on knowledge as an internal representation of the state of nature, is manifestly apparent in the traditional attempt to establish scientific knowledge through processes of empirical verification and falsification. However, if constructionism is to transcend the exogenic–endogenic antinomy, and the interminable conflict it has thus far spawned, then it must also eschew the empiricist account of scientific knowledge. As it abandons the subject–object dichotomy central to disciplinary debate, so must it challenge dualism as the basis for a theory of scientific knowledge.

What is confronted, then, is the traditional,

Western conception of objective, individualistic, ahistoric knowledge—a conception that has insinuated itself into virtually all aspects of modern institutional life. As this view is increasingly challenged one must entertain the possibility of molding an alternative scientific metatheory based on constructionist assumptions. Such a metatheory would remove knowledge from the data-driven and/or the cognitively necessitated domains and place it in the hands of people in relationship. Scientific formulations would not on this account be the result of an impersonal application of decontextualized, methodological rules, but the responsibility of persons in active, communal interchange.

Elsewhere, the contours of this emerging metatheory have been referred to as *sociorationalist* (Gergen, 1982; Gergen & Morawski, 1980). In this view the locus of scientific rationality lies not within the minds of independent persons but within the social aggregate. That which is rational is the result of negotiated intelligibility. For social thinkers the further development of the metatheory should be of especially high priority. For, if the character of sociorationalist process is among the focal concerns of the social investigator, then the critical task of understanding the generation and evolution of knowledge falls centrally to scholars within the social sphere. Much philosophic inquiry—including the philosophy of science—thus falls subject to social constructionist analysis. To a certain degree philosophers of science are already aware of this prospect. In recent years philosophic inquiry into foundations of scientific knowledge has waned. Confidence in empiricist assumptions has largely been eroded, and there is no obvious contender on the horizon (Bernstein, 1978).[3] Such inquiry has become increasingly replaced by historical analysis. Kuhn's (1962/1970) seminal treatise on revolutions in scientific knowledge is essentially a historical account, and much subsequent discussion of rationality and progress in science has largely proceeded on historical as opposed to philosophic grounds. Such history is essentially social, and its elaboration requires close attention to processes of human interchange. It remains, however, for social analysts more generally to become aware of the pivotal position that they might legitimately occupy.

Thus far feminist thinkers have been among those most acutely aware of such possibilities. For feminists, the empiricist orientation to knowledge

has not generally been a congenial perspective—advocating as it does manipulation, suppression, and alienation of those one wishes to understand (Jaeger, 1983). Further, from the feminist perspective, empiricist science seems to have been oft employed by males to construct views of women that contribute to their subjugation (Bleier, 1984; Weisstein, 1971). Both the process and the products of empiricist science have thus come under attack. As a result many feminists have searched for alternative forms of understanding—both of science and of other human beings. Constructionism, because of its emphasis on the communal basis of knowledge, processes of interpretation, and concern with the valuational underpinnings of scientific accounts, has been an attractive alternative. Thus, feminists have been frontrunners in employing interpretive research strategies (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1983; Bowles, 1984), documenting the scientific construction of gender (Morawski, in press), demonstrating the pragmatic uses of constructionist inquiry (Sassen, 1980), and exploring the foundations for constructionist metatheory (Unger, 1983).

Yet, the possibility of an alternative theory of knowledge can hardly demand broad appeal. The investments in and sense of security fostered by the enduring traditions are profound. Acute misgivings can be anticipated within these circles regarding criteria of knowledge and the companionate problem of appropriate methodology. Traditional empiricism holds experience to be the touchstone of objectivity; hypotheses are said to be confirmed or challenged by virtue of sense data. Yet, from the constructionist viewpoint, both the concepts of experience and sense data are placed in question. From what grounds do they derive their truth warrants? Are the so-called "reports of one's experience" not linguistic constructions guided and shaped by historically contingent conventions of discourse? Yet, although casting doubt on the process of objective warranting, constructionism offers no alternative truth criteria. Accounts of social construction cannot themselves be warranted empirically. If properly executed, such accounts can enable one to escape the confines of the taken for granted. They may emancipate one from the demands of convention. However, the success of such accounts depends primarily on the analyst's capacity to invite, compel, stimulate, or delight the audience, and not on criteria of veracity. Required, then, are alternative criteria for evaluating knowledge claims—criteria that might reasonably take into account existing needs for systems of intelligibility, limitations inherent in existing constructions, along with a range of political, moral, aesthetic, and practical considerations.

