Social Constructionism in Psychology: The Road to Solipsism and an Alternative

by

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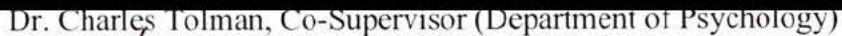

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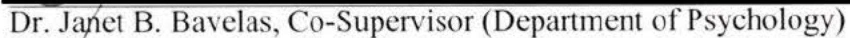

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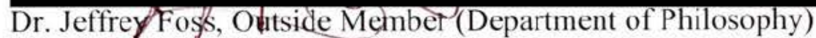

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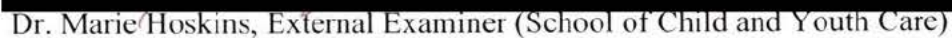

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Co-Supervisors: Dr. Charles Tolman and Dr. Janet Bavelas

Abstract

Theories of social constructionism developed in psychology bear little resemblance to the original theory of constructionism proposed by Berger and Luckmann (1967). Some differences, most importantly those concerning how language is conceived, are at the root of problems suffered by the theories proposed by psychologists Kenneth J. Gergen and John Shotter. The critical literature suggests that psychological constructionism suffers from problems associated with relativism. It is argued, however, that the problem is more serious in that the theories of language proposed by Gergen and Shotter lead to solipsistic rather than relativistic consequences. The solution to the problematic aspects of their theories lies in returning to the use of action rather than language as a starting point for theory development. Berger and Luckmann (1967) avoid the problems suffered by their psychological counterparts by beginning with action. How problems are avoided by the use of action and how a viable theory becomes possible are discussed.

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This thesis is dedicated

to the memory of

Elizabeth Fleming Campbell Kenwood

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Chapter 1. Introduction and Background to Social Constructionism in Psychology

A long-standing debate in the history of science is whether the study of humans should be separate from or subsumed under the natural sciences. The two main sides in the debate are often cast in opposition to each other and are, briefly, the side that attempts to understand human actions rationally with reference to reasons and intentions and the side that attempts to explain human actions by reference to causes and natural laws (von Wright, 1971). Although much of current psychology is directed to the latter endeavour, there is an increasingly influential group, called social constructionists, who reject this approach and who attempt to account for human actions by reference to culture, social interaction and, in particular, by coming to understand the role that language plays in human life.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the social constructionist theories of Kenneth J. Gergen and John Shotter in order to reveal whether either succeeds in providing a viable alternative to the traditional psychology that both theorists reject. Both theorists should be credited with clearly articulating numerous problems with traditional psychology and they make it plain that an alternative is required, but neither, it will be argued, is successful in developing an alternative that is viable. The reason for this failure, it will be shown, is that both versions of social constructionism assume a starting point of individual experience. A logical outcome of this is solipsism. This solipsism is not overcome by talk about social relations and is a major source of

incoherence in the theories.

One consequence of this unintended solipsism is that these social constructionist theories are unable to give a satisfactory account of either language, which they take seriously, or action, which they do not take seriously. This, it will be argued, is the key to overcoming the incoherence. It will be argued that German Critical Psychology provides an example of how the solipsistic consequences that defeat current versions of social constructionism can be avoided and how a more adequate account of both language and experience may be achieved.

Background to Social Constructionism in Psychology

Constructionism in psychology was initially influenced by the original social constructionists, the sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. A summary of their book, *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*, follows this introduction. Although both Gergen and Shotter credit their predecessors with affecting the development of their theories little resemblance is observable between early sociological constructionism and psychological constructionism as it currently exists. This is somewhat surprising as constructionists in general share common philosophical roots and, as well, share the intention to emphasise the importance of the role played by language in mediating human activities. As the thesis unfolds, however, it will become apparent that neither common philosophical roots nor a shared emphasis on language are sufficient to guarantee the development of similar theories.

The central difference between early sociological constructionism and later psychological constructionism lies in the theory of language employed by theorists. The

theories of language are so different between early sociological constructionists and later psychological constructionists that one wonders why the theories of Gergen, Shotter, and Berger and Luckmann share a common name.

It is also somewhat surprising to see that, although language is at the heart of all constructionist theories, and although different theories of language are employed by different theorists, no one has pointed out that language itself is socially constructed.

A crucial starting point for Gergen and Shotter is rejecting the "traditional" view, commonly associated with the natural sciences, that language is isomorphic with reality. According to this view, "hard" scientists employ the scientific method to examine aspects of the world in order to discover the truth about those aspects. What scientists discover is stated in words which are taken to be the universally true products of the scientific method. Language is "isomorphic" with reality in that the words that describe what was discovered about the world are believed to exactly correspond to or to be identical with what was discovered. As they are supposed to be identical with the world, and as people have the world in common, they are considered to be universally applicable.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) do not overtly reject the notion that language is isomorphic with reality, but it is apparent from the central thesis of constructionism that they do not subscribe to this view. Different languages, in Berger and Luckmann's view, refer to or "construct" the world differently so, while language is about the world it is not isomorphic with it.

It may seem on initial encounter that the theories of language proposed by Gergen and Shotter are different; however, it will be argued that the two views are essentially the

same and are problematic for the same reasons. Gergen and Shotter both claim to be relativists, and their critics take them to task for their relativism as we will see in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively. It will be argued that, while it is true in a limited sense that Gergen and Shotter are relativists, calling them relativists underestimates the degree of relativism that their theory of language entails. At the heart of this underestimation is a confusion about what gets constructed in constructionism. When this confusion is untangled in Chapter 4 it will be clear that Gergen and Shotter are better described as solipsists rather than relativists.

It would be convenient if Chapter 5 could be an explanation of how Berger and Luckmann's theory manages to avoid the problems encountered in Gergen's or Shotter's theories and convenient, as well, if their theory could be offered as the viable alternative to traditional psychology that is lacking thus far. Inconveniently, however, Berger and Luckmann (1966) in "providing the foundations of knowledge in everyday life" do not undertake to provide any instruction or information about why, in essence, those foundations are foundational. They state, for instance, that language makes people intersubjective but they do not explain how intersubjectivity arises.

Further, it should be pointed out that it was not Berger and Luckmann's intent to provide a psychological theory. Their intention, as we will soon see in detail, was to provide a framework for sociologists to describe and record human activities in different cultures but it is also their intent to divorce sociology from making moral judgements or recommendations for behaviour which is just the topic that is at the heart of the social constructionist movement in psychology.

Chapter 5 then, will make clear some of the foundations that Berger and Luckmann omit. These foundations, it is argued, form the basis of a more viable theory than the one provided by either traditional psychology or psychological constructionism.

The first steps must be to outline the social constructionist theories being examined. Since Berger and Luckmann are considered to be the original social constructionists, it seems reasonable to begin with a summary of their book.

