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Psychology as "Politics by Other Means"

Kenneth J. Gergen
Swarthmore College

Psychological inquiry is rapidly approaching a new legitimation crisis. As we become increasingly aware of the political and ideological underpinnings or implications of various theories, research findings, and methods, so are these theories, findings and methods called into question. This has been precisely the aim of the critical psychology movement, as its voices have become increasingly audible. The voices of Sampson (1993), Cushman (1995), Prilletensky(1994), Parker (1995), Walkerdine (1989), and Morawski (1994) - among many others - have brought into clear focus the ways in which seemingly neutral proposals of the science and its practices carry with them biases of gender, class, race, sexual preference, individualism, instrumentalism, Westernism, and much more. And, as we become politically aware so do we read theory and research in a different way. Specifically, we read content as politics, claims to knowledge as strategies of power.

For the sake of argument, permit me to speak of these critiques as issuing from the liberal or left wing of the discipline. The abiding concern is typically with the marginalized voices of the culture, and subtle forms of oppression and injustice insinuated into our professional commitments. Putting it in this way we are sensitized to the possibility that psychological inquiry could also be attacked from the domain of right. And indeed, it is precisely this form of critique that now breaks into the scene with increasing regularity. In the March, 2001, issue of the *American Psychologist*, Richard Redding has made a compelling case for the liberal bias inherent in much psychological research. As he documents, the results of research on almost every controversial political issue - from race prejudice, gay and lesbian issues, abortion, law and order, and the like - favor a liberal agenda.

In effect, we are lurching toward the potentially dangerous condition of having all psychology redefined as politics by other means. The politics are also particularly insidious because the "tellings" are typically cloaked in the language of objectivity, logic, and value neutrality. We approach the possibility that all our commentaries on the nature of human suffering, all research, and claims to therapeutic success will be discounted. Consider the case of research to support various cases in a court of law, such as abortion, civil rights, etc. As one federal judge has complained in a case of school testing discrimination, psychologists' opinions "were more the result of a doctrinaire commitment to a preconceived idea than they are the result of scientific inquiry" (*Pase v. Hannon*, 1980, p. 836). Or, as Senator Orin Hatch (1982) has indeed suggested, psychologists are moving into the position where "the findings of their

research are almost perfectly predictable from their political views." (p. 1036)

In what follows I wish to address the possibility of moving beyond this new form of legitimation crisis. First I shall briefly take up several alternatives suggested by the existing literature. My chief aim, however, will be to articulate an alternative proposal for what I shall call a *transpositional hermeneutic*.

First Order Damage Control

At the outset, there are implicit (and sometimes explicit) attempts within both left and right wing camps to establish a forum of neutrality. That is, in both cases there are what may be viewed as a modernist commitment to reason and observation as furnishing the kinds of non-partisan accounts of human action that would ultimately allow us to transcend our biases. It is most obviously the case in the positivist/empiricist wings of the discipline. In this way, for example, IQ researchers have attempted to thwart critiques of racial bias by using better samples and more refined measures. And in this same matter, Ray Fowler, CEO of the American Psychological Association, responded to the congressional attacks on the sex abuse article by publicly promising an independent reevaluation of the article, and vowing to publish critiques that would be made available to the public on-line. In effect, Fowler attempted to assure Congress that evidence and reason would ultimately demonstrate whether the research was valid or not.

However, for many critics of the liberal to left, the situation is more complicated. Indeed, for them, the positivist/empiricist orientation is itself seen as harboring conservative biases. Experimentation, statistics, and even theory do not escape the charges of political/ideological investment. In this sense, these forms of leftist critique do not offer empirical support or justification of the traditional kind. The position of the critique is thus tenuous. It is put forward as "true," but it cannot fall back on empiricist foundations for warranting truth. The result is, that while eschewing positivism, one can find in many of these critiques some faintly articulated foundation for a transcendent vantage point from which claims to "having it right" can be substantiated. This is most evident in the work of Ian Parker and his colleagues, who reject positivism but embrace a form of what they call *realism*. Such claims to realism enable them to launch attacks from the left, but leave no recourse for the positivist to claim that unbiased truth is indeed on their side. Humanist and morality centered critiques of the discipline also bristle with intimations of a transcendent vantage point from which critique can be justified. Here it is a moral high ground that is occupied, with intimated reliance on a foundation of moral reasoning.

Of course, from a social constructionist standpoint, there is reason for suspicion of all claims to transcendence - positivist, realist, humanist or any other kind (Gergen, 1994). Here it is proposed that there is no neutral ground on which our claims about the world can stand. All inquiry and critique are lodged within traditions of value, and will necessarily privilege certain cultural arrangements over others. There is no

means of correcting the biases, or generating insights and outcomes that are expunged of political and ideological investments. Indeed, claims to "accuracy," "foundations" or transcendent moral values may be especially troublesome, as such claims tend to silence or marginalize all those whose traditions are not represented in such claims.