By the same token, social constructionism offers no "truth through method." In large degree the

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[3] Recent interest has been generated in a "realist" alternative to empiricist metatheory (Bhaskar, 1978; Manicas & Secord, 1983). However, although opposed to the Humean basis of scientific explanation, realist philosophy of science shares with empiricism a range of fundamental assumptions. It thus suffers from most of the criticisms lodged against empiricism.

sciences have been enchanted by the myth that the assiduous application of rigorous method will yield sound fact—as if empirical methodology were some form of meat grinder from which truth could be turned out like so many sausages. Yet, as analysts such as Quine, Taylor, Hanson, and Feyerabend have shown, such enchantment is of doubtful merit. Previous security is without firm foundation. For one seeking such security social constructionism will scarcely be palatable. Yet this is not to imply that constructionism eschews investigative methods. Whether rendering the conduct of organisms intelligible or demystifying existing forms of understanding, research methods can be used to produce "objectifications" or illustrations useful in advancing the pragmatic consequences of one's work. In this sense it would seem that virtually any methodology can be employed so long as it enables the analyst to develop a more compelling case. Although some methods may hold the allure of large samples, others can attract because of their purity, their sensitivity to nuance, or their ability to probe in depth. Such assets do not thereby increase the "objective validity" of the resulting constructions. However, like vivid photographs or startling vignettes drawn from daily life, when well wrought they may add vital power to the pen.

Others may eschew the constructionist orientation for what appears to be its rampant relativism. Yet, as we have seen, the attempts to justify objective foundations for knowledge have yet to furnish reason for optimism. One might well argue that the scientist's claims to privileged knowledge have served as mystifying devices within the society more generally. Constructionism offers no foundational rules of warrant and in this sense is relativistic. However, this does not mean that "anything goes." Because of the inherent dependency of knowledge systems on communities of shared intelligibility, scientific activity will always be governed in large measure by normative rules. However, constructionism does invite the practitioners to view these rules as historically and culturally situated—thus subject to critique and transformation. There is stability of understanding without the stultification of foundationalism. Further, unlike the moral relativism of the empiricist tradition, constructionism reasserts the relevance of moral criteria for scientific practice. To the extent that psychological theory (and related practices) enter into the life of the culture, sustaining certain patterns of conduct and destroying others, such work must be evaluated in terms of good and ill. The practitioner can no longer justify any socially reprehensible conclusion on the grounds of being a "victim of the facts"; he or she must confront the pragmatic implications of such conclusions within society more generally.

Should the challenge of developing an alternative metatheory be accepted, a variety of interesting changes may be anticipated in the character of professional life. The problem of forging a compelling account of the social genesis of knowledge is not inconsequential. New theoretical tools are required— concepts that lie between the problematic explanatory domains of psychology and sociology. The functions of language, both as a system of reference and as a form of social participation must be elaborated. A general account must be furnished of the social dimensions of natural science, social science, and philosophy. The demarcation (if any) between science and nonscience must be carefully examined. The extent to which scientific accounts may be (if ever) corrected or modified through observation must be assessed. In effect, an array of challenging problems will be confronted, problems that are essentially conceptual rather than empirical. For such tasks dialogue is essential between psychologists and like-minded colleagues in sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy, and literary studies. Should such dialogue occur, we might reasonably anticipate the development of new theoretical departures, metatheory for a new conception of science, and a general refurbishment of intellectual resources.

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