Berger and Luckmann (1966)

Berger and Luckmann (1966) begin their book by criticizing the existing state of the sociology of knowledge and by noting two main problems. First, sociology's too-narrow focus on the history of ideas and, second, a plague of epistemological and methodological problems that belong, they believe, to other disciplines (p. 14). The history of ideas forms a small portion of any social knowledge, but is less important than the everyday, social knowledge that sociologists routinely and entirely ignored (p. 15). Berger and Luckmann's new, reformulated sociology of knowledge would avoid tangling with epistemological and methodological problems and would, moreover,

> refrain from [making] any causal or genetic hypotheses, as well as from [making] assertions about the ontological status of the phenomena analysed. (p. 20)

Instead, their sociology of knowledge would be an empirical discipline, though not a natural science. Its task would be to record the "subjective experience of everyday life" in different cultures, using the method of phenomenological analysis (p. 20). Even though Berger and Luckmann (1966) wish to dispense with philosophizing and to get on with the actual phenomenological analysis of cultures they acknowledge the necessity of

> [clarifying] the foundations of knowledge in everyday life, to wit, the objectivations of subjective processes (and meanings) by which the intersubjective commonsense world is constructed. (p. 20)

Berger and Luckmann (1966) hope that their book will be all a sociologist of knowledge will need by way of a foundational philosophy. With it, sociologists supposedly would be free of philosophical baggage and they would be equipped with a guide to human phenomena that are common to all cultures, although, of course, the character given to the phenomena may differ between cultures. Capturing the unique character of everyday life in different cultures (rather than intellectual life only) is to be the central task of a reconstructed sociology of knowledge.

The foundations of knowledge in everyday life.

The foundations of knowledge apply broadly to all cultures not just a particular culture. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), one of the foundations is human intersubjectivity. By intersubjectivity, they mean the knowledge that the world of everyday life is as real to others as it is to oneself, demonstrated by the fact that people cannot exist in everyday life without continually interacting and communicating with others. Intersubjectivity does not mean that each person sharing a language shares identical knowledge. One's "here," Berger and Luckmann explain is others' "there" and one's "now" does not overlap fully with theirs (p. 23). Further, the projects of individuals in the same society may even conflict but nevertheless there is an ongoing correspondence between one's own meanings and their meanings (p. 23).

Another foundational characteristic is the fact that:

> Consciousness is always intentional; it always intends or is directed toward objects. We can never apprehend some putative substratum of consciousness as such, only consciousness of something or other. (pp. 20-21)

Moreover, consciousness is always ordered temporally (p. 26).

Another foundational characteristic shared by all people is the experience of "different spheres of reality" (p. 21) that appear as "finite provinces of meaning" (p. 25). Examples of different spheres of reality are dreaming and suspension of disbelief during a play. It is the experience of everyday life, however, that is the most salient and the sphere of reality that people "leave from" and "return to" (p. 21).

Concerns with the "here and now" and the pragmatic motive dominate social knowledge. The pragmatic motive is apparent when "attention is mainly determined by what I am doing, have done or plan to do" (p. 22). Berger and Luckmann (1966) emphasize the role of language in allowing people to attend to pragmatic things in the "here and now" while also allowing people to attend to things that are in the past or future or located at other places or concerning other people, etc.

Central to Berger and Luckmann's thesis is that everyday life is an ordered reality consisting of social objects (institutions, roles, etc.) that exist independently of people and are experienced as an objective reality that cannot be simply wished away (p. 60). Yet, the independence of social objects does not imply that they could exist without people. Berger and Luckmann state:

> What remains sociologically essential is the recognition that all symbolic universes and all legitimations are human products; their existence has its base in

> the lives of concrete individuals, and has no empirical status apart from these lives. (p. 128)

Social objects are constructed through language use. Language is of central importance in understanding the socially constructed nature of reality as the social order is created, maintained and transmitted by people through language (p. 22; p. 133). Other people are, of course, crucial in language use. Through using language in interactions with others in the world, everyday life "presents itself to me as an intersubjective world, a world that I share with others" (p. 23). The intersubjectivity of everyday life is what allows people to distinguish between everyday life and other realities such as dreams. As real as dreams may seem, a person knows that everyday life is real and that others know the difference too as a result of their intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity is lacking in other realities such as dreams.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) state that the face-to-face situation is the "prototypical case of social interaction" and that "[a]ll other cases are derivatives of it" (p. 28). Social interactions, mediated by language, are further facilitated by the development of "typificatory schemes." These schemes govern how others (and ourselves) are understood and dealt with in face-to-face encounters (p. 31). "Typificatory schemes" are important in everyday life because, according to Berger and Luckmann, the "[s]ocial structure is the sum total of these typifications and of the recurrent patterns of interaction established by means of them" (p. 33). Further, typifications serve to make intersubjective relations more predictable and they prevent people from "reinventing the wheel" each time they encounter a situation.

Roles are important typifications because, Berger and Luckmann point out, the origin of institutional order lies in the typification of one's own and others' activities (p. 72). Roles are typifications first for the originators of the habitualized activity and later, the roles are adopted by other people as well.

Roles mediate between the "macroscopic universes of meaning objectivated in a society and the ways by which these universes are subjectively real to individuals" (p. 79). That is, roles are an important link between institutions and individuals. Studying the link reveals how the societally provided "world view is manifested in the consciousness of an individual" (p. 79).

Human intersubjectivity is also facilitated by the process and products of objectivation. Berger and Luckmann define objectivation as:

> Human subjectivity ... [that] manifests itself as products of human activity that are available both to their producers and to other men as elements of a common world. (p. 34)

Objectivations (social objects) are used by people in face-to-face situations and they extend communication to include other situations as well (p. 34). Berger and Luckmann note that everyday life is filled with objectivations and, in fact, is only possible because of them (p. 35).

Interestingly, objects may "proclaim" the subjective intentions of people but, sometimes, the particular meaning is impossible to discern. For example, archaeological objects may "proclaim" that they are man-made but their purpose and meaning remain obscure because the people who produced the object are no longer present to explain.

Language is also an objectivation and is, according to Berger and Luckmann (1966), a system of vocal signs. Meaning, through language, is intersubjectively shared by all members (p. 35). Language or vocal signs are distinguished from other forms of vocal expressivity, e.g., grunting. Grunting, like language, is useful in face-to-face situations, however, it is unlike language in that it expresses a limited range of meanings in the "here and now" only (p. 37). The power of language over other forms of vocal expressivity lies in its ability to make the past, present or future events, distant places, absent people, etc,. available to oneself in thought or to others in speech (p. 39).

Language also facilitates the transmission of "recipe" knowledge which is the part of any social knowledge that is concerned with pragmatic or "how to" considerations that arise in everyday life (p. 42; p. 65). Examples are applying for a passport or making a phone call.

