Social Psychology as Social Construction: The Emerging Vision

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My commitment to social psychological inquiry has now exceeded three decades; the commitment has been a passionate one throughout. However, the nature of this passion - the sense of the inquiry and its significance - has changed substantially over this period. The "message" of the discipline, as it initially kindled my excitement, now seems deeply mistaken - in certain respects even injurious to the society. Because the various assumptions that grounded this message were (and continue to be) the assumptions of the vast majority of the discipline, my evolving writings drew strong criticism. For some the emerging writings seemed anti-science, anti-psychological, and even nihilistic. Yet, while I no longer find the traditional views of science and psychology compelling, I am far from pessimistic about the future of the discipline. In light of critical reflection and continuing dialogue within various sectors of the field and within the social sciences more generally, I find myself more excited by the prospects for social psychology than ever before. For present purposes, then, it is propitious to proceed autobiographically. I shall proceed to lay out some of the traditional assumptions and reasons for my abandonment of them. More importantly, I shall explore the contemporary vision of the field growing from this soil of discontent, and describe some of its special promises. These promises can be placed under the more general rubric of social constructionism.

Progress in Perpetuity: The Experimental Paradigm

In my university years I was struck by what seemed to be two obvious facts: first, the greatest contributions to human betterment of the preceding century were those emanating from the natural sciences, and second, that we continued to remain ignorant of the wellsprings of human behavior. The discipline of psychology seemed not only to recognize both these facts, but held the promise that if we could but generate scientific knowledge of human behavior, the society would be able to solve many of its severest problems - problems of aggression, exploitation, prejudice, class conflict, immorality, abnormality, and the common suffering of daily life among them.

These inviting possibilities also furnished me with an individual raison d'etre. As a trained scientist, I could establish experimental settings in which precise causal linkages could be traced - the effects of various stimulus conditions (as they are called) on the psychological processes of individual subjects and the effects of these

psychological processes on the subjects' behavior toward each other. Observations of these causal sequences could also be evaluated statistically so as to ensure their broad generality. I could then make these findings available to my colleagues for further study, and as weaknesses and limitations were discovered in this work, further research would be invited. Over time, aided by my participation, the field would generate highly sophisticated and well-tested theoretical accounts (principles and explanations) of broad generality. These accounts would not be biased by any particular ideology, political position, or ethical commitment. In effect, these accounts could be made available to all people, so that policy makers, organizational decision makers, community leaders - indeed, any private citizen - could benefit in their attempts to improve the human condition.

These various beliefs were scarcely my own; indeed they are major suppositions within what is generally called empirical or experimental social psychology. To illustrate these assumptions in action, let me draw from early research of my own, on a topic that continues to fascinate me even today, namely the self. Joining with my many colleagues in psychology, I believed that any proper understanding of individual action must take into account various psychological processes - such as perception, motivation, emotion, memory and the like. However, I was particularly struck by the possible impact on human behavior of the individual's conception of self and others. Our moment-to-moment decisions, it seemed, depend on what we think of ourselves (our concept of self, self-esteem, and the like) and others (their personality, expectations, etc.). In contrast to many personality theorists, I was also impressed by what seemed to me a profound lability in self-conception. We don't seem to have a single, stable conception of ourselves, it seemed to me, but to have the capacity for infinite fluctuation. Further, to extend George Herbert Mead's (1934) insights, these fluctuations seem directly connected to others' behavior toward us. As I reasoned, then, an individual's self-esteem can be shaped from moment to moment by others' expressions of esteem for them.

This sort of reasoning invited an experimental study in which I attempted to trace the systematic effects of one's person's evaluations on the self-esteem of another. Within the context of a very elaborate study, with many variables and measures, I thus had subjects (college sophomores) interviewed by a graduate student (stimulus person). During the interview the subjects were asked to make a series of self-evaluations. In an experimental group, the interviewer subtly agreed with the subject each time she evaluated herself positively, and was silent or disagreed when she evaluated herself negatively. As I found, the self-ratings of the subjects increased steadily throughout the interview. They did not do so in a control group who were not exposed to this form of feedback. In a subsequent test of self-esteem, administered privately, the experimental subjects demonstrated statistically higher ratings than control group subjects. The positive feedback, in effect, seemed to carry past the interview itself. These and other results were subsequently published for my professional colleagues (Gergen, 1965), and I derived a certain satisfaction from the sense of having contributed to a growing body of research that would eventually inform us of the nature of self-conception, and which could be used by therapists, educators, parents

and all of us concerned with each others' welfare.

