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CHAPTER 27

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SELF

KENNETH J. GERGEN

IN treating the social construction of self it is first necessary to identify the boundaries of the domain. At the outset, there is the matter of the self. History has prepared us to speak of the self in many different ways, and some of these are more central to constructionist concerns than others. My particular concern in the present chapter will be with a family of uses that generally refer to a psychological or mental world within the individual. The members of this family are many and varied. We variously speak of persons as possessing mental concepts of themselves, and it is often said that these concepts are saturated with value, that they may be defective or dysfunctional, that they figure importantly in the individual's rational calculus, and that they ultimately supply resources for the exercise of personal agency. And too, many simply identify the process of conscious choice as equivalent to the individual self. Such assumptions are deeply embedded in Western culture, and provide the under-girding rationale for practices of jurisprudence, childrearing, education, counseling, and psychotherapy, among others. Further, such assumptions furnish the basis for myriad research studies in psychology and sociology. Individual self-esteem, for example, has been one of the most intensively studied topics in psychology. Indeed, the Western traditions of democracy and capitalism are both wedded to conceptions of the individual self as alluded to above.

With this particular focus on self in place, I shift attention to the matter of social construction. In this case, it is important to outline some of the major assumptions that play themselves out in contemporary constructionist scholarship. The ground is then prepared for treating issues in the social construction of the self. Here I will begin with a discussion of the ungrounded character of mental accounts in general. Following this, I will discuss major lines of inquiry into the social construction of self, along with its socio-political implications. Finally, I will introduce an alternative to traditional conceptions of self, one that emerges distinctly from social constructionist theory.

THE EMERGENCE OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST THEORY

There are many stories to be told about the development of social constructionism in scholarly worlds. I offer here but one, although one that is congenial with much common understanding. To be sure, one may trace the intellectual roots of social constructionism to Vico, Nietzsche, Dewey, and Wittgenstein, among others. And Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) was a landmark volume with strong reverberations in neighboring disciplines. However, the social movements and intellectual ferment taking shape in the late 1960s in the United States and Western Europe were perhaps more influential in paving the way to social construction in psychology. Resistance to the Vietnam War and to the country's political leadership was intense; profound skepticism of the established order was voiced. Much of the academic community was deeply engaged in political protest. The context was optimal for reassessing the established rationale and practices within the sciences and other scholarly traditions. In brief, one can locate at least three major forms of broadly shared critique that resulted from such reassessment. Each of them found expression in the psychological literature. Most importantly, the amalgamation of these forms of critique—sometimes identified with postmodernism—largely serves as the basis for most social constructionist inquiry in the scholarly world today.¹

Perhaps the strongest and most impassioned form of critique of the dominant orders has been, and continues to be, *ideological*. In this case, critics challenge various taken-for-granted realities in society and reveal the political ends that they

¹ For a more detailed account of these critiques within psychology, see Gergen (1994b). Additional accounts of social constructionist premises and potentials may be found in Potter 1996; Gergen 2009; Hacking 1999.

achieve. In effect, such analysis discloses the socio-political consequences of the sedimented accounts of reality, in the attempt to liberate the reader from their subtle grasp. Within the scholarly world more generally, such 'unmasking' has played a major role in Marxist scholarship, along with anti-psychiatry, feminist, racial, gay and lesbian, and anti-colonialist movements, among others.

The second major form of critique may be viewed as *literary/rhetorical*. With developments in semiotic theory in general and literary deconstruction in particular (Derrida 1976), attention was variously drawn to the ways in which linguistic convention governs all claims to knowledge. Thus, whatever reality posits one puts forward, they will bear the marks of the linguistic forms (including, for example, grammatical rules, narrative conventions, and binary distinctions) necessary for communication. In this sense the forms of language are not driven by reality so much as they provide the forestructure for what we take to be its nature.

The third significant critique of foundational science was stimulated largely by the 1970 publication of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn portrayed normal science as guided by paradigms of thought and practice shared by particular communities. In effect, the outcomes of science were not demanded by the world as it is, but are the result of communal negotiation. This social account of science was further buttressed by a welter of research in the sociology of knowledge and the history of science (see e.g. Feyerabend 1978; Latour and Woolgar 1986).² Although these movements largely originated within separate scholarly spheres, scholars increasingly discovered affinities among them. In effect, one could recognize the contours of a broader movement, often identified as social constructionist. Within this movement, three domains of agreement are noteworthy: the social origins of knowledge, the centrality of language, and the politics of knowledge.