It is important to note that while language is intersubjective and that people live in the same world, it does not mean that everyone knows the same things or that knowledge is shared equally (p. 23; p. 46). For example, people know more about their own pragmatic matters and have differing areas of expertise.

Also, groups may participate in different activities simultaneously within a single society but their participation is segregated. An example would be when one group in a society that performs fertility rites coexists with another that makes weapons (p. 64). It is important to note that even though groups may be segregated, the groups are integrated into a single society or symbolic universe (p. 95). Berger and Luckmann (1966) state that:

> Individuals perform discrete institutionalized actions within the context of their biography. This biography is a reflected-upon whole in which the discrete actions are thought of not as isolated events, but as related parts in a subjectively meaningful universe whose meanings are not specific to the individual, but socially articulated and shared." (p. 65; see also p. 67; 95-97)

A symbolic universe is defined by Berger and Luckmann (1966) as a "matrix of all socially objectivated and subjectively real meanings" (p. 96). It includes all forms of socially legitimate institutions and also marginal situations, e.g., black markets. Symbolic universes are "social objects with a history" and the authors stress that in order to understand any symbolic universe one must also understand the history of its production (p. 97).

<u>Society as objective reality: The difference between societal and social behaviour.</u>

Human society is qualitatively different from the lives of even the most social animals. People, for instance, are not restricted to specific environments by their "own instinctual organization" as animals are but can and do modify their environments to suit themselves, thus, cultures have developed all over the world in extremely varied circumstances (p. 47).

The qualitative difference that is apparent between humans and animals arises from humans' unique capacity to transcend biological limitations through working with others. Berger and Luckmann's contention that people's reliance on other people qualitatively differentiates people from animals does not, however, mean that the social

constructionist thesis entails a denial of biological influences altogether nor the denial of the relevance of biological dictates to human functioning (p. 47). Berger and Luckmann explain that the relationship between the biological and the social in humans is that the origin of social structure lies in the satisfaction of biological requirements; however, any number of solutions will suffice.

Human beings are better equipped to satisfy biological needs through the creation of societies. They are ill-equipped to satisfy biological needs instinctually or individually. Biological requirements demand (but do not dictate) satisfaction, and social order is created in order to satisfy the needs of people (p. 52).

Humans are more dependent on other social beings for both their biological needs and for their ontogenetic development than are animals. Berger and Luckmann (1966) point out that the "fetal period in the human being extends through about the first year after birth" (p. 48).

Humans, undeniably, grow up in a physical environment but more importantly, they grow up in a social environment (p. 48). Berger and Luckmann (1966) state:

> Humanness is socio-culturally variable. In other words, there is no human nature in the sense of a biologically fixed substratum determining the variability of socio-cultural formations ... While it is possible to say that man has a nature, it is more significant to say that man constructs his own nature, or more simply, that man produces himself. (p. 49)

It is important to reiterate that Berger and Luckmann do not mean that individuals each produce themselves individually. They emphasize that: "Man's self-production is always,

and of necessity, a social enterprise" (p. 51).

An important feature of any social enterprise is its institutions and the seed of institutionalization, according to Berger and Luckmann, is habitualization. Habitualization saves time and effort and occurs when people working together develop a routine method to achieve their goal (p. 53).

Institutionalization follows habitualization "whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors" (p. 54). Institutionalization results in the ability to predict others actions' or, at least, to know what is appropriate (p. 57). Institutions specify that "actions of type X will be performed by actors of type X" (p. 54).

Berger and Luckmann (1966) point out that as institutions "age", they can become opaque, that is, the initial reasons for their creation are lost. The opacity of institutions is a fact of life for children as they play no role in shaping the world into which they are born. For children, both nature and their society's institutions confront them as a given reality (pp. 59-60).

When institutions become opaque, it may become necessary to employ "various legitimating formulas" (p. 62) in order to justify the continued existence of the institution. A legitimation is "a 'second order' objectivation of meaning" (p. 92), that is, legitimation processes develop to integrate and justify existing institutions which are the "first order" objectivations.

Berger and Luckmann explain that legitimation "justifies the institutional order by giving a normative dignity to its practical imperatives" (p. 93) and that legitimation has a cognitive as well as a normative component. Legitimation, they say, includes values and

knowledge as well because in order to behave correctly or incorrectly according to a role within a society one must know oneself to be a member of the society and, as well, to know the roles and what constitutes right and wrong with respect to them (p. 93).

Legitimations may also develop in response to threats to the prevailing symbolic universe. Within a society, "deviants" (pp. 106-107) may be treated with processes such as therapy, for example, in order to ensure that individuals govern their behaviour within institutionalized definitions of reality (pp. 112-113). If deviance congeals into a social reality in its own right, then stronger suppressive measures (and legitimations) may develop. Often, Berger and Luckmann point out, it is power rather than rationality that is the deciding factor in determining which of two competing realities will prevail (p. 109). Berger and Luckmann suggest that another potent threat to an existing society comes from other societies with different symbolic universes (pp. 107-108) as this external knowledge threatens the inevitability of one's own (p. 108).

Nihilation is a mechanism identified by Berger and Luckmann by which external threats to society can be limited (p. 114); it involves negative legitimation. In negative legitimation, anything outside the reality of the threatened universe is denied. Threats are neutralized by assigning an "inferior ontological status ... to all definitions existing outside the symbolic universe" (p. 115).

Also, nihilation involves accounting for all deviant definitions in the terms of the socially constructed reality. That is, the deviant definitions are grappled with theoretically and incorporated into already existing concepts. Berger and Luckmann note that this process subtly changes the negation of one's universe to an affirmation of it by

presupposing that the negator does not know what he is saying.

It is important to note here that, in identifying and categorizing symbolic universes, societies, deviants, etc., as social objects, Berger and Luckmann themselves are not stating that these categories are immutable nor that they are judging "good" institutions and "bad" institutions. Berger and Luckmann treat social objects as objects that can be studied and they emphasize that change is also part of the nature of social objects. Dominant realities may be replaced with those that were initially categorized as deviant. Deviance in this usage is not used to characterize a necessarily negative threat nor is it meant to indicate that Berger and Luckmann are judging symbolic universes or their alternatives. By deviance they mean only to indicate difference or deviation from the dominant perspective. Berger and Luckmann say that:

> Because they are historical products of human activity, all socially constructed universes change, and the change is brought about by the concrete actions of human beings ... Reality is socially defined. But the definitions are always embodied, that is, concrete individuals and groups of individuals serve as definers of reality. To understand the state of the socially constructed universe at any given time, or its change over time, one must understand the social organization that permits the definers to do their defining." (p. 116)

Children, and often adults too, experience many parts of social reality as an opaque, unavoidable objective reality despite the fact that the social world is "a humanly produced, constructed objectivity" (p. 60). Berger and Luckmann note the paradox that man is capable of producing a world that he then experiences as something other than a

human product. Further, it then becomes possible to understand how people are capable of maintaining a reality that denies them in some fundamental way (p. 89). If one believes that reality is given and impossible to change then no attempt will be made to change it.

