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## Psychological Science in a Postmodern Context\*

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### Abstract

Postmodern scholarship poses significant challenges to pivotal assumptions of individual knowledge, objectivity, and truth. In their place we find an emphasis on the communal construction of knowledge, objectivity as a relational achievement, and language as a pragmatic medium through which local truths are constituted. While these developments in understanding may seem opposed to psychological science, they are not. Rather, they invite a new range of questions about the potentials of traditional research. These questions are vitally concerned with the significance of such inquiry in cultural life. More importantly, the emerging view of psychological science opens new and exciting vistas of theoretical, methodological, and practical significance. Increasing manifestations of movement in these directions suggest the possibility of profound change in the profession.

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While the term "postmodern" has now been employed in so many and differing ways that decay and cliché are immanent, the term does index an enormous domain of dialogue within the scholarly world. Central to these dialogues have been longstanding ("modernist") concepts such as "truth," "rationality," "objectivity," "individual knowledge," "evidence," and "scientific progress." Regardless of one's location in the dialogues, it is difficult to engage with the bracing and concatenating confluence of ideas without moving into new spaces of understanding. Within neighboring social sciences these dialogues have had an enormous impact - on metatheory, theory, methodology, and practice (See summaries by Dickens and Fontana, 1994; Hollinger, 1994; Rosenau, 1992.) Arguments are heated and extensive, and innovative developments are everywhere in evidence. Yet, possibly because of their strong identification with the natural sciences, psychologists have been slow to enter these debates. Only within the past decade have vital signs become fully manifest. A brief exchange in the *American Psychologist* (Smith, 1994; Gergen, 1994a), and edited volumes by Sarbin (1986), Kvale (1992) and by Fee (2000) are among the most visible cases. Yet, as I will hope to demonstrate, on a more subtle level various elements of postmodern consciousness are entering the field in

numerous ways and in far-flung locales. If we view the pattern as a whole, we begin to discern the possibilities for profound change within the discipline.

My hope in the present article is first to bring into focus several major assumptions undergirding our traditions of psychological science, and then ways in which postmodern thought can bring us into a new and more positive space of understanding. After briefly reviewing several lines of defense against these critiques, I shall selectively survey the landscape of emerging developments. What forms of transformation are invited by the newly emerging understandings? Here I will be especially concerned with the flowering of intellectual inquiry, the revolution in methods of inquiry, and the development of new forms of practice. The reader should be alerted to several themes that will pervade these discussions: At the outset I am concerned that the conception of psychological science commonly shared within the discipline is historically frozen, and is endangered by its isolation from the major intellectual and global transformations of the last half century. Second, the domain of postmodern dialogue contains very substantial and far reaching critiques of this tradition; at the same time, it must be understood that these critiques are not lethal to the science as we have known it. Finally, and most importantly, if we can replace a defensive posture with more productive participation in the postmodern dialogues, psychological inquiry can be transformed in ways that will deeply enrich our endeavors.

### **Contours of Modernist Psychology**

Psychological science as we know it today is essentially a byproduct of what is often called "cultural modernism." There is now an enormous literature analyzing modernist culture and its institutions (cf. Berman, 1982; Frisbee, 1984; Harvey, 1989), and in this brief space I can but reflect certain central themes. In particular I will touch on three ingredients of the modernist worldview that are pivotal to the common practices of psychological science: individual knowledge, the objective world, and language as a carrier of truth.

#### **The Centrality of Individual Knowledge**

In western cultural history, "modernism" is typically traced to the period in which we moved from "the dark ages" of medievalism into the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was a historical watershed primarily owing to the dignity that its scholars and statesmen granted to the individual mind. For Enlightenment thinkers, it was no longer necessary to bend unquestioningly to the totalitarian force of royal or religious decree. For within each of us, it was proposed, lies a bounded and sacred sanctuary of the mind, a domain governed by our autonomous capacities for careful, conscious observation and rational deliberation. It is only my thought itself, proposed Descartes in 1637 that provides a certain foundation for all else.

It is this 17th century construction of the individual mind - and its further development in the 18th century, that served as the major rationalizing device for the

19th century beginnings of a systematic psychology. The effects were twofold: first, the individual mind came to be a preeminent object of study, and second, knowledge of the human mind could be understood as an achievement of the individual minds of scientific investigators. If individual mentality is the source of all human conduct, on the one hand, then to unlock the secrets of mental process is to gain a certain degree of control over human action. In Wilhelm Dilthey's (1914) terms, "The nexus of psychic life constitutes the originally primitive and fundamental datum (of scientific study)...the external organization of society in the ties of family, community, church and state, arise from the living nexus of the human mind..." (p. 76) At the same time, it is the individual investigator, endowed with capacities for observation and rationality, who is best equipped for such study. These twin assumptions continue to undergird research in contemporary psychology. As we now hold, in revealing the workings of cognitive schemas, information storage and retrieval, the emotions, and the like the individual scientist improves our capacities for prediction and control of human activity. Armed with the scientist's knowledge of these fundamental processes, we may derive procedures for curing mental illness, improving education, reducing crime, stamping out prejudice, creating fulfilling lives, and so on. In effect, it is through the scientist's systematic inquiry into the individual's mental states, that we may progressively move toward an ideal society.