The social origins of knowledge

Perhaps the most generative idea emerging from the constructionist dialogues is that what we take to be knowledge of the world and self finds its origins in human relationships. What we take to be true as opposed to false, objective as opposed to subjective, scientific as opposed to mythological, rational as opposed to irrational,

² It should be noted that the term *constructivism* is sometimes used interchangeably with constructionism. However, unlike social construction, early scholars tended to define constructivism in terms of cognitive processes within the individual mind. For these theorists the focus was placed on the individual's perceptions and interpretative capacities as the originating source of their constructions of the world. Recent scholarship has made it increasingly difficult to sustain the distinction between constructivism and constructionism. Constructivists increasingly view mental practices as reflections or embodiments of social process. Many now speak of social constructivism, or use the terms interchangeably.

moral as opposed to immoral is brought into being through historically and culturally situated social processes. This view stands in dramatic contrast to two of the most important intellectual and cultural traditions of the West. On the one hand is the tradition of the individual knower, the rational, self-directing, morally centered, and knowledgeable agent of action. Within the constructionist dialogues we find that it is not in the individual mind that knowledge, reason, emotion, and morality reside, but in relationships.

The communal view of knowledge also represents a major challenge to the view of Truth, or the possibility that the accounts of scientists, or any other group, reveal or approach the objective truth about what is the case. In effect, propose the constructionists, no one arrangement of words is necessarily more objective or accurate in its depiction of reality than any other. To be sure, accuracy may be achieved within a given community or tradition—according to its rules and practices. Physics and chemistry generate useful truths from within their communal traditions, just as psychologists, sociologists, and priests do from within theirs. But from these often-competing traditions there is no means by which one can locate a transcendent truth, a ‘truly true’. Any attempt to determine the superior account would itself be the outcome of a given community of agreement.

To be sure, these arguments have provoked antagonistic reactions among scientific communities in particular. There remains a substantial number in the scientific community, including the social sciences, who still cling to a vision of science as generating ‘Truth beyond community’. For scientists who see themselves as generating pragmatic or instrumental truths, constructionist arguments are quite congenial. Thus, for example, both would agree that while Western medical science does succeed in generating what might commonly be called ‘cures’ for that which is termed ‘illness’, these advances are dependent upon culturally and historically specific constructions of what constitutes an impairment, health and illness, life and death, the boundaries of the body, the nature of pain, and so on. When these assumptions are treated as universal—true for all cultures and times—alternative conceptions are undermined and destroyed. To understand death, for example, as merely the termination of biological functioning would be an enormous impoverishment of human existence. The constructionist does not abandon medical science, but attempts to understand it as a cultural tradition—one among many.

The centrality of language

Central to the constructionist account of the social origins of knowledge is a concern with language. If accounts of the world are not demanded by what there is, then the traditional view of language as a mapping device ceases to compel. Rather, following Wittgenstein (1953), a view of language is invited, in which meaning is understood as a derivative of language use within relationships. And,

given that games of language are essentially conducted in a rule-like fashion, accounts of the world are governed in significant degree by conventions of language use. Psychological research could not reveal, for example, that 'motives are oblong'. The utterance is grammatically correct, but it is cultural nonsense. Rather, while it is perfectly satisfactory to speak of motives as varying in intensity or content, conventions of talk about motivation in the twenty-first century do not happen to include the adjective, 'oblong'. Expanding on this point, many constructionists see attempts at generating philosophical foundations for scientific study as forms of language games. For example, the long-standing question of whether and to what degree the mind has access to the external world—the central problem of epistemology—is a problem only within a given game of language (see Rorty 1979). To play the game we must agree that there is a 'mental world' on the one hand and a 'material world' on the other (an 'in here' and 'out there'), and that the former may possibly reflect the latter. If one does not agree to play by these rules, there is no 'problem of individual knowledge'.

Of special relevance to an understanding of research methods, constructionists also tend to accept Wittgenstein's view of language games as embedded within broader 'forms of life'. Thus, for example, the language conventions for communicating about human motivation are linked to certain activities, objects, and settings. For the research psychologist there may be 'assessment devices' for motivation (e.g. questionnaires, thematic analysis of discourse, controlled observations of behavior), and statistical technologies to assess differences between groups. Given broad agreement within a field of study about 'the way the game is played', conclusions can be reached about the nature of human motivation. As constructionists also suggest, playing by the rules of a given community is enormously important to sustaining these relationships. Not only does conformity to the rules affirm the reality, rationality, and values of the research community, but the very *raison d'être* of the profession itself is sustained. To abandon the discourse of the mind would threaten the discipline of psychology; to dispense with the discourse of social structure would threaten the collapse of sociology. Without conventions of construction, action loses value.

The politics of knowledge

As indicated above, social constructionism is closely allied with a pragmatic conception of knowledge. That is, traditional issues of truth and objectivity are replaced by concerns with that which research brings forth. It is not whether an account is true from a god's eye view that matters, but rather, the implications for cultural life that follow from taking any truth claim seriously. This concern with consequences essentially eradicates the long-standing distinction between *fact* and *value*, between is and ought. The forms of life within any knowledge-making

community represent and sustain the values of that community. In establishing 'what is the case', the research community also place value on their particular metatheory of knowledge, constructions of the world, and practices of research. When others embrace such knowledge they wittingly or unwittingly extend the reach of these values.