Berger and Luckmann explain that the relationship between the individual and society is dialectical. The dialectic consists of three moments; objectivation, externalization and internalization (p. 61). Each dialectical moment

> corresponds to an essential characterization of the social world. *Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product.* (p. 61)

The dialectic is not to be thought of as occurring temporally but rather that society and each part of it are simultaneously characterized by each moment (p. 129).

A potentially dangerous characteristic of socially constructed reality is the problem that people are capable of forgetting their "authorship of the human world, and further, that the dialectic between man, the producer, and his products is lost to consciousness" (p. 89). Berger and Luckmann identify this problem as reification and explain that reification is the

> apprehension of the products of human activity *as if* they were something else than human products – such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will. (p. 89)

With reification, it is possible for people to actively (though not knowingly) maintain institutions that are dangerous to themselves because the institution is "apprehended as a non-human facticity" (p. 88) and perceived as being unamenable to change. Studying

reified institutions is, according to Berger and Luckmann, a "standing corrective to the reifying propensities of theoretical thought in general and sociological thought in particular" (p. 91). That is, it prevents the error of believing that what is must always be.

Society as subjective reality.

Individuals participate in a societal dialectic as they externalize their own being into the social world and internalize it as an objective reality (p. 129). People are not, however, born members of society but are born with only a "predisposition" to sociality and, over time, they become inducted into participation in the societal dialectic through primary and secondary socialization processes (pp. 129-130). Primary socialization is the first socialization an individual undergoes in childhood, through which she becomes a member of society. Secondary socialization is any subsequent process that inducts a member of the society into new sectors of the objective world of his society (p. 130).

Berger and Luckmann (1966) point out that socialization processes are not uniform across a culture as, for example,

> the lower class child will not only come to inhabit a world greatly different from that of an upper-class child, but may do so in a manner quite different from the lower-class child next door. (p. 131)

Moreover, within a class, for instance, children's appropriation of social objects is mediated through their significant others (pp. 131-132).

Primary socialization includes the recognition of the generalized other. This recognition

> implies the internalization of society as such and of the objective reality

established therein, and, at the same time, the subjective establishment of a coherent continuous identity (p. 133).

Berger and Luckmann explain that an appreciation of the generalized other occurs gradually through a "progressive abstraction from the roles and attitudes of specific others to roles and attitudes *in general*" (p. 133). When the generalized other is "crystallized" Berger and Luckmann note that what is real "outside" corresponds to what is real "within" (p. 133).

Secondary socialization includes the acquisition of role-specific knowledge about institution-based "subworlds" that are characterized by "the complexity of the division of labour and the concomitant social distribution of knowledge" (p. 138). Secondary processes of socialization are less dependent on biological limitations than are primary processes of socialization that is, the new knowledge builds on the already existing social foundation built by primary socialization not on age-specific capabilities for learning (p. 136; p. 140).

Primary and secondary socialization are maintained through ongoing social interactions which reaffirm everyday reality (p. 149) by continually repeating the objectivations that became internalized during socialization. Language is identified as the most important vehicle of reality-maintenance. Interestingly, Berger and Luckmann note that most reality maintenance is carried out implicitly not explicitly, that is, most conversations rest on common ground that is taken for granted by people and not discussed in each conversation (p. 152).

In addition to maintaining reality, conversation also modifies reality.

Modification can come from not speaking about something as "the subjective reality of something that is never talked about comes to be shaky" (p. 153) and so its importance may wane. Repeated conversations about something may increase its importance as "conversation gives firm contours to items previously apprehended in a fleeting and unclear manner" (p. 153). Berger and Luckmann (1966) state that this

> reality-generating potency of conversation is already given in the fact of linguistic objectification. We have seen how language objectifies the world, transforming the *panta rhei* of experience into a cohesive order. In the establishment of this order language *realizes* a world, in the double sense of apprehending and producing it. Conversation is the actualizing of this realizing efficacy of language in the face-to-face situations of individual existence. In conversation the objectifications of language become objects of individual consciousness. Thus the fundamental reality-maintaining fact is the continuing use of the same language to objectify unfolding biographical experience. In the widest sense, all who employ this same language are reality-maintaining others. (pp. 153-154)

Also of importance in subjective reality-maintenance are the specific social base and social processes that support consistent belief in a reality. What Berger and Luckmann mean is that it is, for example, impossible to maintain one's sense of being important unless the milieu confirms the identity and others treat the person as important (p. 155).

Although it is difficult, a person's subjective reality (resulting from primary socialization) can be transformed (p. 156). For example, with religious conversions

people "switch worlds." This type of switch is more like primary socialization than secondary in that it requires intense identification with the new group; however, it is unlike primary socialization in that a previous world needs to be dismantled and disintegrated (pp. 157-158). Religious conversions and other such dramatic switches require a "legitimating apparatus" in order to be successful, that is, without the new collective and new significant others, the switch will not succeed in re-interpreting the old reality in terms of the new.

Difficulty in modifying social conditions may be the result of unsuccessful socialization which is characterized by "asymmetry between objective and subjective reality (p. 163). For example,

> the individual cripple or bastard has virtually no subjective defense against the stigmatic identity assigned to him. He is what he is supposed to be, to himself as to his significant others and to the community as a whole. (p. 165).

Berger and Luckmann (1966) point out that these sorts of situations have the character of individual misfortune. They do not provide the ground for the institutionalization of counter-identities and counter-reality (p. 165). The reason for this is, as Berger and Luckmann have mentioned before, that institutionalization is a social process. If an individual's unique characteristic becomes the focus, the processes that are available to modify social reality are precluded to the individual, as change in the dominant reality requires other people. Berger and Luckmann state:

> The unsuccessfully socialized individual himself is socially predefined as a profiled type — the cripple, the bastard, the idiot, and so on. Consequently,

requires other people. Berger and Luckmann state:

> The unsuccessfully socialized individual himself is socially predefined as a profiled type — the cripple, the bastard, the idiot, and so on. Consequently, whatever contrary self-identifications may at times arise in his own consciousness lack any plausibility structure that would transform them into something more than ephemeral fantasies. (pp. 165-166)

Only when there are enough people can counter-realities develop.

Unsuccessful socialization also occurs when discrepancies between primary and secondary socialization develop as in the case where a man wants to become a knight but his social position precludes it (p. 171). Another case of unsuccessful socialization occurs when more than one world is present during primary socialization which can result in internalization but without the sense of taken-for-granted reality. When a child is raised with competing realities, people may choose to manipulate those worlds. And, "if this phenomenon becomes widely distributed, the institutional order as a whole begins to take on the character of a network of reciprocal manipulations" (p. 172).