### **The World as Objectively Given**

Within the modernist tradition a distinction is typically drawn between the "inner world" of mind and the "external world" of material. Within this dualist metaphysics, the importance placed on the individual mind is sensible primarily to the extent that mental processes are advantageous to our actions in the world. In this sense, the perfect companion to the fully functioning mind is an objectively knowable and rationally decipherable world. It is in this respect that the work of Enlightenment figures such as Isaac Newton and Francis Bacon were of pivotal importance. Their writings convincingly demonstrated that if we view the cosmos as material in nature, as composed of causally related entities, and available to observation by individual minds, then enormous strides can be made in our capacities for prediction and control. It is indeed the precise determination of the cause-effect relations among the elements making up the world that we typically define as knowledge. Again, such 18th century views were later inscribed in the 19th century writings on mental life (for example, in the works of Wundt and Titchener). They continue to reverberate today in the broadly shared assumptions that a) mental processes are available for objective study (e.g. they are biological processes at a higher level of abstraction), b) mental processes are related in a causal manner to environmental inputs on the one hand and to behavioral consequences on the other, and c) that the experimental method is superior to all others in capturing these causal relationships.

### **Language as Truth Bearing**

There is a third modernist belief that informs our discipline. In comparison to the stories of individual knowledge and the materially ordered world, it was of minor

significance to modernist thinkers. Yet, it is one that proves critical as we move to the potentials of postmodernism. The emphasis in this case is on the function of language in both science and the culture at large. John Locke (1689) captures the Enlightenment view of language. Our words are, according to Locke, "signs of internal conceptions." They stand as external "marks for the ideas within (the individual's) mind whereby they might be made known to others and the thoughts to man's (sic) mind might be conveyed from one to another." (p. 212) Thus, if the individual mind acquires knowledge of the world, and language is our means of conveying the content of mind to others, then language becomes the bearer of truth. In the same way today, as scientists we treat language (including numerical language) as the chief means by which we inform our colleagues and our culture of the results of our observations and thought. In effect, we use language to report on the nature of the world as we see it, and these reports are then subject to falsification or vindication as others test them against their observations. The results of systematic and collective observation, then, should be an array of words and explanations that match or map the world as it is.

### **The Emerging Voices of Postmodernism**

As we find, these three modernist themes - emphasizing the individual mind, an objectively knowable world, and language as carrier of truth, are mainstays of traditional psychological science. Yet, critiques of modernist assumptions now issue from every quarter of the humanities and the sciences. Many of these have focused on the traditional conception of scientific knowledge in particular (cf. Kuhn, 1970; Lyotard, 1984; Rorty, 1979; Poovey, 2001). Rather than touching on all the many themes relevant to our discipline, space permits only a brief account of fundamental transformations in the three linchpin lines of reasoning just outlined. To appreciate these transformations is also to set the stage for exploring the enormous promise for psychology in the new century.

### **From Individual Reason to Communal Rhetoric**

While faith in individual knowledge lies somewhere toward the center of the modernist worldview, the texts of postmodernism find the concept of individual rationality deeply problematic, if not oppressive in its function. Its problems are demonstrated most clearly in the case of literary and rhetorical critiques of individual reason (cf. Derrida, 1976; Myerson, 1994). Consider again the modernist assumption that one's language is an expression of one's reasoning about the world. As literary and semiotic theorists propose, language is a system unto itself, a system that both precedes and outlives the individual. Thus to speak as a rational agent is to participate in a system that is already constituted; it is to borrow from the existing genres, or to appropriate forms of talk (and related action) already in place. In this sense, private rationality is a form of cultural participation simply removed from the immediate exigencies of relationship. How could we deliberate privately on matters of justice, morality, or optimal strategies of action, for example, except through the terms of public culture? (See also Sandel, 1982.) When applied to the domain of scientific

knowledge, we see that the individual scientist is only "rational" if he or she adopts the codes of discourse common to his/her particular community of science. In effect, scientific rationality is achieved through locally privileged uses of language (Nelson, Megill and McCloskey, 1987; Simons, 1990).

The oppressive potential inhering in the modernist view of individual rationality is made most apparent in feminist and multicultural critiques along with writings on the colonizing effects of language (Lutz, 1996; Bohan and Russell, 1999; Foucault, 1980). As variously surmised, there are hierarchies of rationality within the culture. Some individuals are deemed more rational, and thus more worthy of leadership, social position, and wealth than others. Interestingly, those who occupy these positions are systematically drawn from a very small sector of the population (In the U.S., typically white male. Such categories as "female" or "black" are often associated with being irrational or emotional). In effect, while Enlightenment arguments have succeeded in unseating the totalitarian power of crown and cross, they now give rise to new structures of power and domination. And, if the exercise of rationality is, after all, an exercise in language; if convincing descriptions and explanations are, after all, rhetorically constituted, then there is no ultimate means of justifying one form of rationality, description, or explanation over another. If such justifications were offered, they would also prove to be exercises in linguistic convention. In effect, the very idea of "superior reason" currently functions unjustifiably to exclude many people from the corridors of decision making.