Thus, for example, the scientist may use the most rigorous methods of testing intelligence, and amass tomes of data that indicate racial differences in intelligence. However, the presumptions that there is something called 'human intelligence', that a series of question and answer games reveal this capacity, and that there are separable 'races' in the world, are all specific to a given tradition or paradigm. Such concepts and measures are not required by 'the way the world is'. Most importantly, to accept the paradigm and extend its implications into policy within the tradition is deeply injurious to those people classified as inferior by its standards.

This line of reasoning has had enormous repercussions in the academic community and beyond. Drawing sustenance in particular from Foucault's (1978, 1979) power/knowledge formulations, one comes to understand that the realities, rationalities, and values created within any social enclave have socio-political ramifications. And particularly because those within a given interpretive community seldom appreciate that their realities are local and contingent, there is a strong tendency toward reification. Those who fail to share the local realities and values are thus viewed as misled, ignorant, immoral, and possibly evil. In effect, with the process of reality building set in motion, the result is often social division and antagonism. Each tradition of the real becomes a potential enemy to all those who do not share in the tradition. To illustrate, experimental psychologists are generally committed to a causal view of human action, and view the experimental method as the most valuable means of demonstrating cause-effect relations. There is little doubting these assumptions and practices; they are simply taken for granted. However, this form of life cannot accommodate the concept of human agency. To include an uncaused cause within the formulations would destroy a way of life. At the same time, to embrace the experimental way of life is to threaten the legitimacy of claims to voluntary action and thus a tradition of moral responsibility. With this background in place, we may now turn to more specific concerns with the self.

MENTAL DISCOURSE IN QUESTION

The term 'self' is employed in many different settings, and for different purposes, and in this sense is richly polysemic. On the present account, all such meanings

are essentially constructed within social enclaves. However, the more difficult task is to remove the sediment sense of the real accumulating from long-standing usages. It is only when the painstaking work of denaturalizing has taken place that one is liberated from the past, and thus positioned to reformulate as conditions require. It is in this context that I wish to focus specifically on the self as a constituent member in the family of mental discourse. Over the past three centuries Western culture has developed an enormous vocabulary referring to mental states, mechanisms, processes, or conditions. Although subject to long-standing contention within philosophy (see e.g. Almq 2005; Ryle 1949), for most people there is little doubting the existence of the world created by these terms. We readily speak of one's thoughts, desires, emotions, and motives, in the same way we refer to one's 'self-image', 'self esteem', 'self love', and 'voluntary choice'. As indicated earlier, these 'realities' are insinuated into the rationale for many of the major institutions and traditions of Western culture. In what follows I wish to outline some of the major problems inhering in the attempt to anchor the discourse of the psychological self in an independent world of existents. This brief account should move toward unsettling existing assumptions. In the following section we explore some of the major means by which the psychological self is constructed. These explorations will set the stage for considering alternatives to the psychological conception of self.

As proposed, we typically employ such terms as 'thought', 'emotion', 'motivation', and 'self-esteem' as if they referred to existing states or entities within the individual. Yet, one may ask, on what grounds do we make such references? In many domains, and science in particular, we justify the favored vocabulary through ostensive definition. In effect, we can point to what we take to be an entity and declare, 'that is a cow', or 'this is the left hemisphere of the cerebral cortex'. To be sure, such constructions may be shared only within particular traditions, but the ability to relate the vocabulary to a publicly shared world of observables can serve as a local form of grounding. In contrast, there is little way of wedding mental terms to a world of ostensibly designated referents. The Western tradition does suggest two major candidates for justification: *self-observation* and *observation by others*. In the former case, we might presume that we can know with confidence about mental states such as self-esteem because we are intimately acquainted with them. As psychologists often say, we have *metacognitive* knowledge of our psychological processes. In the case of external observation, we might presume a warrant for psychological knowledge based on the reasoned inferences of neutrally positioned observers. Let us consider these possibilities further.