Berger and Luckmann note that when a society is exposed to other worlds "on a market basis", specific problems emerge for subjective reality and identity. They suggest that a general consciousness of the relativity of *all* worlds, including one's own, develops such that people lose their sense of living in "the world" and feel that they live in "a world." Also, it then follows that "one's own institutionalized conduct may be apprehended as a role from which one may detach oneself in one's own consciousness, and which one may "act out" with manipulative control" (p. 173). Berger and Luckmann

point out that contemporary industrial society (p. 173) is often characterized by this sort of manipulativeness. They unfortunately do not provide examples nor do they elaborate on the consequences. It seems though, that people, when *playing* at roles, are no longer recognized as historically situated members of a particular society whose roles (with entailed rights and responsibilities) are well-defined. Rather, people are recognized as mere actors who borrow the visible (observable) trappings of a role in order to achieve the goal of impressing others.

In contemporary industrial society, the rights and responsibilities entailed in roles do not need to be included if they are inconvenient. Of course, few would object to assuming the rights accorded a role but many balk at assuming the responsibilities. In a society where roles are borrowed for gain and discarded when inconvenient, that is, used manipulatively, the role itself and the symbols associated with it become meaningless. Roles are no longer typifications of one's own and others actions (p. 72) but instead are only displays that have been separated from their associated activities.

Identity.

Personal identity is formed by and maintained in the dialectical relationship with society. Persons, in turn, act back on social processes and structures to modify and reshape them (p. 173) to complete the dialectic. Berger and Luckmann wish to clarify the distinction between identity as a phenomenon emerging from the dialectic between the individual and society, and identity *types* which are relatively stable social elements of objective social reality. So, while the phenomenon of identity is common to all societies, the identity types will be peculiar to each society.

According to Berger and Luckmann, the categories developed by scientists including psychologists are also peculiar to the society in which they develop. Scientific categories are identity types and are not universally applicable despite the claims of scientists to the contrary. Berger and Luckmann explain that,

> a psychology interpreting certain empirical phenomena as possession by demoniacal beings has as its matrix a mythological theory of the cosmos, and it is inappropriate to interpret it in a non-mythological framework. Similarly, a psychology interpreting the same phenomena in terms of electrical disturbances of the brain has as its background an overall scientific theory of reality, both human and non-human, and derives its consistency from the logic underlying this theory. (p. 175)

For Berger and Luckmann, "psychology always presupposes cosmology" (p. 175) so making sensible, intelligible judgments about people's behaviour requires establishing which reality a person belongs to. Discovering which reality a person belongs to is crucial because questions about psychological status cannot be answered without recognizing the "reality-definitions that are taken for granted in the social situation of the individual" (p. 176).

Berger and Luckmann note that psychological theories within a culture may be "empirically adequate or inadequate." "Inadequate" here does not mean that a theory fails to meet the terms of the procedural canons of empirical science but, rather, that it fails to be useful as an interpretative scheme for experts or layman when they are applied to empirical phenomena in everyday life (p. 177). Further, a psychology that

demonstrates "empirical adequacy by [its] applicability in therapy" does not demonstrate the "ontological status of its categories" (p. 177). What Berger and Luckmann mean here is that even though a particular therapeutic strategy is successful within a culture this does not necessarily mean that the categories employed by the theory can be generalized to other cultures.

It is obvious that Berger and Luckmann believe that social factors influence identity development, but they do not exclude or ignore organismic factors. They remark that the "continuing coexistence of man's animality and his sociality may be profitably observed at any conversation over dinner" (p. 180) and that

> the channelling of activity is the essence of institutionalization, which is the foundation for the social construction of reality. It may be said then that social reality determines not only activity and consciousness but, to a considerable degree, organismic functioning ... The point is that society sets limits to the organism, as the organism sets limits to society (p. 182).

Berger and Luckmann close by indicating that they were not the first to note the dialectic between social reality and individual existence acknowledging that others recognized it before them. It is their contribution, they feel, to apply the dialectical perspective to the theoretical orientation of the social sciences (p. 187).

What Berger and Luckmann Mean by the Social Construction of Reality

According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), human beings are biological organisms that must interact with the world into which they are born if they are to survive. What Berger and Luckmann are emphasizing in particular is that the world into

which people are born is an already existing natural world and, more importantly for understanding human activities, also a social world. Human interaction with other humans and the natural world is not simply a matter of "stimulus-response" but is a matter of people participating in an ongoing social dialectic. The dialectic is a common feature of all cultures but the character of the dialectical relationship is different in each culture. That is, each society develops its own unique social world consisting of institutions, roles, meanings, etc., which mediates the relations between people, the natural world and the satisfaction of their biological needs.

Berger and Luckmann's reformulated sociology of knowledge acknowledges the universality of the foundations of knowledge while also acknowledging the unique character of each culture. Through understanding the foundations of knowledge, Berger and Luckmann believe that sociologists can understand, recognize, and record patterns in other cultures than their own. Berger and Luckmann emphasize that to understand, recognize and record is as far as sociologists should go because the task of judging moral matters is for other disciplines to complete.

Human social interactions are a qualitatively different kind of activity than that which constitutes the social behaviour of animals. It is qualitatively different because humans can use language. The particular language spoken, imbued with particular meanings shared by members of the society sharing that language, mediates between members of the society and the world in which they live. Humans, it is crucially important to remember, live not only in the material, natural world into which they are born but also live in a social world into which they are born. Human reality is natural

and social. It is influenced but not dictated by the natural world because social meanings, sustained and conveyed in language mediate people's relations with the natural and social world. The meanings conveyed in language are shared intersubjectively between same language speakers who share both the natural and social worlds.

Language and its capacity for allowing intersubjectivity is crucially important in the development of social institutions and relations constituting any society. The institutions and relations constituting any society are created, maintained and revised by people in their societally mediated activities which are facilitated by language use.

It is worth reiterating here that Berger and Luckmann leave some gaps in the foundations of knowledge that they lay. Intersubjectivity, for instance, is an important feature of their theory of language but they omit any discussion of how intersubjectivity arises. Another feature of theories of language in general which will become increasingly important as the thesis develops is how language is related to reality. In their theory, language clearly refers to reality which same language speakers share, but again, Berger and Luckmann omit a clear explanation of why or how they become confident that language refers to reality. Stating that language refers to reality may strike the reader as a statement of the obvious but it must not be assumed to hold for all theories. It is just this assumption that Gergen and Shotter attempt to give up.