Yet, the implications of postmodernist dialogue take us far beyond critique. For when these various ideas are linked to emerging arguments in the history of science and the sociology of knowledge, we find a more promising view of human rationality emerging. Consider again the role of language in cultural life. Language is inherently a byproduct of human interchange. There can be no "private language" (Wittgenstein, 1953); to speak in a symbol system of one's very own would fail to make sense. Or, as we psychologists' might say, such a language would be a form of autism, possibly a schizophrenic symptom. Viable language, then, depends on communal coordination - a fundamentally relational event. Making sense - or being rational - is inherently a form of communal participation. We are invited by this view to see ourselves not as isolated and competing atoms, but as fundamentally interdependent beings. We shall return to this issue shortly.

### **From an Objective to a Socially Constructed World**

For modernists, the world simply is "out there" available for observation. Within the texts of postmodernism, however, there are no grounds for such a presumption. There is no means of declaring that the world is either "out there" or reflected objectively by an "in here." To speak of "the world" or "mind" at all, requires language. Such words as "matter" and "mental process" are not mirrors of the world, but constituents of language systems. To speak, then, of the "material world," and "causal relations" is not to describe accurately what there is, but to participate in a textual genre - to draw from the immense repository of intelligibilities that constitute a particular cultural

tradition. Or, to amplify my earlier remarks, the view of human beings as constituted by universal mechanisms (cognitive, emotional, etc.), causally related to environmental antecedents and behavioral consequences, is not derived from "what is the case." Rather, this conception of the person is an outgrowth of a particular tradition - including both its linguistic genres and the institutions in which they are embedded. This conception the person cannot itself be verified or falsified through observation; rather, a linguistic forestructure is essential to direct and interpret whatever observations we do make.

In this sense what we take to be "the real," what we believe to be transparently true about human functioning, is a byproduct of communal construction. This is not to offer a form of linguistic solipsism or reductionism; it is not to say that "nothing exists outside our linguistic constructions." Whatever exists simply exists, irrespective of our linguistic practices. However, once we begin to describe or explain what exists, we inevitably proceed from a forestructure of shared intelligibility. We can unproblematically study the emotion of "anger," for example, because we have a long tradition of indexing people's actions in this way. However, we would be ill equipped to commence research on "Atman," "liget" or "fago" because these terms from other cultures are generally unintelligible to Western speakers. When we describe "the essence" of the individual mind we always speak from some tradition. This is not to say that our descriptions and explanations cannot be subjected to correction or alteration through observation. Research findings can indeed confirm or disconfirm our theories. However, these corrections or alterations can only be achieved by an array of pre-existing agreements or conventions. Once we agree about what constitutes an observation, what language we shall use to describe and explain, what counts as a method of study, and the like then we can set about the task of "testing" a given account of the world. We can corroborate hypotheses about anger, for example, but only with a set of agreements already in place. Should others fail to accede to the agreements, then "the evidence" is for them rendered meaningless. This is so both in the case of natural sciences and in spiritual practices. They both constitute traditions of understanding; among their major differences are the rules of agreement (ontologies, epistemologies, ethics) which they embrace, and the kinds of outcomes they provide for the culture. The importance of outcomes becomes prominent in a third postmodern transformation.

### **Language: From Truthful Picture to Pragmatic Practice**

As we find, the postmodernist proposes that language is not the child of the mind but of cultural process. It also follows that one's descriptions of the world are not outward expressions of an inner mirror of the mind - that is, external reports on one's internal "observations" or "perceptions." Nor, on the scientific level, is what we report in our journals and books a mirror or map that corresponds to the contours of nature. Rather our languages of description and explanation are generated within our relationships - with each other and the world. Again, following the late work of Wittgenstein (1953), language gains its meaning not from its mental or subjective underpinnings, but from its use in action. Or, emphasizing the significant place of human relatedness in

postmodern writings, language gains its meaning within ongoing forms of interaction - within "language games" as Wittgenstein called them. To "tell the truth," on this account, is not to furnish an accurate picture of "what actually happened," but to participate in a set of social conventions, a way of putting things sanctioned within a given "form of life." To "be objective" is to play by the rules within a given tradition of social practices. To illustrate, the terms "strike," "inning," and "home run" gain their meaning from within the practices that constitute the game of baseball. One can be quite accurate in assessing whether a "home run" has occurred within the practice of the game; but outside the ballpark the term moves only metaphorically - if at all. More broadly put, this is to say that language is world constituting; it assists in generating and/or sustaining certain forms of cultural practice. In this sense, to do science is not to hold a mirror to nature, but to participate actively in the interpretive conventions and practices of a particular culture. The major question that must be asked of scientific accounts, then, is not whether they are "true to nature," but what do these accounts (and the practices in which they are embedded) offer to the culture more generally. The local truths of scientific cultures are essential to sustaining their traditions, but to presume the local to be universal is not only arrogant; it sets the stage for conflict and a deathly silencing. I will return to the implications of this view shortly.

### **Postmodernism in Question**

For many psychologists these lines of thought are well understood and appreciated; others approach these ideas with strong critical reservation (Parker, 1998; Held, 1996; Nightengale and Cromby, 1999). Before exploring the positive implications of postmodernism, it will be helpful to give expression to three of the major criticisms.