To summarize, the message of social psychology inherent in the prevailing Zeitgeist was that empirical research can furnish an unbiased and systematic description and explanation of social behavior, that the accuracy and generality of these theoretical accounts are subject to continuous improvement through research, and that there is nothing so practical for society as an accurate, empirically supported theory. In effect, scientists can offer the society enormous riches in terms of principles of human interaction, and with these principles the society can improve itself. With respect to our understanding of selves, progress in knowledge is interminable.

The Early Impasse: Social Psychology as History

The preceding pages were difficult to write, much like attempting to reignite the naive idealisms of adolescence. No, I don't wish to abandon all the premises and certainly not the optimistic sense of potential for the discipline. However, it was essential to squarely face the foolishness if some sort of salvaging was to take place. For me, the first step in critical self-reflection was the growing realization of the historical perishability of social psychological knowledge. Much of the above enthusiasm depends on the belief that knowledge accumulates: each experiment can add to the previous and the accretion of findings gives us an improved fix on the realities of social life. But what if social life is not itself stable; what if social patterns are in a state of continuous and possibly chaotic transformation? To the extent this is so, then the science does not accumulate knowledge; its knowledge represents no more than a small, and perhaps not very important history of college student behavior in artificial laboratory settings.

These doubts began to take place even in the design of the above described research on self-evaluation. In an additional part of the study I argued that in order for others' feedback to affect one's level of self-esteem, this feedback would have to appear authentic. If one believed the feedback was insincere, not intended to be an accurate expression of feeling, then the feedback would have little effect. Indeed, I tested this hunch by running a group of subjects under the same conditions as above, with the exception of telling them that the interviewer would be practicing a set of interview techniques. The results confirmed my hypothesis. However, in moments of repose, it also struck me that none of the feedback in any of the conditions was truly sincere; all of it was experimentally arranged. This meant that it was not what the interviewer actually did in the interchange that mattered, but the interpretation that was placed on it. Yet, if interpretations come and go across cultural history, and there is virtually no limit on the ways events can be interpreted, then what are we to make of these results? There was widespread belief at one time in people's souls, and in demon possession; such interpretations are no longer favored. In the 16th century, states of melancholy were detected everywhere; early in the present century, people suffered from "nervous breakdowns." These interpretations are now little evidenced. My results seemed, then, to be reflections of the present cultural conditions.

To think about the way "nervous breakdowns" disappeared from view, and concepts like "identity crisis," and "anomie" came and went in more recent years, added an additional wrinkle to the gathering doubt. There are many ways in which psychology is a creative discipline. It is continuously developing new terminologies, new explanations, and novel insights into the wellsprings of human conduct. Aren't these efforts all adventures in interpretation? And if they are, don't they contribute to the interpretive mix within the society? Aren't they pressing our interpretations in new directions, and thus affecting our actions toward each other? In effect, to the extent that social psychological theories enter the society, they have the capacity to alter social pattern. In effect, the field itself contributes to the very transience in social patterning that invalidates its faith in cumulative knowledge.

The plot thickens: consider again my little study on self-conception. My theoretical reasoning seems compelling enough, some might say that it reflects general common sense. But let us consider where my assumptions about selves differ from common sense. For most of western culture, we are each endowed with capacities for autonomous choice. We are fundamentally free to chose one path of action as opposed to another. Indeed, it is just such a commitment to individual choice that undergirds our beliefs in democracy, law, and the kind of everyday morality in which we hold each other responsible for our actions. Yet, the self I portray in my experiment has no voluntary agency. One's sense of self, in this context, is determined by social feedback; I am simply the repository of others' attitudes toward me. In this sense I suppress or negate the common cultural wisdom, and subtly undermine the rationale for the cultural institutions of democracy, legal responsibility, and so on. If I extend my theoretical assumption, I even destroy the assumption of authentic or sincere feedback, as all feedback from others would equally well be the outcome of social programming.