Subsequent constructionist theorists, such as Gergen and Shotter within psychology, develop markedly different theories from Berger and Luckmann in spite of a shared name, common roots and seemingly similar emphases on understanding the role

of language in accounting for human activities. It will become apparent in the next chapter that what Berger and Luckmann mean by language is not the same thing as Gergen and Shotter mean. The view of language employed by a theorist, it will be argued in Chapter 4, has crucially important ramifications for the kind of theory that follows from it. The next chapter is devoted to providing summaries of Kenneth J. Gergen's and John Shotter's theories of social constructionism.

Chapter 2. The Social Constructionist Theories of Gergen and Shotter.

The Social Constructionist Theory of Kenneth J. Gergen

Although Gergen (1985) acknowledges that Berger and Luckmann (1966) was a "seminal volume" in the development of the social constructionism movement in psychology, little of Berger and Luckmann can be found in Gergen's work. To begin with, Berger and Luckmann had different intentions than Gergen. Berger and Luckmann intended to clarify and elaborate the socially constructed nature of reality in general so that sociologists would be well equipped to describe the social structures of any culture they chose to study. Gergen's intentions are less easily identifiable.

Two themes are apparent in Gergen's writing concerning the meaning of social constructionism within society. Some of his writing clearly indicates that he views social constructionism as an approach that focuses on language in that it "explicat[es] the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world" (Gergen, 1985, p. 276). In so doing, social constructionism serves a useful critical function. That is, by examining people's accounts, a clear picture of what is happening can be exposed. For example, when it is realized that what was originally portrayed as positive or helpful is actually destructive then a positive alternative can be developed. In articulating this theme Gergen's theory resembles Berger and Luckmann's in that both assume that a real world exists.

An example of Gergen's realist, critical writing sometimes appears when he discusses the therapeutic professions. Gergen (1990a) explains that they are actually responsible for the rapid development of a multitude of mental illnesses rather than being

responsible for remedies. He criticizes these professions for reifying mental illnesses and he points out that

> in the very efforts to furnish effective means of alleviating human suffering, there are important respects in which mental health professionals simultaneously generate a network of increasing entanglements for the culture at large. (Gergen, 1990a, p.354[106])

Gergen (1990a) suggests that a more promising alternative lies in developing alternative vocabularies that do not locate the problem in individuals but in social relations, and in "ultimately eras[ing] the concept of "problem behaviour" itself (p. 365[119]).

The other theme developed by Gergen is that no point of view or theory can be demonstrated to be preferable to any other. Social constructionism then, rather than serving a critical function in society, becomes radically relativist and a theory that attempts to justify the position that all points of view are equally valid. What this view means for society is, according to Gergen (1991), that

> the very concept of "foundational conflicts" between good and evil, true and false, rational and irrational would dwindle into obscurity. To silence, incarcerate, or kill adherents of differing political, religious, economic, or ethical discourses (and their related practices) would cease to make sense. (pp. 253-254)

Gergen (1997) for instance, compares bio-medical and "talking cure" approaches to treating human problems. He states that

> our "natural" desire ... is for a fix of "the truth" about disorder and therapy, "the answer" that would allow us to escape the stranglehold of groundless and

> problematic traditions. Yet, it is at precisely this juncture that we also confront the painful realization that there is no escape from assumptions. There is no "sound reason" or "compelling evidence" outside a tradition, a perspective, a domain of value, a way of life. (p. 26).

The alternative Gergen (1997) proposes is "a democratization of the entire "mental health" project because, he says, "[i]n issues of moral and political significance, univocality is our worst enemy" (p. 26). The goal then is not to find a single right answer but to "expand the range of voices relevant to molding our cultural future" (p. 26).

The foundation of his position that all points of view are equally valid stems from his assertion that since philosophers and psychologists alike are unable to justify the distinction between the objective, real world and the experienced subjective world (Gergen, 1989, p. 53; Gergen & Gergen, 1991, p. 88) that one must doubt the existence of the real world. Gergen (1991) asserts:

> There is scarcely a reader who doubts that when he or she is asleep the world goes on as it is. The world is there, independent of us; we are but its spectators during our conscious hours. Yet in spite of the obvious fact that we are transient agents of experience in a world that will continue beyond our demise, can such a belief be justified? The distinction between the *real* world and the *perceived* world seems altogether self-evident, but is it? If all experience were removed from existence, would anything be left over to be called real "clouds" or "steeples"? If we removed from existence all that we call real-world, would anything remain that we call "seeing", "hearing", or "smelling"? To remove the entirety of one

domain is to remove the whole of the other. Why then do we treat this unity as two realms of existence rather than one? And, as philosophers have long questioned, if each of us lives in our private experience, then on what grounds do we conclude that there is anything outside of experience? If all that we can know is in our experience, then we can know nothing beyond it – which would exclude the possibility of knowledge of an external, or nonexperiential, world. (p. 101)

Gergen uses examples to illustrate that the problem with the idea of objective reality and "true" descriptions in language of it is a problem of interpretation (Gergen, 1988; 1989; 1991). One example involves two friends, Ross and Laura. Gergen (1988) recounts that when Ross reaches out and touches Laura's hair, neither the observers of this event or even Ross himself knows the true meaning of the action. Subsequently, he leads the reader through several "contextual indicators" (e.g., Ross loves Laura madly, Ross is trying change Laura's perception that he is cold and unaffectionate) which Gergen feels are, in the end, unhelpful. They are unhelpful because while each is supposedly a version of the truth about why Ross touched Laura's hair yet, Gergen (1988) notes that the "interpretation of any given action is subject to infinite revision" (p. 33) and human beings are destined to enter "into an infinite regress of realities" (p. 59). Gergen (1988) concludes that "we find ourselves with no viable account of validity in interpretation" (p. 39) as each new piece of information disproves the validity of the last piece and he sees no end to the process.

Gergen (1991) points out that because many views exist, it becomes impossible to "determine precisely" what is true (p. 84). Gergen argues that the consequence of

being certain that it is impossible to precisely determine the truth is liberating because people need not take each other seriously. After all, he reasons, if people cannot have confidence in the truth of the statements (or actions or intentions) of others then people are free from the responsibility of taking that statement seriously. He does not explain the paradox of how he can know for certain that it is impossible to determine anything precisely when, according to his own theory, nothing can be known with confidence.

Gergen (1991) contends that the prevalence of talk about objective facts is accounted for not by the existence of the facts but by the existence of social processes of agreement and consensus only (p. 89). For Gergen, counting something as "factual" or "true" depends only on others reaching the same conclusion.

He gives the example of a person who proclaims that she sees a full moon (p. 84). Gergen feels that if no one else agrees with her, then she should reconsider and wonder whether her eyes have failed her. Further, if even supposedly empirically testable natural events such as full moons are unverifiable then, according to Gergen, it is completely hopeless to pursue "real" knowledge about "ephemeral social things, like economic conditions, or even the ozone layer" [sic] (p. 85).