There is first the anguished cry of the realists - both material and psychological. As materialist realists adamantly object, "But there is a world out there. There is no denying the reality of the human body, of death, or that the world is round." And as the politically concerned realist adds, if we were to agree that oppression, injustice and power are socially constructed, we not only lose the point of social critique but contribute to the misery of the status quo. As the psychological realist joins in, to deny the reality of mental process is to destroy the discipline of psychology altogether. And the humanist psychologist adds, to deny the reality of individual experience and human agency is to destroy the moral foundations of society. These are powerful critiques indeed, and the present response can only touch on the results of existing rejoinders (see, for example, Edwards, Ashmore and Potter, 1995; Gergen, 1994b, 2001). For now, it is important to point out that such critiques issue from a modernist sensibility in which the term "real" plays a strong moral and constitutive role. Only the real is worth studying, reforming or revolutionizing. In contrast, the postmodernist proposes that arguments about what is "really real" are futile. There is no means of transcending cultural traditions to make such an assay. Further, in the present global conditions - in which cultures increasingly collide and social movements can be organized with dispatch - taking stands on what is ultimately "real" (or "true" or "moral") is increasingly perilous. In a world in which

there are conflicting conceptions of these verities, strong commitments invite intense conflict and frequent attempts to eradicate those who stand as threats.

At the same time, to propose that we live in a socially constructed world does not make it a world of any less significance. Consciousness of the cultural constitution of my emotions, for example, does not render them null and void. To understand that the value I place on human equality is an outgrowth of the Western tradition does not mean that I abandon the value. To know that a home run is only part of a game does not lessen the thrill when the bases are loaded. However, once conscious of the cultural contingency of my ontology and values, I acquire a certain degree of humility. I am prepared for a more searching dialogue about these matters, and especially with those who do not share these assumptions. Most will agree, for example, that death is both real and inexorable. However, if what we understand by this reality is simply "the end of biological functioning" we impoverish the event in terms of the rich heritage of meaning available to us, a heritage that may be vital during times in which the search for meaning is intense (Neimeyer, 2001) It is in the unstinting commitment to a particular way of defining "the real" that we become deaf, dialogues ceases, and we slouch toward the end of meaning.

A second important critique of postmodern arguments is an extension of early philosophic diatribes against skepticism. The argument takes many forms, often with the flavor in the following: "You claim that there is no truth, no objectivity, no knowledge without value bias, and no universal logic. And yet, you claim your arguments to be true, logical, objective and non-partisan. Your proposals are thus incoherent, ultimately relying on precisely what is placed under attack." There are many replies to such critiques of skepticism (Gergen, 1994b; Smith, 1997), but for the moment let this suffice: The kind of postmodern constructionism to which I am drawn makes no claims for the truth, objectivity, universality or moral superiority of its own position. To be sure, certain arguments of the traditional kind are put forth (e.g. they follow certain conventions of rational argument, they make reference to an assumed reality, etc.), but this is not to impress them with the stamp of Truth. It is only to engage in a cultural practice of sense-making. One can scarcely stand outside one's traditions and still communicate effectively. Most importantly, one should not mistake the form of the constructionist arguments for their function. The attempt in these arguments is not to generate yet another "first philosophy" or foundation to replace all that has preceded - for example, to put logical empiricism to death. To construe the proposals in this way would be to give them a modernist reading. When we enter the postmodern dialogues, we begin to look at such arguments in their pragmatic capacity. What do they accomplish in cultural life; what institutions do they champion, what do they silence?

This latter emphasis on pragmatic outcome is particularly important in light of a final critique of postmodernism, one that issues not from the empiricist tradition but from more politically and morally committed enclaves within psychology. Here the critics take postmodern constructionism to task for its so called, "moral relativism" - its failure to take a stand in terms of what is just, good, or valuable in cultural life. In my



view, most such critiques border on the disingenuous, for it is not the lack of any commitment that is typically decried, but the lack of commitment to the particular standpoint of the critic (e.g. Marxist, humanist, feminist). At the same time, many engaged in the postmodern dialogues do indeed support such political and moral causes (cf. Bohan and Russell, 1999; Hepburn, 2000). There is nothing about the emerging orientation that argues for the obliteration of our traditions - of science or human values. The advantage of postmodern constructionism is that it does not seek to lodge these commitments in some form of foundation, a secure base from which others may be viewed as transcendently wrong or evil. It is just such unrelenting commitments that invite the silencing of the other - from forms of subtle exclusion to the technologies of genocide. It is in this context that the postmodern context has given rise to a range of explorations into forms of dialogue enabling otherwise hostile camps of the committed to speak with each other in ways that may traverse boundaries of difference (cf. Chasin et al, 1997; Cooperrider and Whitney, 2000). When we understand our values as historically and culturally situated, we are more fully prepared to engage in the kinds of dialogue from which new and more viable constellations of meaning may emerge.