As a result, many constructionists will opt for what might be characterized as non-foundational authority. Drawing from the work of Judith Butler () and Richard Rorty (), for example, acknowledgement is made of the historically and culturally situated character of claims to knowledge and critique. Such acknowledgement, however, does not deny their value; it is simply to say that they are valuable within their own tradition. It is much this orientation that Mary Gergen (2001) adopts in her recent book, Feminist reconstructions in psychology. Feminist critique abounds, but a one might say, within parentheses; the critique is passionately advanced, but with no attempt to provide foundations. Yet, while I see this shift to a non-foundational orientation as both significant and catalytic, critique is still left standing. That is, whatever account is made of the world, is still read as politics. Further steps are thus invited.

Toward a Transpositional Hermeneutic

Given the substantial problems inhering in palliatives for psychology as politics by other means, I wish to open discussion of an alternative that grows in particular from a social constructionist perspective. My concern here issues from the constructionist emphasis on the conjoint construction of meaning. The central argument is that meaning does not originate in the minds of individual actors, but is brought forth within the relations among persons. In this sense, the words offered here now possess no inherent meaning. For many they people they would be found muddled, nonsensical, or empty. The words begin to acquire meaning as you the reader respond to them in various ways - in acts of supplementation, as I have outlined elsewhere (Gergen, 1994). Some may find certain passages relevant to issues of morality, others to history, and still others to politics, or social influence. At the same time, you have not generated such meanings alone; your supplement cannot grant meaning until I have offered these words. Thus, the meaning of these words is neither yours nor mine, but ours.

Now let me propose that there are two particular forms of supplementation that will destroy the collaborative process from which meaning is brought forth. The first is *duplication* and the second negation. In the case of duplication, if everything one says is simply repeated by one's interlocutor, we are left again at the beginning - with the utterance itself. A child who echoes everything said by a parent, essentially obfuscates the process of meaning making. The second means of destroying the possibility of meaning is through negation, in effect, denying that another's utterance has any potential meaning. The simplest case is treating the person as if he or she has said nothing at all - a blank stare, nothing has registered. A more complex and more pervasive form of negation essentially informs the speaker that what was uttered was

not uttered, or in effect, "You did not say what you said." For analytic purposes, consider the following interchange:

A. "This is a red hat."

B. "Ah, you say this is a green hat."

A. "So you are telling me I said the hat is brown."

B. "Ah, you misunderstand. I was referring to the fact you said the hat is yellow!"

In effect, each interlocutor negates the preceding utterance and the co-construction of meaning is aborted.

It would be interesting at this point to explore the way in which conjoint meaning depends on the continuous generation of difference. However such consideration will take us off course. Most important at this point is to focus on acts of negation and their application to the problem of psychology as politics. For it is precisely this move of negation that is employed in the various ideological and political critiques of psychological offerings. The critic essentially denies the offered utterance, proclaiming instead that, "You are not saying X; you are saying Y." Or to paraphrase the critic, "When you say 'cognition,' you are really saying 'I favor individualism,'" "When you say 'the findings favor gay marriage,' you are really saying 'I am a liberal'."

This is not at all to argue that we should abandon the critical enterprise. Indeed, it is of enormous importance to the health of the field and the society at large that we submit our work to continued critical reflection. We must be capable of alternative readings of our work, and particularly readings that sensitize us to their political and ideological consequences. However, we must simultaneously realize that the critical move is also one that endangers the very process of engendering meaning.

Let me phrase it in this way: each time we offer ourselves to another in our discourse, we *quest for authentication*. We ask the other to treat the offering as an authentic candidate for conjoint construction. To be treated as authentic means that the other will supplement our offering in a way that will bring it into meaning. The kind of negation inherent in the critical reading is essentially a denial of authenticity. The other is denied entry into meaning. Further, we must understand that the critic's utterances themselves stand in the same position. That is, the political critique also serves as a quest for authentication. It too can be granted or denied entry into meaning as we supplement it in our various ways. And it too may be denied meaning through negation. (For example, once the political agenda "lying behind" the critique is revealed, it too will be de-authenticated.)

How can we honor the critical endeavor while simultaneously sustaining the very process of co-construction that makes possible meaning of any kind? It seems to me that a particular form of discursive act is called for, one that may be called a *transpositional hermeneutic*. A transpositional reading of a text (or reaction to an utterance) is one that both recognizes its legitimacy within its own assumptive

network, but simultaneously demonstrates an alternative reading within a second order domain. A useful metaphor can be drawn from music, in which transposition traditionally refers to the reproduction of a score in a new key. In effect, something remains of the music in its original form, but something has also changed. Or again, the transpositional reading would recognize the writer's offering as one possible lens through which the world might be understood, but then demonstrate the way in which the same offering lends itself to a quite different view. A more gracious form of the transpositional hermeneutic would first recognize ways in which an offering might indeed be salutary in certain respects, before demonstrating its problematic potentials. (For example, while lending itself to an unfortunate individualist ideology, cognitive theory does sustain democratic forms of governance.)

In conclusion, I am not attempting here to claim some moral foundation for the transpositional hermeneutic itself. However, if there is reason to hold that meaning is generated within a relational matrix, then we are drawn ineluctably to the conclusion that all claims to knowledge, along with claims to good and evil, require some form of authentication. To the extent that negation prevails, the very process of conjoint construction is subverted. Herein we slouch toward the end of meaning itself.

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