Problems of modernism.

In justifying that reality is unverifiable, Gergen frequently begins his books and articles by creating a theoretical foil against which to contrast his view. This foil often claims to be an account of modernism and is present in both his realist, critical writings and his relativist writings although the use to which modernism is put differs. In his realist writings, it is the products of modernism, e.g., science, that are characterized as

being destructive and in need of replacement. In his relativist writings, the idea of modernism itself is used as an example of the destructive influence of univocality or the hegemony of a single discourse that, he argues, must be replaced with pluralism.

Gergen (1991) states of modernism:

> Although unanimity of characterization is far from complete, there is also a general recognition that this interrelated set of modernist beliefs is slowly losing its commanding sense of validity. (p. 28)

According to Gergen, modernism developed at the end of the nineteenth century as Romanticism began to wane. He states that

> since the rise of the *modernist* worldview beginning in the early twentieth century, the romantic vocabulary has been threatened. For modernists the chief characteristics of the self reside not in the domain of depth, but rather in our ability to reason – in our beliefs, opinions, and conscious intentions. In the modernist idiom, normal persons are predictable, honest, and sincere. Modernists believe in educational systems, a stable family life, moral training, and rational choice of marriage partners. (p. 6)

Gergen has identified several other themes that characterize modernism as well, including the return of the Enlightenment ideals of "systematic observation and rigorous reasoning" (Gergen, 1991, pp. 29-30; Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996, 356-359), the grand narrative of progress (Gergen, 1990b, p. 26; 1991, 30-32; Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996, pp. 600-601), the quest for essence or universal properties (Gergen, 1990b, p. 25; 1991, pp. 32-36), the metaphor of the machine (Gergen, 1991, pp. 36-38), belief in the

true and accessible self (Gergen, 1991, pp. 38-41).

In Gergen's (1985) view, modernism and the science of psychology that it encouraged are deeply flawed. He believes that science's special status as a "meat grinder from which truth [can] be turned out like so many sausages" (p. 273) should be revoked.

Social constructionism, according to Gergen in some of his writings, will turn science "on its head" by changing the view that social psychology is merely one branch of natural science to the view that all science is actually part of social psychology. One example where social constructionism can be seen to turn "science on its head" comes from Gergen's critique of the therapeutic professions discussed above. Gergen (1990a, p. 353[107]; 1991, pp. 13-16) points out that traditional approaches are destructive rather than helpful in that they create and perpetuate the very illnesses that they were supposed to alleviate.

In other writings, Gergen's account of modernism includes the notion that it inevitably leads to one of two unacceptable alternatives. Gergen (1991) believes that when people become

> convinced of the truth or right of a given worldview, a culture has only two significant options: totalitarian control of the opposition or annihilation of it. (p. 252)

This is because, he explains,

> to be convinced of the "truth" of a discourse is to find the alternatives foolish or fatuous and also necessary to slander or silence other views. Warring camps are

> developed that speak only to themselves, and that seek means of destroying others' credibility and influence (and life), all with an abiding sense of righteousness. As modernism gained hegemony, for example, religion was forced out of college curricula and replaced by science. (p. 252)

Abandoning the modernist pursuit of truth and acknowledging that all points of view are equally valid will, according to Gergen, leave nothing for people to argue or fight about and will be liberating. Gergen (1991) explains that:

> Learning that there is no thing-in-itself to which our accounts of the world must be true can lead to an enormous sense of liberation. So long as there is at least someone or some group to say "That's interesting," "It seems possible," or "That sounds reasonable," one is free to construct, render, or depict the world as desired. (p. 112)

In addition to outlining the promise of his alternative to modernism, Gergen recruits many authorities in order to discredit it. For instance, Gergen (1991) states that as

> the physicist Werner Heisenberg convincingly demonstrated in the mid-1920's, it is theoretically impossible to determine the position and velocity of the basic units of matter. We do so in practice, proposed Heisenberg, only because we limit most of our interests to cases so crude (those seen with the naked eye) that we do not detect the impossibility. (p. 89)

In effect, there is no basic unit of matter to be observed independently of those who make the observation because each time such an observation is attempted the particles are

influenced by the methods of observation.

As well, Gergen states that Thomas Kuhn's (1970) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* casts doubt on the idea that the progressive accumulation of knowledge through science is an inexorable, self-correcting, rational process. According to Kuhn, there is no gradual replacement of old, false theories with new, true theories but an abrupt shift to the wholesale endorsement of the new perspective. The new theory is not comparable to the old theory in terms of empirical truth as it is not a difference in truth but a different way of looking at the world.

Gergen (1991) notes that support for Kuhn's position was widespread and that his position "cut directly to the jugular of modernism" (p. 91). That is, Kuhn's position jeopardized the unquestioned assumption that the facts of the world are essentially there for study as what counts as fact, Kuhn maintains, "depends on one's perspective" (p. 91).

Gergen (1991) also appeals to Garfinkel's (1967) ethnomethodological research that examines "the conversational conventions used by people in everyday life to determine what counts as "the factual world" (p. 92). An example of Garfinkel's research involves suicide (pp. 11-18). Gergen (1991), in discussing suicide, says:

> We take it for granted there are various sorts of death, including death by natural causes, murder, and suicide. There are statistical compendiums that chart suicide rates in various countries; insurance companies are keen to determine into which category a death is properly placed; and it is of enormous significance to us if we are told that a friend has committed suicide. But how do we determine when a suicide occurs? Corpses carry no labels telling us how they came into this state.

> To make such determinations, argued Garfinkel and his colleagues, we must fall back on conversational conventions about such issues. Often such conversations are built around the concept of "intention." Did the individual intend to take his life or not? Yet it is very difficult to know about people's intentions. How are people to determine, for certain, what intentions underlie their behaviour? And how, in the light of cultures in which the concept of intention is not found, can we be so certain that people even have intentions? An individual may write a note in which he says he intends to take his life, but on what grounds should we trust this as an accurate report on his mental condition? ... And what about deaths that we call "natural"? If our only desire in life were for longevity, chances are we would not eat many of the foods we do, breathe the air in our city streets or lead such stressful lives. Since we do, and indeed we die before our time, shouldn't our deaths be considered forms of suicide? What then counts as evidence for suicide? It depends on the social group in which such decisions are made. Suicides are not "facts in the world", but the products of group perspective. (pp. 92-93)

Gergen also recruits Latour and Woolgar (1979) to support his doubts about objective reality. These researchers studied scientists at work at the Salk Institute for Biology. Gergen (1991) states:

> Latour and Woolgar conclude that what counts as objective truth is not the result of rationally subjecting hypotheses to empirical test, but emerges from a network of social agreements (p. 93)

According to Gergen then, modernism has little if anything to recommend it. It is, by Gergen's (1991) account, destructive because, under its guidance, people search for and falsely believe that they find essential truths or facts when they encounter merely "entries in the discursive practices of the culture" (p. 102) . Further, and worse, the modernist pursuit of truth leads people to denigrate and destroy each other because they will not tolerate competing views of the truth. A preferable alternative, by Gergen's account, is to recognize that what we take to be facts or truths are only social constructions and that all constructions, since the truth about them cannot be established, must be considered to be equally valid.