The upshot of this line of reasoning is that the discipline of psychology not only stirs the pot of social meaning, but it is value saturated. That is, in spite of its attempt to be value-neutral, the interpretations of the discipline subtly lend themselves to certain kinds of action and discredit others. The tradition's most well known research, for example, discredits conformity, obedience, and succumbing to attitude change pressures. In this way the discipline subtly champions independence, autonomy, and self-containment; cooperation, collaboration and empathic integration of the other are all suppressed. So not only does the field operate to change (or sustain) interpretations, it also functions unwittingly as a moral and political advocate. The hope of a value neutral science is deeply misguided.

Most of these arguments were published in an early article, "Social psychology as history" (Gergen, 1973). The effects were startling. Broad controversy ensued; my arguments were rejected as counter-productive philosophy by some, pilloried by others, and for a few, there was a sense of "at last, vindication of long silent doubts." This article, combined with a range of additional critique (Harre and Secord, 1972; Ring, 1967; McGuire, 1973) produced what was called the "crisis in social psychology."(see, for example, Strickland, 1976). Yet, within a few years the crisis

subsided; the experimentalists returned to business as usual; self-reflection largely disappeared from the pages of the major journals. At the same time, for a small number of beleaguered but undaunted souls, there loomed but dimly the vision of a reconstructed social psychology.

The Emergence of Social Construction

For me, exploration of this vision grew importantly from attempts to defend my initial criticisms. This was not only true in the general sense that for purposes of defense it was essential that I broaden my acquaintance with relevant work in philosophy, sociology, history and other relevant fields. However, the possibility of a positive alternative to the traditional view of the field was also invited more specifically by what seemed to me the most powerful attack on my thesis of social psychology as history. To paraphrase this interesting line of argument: my thesis was altogether too concerned with public activity. To be sure, social patterns were in constant flux; styles, ideologies, public opinion, and customs are subject to historical shifts, and psychologists (to the extent they are read or understood), might affect these proclivities. However, social psychology is not interested in exterior ephemera. Its task is to lay bear the psychological bases of these patterns - how it is that basic processes of cognition, motivation, prejudice, and the like function in human organisms. These processes are not unstable; they are inherent in human nature. Only their expressions are mutable.

This defense did seem a little awkward, inasmuch as the field was ostensibly dedicated to predicting and understanding social behavior, in effect, patterns that are inherently unstable. However, there was little means by which I could be certain that the underlying processes were not both stable and universal. But why the uncertainty; and how could the critic be so certain that there were such enduring phenomena? How could we judge whether the internal processes were indeed ephemeral or universal? This question continued to haunt me until ultimately a rebuttal was forthcoming. And it was this rebuttal that furnished the critical turning point toward a new, constructionist social psychology. The important reading for me was Gadamer's (1975) classic work Truth and Method. Gadamer was grappling with the question that had plagued hermeneutic scholars for several centuries: how is it that we can understand the meaning within a text - what the author is attempting to say? The question had never yielded a satisfactory answer within the hermeneutic tradition, a fact that was very interesting to me indeed. For the problem of how readers understand the meaning within texts is essentially equivalent to how it is psychologists comprehend the psychological processes giving rise to overt action. For me, the pivotal concept in Gadamer's work is the horizon of understanding. As he argued, a reader approaches a text with a forestructure of understanding in place, essentially a range of interpretive tendencies that will typically dominate the way in which the text is understood. Although Gadamer went on to search for means by which the reader can suspend the horizon of understanding, I was much less impressed with this account than by the ambient resonances of this concept with other intellectual developments. In his work, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,

Thomas Kuhn had demonstrated the ways in which the interpretation of scientific evidence is largely guided by a paradigm of understanding (or theoretical forestructure) central to the field at any given time. As he reasoned, the scientist carries out research and interprets the findings in terms of a theoretical (and metatheoretical) framework (or set of a priori assumptions) shared within a particular community. Much the same conclusion was reached, albeit on a different terrain, by the literary theorist, Stanley Fish. As Fish (1980) convincingly argued, when readers attempt to understand a text, they do so as members of an interpretive community. Their interpretations will inevitably bear the conventional understandings of the community.