First, in the case of knowledge through self-observation, a scan of both philosophic and psychological analyses suggests that the very concept of internal observation is deeply flawed. To succinctly summarize some of the major problems (for a more extended summary of these arguments, see Gergen, 2009):

- How can consciousness turn in upon itself to identify its own states? How can experience become an object to itself? Can a mirror reflect its own image?
- How can one be certain that various mental processes would not obstruct the attempt to identify one's states? Could other processes (e.g. repression, defense) not prevent accurate self-appraisal?
- What are the characteristics of mental states by which one could identify them? By what criteria does one distinguish, let us say, among states of anger, fear, and love? What is the color of hope, the size of a thought, or the shape of anger? Why do none of these attributes seem quite applicable to mental states? Is it because our observations of the states prove to us that they are not? What would we be observing in this case?
- By what criterion could one determine that what one experiences as 'certain recognition' of a mental state is indeed certain recognition? Wouldn't this recognition ('I am certain in my assessment') require yet another round of self-assessments ('I am certain that what I am experiencing is certainty . . .'), the results of which would require additional processes of internal identification, and so on in an infinite regress?
- How could one identify an inner state save through an a priori agreement about what exists in the mind? Could one identify an emotion that was not already given within the prevailing discourse on emotion? Could a Westerner identify 'liget' or 'amae' (terms from non-Western cultures)?
- Could one identify one's mental states through their physiological manifestations—blood pressure, heart rate, etc.? Can one know he or she is 'thinking' by examining one's blood pressure, or that one has 'hope' through a recording of neurological activity? And, if one did have access to brain scan data, how could one know to which states such scans referred?

Of course, many contemporary psychologists (along with many psychoanalysts) are quite willing to abandon the idea of inner observation (or introspection) as a valid source of psychological knowledge. For many, it is the external observer—rationally systematic and personally dispassionate—who is ideally situated to draw valid conclusions about people's internal states. Yet, the past thirty years of post-structural and hermeneutic deliberation leave the presumption of external observation as imperiled as that of introspection. Again in abbreviated form, consider some of the major flaws:

- If we were to base our knowledge on our subjects' descriptions of their internal states (e.g. 'I am depressed', 'I am angry') how would we know to what the terms referred within their own mind/brain? We have no access to the states or conditions. What if one person's referent for 'love' was another's referent for 'anxiety'? Without access to the putative referents, there would be no means of sorting out the differences. Indeed, how could one be certain that mental terms refer to anything at all (e.g. 'my soul is anguished')?

- If we abandon introspection as the basis of knowledge, how can we trust any self-reports (e.g. 'I feel . . .', 'I aspire to . . .', 'It is my opinion that . . .') as the basis of external inference? How could the person know about these conditions, sufficient that the reports would count as inferential evidence?
- Even if self-reports converge (as in the items making up a self-esteem scale), how would we know to what (in the individual's mind/brain) the individual items referred—if anything (could we not also generate a twelve-item scale of 'soul anguish')? How could we trust the subject to know?
- How can we determine the nature of what we are observing, save through the lens of a theory already established? Could we identify 'cognitive conservation' without a theory enabling us to interpret a child's action in just this way? Could we observe aggression, moral behavior, altruism, conformity, obedience, or learning, for example, without a pre-understanding that would call our attention to certain patterns of activity as opposed to others? Can we observe a 'causal relation' without at least a rudimentary theory of cause already in place? Or, in effect, aren't our observations of psychologically relevant behavior theory determined?
- If we propose to identify psychological states through their physiological correlates (as in 'the physiology of memory'), how can we determine to what psychological states the physiology provides the underpinning? If we cannot determine when a 'memory', 'a thought', or 'an agitation of the spirit' has occurred, how are we to establish the physiological correlates?

As this brief account suggests, the discourse of the psychological self cannot be anchored in a referential base sufficient to inspire, direct, or constrain its usage. It is largely for this reason that the conception of self has been such an inviting topic of exploration for social constructionist scholars.

THE CONSTRUCTION AND CRITIQUE OF SELF

Inquiry into the social construction of self can roughly be divided into three categories. The first is primarily concerned with establishing the self as a social construction; the second is focused on specific social processes in which the conception of self is embedded; and the third involves critical assessments of the cultural and political repercussions of traditional beliefs in the self. I consider each in turn.

The self in historical and cultural context

One gains an acute appreciation of the extent to which one's everyday understandings are both culturally and historically situated—and perhaps precariously so—through comparisons with commonplace beliefs in other cultures and times. In this sense, such comparisons not only illustrate the richness in human constructions of the self, but function as well as a destabilizing device in contemporary culture. The historical and cultural literature in this case is enormous, and as these topics are relevant to other discussions in this volume, I will simply earmark here two significant lines of inquiry. On the historical side, two of the most extensive accounts of the vicissitudes in Western conceptualizations of the self are those of Charles Taylor (1989) and Jerrold Siegel (2001). Both explore this history in an attempt to locate resources for a morally or personally meaningful life. Numerous other accounts treat the emergence of particular concepts of self within circumscribed historical periods (see e.g. Cary 2000; Cushman 1996; Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Much the same denaturalization of the self takes place in cross-cultural comparisons. Perhaps the major theme that pervades this work is the comparison between the individuated, bounded, and autonomous view of the self that is shared within Western culture, and the more socially or communally embedded vision of the self that may be found in many other cultures of the world (see e.g. Marsella *et al.* 1985; Becker 1995; Markus and Kitayama 1991).