### **Promises of a Postmodern Psychology**

Thus far I have briefly sketched central modernist assumptions in psychological science, and explored major criticisms and revisions of these assumptions. As I indicated at the outset, the lines of postmodern critique are substantial. They virtually transform the landscape of intellectual life, and their reverberations now ripple across western culture and around the globe. Yet, as many are aware, while modernism as a cultural movement has been subjected to extensive and elaborate critique, there has been all too little concern with more promising futures. In this sense, one might even say that much of the critique of modernism has been irresponsible. It has been all too content with bashing existing traditions, and too little with the repercussions. In my view, however, the emerging revisions in the conceptions of knowledge, objectivity and truth harbor rich potentials. When the positive implications of the postmodern discussions are more fully extended, we find reason for a profound increment in the activities of the psychological profession and its potential contribution to the world. I do not believe these possibilities are simply idle fantasies. In the remainder of this paper, I shall outline several significant departures for psychology in a postmodern context. In doing so, I shall also touch on promising developments to date.

### **Empirical Science in a Postmodern Context**

First we must treat the dominant tradition - empirical research devoted to testing hypotheses typically of universal scope. What of its future in a postmodern context? Here it is essential to point out that while highly critical - on both conceptual and ideological grounds - there is nothing within the postmodern critiques that is lethal to this tradition. As I have pointed out, the postmodern critiques are themselves without foundations; they constitute important voices but not final voices. Empirical psychology represents a tradition of discourse, practice, and politics that has as much

right to sustain its existence as any other tradition. The point of postmodern critique, in my view, is not to annihilate tradition but to give all traditions the right to participate within the unfolding dialogues.

Yet, the postmodern critiques do ask empirical researchers for a more pragmatic accounting of their efforts. In what ways does psychological inquiry benefit humankind and what are the detriments? This is not to ask for the traditional reply: empirical psychology generates basic knowledge of the mind and behavior. From the postmodern vantage point, knowledge is such only within a tradition. The important questions pertain to the value of the local tradition of investigation for the cultures that make up the society more generally. Here we are drawn to more pragmatic questions about the value of traditional theories, practices and findings. As psychological theories are exported to the culture more generally, what are the reverberations in cultural life? When we hold that the primary ingredients of the mind are cognitive, when we view behavior as genetically prepared, when we distinguish between pathology and normalcy, what doors are opened within the culture, and which are shut? For example, is the recent emphasis on positive psychology (see the special issue of the *American Psychologist*, (Jan. 2000) not more promising for the culture than the traditional focus on deficit? Is cultural life not more enhanced when we focus on positive possibilities than all the possible failings? Psychology has also amassed a sophisticated array of methods for generating predictions. The primary question is, however, what utility do our existing forms of prediction have for the culture outside the laboratory. For example, in my view the kinds of predictions sought within the field of health psychology (with dependent variables of life and death consequence) can be quite valuable to many people in the culture. I am far less sanguine about the predictions of artificial and culturally isolated behaviors often used in testing abstract hypotheses about mental function. The question is not whether such hypotheses are true or false in any ultimate sense, but whether the particular predictions have any utility outside the local game of truth. As I see it, a postmodern empiricism would replace the "truth game" with a search for culturally useful theories and findings with significant cultural meaning. An effective empiricism requires a posture of culturally, ethically and politically informed pragmatism.

This is not all we may anticipate from research of the traditional sort. Empirical demonstrations can bring the kind of life to abstract theory that kindles appreciation of its particular construction of the world. Theories of operant conditioning come alive, for example, as one observes a researcher conditioning the pecking of a pigeon. Further, research can incite public discussion on issues of political and moral significance. This was so of the early research on conformity (Asch, 1956) and obedience (Milgram, 1974) as it is of today's research on the way stereotypes may affect intellectual performance for women and African Americans (Steele, 1997). We are not speaking in either of these cases about discovering transcendent truth, but rather, about psychologists as effective cultural participants. At the same time, however, the strong promises of psychology in a postmodern context do not derive from the kind of honing of the modernist tradition just discussed. Rather, I believe

the profound gains are located in the additions to the current agenda. The postmodern invitation is to expand our potentials, and in my view the vistas are both exciting and promising. Here I shall treat - all too briefly - anticipations and emerging realizations in the domains of intellectual enrichment, methodological flowering, and the profusion of new practices.

### **The Vitalization of Intellectual Life**

In the modernist tradition we were taught to take our marching orders from reality - to observe the world for what it is and to report accordingly. In effect, the world serves as the ultimate primogenitor of our words. In the postmodern context the emphasis is reversed. The world does not speak itself through us. Rather, what we "find" will depend importantly on the theoretical and metatheoretical paradigms already embraced. What counts as a significant datum for the cognivist will not do so for the psychoanalyst, the behaviorist, or the phenomenologist. This reversal of emphasis - from the world as given to our interpretation of the world - restores to psychology a tradition much endangered - that of intellectual reflection. In a broad sense, it is only to the extent that we expand and enrich the domain of theoretical deliberation are we likely to move cultural intelligibilities beyond the commonplace and to broaden the scope and potentials of research. The realms of expansion and enrichment are several, and in my view there are significant signs of life in each.