As these various arguments converged, it became apparent that there is no reading of a "psychological interior" save through the presumptions one brings to bear. People's actions do not transparently reveal the character of their subjective worlds or mental processes; however, once psychologists bring a given theory to bear, they locate "internal events" in its terms. These theories have no basis in fact; any facts about the mind used in their support would have necessitated the use of such theories. In effect, the psychological world so dear to the heart of many social psychologists is a social construction, and the findings used to justify statements about this world are only valid insofar as one remains within the theoretical (and metatheoretical) paradigms of the field. Research findings don't have any meaning until they are interpreted, and these interpretations are not demanded by the findings themselves. They result from a process of negotiating meaning within the community.

One could, of course, see such conclusions as spelling the end of social psychology (and indeed, the end of science itself as a truth telling institution). However, such a dolorous conclusion is scarcely warranted. For, after all, the social constructionist critique is itself based on a set of premises, assumptions, and negotiations, and the pivotal concept within this domain is that of social process. Can we envision a social psychology, then, that views itself as inherently a social process and its contributions to the culture primarily in terms of social construction? The beginnings of this vision were developed in my 1982 book, Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge. The exploration of its potential continues to the present.

Social Psychology in a Constructionist Key

As I presently see it, a social psychology informed by a constructionist view of knowledge vitally expands and enriches the scope of the field. Certain positive contributions of the past are salvaged, and the largely wasted efforts of the tradition abandoned. More importantly, a new range of significant endeavors is invited. I am not speaking here of a pie-in-the-sky vision, a dream on paper. Rather, as I have tried to outline in a recent volume, Realities and Relationships, movements toward a reconstructed psychology are in evidence throughout psychology (1) around the globe(2), and resonate with similar movements across the human sciences and the humanities (3). Michael Billig's contribution to the present volume is but one representative. Let me outline, then, what I see as the three major challenges of a

social psychology in a constructionist mold, and describe representative offerings in each case:

The Empirical Challenge

There is nothing about a social constructionist psychology that rules out empirical research. However, the place of such research and its particular potentials are substantially refigured. From a constructionist perspective, the traditional attempt to test hypotheses about universal processes of the mind (cognition, motivation, perception, attitudes, prejudice, self-conception) seems at a minimum misguided, and more tragically, an enormous waste of resources (intellectual, monetary, temporal, material). Not only is the subject matter itself a social construction, thus not subject to empirical evaluation outside a particular tradition of interpretation, but such research represents the arrogation of a uniquely western ontology of the mind to the status of the universal.

More positively from a constructionist perspective, traditional empirical research is most effectively deployed in 1) illustrating interesting or challenging ideas, and 2) tracing patterns of conduct of major significance to the society. In the case of bringing challenging ideas to life, the classic work of Asch (1952) on social conformity, and Milgram (1974) on obedience are illustrative. Neither of these inquiries proved anything about social life; they do not necessarily demonstrate anything about either conformity or obedience (which are themselves interpretations subject to challenge and negotiation). However, in the hands of these scholars, the data dramatically succeeded in bringing provocative ideas about human interaction to life, thus generating debate and dialogue. Both researchers raise fundamental questions about the power of social influence, and the needs and problems of both belonging to social groups and remaining independent of them. To be sure, there are many other resources for raising such issues, for example, in history, literature, and case studies. However, if the ethical and ideological burden is acceptable, the researcher's advantage is that he/she is able to craft the needed illustration in concrete terms and to demonstrate its potential generality in the population.