The self as social accomplishment

A second significant line of constructionist inquiry builds on the first. If the self is socially constructed, one asks, how are we to understand the processes central to this achievement? Echoing the earlier discussion of the literary and rhetorical contributions to social construction, the major focus of this line of inquiry has been on discourse practices. To be sure, psycholinguistic study of the relation of mind (or cognition) to language, along with research into grammar and syntax, for example, has generated a large corpus of literature. However, within a constructionist frame, this tradition has not been engaging. For one, studies relating mind to language have presumed a dualism between mind and speech that many constructionists call into question. Further, in its search for 'the truth about language', traditional research was stripped of concern with political and ideological context, and thus of little relevance for many constructionists.

Inquiry into social achievement of the self has taken two major forms. The first is concerned with the structure of language and the demands made by linguistic convention on the conception of self. The second has focused on ongoing conversational practices. In the case of language structure, for example, Sampson (2008) has drawn attention to the binary structure of language and its contribution to the

self/other dichotomy. As Harré (1991) has also proposed, the existence of personal pronouns (e.g. I, you, he, me) contributes significantly to an ontology of separate selves. Perhaps the most prominent form of inquiry linking discursive structure to conceptions of self has centered on narrative. Drawing from a long-standing emphasis in semiotic studies on the formative influence of narrative structure, scholars have variously explored the way in which conceptions of the self are guided by a narrative forestructure. As MacIntyre (1984) cogently argued, one's conception of self, and indeed one's moral integrity, emerges from one's narrative of self. It is the form of this narrative, as shared within an interpretive tradition, that underlies one's sense of self. The work of Gergen and Gergen (1983), Sarbin (1986), Polkinghorne (1988), Rosenwald and Ochberg (1990), and Bruner (1990) has given the study of narrative a prominent place in the psychology of the self. The long-standing concern in psychology with life history has also been highly congenial to narrative study. The work of Dan McAdams (1985, 1997) has underscored the centrality of narrative not only to self-understanding but to the trajectory of one's actions. His inquiry into 'redemptive narratives' has also fired interest in the relationship of self-understanding and spiritual traditions (McAdams, 2006).

The second major line of inquiry into the self as a social accomplishment has been concerned with ongoing interaction. Such inquiry was initially stimulated by the work of Harold Garfinkel (1967) and the *ethnomethods* by which realities are constituted within conversation. The link between ethnomethodology and the psychological self was secured in Jeff Coulter's 1979 volume, *The Social Construction of Mind: Studies in Ethnomethodology and Linguistic Philosophy*. Coulter's work demonstrated the ways in which the self is continuously fashioned and refashioned as conversation unfolds. Inquiry into discursive *positioning* (Davies and Harré, 1990; Van Langenhove and Harré, 1998) offered subsequent insight into a critical aspect of this process. The concern in this case is with the way in which conversational interlocutors position each other's identity as they speak. However, while further work in discourse and conversational analysis adds depth and richness to these views, such inquiry reaches a juncture at which the specifically psychological self is no longer in focus (see e.g. Benwell and Stokoe 2006, and Buchholtz 1999). Such inquiry focuses almost exclusively on the spoken or written word, while simultaneously placing the 'conversational object' at ontological risk. Thus, analysts will demonstrate how conversational references to the self deconstruct the psychological referent. Attention is then drawn to publicly defined identity.

Critical reflection on the psychological self

For the constructionist, the realities created by people together are functionally insinuated into their daily relationships. The discursive ontologies and ethics are embedded within normal and normative practices. Or, more succinctly, the

discourses of daily life are constitutive of living traditions. In this sense, scholars have been concerned with the way in which vocabularies of the self both rationalize and sustain cultural practices. It is in this vein that many constructionists have drawn sustenance from Foucault's (1978, 1979) writings on knowledge and power. Language, for Foucault, serves as a major medium for carrying out relations. Because language constitutes what we take to be the world, and rationalizes the form of reality thus created, it also serves as a socially binding force. By acting within language, relations of power and privilege are sustained. And, by engaging in the further circulation of a form of language, the array of power relations is further extended (see Rose 1985, 1990).

In particular, as many critics see it, there is a substantial dark side to constructing a world of individual and agentic selves. When a fundamental distinction between self and other is established, the social world is constituted in terms of differences. The individual stands as an isolated entity, essentially alone and alienated. Further, such a view lends itself to a prizing of autonomy—of becoming a 'self-made man', who 'does it my way'. To be dependent is a sign of weakness and incapacity. To construct a world of separation in this way is also to court distrust; one can never be certain of the other's motives. And given distrust, it becomes reasonable to 'take care of number one'. Self-gain becomes an unquestionable motive, within both the sciences (such as economics and social psychology) and the culture at large. In this context, loyalty, commitment, and community are all thrown into question, as all may potentially interfere with 'self-realization'. Such views represent an extended critique of Western individualism. (See e.g. Gelpi 1989; Hewitt 1989; Bellah *et al.* 1985; Heller *et al.* 1986; Lasch 1978; Leary 2004.)