**Reflexive Deliberation.** Psychological science has long been dedicated to a posture of value neutrality. This posture was lodged in a belief that facts could be separated from values, and the result within the field has been a generalized avoidance of debates of moral and political significance. To paraphrase the dominant sentiment, "Do politics on your own time; ideology has no place in science." In the postmodern intellectual context the distinction between fact and value becomes blurred. While one may carry out research from a value neutral standpoint, theory, research findings, and methods of inquiry may all enter cultural life as "authoritative intelligibilities." Thus the theoretical distinctions we make (e.g. **between rapid as opposed to slow information processing**), the findings we report (e.g. that the aged are inferior in information processing), and the research methods we favor (e.g. where manipulation and control are keys to "proper understanding"), all enter society as guiding intelligibilities with the capacity to alter cultural life for good or ill - according to some standard. To avoid these issues is not only myopic but irresponsible. If our intelligibilities favor certain ways of life while possibly destroying others, then it is essential that we develop a robust program of reflection - ethical, political and conceptual. Who are we helping and who are we hurting when we distinguish between the intelligent and unintelligent, pathological and normal, prejudiced and the unbiased? What form of culture do we create when we view exploitation, infidelity, or rape as biologically prepared actions of the male? These sorts of questions deserve the careful and caring scrutiny of we who occupy the discipline, not as an afterthought but as a prelude to inquiry.

In this respect there is reason for encouragement. Feminist critique of the past two

decades has established a powerful and sophisticated precedent (e.g. Hare-Mustin and Marecek, 1990; Morawski, 1994; M. Gergen and Davis, 1997). The creation of APA Divisions on Ethnic and Minority Issues, on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Issues, and on International Psychology encourages a broader sharing of the same kind of reflection. At the same time, there is a steadily increasing volume of ethically and politically reflexive literature within the field more generally, a literature that examines the numerous ways in which psychological inquiry can negatively affect cultural life (see, for example, Parker, et al., 1995; Prilleltensky, 1994; Ibanez, and Iniguez, 1997). The first international conference on critical psychology was held in Sydney, Australia this past year. The first issue of the International Journal of Critical Psychology is imminent. Such work also begins to open further horizons: psychologists are invited to turn their critical attention beyond the discipline to treat political and valuational issues within the culture more broadly (cf. Walkerdine, 1989; Apfelbaum, 2000). In postmodern conditions, passionate analysis of existing social conditions becomes a legitimate and desirable option for the professional.

Yet, ethical and political reflection must also be coupled with astute conceptual analysis. **We must be prepared to stand outside our theories and ask about their properties** - for example, their coherence, their circularity, and the extent to which our explanations add to the vocabularies of cultural understanding (as opposed to recirculating tired old assumptions). Again, a literature is now accumulating (e.g. Smedslund, 1988; Westmeyer, 1989; Tolman et al. 1996), and curricula in theoretical psychology are beginning to increase in number and sophistication. Slife and Williams' (1997) arguments for a sub-disciplinary specialty of theoretical psychology are both timely and compelling. At the same time, while critical deliberation can add a vitalizing dimension to our future work, it would be an unhappy circumstance should we simply assign the task to a group of specialists. The dialogues here should be broad and integrative. Nor should they be nihilistic in their intent. The point of criticism should not be that of terminating traditions or practices but helping them to evolve in ways that more fully integrate the voices of the discipline and of our constituents, and contribute to the intellectual resources of the world.

**Historical Restoration and Revitalization.** In a sense psychology is a cruel discipline; guided by the image of progress in knowledge, all that is currently alive moves steadily toward obscurity. Research conducted even a decade ago is virtually confined to a casket. In contrast, within the postmodern context all that is solid need not melt into air. Rather, theoretical perspectives constitute discursive resources. As such, they enrich our practices - both in the profession and the society more generally. Thus, as we expand these discursive resources so do we gain innovative flexibility and greater potential for effective action - both with respect to disciplinary practices and within the culture more generally. In this sense we should strive to sustain the vitality of our earlier traditions, and as well, challenge these traditions to enrich and revitalize themselves in light of the contemporary cultural context. An excellent example of this kind of refurbishment can be found in psychoanalytic theorizing, as it has moved from a strictly depth or psychodynamic orientation to incorporate concerns with narrative, language and relational process (cf. Spence,

1982; Mitchell and Aron, 1999) Stimulated by the postmodern dialogues, there has also been a substantial renaissance in hermeneutic and phenomenological theorizing, and the result has been a brace of innovative and challenging proposals (cf. Martin and Sugarman, 1999; Richardson, Fowers and Guignon, 1999). Such efforts must now be extended in further directions.

This kind of historical revitalization must also be coupled with analyses of the historical conditions giving rise to various conceptions of the mind. How did our conceptions of mental life come into being, what function did they play in cultural life, and so on. Such analyses are pivotal in casting light on the function played by conceptions of the mind within our culture today. Psychologists now join historians in this endeavor and the outcome is a substantial literature on the historical genesis and transformation of anger, child development, boredom, the sense of smell, the concept of an independent self, and more. Perhaps the key journal in this domain, History of the Human Sciences, is also flourishing.

**Inter-cultural Dialogue.** The postmodern dialogues make us keenly aware of the historical and cultural location of the empiricist tradition in psychology. We slowly become aware that our taken for granted assumptions about mental life, along with our methods of exploration, are saturated with Western values, along with an ontology and epistemology that are uniquely ours. We see, for example, that concepts of cognition and emotion - along with experimental methods and the scientific values of prediction and control - are byproducts of the Western tradition. To be sure, there is much to be cherished in this tradition. However, the postmodern dialogues suggest a certain degree of humility in this respect; universalizing tendencies approximate neo-colonialism. Moreover, they invite intercultural dialogue, in which concepts of the person and of knowledge itself, along with methods and practices are appreciatively exchanged. Western psychology stands to be vitally enriched, for example, by the emerging literatures on Asian and Indian psychology (cf. Sugiman, et al, 1999; Paranjpe, 1998). In the same way movements toward indigenous psychology open doors to new methodologies and practices.