Many social psychologists, informed by constructionist concerns, are discontent with the political implications of human experimentation, and choose instead to explore the ways in which reality is constructed within the society. These studies, which focus on the discursive means by which we determine what is true and good, are emancipatory in their aims. Rather than trying to demonstrate universal principles, they use discourse analysis to foreground our particular habits of constructing the world and ourselves. The chief aim is to demonstrate the problems created by these discursive conventions and to open discussion on alternative intelligibilities. Thus, for example, investigators have used discourse analytic methods to unsettle the traditional gender distinction (Kitzinger, 1987), the concept of individual memory (Middleton and Edwards, 1990), the rationalities of social unrest (Potter and Reicher, 1987), accepted truths about alcohol (Taylor, 1990), and attributions of intention (Edwards and Potter, 1992), and the idea of factual or objective reports (Woofitt,

1992). Others have been concerned with the ways in which forms of rhetoric or speech conventions inadvertently guide our presumptions of the real. In the case of the self, for example, Mary Gergen and I (Gergen and Gergen, 1988) have attempted to show how narrative conventions - or traditional ways of telling stories - provide the forestructure through which we make ourselves intelligible to others. In contrast to the traditional experimental work I described earlier, the self is viewed, then, as achieved through dialogic processes that are continuously in motion.

It should finally be added that traditional empirical methods have additional purchase in actuarial terms, that is, in providing information on recurring patterns of social conduct. The capacity of survey researchers to predict election outcomes, insurance companies to predict auto accidents, and population experts to forecast birth rates are illustrative of this potential. Laboratory research in social psychology is generally ill suited for this task, inasmuch as the research context is typically rarefied and the findings poor in ethological validity. However, attempts by social psychologists to predict health indicators (e.g. heart failure, cancer, length of life) have been especially promising. Largely removing the research from its laboratory confines, researchers trace the correlations between a range of social variables, e.g. social support, traumatic events, personal dispositions and a range of health variables. The results of such research are often highly suggestive in terms of possible health policies and practices. To be sure, the phenomena in such research are socially constructed; labels such as heart failure and social support are culturally and historically contingent. However, because these constructs are widely shared in the culture, and are congenial to the prevailing ideology of health, the discipline contributes to the society by adopting its terms and furnishing information on patterns of action constructed in just this way.

The Reflexive Challenge

As we find, from a social constructionist perspective empirical research is not abandoned; its goals are simply revisioned in such a way that its outcomes are more directly keyed to societal concerns - provoking cultural dialogues, challenging traditional understandings, and furnishing information directly relevant to its investments. At the same time social constructionism invites a range of additional pursuits. Among the more prominent is that of reflexive deliberation. That people in relationships move toward collective agreements on what is real, rational, and right, and articulate these agreements in their forms of language, seems apparent enough. Whether a primitive society or a scientific sub-culture, we develop working languages for carrying out our collective lives. For the constructionist, however, there are significant dangers inhering in the solidification ("objectification") of any given way of constructing the world. Univocal agreements occlude possibilities for self-reflective appraisals. To reflect critically on one's pursuits, using the very rationalities that legitimate these pursuits, one can scarcely do other than rationalize the status quo. More importantly, those who do not share the premises are rendered "other," often dismissed, disparaged, or denigrated.

From this perspective, it is essential to set in motion processes of reflexive deliberation, processes which call attention to the historically and culturally situated character of the taken-for-granted world, which reflect on their potentials for suppression, and which open a space for other voices in the dialogues of the culture. These are indeed worthy goals, and specifically invited by a constructionist orientation to social psychology. Sensitive to the constructed character of our realities, to processes by which realities are generated and eroded, and the pragmatic implications of language formations, the constructionist social psychologist is optimally positioned to incite reflexive dialogue - both within the discipline of psychology, and within the culture more generally. Again, these are not idle speculations. Reflexive deliberation has been, and continues to be, a significant form of scholarship within the constructionist frame. Concerned with the potentially strangulating and oppressive potentials within the taken for granted assumptions of the discipline, psychologists have explored, for example, the limitations of traditional conceptions of individual psychological processes (Sampson, 1975, 1978), child development (Bradley, 1993), mental illness (Sarbin and Mancuso, 1980), and anger (Tavris, 1989). Concerned with the culture more generally, constructionist psychologists have probed, for example, the problems and potentials of the romanticist and modernist conceptions of the person (Gergen, 1991), the problematic assumptions underlying the way in which students are constructed in the educational sphere (Walkerdine, 1988), and the subtle sustenance of nationalist ideology (Billig, 1995).