These critiques become more pointed in their implications when self-dysfunction is considered. At the outset, an extensive literature illuminates the constructed character of the psychiatric concepts of mental illness, and points to the ideological and political interests served by diagnostic categorization. Thus, for example, scholars have explored the social construction of schizophrenia (Sarbin and Mancuso 1980), anorexia (Hepworth 1999), depression (Blazer 2005), attention deficit disorder (Divorky and Schrag 1975), post traumatic stress disorder (Quosh and Gergen 2008), and many other forms of 'mental disorder' (see e.g. Neimeyer 2000; Fee 2000). These deconstructions of illness categories have been accompanied by critical assessments of the impact on both clients and the society more generally. For example, diagnostic categories are variously seen as devices used largely for purposes of social control (e.g. client management, insurance justification), that mystify the values agendas they express, and sustain the myth of mental health practice as medical science in such a way that problems in living are increasingly treated with pharmaceutical suppressants (Kutchins and Kirk 1997; Szasz 1961). Further, by disseminating 'knowledge of mental illness' to the culture, people cease to examine the societal conditions that may favor depression or hyperactivity, for example, and increasingly come to construct themselves in

these terms (Gergen 2006; Hare-Mustin 1994). Further, to be categorized as mentally ill frequently increases the anguish of those who bear the labels. To hear voices, to be hyperactive, or to be chronically sad, for example, is not inherently to possess an illness, and there are more beneficial constructions possible (Parker *et al.* 1995).

THE RELATIONAL SELF

The preceding critiques of the psychological self have brought about an active movement to reconceptualize the mind in general, and the self in particular. The attempt in this case is to construct an ontology that replaces the vision of the bounded self as the atom of the social world with relational process. From this standpoint, it would not be selves who come together to form relationships, but relational process out of which the very idea of the psychological self could emerge. As can be seen, the development of such a view follows congenially from the constructionist perspective so instrumental in denaturalizing the traditional view of the psychological self. If what we call knowledge emerges from social process, then social process stands as an ontological prior to the individual.

Relational explorations draw nourishment from a number of early lines of scholarship. Phenomenologists have long been concerned with the arbitrary character of the mind/world dichotomy. For example, Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) proposed that all experience is *intentional*, essentially directed toward or absorbed by some pattern (object, person, etc.). Thus, conscious experience is fundamentally relational; subject and object—or self and other—are unified within experience. For many psychologists George Herbert Mead's volume, *Mind, Self and Society* was the first important step toward a relational account of self. As Mead proposed, there is no thinking, or indeed any sense of being a self, that is independent of social process. For Mead, we are born with rudimentary capacities to adjust to each other, largely in response to gestures—with the hands, vocal sounds, facial expressions, gaze, and so on. It is through others' response to our gestures that we slowly begin to develop the capacities for mental symbolization; as others respond to our gestures, and we experience these responses within us, we are able to gain a sense of what the other's gesture symbolizes for him or her. 'No hard-and-fast line can be drawn between our own selves and the selves of others, since our own selves exist and enter as such into our experience only in so far as the selves of others exist and enter as such in our experience also' (Mead 1934).

The work of Lev Vygotsky (1978) also offered a bold alternative to the dominant conception of mind independent from social process. For Vygotsky, individuals are inextricably related, both to each other and to their physical surrounds. Of particular

interest for Vygotsky were the 'higher mental functions' such as thinking, planning, attending, and remembering. For Vygotsky, these higher processes are lodged within relationships: 'social relations or relations among people genetically underlie all higher (mental) functions and their relationships.' In effect, mental functioning reflects social process. On the psychoanalytic front, theory has shifted toward 'object relations' (or the mental representation of others). Here therapists have become increasingly concerned with the complex relations between transference and counter-transference. As relational analysts propose, it is no longer possible to view the therapist as a neutral investigator of the client's mind, as the therapist's psychological functioning cannot be extricated from that of the client. Literary theory has also served as a vital stimulus to theorizing a relational self. Bakhtin's explorations of dialogicality in the novel have been especially significant. As Bakhtin (1981) reasons, self and other are locked together in the generation of meaning: 'Consciousness is never self-sufficient, it always finds itself in an intense relationship with another consciousness.' Or, in brief, 'To be means to communicate.'