Perhaps the most visible movement toward inter-cultural dialogue is carried in the emergence of cultural psychology (cf. Bruner, 1990; Cole, 1996). In this case researchers explore the possibility that psychological functioning is significantly embedded within the cultural milieu. Thus, in contrast to the universalist assumptions guiding psychology in the modernist mold, psychologists propose that the very conception of the self, cognition, emotion and so on are born within cultural traditions (cf. Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Valsiner and van der Veer, 2000). Much welcomed in this respect is also the journal, *Culture and Psychology*. The implications of these discussions are profoundly important for the discipline.

**Creating Functional Intelligibilities.** One of the most significant vistas opened by the postmodern dialogues lies in the refiguring of theoretical potentials. If our descriptions and explanations of the world are not demanded by the nature of the world itself, then we are released from the shackles of the taken for granted. Most

importantly, we are invited into a posture of theoretical creativity. As scientists we are liberated from our task as mere mirror holders to the "world as it is," and challenged to articulate new and potentially transformative conceptions. Our task is not simply that of describing what currently exists, but of creating intelligibilities that may foster worlds to come. Metaphorically, our function shifts from that of scribe to poet. In certain degree it is the willingness to function poetically from which the importance of Freud, Skinner and Piaget can be attributed. Through their interpretive imagination they were able to forge new worlds of intelligibility, worlds that could usefully be appropriated (for good or ill) by the surrounding culture. Much the same spirit now inhabits such innovative concepts as "protean process" (Lifton, 1993) "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and "wisdom" in aging (Baltes and Staudinger, 2000).

A more extensive illustration of the creative impulse at work is found in recent work attempting to reformulate psychological processes in relational terms. The traditional view of psychological processes or mechanisms "in the mind," creates a vision of society in which individuals function as isolated, self-contained, and competitive monads (Sampson, 1993). Setting in motion a more collaborative view of human life, a range of new work asks us to consider psychological process as constituted within relationships. As we have seen, for example, rather than viewing thought as a psychological process that precedes language, we may define rationality in terms of language use itself. In effect, rationality is conjointly created within dialogue (cf. Billig, 1987) Rather than holding attitudes to be underlying determinants of action, an attitude may be equated with taking a particular position in a conversation (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). The self, in this case, is a matter of how one is constructed in various relationships, to possess an emotion is to perform appropriately in a culturally constituted scenario, and to possess a memory is to take part in a process of communal negotiation and sanction (cf. Gergen, 1994b; Shotter, 1990). In effect, all that we have heretofore defined as private and separated from "the other," is conceptualized as inherently relational - inseparable from communal activity.

The present challenge, then, is to move from happenstance to the reflexively conscious creation of culturally significant theory. In this light we can take pleasure in the emergence of journals such as Theory and Psychology, Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology, Philosophy and Psychotherapy, New Ideas in Psychology, Feminism and Psychology, Journal of Constructivist Psychology, and the Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour. All feature significant moves toward generative theory. Whether such vehicles can facilitate communication with broader communities remains in question.

### **The Flowering of Methodology**

Let us turn from vistas of intellectual enrichment to methods of inquiry in psychology. This is not a clean break in subject matters because our theoretical presuppositions are intimately linked to our methods of inquiry (cf Danziger, 1990). Behavioral observation in a laboratory experiment would be degraded data for a depth psychologist, and the experimental focus on cause and effect would be myopic

for the phenomenologist. This is to say, that as we expand the domain of intelligible theory in psychology, so do we open new doors to methods of inquiry. The reverse may also occur: as we explore new methods of inquiry so may we transform our theoretical understandings. Further, differing methodologies carry with them differing values or ideologies. At times we purchase control over variables at the price of secrecy and manipulation; other investigators wish to sacrifice control for more sensitive and caring engagement with those they wish to understand. Methods, no less than theory and data, contribute to cultural intelligibilities and forms of life.

It is in this domain that we find that the postmodern dialogues have given rise to an unparalleled flourishing in methodology within the social sciences more generally. The publication of the 2nd edition of the highly successful, Handbook of Qualitative Research, along with the journal, Qualitative Inquiry, are significant weathervanes. Slowly these innovations are beginning to make their way into the psychological literature. The postmodern concern with the linguistic construction of reality has stimulated a new and innovative range of methods for discourse and conversation analysis (van Dijk, 1986; Van Mannen, 2000). Increasing efforts are directed not only to illuminating patterns of discourse, but to critically exploring their interpersonal and ideological ramifications. Such journals as Discourse and Society, Discourse Studies, and Journal of Language and Social Psychology are indicators of this explosion. Closely related, researchers are increasingly engaged in exploring the pivotal function of narratives in self-understanding, human development, and personal well-being (Sarbin, 1986). The volume of such work has led, among other things, to the creation of the book series, The Narrative Study of Lives, and to the journal, Narrative Inquiry.