The Creative Challenge

Traditional social psychology largely contented itself with charting existing patterns of behavior. The task of the scientist, in this case, was to give accurate accounts of existing reality. Because existing reality is taken to be an instantiation of universal and transhistorical processes, the field took little interest in molding new futures for the society. Further, because contributions to new cultural forms would require a value commitment, and social psychology aimed to be value neutral, there was scant investment in professional pursuits directly concerned with social change. This attitude of cultural disengagement stands in stark contrast to a constructionist social psychology. Already we have seen the constructionist concern with ethical and political issues manifest itself in reflexive scholarship. To engage in critique is to presume a criterion of "the good," toward which effective critical analysis inherently strives. However, the constructionist mandate for social transformation is far more profound. For the constructionist, the discourses of the profession are themselves constitutive of cultural life. When they serve to mold the intelligibilities of the culture - making distinctions, furnishing rationales for action, and implicitly evaluating forms of conduct - they also prepare our future. This may be a future which simply recapitulates the past, which sustains the taken-for-granted assumptions of the culture. Such are typically the effects of a social psychology based on a realist (or objectifying) account of science. However, for the constructionist, social psychological inquiry can enter into the creation of new forms of cultural life. With the development of new theoretical languages, research practices, forms of

expression, and practices of intervention, so does the field invite cultural transformation.

Constructionism places no particular constraints or demands on the scholar in terms of preferred visions of the future. However, there has been perhaps an inevitable tendency among constructionist scholars to develop theories and practices that favor communalism over individualism, interdependence over independence, participatory over hierarchical decision making, and societal integration as opposed to traditionalist segmentation. Such leanings are virtually derivative of the constructionist view of knowledge as socially constructed. To illustrate the way in which theoretical work is used to effect such ends, let us return to the continuing theme of the self. As we found, within the experimentalist tradition self-conception is usually treated as more or less self-contained within the individual, a feature of universal and biologically based processes of mental functioning. Such a view perpetuates the longstanding individualist practices within the culture, stressing as it does the independent functioning of the individual. Social institutions, on this account, are byproducts of individual interaction. Or to play out the implications, friendship, marriage, family, and community are artificial contrivances, possibly resulting from our individual insufficiencies. The sufficient person is an independent being.

Eschewing the individualist tradition, and giving value to relationship over isolation, ultimately requires an alternative to the traditional conception of the self - in effect, creative theoretical work. In this vein, theorists such as John Shotter (1994a, 1994b), Edward Sampson (1994), and Hermans and Kempen (1993) have begun to develop a deeply socialized conception of self. Drawing importantly from earlier writings of Vygotsky (1978) and Bakhtin (1981), individual functioning is held to be inseparable from relationship. The vast share of human action grows out of interchange, and is directed into further interchange. As I write these lines I am reflecting myriad dialogues with professionals and students, for example, and am speaking into a relationship with readers. The words are not "my own," the authorship is misleading. Rather, I am a carrier of relationships, forging them into yet new relationships. This work is further complemented by a series of creative theoretical formulations attempting to reconstitute traditional psychological terms. For example, for Potter and Wetherell (1987), attitudes are not lodged within the heads of private individuals; to possess an attitude is to take a position in a conversation. For Billig (1987), there is little reason to examine the rational processes lying behind language, somewhere in the brain; rather, to speak rationally is to engage in accepted forms of rhetoric.