With these resources serving as a vital background, the question emerges as to whether it is possible to eliminate entirely the 'thinker behind the words'. Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) provides the groundwork for such a venture. For Wittgenstein, language obtains its meaning and significance primarily from the way in which it is used in human interaction. Thus, for example, the meaning of 'yellow card' and 'corner kick' gain their significance from their use in the game of soccer. This same logic may be applied to the discourse of the self, and in particular, to the way in which one refers to states of mind. We may expand on the implications with the following propositions.

1. *The self as discursive action.* As we have seen, there is no viable way of understanding such utterances as 'I decided' or 'I am angry' as reports on what we presume to be an inner state of mind. We may thus relinquish the view of such discourse as a manifestation or 'outward expression of an inner world'. Rather, we may view the meaning of such discourse as dependent upon its use in relationships. Thus, to announce, 'I am unhappy' about a given state of affairs, the term 'unhappy' would not be rendered meaningful or appropriate by virtue of its manifesting the state of one's neurons, emotions, or cognitive schema. Rather, the report plays a significant social function. It may be used, for example, to call an end to a set of deteriorating conditions, enlist support and/or encouragement, or to invite further opinion. Both the conditions of the report and the functions it can serve are also circumscribed by social convention. The phrase 'I am deeply sad' can be satisfactorily reported at the death of a close relative but not the demise of a spring moth. A report of depression can secure others' concern and support; however it cannot easily function as a greeting, an invitation to laughter, or a commendation. In this sense to use mental language is more like a handshake or an

embrace than a mirror of the interior. In effect, mental terms are used by people to carry out relationships.

2. *Discourse of the self as performance.* As theorists further reason, we are not dealing here with 'mere words' used by people to 'get what they want from the other'. One's utterances are essentially performative in function. That is, in the very saying of something, one is also performing an action within a relationship. As performance, more than the felicitous use of words is required. For example, if spoken in a faint voice, eyes on the floor, and with a smile, the words 'I am angry' would constitute a failed performance. It would be culturally bewildering. In order to perform anger properly within Western culture, voice intensity and volume are essential; a stern face and a rigid posture may be required. Much is gained, then, by replacing the image of private 'feelings' with public action; it is not that one has emotions, a thought, or a memory so much as one *does* them.

3. *Discursive action as relationally embedded.* If it is reasonable to view psychological discourse as embedded within an embodied performance, one may then inquire into its origins. If there is no animating origin lying behind the action, one is then drawn to its roots within relationship. In the same way that one cannot achieve intelligibility by using a word of his own creation, one's actions will not make sense if they do not borrow from a cultural tradition. Thus, the performance of self carries a history of relationships, manifesting and extending them. One may also ask about audience; for whom are these intelligible performances? As Bakhtin (1981) pointed out, to speak is always to address someone—either explicitly or implicitly—within some kind of relationship. This is also to say that the performances are fashioned with respect to the recipient. The other enters expressions of the self in their very formulation.

The relational rewriting of self

Relational theorizing of this sort has been a significant stimulus to a range of constructionist inquiry, which together essentially reconfigures both the conception of the psychological self and its implications for practice. In one of the earliest provocations of this kind, Potter and Wetherell (1987) demonstrated the problems inhering in the supposition that attitudes in the head cause overt public actions. As they went on to demonstrate, an attitude is more fruitfully understood as a public action in itself, or essentially, a position taken in a conversation. Much the same line of argument may be applied to the concept of reason. Replacing the Cartesian view of thinking as that process establishing the very certitude of self, reasoning may be viewed as a form of public performance. As Billig (1987) has proposed, most of what we take to be rational thought is more adequately viewed as a social process of argumentation. We do not argue because we have private thoughts, but rather, private thinking comes into being through the social practice of

argumentation. What we consider 'good reasoning', then, is not distinguishable from effective rhetoric.

Echoing this line of reasoning is a substantial movement focused on *communal memory*. Common conceptions of memory—and indeed the conceptions that ground most scientific study of memory—presume the existence of an interior process. Following the preceding line of reasoning, however, one may consider the word 'memory' in its performative role. It makes little sense to view the phrase 'I remember' as a report on a particular psychological or neurological condition. What kind of condition would one be reporting on, how would one be able to 'look inside' and recognize when we had a memory as opposed to a 'thought' or a 'desire'. Rather, as John Shotter has put it, 'Our ways of talking about our experiences work not primarily to represent the nature of those experiences in themselves, but to represent them in such a way as to constitute and sustain one or another kind of social order' (1990: 145). In effect, memory is not an individual act but a collective one.