Other investigators, concerned with the political impotence of much psychological research, and discontent with the ways in which traditional methods distance scientist from subject, have developed an array of action research methods. The range and richness of such methods - in which researchers typically work with oppressed communities to achieve local ends - is amply explored in the recently published, Handbook of Action Research, Participative Inquiry and Practice (Reason and Bradbury, 2000). I should also mention cutting edge developments in auto-ethnography - research in which the investigator uses his or her own life experiences to provide insights into human functioning (Ellis and Bochner, 1996); there is also polyvocal inquiry in which investigators attempt to give voice to multiple perspectives on a given phenomenon - such as child molesting or living with AIDs (Lather and Smithies, 1997); and finally there are interesting developments in performative psychology, where attempts are made to explore and develop human action through public performance (M. Gergen, 2001). Critics of the methodological explosion worry about the fragmentation of the discipline. But concerns with fragmentation are only important if one believes that a single voice should prevail - one ontology, epistemology, and code of values for all. On the contrary, within the postmodern context, a plethora of methods is welcomed. Here we open the door to the multiplicity of traditions of which we are a part, and an ensuing dialogue with

unlimited creative potential.

### **The Enrichment of Practice**

Finally I wish to touch on contributions of psychology to cultural practice. In the modernist view, a strong and hierarchical distinction is drawn between knowledge generation and the application of knowledge in practice. From the postmodern view this distinction is largely erased. Theoretical accounts of the world are not mirror reflections of the world, but discursive actions within a community. In effect, theory is itself a form of practice. As argued earlier, such discourse can be enormously important because it constitutes an invitation to act in certain ways as opposed to others; in this sense theory can be constitutive of cultural life. Yet, how can we press beyond the discursive world of the academic profession, and more directly enrich forms of practice that might better serve society. If psychology is inevitably a body of cultural practices, how might we augment the range of what is now available? What can be said, then, about the great majority of the profession - those engaged in therapy, counselling, education, testing, organizational work, and so on?

Although many psychological practices remain tightly conventional, it is in the domain of practice that we find the postmodern dialogues in psychology have made their most telling impact. In the therapeutic community, for example, we find a multitude of new practices based on a conception of therapy as the reconstruction of meaning. Narrative therapies are the most obvious exemplars (cf. White and Epston, 1990; McLeod, 1997), and are now practiced around the globe. Narrative therapies typically stress the importance of the stories by which people understand and live their lives, and the functional (or dysfunctional) significance of these stories within the cultural milieu. Brief therapies, postmodern therapies, and much systemic therapy also stress the importance of language in constructing the realities by which we live (Anderson, 1997; deShazer, 1994; Friedman, 1993). Closely tied to these developments in therapy has been a rethinking of diagnostic categories and procedures. Extensive criticism and deconstruction of traditional DSM categories (Kutchins and Kirk, 1997; Hepworth, 1999) has been coupled with a concern for dialogic procedures that give voice to a wider circle of engaged parties. Here, forward thinking therapists are abandoning psycho-diagnosis in favor of teams - made up of representatives from various helping professions along with family and community knowledgeable. These teams deliberate on possible ways of understanding the individual within his or her context, and how best to go on. The results thus far have been impressive in reducing both hospitalization and drug prescriptions (cf. Seikkula, et al., 1995).

Outside the therapeutic arena, educational psychologists are also realizing the limitations of the individualist view of knowledge, and traditional forms of pedagogy centered on the improvement of individual minds. There is particular interest in Vygotskian orientations to education that stress the relationship of teacher to student (Rogoff, 1990; Holzman, 1997). More radically, psychologists are exploring collaborative pedagogies, processes that attempt to replace hierarchical teaching (top



down) with productive and more equalizing classroom dialogue (cf. Wells, 1999). In the organizational sphere, we find again a strong movement concerned with the social construction of organizational realities (cf Weick,1995). Practitioners have developed a variety of new practices relying on narrative and metaphor for reducing conflict in organizations and inspiring positive change. I am also very impressed by work in the medical sphere which challenges the biological universals of pain and explores the cultural construction of illness (Frank, 1995; Morris, 1998). Here we find that the experience of pain and illness may importantly depend on the meanings assigned to them. Narrative understanding may be vital to our physical well-being.

### **In Conclusion**

In the intellectual world more generally, psychologists are notorious in their absence from the major debates of the past 20 years. In effect, the risk we incur through our immense success in self-organizing, is that of irrelevance and ultimate degeneration. Rather than closing our laboratory doors on the storms that rage around us, there is a greater strength to be gained through constructive dialogue. As I have tried to demonstrate here, with judicious and careful sifting of the arguments, we may emerge with a far richer and more effective psychology than we have ever known. This will be a psychology replete with conceptual resources, sensitive to ideology and history, innovative in its methods of inquiry, and a continuing font of new and effective practices. It will be a psychology in which colonialist universalism is replaced by a global conversation among equals. Most importantly, it will be a psychology with an unparalleled contribution to our various cultures and to the world more generally. As I have tried to demonstrate, there are brave beginnings to such a psychology. However, the future remains hanging in the balance. The inertial forces of the routine and the right feeling realities of the past are immense. Can transformative dialogues take place? As we speak together now so do we create our future.

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### Footnote

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