It will prove illustrative to contrast my work on the self-concept within the old paradigm (mechanistic, individualistic, experimental), with recent recent, relationally oriented explorations of emotion (Gergen, 1994). Let us first deconstruct the traditional emotional terms - concepts such as anger, love, fear, joy, and the like. That is, let us view such terms as social constructions, and not as indexing differentiated properties of the mind or the cortex. With the aid of such deconstruction we are relieved of the endlessly burdensome search for the signified - that is, the elusive

essence of anger, love, and so on. Further, the individualist conception of such terms may be bracketed. This critique also enables us to view the language of emotion, not as a set of terms referring to off-stage properties of the mind, but as performatives. That is, when we say, "I am angry," "I love you," and the like, we are not trying to describe a far off land of the mind, or a state of the neurons. Rather, we are performing in a relationship, and the phrases themselves are only a constituent of more fully embodied actions, including movements of the limbs, vocal intonations, patterns of gaze, and so on.

At the same time, let us not view these performances as purely individual. Rather, they are more adequately viewed as integers in more complex patterns of relationship. They cannot be performed at random, but require the actions of others as invitations; and once performed, they invite only a circumscribed array of actions on the part of the others. Let us view these extended patterns of interchange as emotional scenarios. In documenting emotional scenarios for anger, for example, we find that there are only certain actions that warrant anger as an intelligible response (e.g. insult, expressions of hostility). And, once anger has been performed, the other is not free to act in any way; convention requires that one react, for example, with an apology, with an exonerating explanation, or with anger. Or to put it more broadly, we find emotional expressions to be constituents of extended forms of interchange, somewhat like cultural dances, and they gain their intelligibility and importance only by virtue of their placement within such dances. Emotional performances are no more possessions of the single individual than are the words we speak.

Although innovative theoretical formulations such as these are one means of contributing to a process of societal transformation, we find additional professional means of pursuing such ends. For example, constructionist psychologists have also pursued alternative forms of methodology, reasoning as they do that research methods also convey values and ideologies. Feeling that experimental technologies place a divide between the scientist and subject, privilege the scientist's voice over the subject's, and invite manipulation, they seek means of broadening the range of research methods. Qualitative methodologies (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994) are one significant step toward an enriched social psychology, as are discourse analytic procedures. Further, we are invited to experiment with our very forms of scientific expression. Professional writings in social psychology inherit stale traditions of rhetoric; they are intelligible to but a minute community of scholars, and even within this community they are overly formal, monologic, defensive, and dry. The nature of the social world scarcely demands such an archaic form of expression. Constructionism invites the scholar to expand the repertoire of expression, to explore ways of speaking and writing to a broader audience, perhaps with multiple voices, and a richer range of rhetoric. Recent examples would include the feminist writings of Mary Gergen (1988), and the first undergraduate text in constructionist social psychology by Rogers (1995).(4)

In conclusion, I find a constructionist social psychology one that is unbounded in potential: it neither specifies the margins of the discipline nor fixes the parameters of

inquiry in advance. It is psychology closely tied to cultural life; inviting passionate engagement; linking intellectual work with change-oriented practices; favoring provocative dialogue both within and external to the discipline; firing the imagination of futures; and yet, retaining considerable humility toward to its own assumptions and respect for the assumptions of others. The message of a social psychology in a constructionist frame is, then, profoundly optimistic.

Footnotes

(1) See, for example, Kessen (1990) in developmental psychology, Hermans and Kempen (1993) in personality studies, Spence (1982) and Penn and Frankfurt (in press) in individual and family therapy, Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1988) and M. Gergen (1988) in feminist psychology, and Danziger (1990) in the historical analysis of psychology.
(2) Among many others, we may include Ibanez (1991) in Spain; Bradley (1993) in Australia; White and Epston (1990) in New Zealand, Misra (1994) in India, Schnitman and Fuks (1993) in Argentina, Hermans and Kempen (1993) in the Netherlands, Engestrom (1990) in Finland, Middleton and Edwards (1990) in the UK, and Wilutzky (1995) in Germany, Stam (1990), in Canada, and Petrillo (1995) in Italy.
(3) See, for example Coulter's (1989) work in sociology, Lutz (1988) work in anthropology, White (1978) in history, McNamee (1989) in communication, Fiske (1982) in cultural studies, and Rorty (1991) in philosophy, and Gregory (1994) in geographic studies.
(4) An additional work on social construction by Vivien Burr (1995) is also a significant new entry at the university text level, but the writing in this case is more traditional.

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