In this sense, if a school child is asked 'what does three times three equal?' the answer 'nine' is not a report on an inner condition of memory, but an action that has been fashioned within a complex relational history. And when the family gathers at a reunion, the stories of yore are not pictures of their minds, but forms of conversation that have typically been incubated in a long history of conversation. In their study of how people recall political events—such as wars or revolutions—the researchers conclude, 'Every memory, as personal as it may be—even of events that are private and strictly personal and have not been shared with anyone—exists through its relation with what has been shared with others: language, idiom, events, and everything that shapes the society of which individuals are a part.' For an extended review of the literature on collective or relational memory the reader may consult Middleton and Brown (2005).

A final line of inquiry adds further dimension to this relational reconstruction of self. One tends to think of emotions as 'natural givens', simply part of one's biological makeup. We generally assume that infants are born into the world with fully functioning emotions; a child's cry is taken as a sign of anger, and a smile as an expression of happiness. Psychologists attempt to locate the physiological basis of emotion, and argue for its universality. The argument for universality is appealing on one level, as it suggests that human understanding is part of our biological makeup. We are innately prepared, for example, to appreciate another's fear or love or joy. Yet, it is also a dangerous assumption, in as much as what one assumes to be 'natural' is typically the emotions of one's own culture. What the Ifaluk call *fago* or the Japanese call *mayae*, for example, we in the West simply delete from the universal vocabulary of emotion.

In the present context, it is more helpful to view emotional expressions as relational performances. More specifically, one may employ the concept of a *relational scenario*, that is, a scripted set of interdependent actions such as one

might find in a stage performance. Each action in the scenario sets the stage for that which follows; what follows gives intelligibility to that which has preceded. In effect, the performance of each actor is required to give the play its coherent unity; each performance depends on the others for its intelligibility. In these terms, one can view emotional performances as constituents of culturally specific scenarios—parts of a play in which others are required. This is to propose that the angry shout or the sluggish expression of depression only make sense by virtue of their position in a relational scenario. That is, such expressions cannot take place anywhere and anytime, but only within a culturally appropriate sequence. One cannot easily jump to his feet in the middle of family dinner and shout, 'I am so sorry'; such behavior would be unintelligible. But if accused of an implicitly racist remark, the same expression would not only seem fitting, but desirable. More generally, there are socially prescribed times and places where it is appropriate to perform an emotion.

Further, once an emotion is performed the relational scenario also prescribes what follows. Thus, if a friend announces that he fears he has a fatal disease, certain actions are virtually required by the cultural scenarios and others prohibited. One may properly respond with sympathy and nurturance, but it would be tasteless to reply with a silly joke or talk about one's vacation. Further, like good stories, many emotional scenarios also have *beginnings* and *endings*. If it is late at night and one's electric power is suddenly lost, that is the beginning of a scenario in which expressions of fear (as opposed, for example, to jealousy or ecstasy) would be appropriate. In contrast, if someone is reporting one's sorrow, another may continue to give nurturance and support until the sorrow subsides. At that point the scenario is terminated.

The relational reconstruction of the self has naturally given rise to a range of criticism. Two of these critical points are most prominent. In the first case, critics charge that such relational views create a black box or empty organism, bereft of all subjective life. In reply, the relational theorist points to the desirability of abandoning dualism, and the problematic distinction between *inner* and *outer*, between self and identity. This is not to deny that one is doing something privately in one's prolonged gaze into the distance as one begins to write an essay. However, it is a mistake if it is proposed to view this silent period specifically in terms of *psychological* processes, that is, functioning according to their own autonomous demands. Rather, the relational theorist proposes, when preparing to write, one is readying oneself to put socially intelligible statements on paper, that is, preparing to engage in a social action. Thus, one may be doing something privately—which we might want to call reasoning, pondering, or feeling—but from the relational standpoint these are essentially public actions carried out in private. To illustrate, consider the actress preparing her lines for a play. The lines are essentially nonsense independent of their placement within the play; that is, they require a relationship to be intelligible. Yet, the actress can rehearse the lines in private, quietly

performing the words without voicing them. We might say she was 'imagining' or 'thinking them through'. But essentially she is carrying out a public action, only without audience and full performance. In effect, they are *partial performances* (Gergen 2009).

The second significant critique is that a relational view represents an eradication of individual agency, and thus undermines long-standing traditions of moral responsibility. To this the relational constructionist replies that there is no eradication of tradition implied. The relational account is itself a construction, and not a truth posit. No traditions need be abandoned; however, all may be subjected to critical reflection. At this point, questions may be raised concerning the wisdom, and indeed the justice, of holding single individuals responsible for their actions. Not only do such practices generate alienation and resentment, but in selecting a target of scorn, they relieve those in judgment from assaying their own contribution to the unwanted outcome. In contrast, the relational theorist proposes, a relational account abandons the determinist/voluntarist antinomy of long standing, and shifts the concern with 'wrong-doing' to the collaborative practices that may be viewed as its origin. One begins to inquire into practices of justice that may sustain viable relationships as opposed to severing them.

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