What Gergen means by social constructionism.

Before summarizing Gergen's position, it will be useful to articulate two different meanings of the word *real* that are apparent in Gergen's theory. The simple, commonly understood definition (and the one assumed in the traditional view of language and in Berger and Luckmann's theory) suggests that whatever is being described as being real exists. One philosophical dictionary explains that realism is:

> Most commonly the view (contrasted with idealism) that physical objects exist independently of being perceived. (Flew, 1979, p. 299)

In his critical mode, for instance, when criticizing the effects of traditional therapeutic practice, Gergen points to real negative consequences that can be overcome by replacing them with constructionist practices which, he argues, will have real positive consequences for people.

In his other writings, the term reality means something quite different. He argues

that there is no justification for believing in the existence of anything real as the quotes provided above reveal. For example, we can presume neither that the world exists while we sleep nor that a suicide resulted from the intentions stated in a note. Instead, what Gergen means by real is merely what people *believe* to be real. How people come to believe that certain things are real while others are not is, he maintains, a social process consisting of coming to an agreement that something is real.

In order to distinguish between the usages of the term *real*, the commonly understood definition suggesting that what is real actually exists will be indicated by using the term without quotation marks. To indicate the usage suggesting that what is real is only believed to be real, I will adopt the convention of using quotation marks around the word *real*.

With these two meanings of *real*, that is real and "real," it can be observed that Berger and Luckmann's theory and Gergen's critical constructionist writings address the social construction of reality while Gergen's relativist writings address the social construction of "reality."

Gergen's theory of social constructionism is unlike Berger and Luckmann's in that he denies the existence of the natural world and laws governing it. Berger and Luckmann maintain that while natural laws cannot provide a complete and satisfactory explanation of human activity, they are an important. For example, human biology may dictate that people must eat in order to live; however, a political prisoner on a hunger strike may choose not to live. In order to come to a full understanding of the person's action and how it is accomplished, one must understand not only natural laws but also

the social meanings that mediate and the rationalization that just justifies the person's deliberate starvation.

What gets constructed in Gergen's theory of social constructionism? Either reality or "reality" depending on the stance he is taking in the particular book or article read. In his critical mode, Gergen maintains that the material and social worlds exist and that they can be constructed differently as in his criticism of psychotherapeutic practice. In his radical relativist mode, Gergen maintains that "reality" is constructed in language. That is, "reality" is the constructed product of agreement between people or, as he calls such agreement, a "coalition of subjectivities" (p. 84).

The function of language differs significantly in the two theories of social constructionism examined so far. Briefly stated, In Berger and Luckmann's theory, language is *about* reality while in Gergen's theory, language *is* "reality."

John Shotter

As Gergen did in his earlier work, Shotter finds grave problems with traditional psychology. Shotter (1990) says that what depresses him most is the way traditional psychology suppresses genuine individuality and the way it treats people as indistinguishable atoms. Even worse, for him, is

> the way in which appeals to mechanism were used as a device to disclaim responsibility and to avoid accountability for what were (to my mind), obviously political (and often morally obnoxious) proposals. (p. 207)

Shotter (1975), reminiscent of Berger and Luckmann (1966), acknowledges that "man is not simply a being immersed directly in nature but is a being *in a culture* in nature" (p.

14). The importance of culture for humans, according to Shotter, is a fact that demands a drastically different approach to the study of humans from the approach taken by natural scientists.

Shotter points out that traditional psychology, in trying to examine the inner dynamics of individual psyches or in trying to predict and control behaviour on the basis of external events or characteristics, has succeeded in obscuring or making "rationally-invisible" an extremely important aspect of being human.

The term "rationally-invisible" is a term that Shotter has borrowed and inverted from Garfinkel (1967). Garfinkel (1967) speaks of our everyday activities as containing within themselves devices for rendering what we do and say as "visibly-rational-and-reportable-for-all-practical purposes" that is, "accountable", as organizations of commonplace everyday activities (p. vii). While some devices render activities visibly-rational, Shotter (1993b) notes that it is also possible for some devices

> to render certain other aspects of our activities *"rationally-invisible"*, i.e., “unaccountable” in commonplace terms. (p. 175, note 4)

The science of psychology, Shotter (1992a) points out, renders aspects of ordinary social life invisible. He states:

> It leads to the invisibility of society; the social; the unique individual; rational agency; and, most strikingly, cultural artifacts, and their place in the socio-historical character of our human being. (p. 180)

The task involved in a new kind of human science would seek to render "rationally-visible" that which has become obscured in society. Further, Shotter, in

agreement with Winch (1958), holds that the goal of the science "is not one of proving whether reality exists or not, but of making clear what one commits oneself to saying or doing in the future by saying now that it exists" (p. 9 in Shotter, 1975, p. 36).

The alternative, Shotter (1975) explains, is a human science that is just as rigorous and disciplined as a natural science but, rather than seeking to predict and control human behaviour, will

> seek *understandings*; so that by understanding more clearly what we are and the situation or "position" we occupy, we may be able to describe explicitly the possibilities available to us all for what we might do next, for what we might make of ourselves and our world. (p. 14)

In order to achieve a psychology of "understandings", Shotter proposes a "rhetorical-responsive" version of social constructionism. Instead then, of a supposedly morally neutral natural science, Shotter (1989) wants a moral science. The major change resulting from the shift from a natural to a moral science is

> the abandoning of the attempt simply to discover our supposed "natural" natures, and a turning to the study of how we actually do treat each other as being in every day life activities. (p. 64)

In describing his "rhetorical-responsive" version of social constructionism, Shotter, like Gergen, begins by creating a foil against which to contrast his theory. The foil consists of several themes that developed during the Enlightenment that, according to Shotter (1993a), have become irrelevant. In particular, he identifies

> five features of Enlightenment thought that ... it will be useful to highlight: (a) its

> concern with analysis and (b) mental representations, and (c) with the formulation of such representations as systems; (d) its determination to break away from the authority of traditional, religious systems of thought and to find a new form of authority in ahistorical experience; and (e) its attempts to overcome the idea of original sin ... and its emphasis upon the individuals' being able to find all the resources they require to be autonomous, psychologically, within themselves. (p. 8)

It is Shotter's (1993a) view that these themes don't need to be entirely replaced but only displaced to a degree sufficient to "allow their contemporary 'others' ... a 'voice' in the current arguments" (pp. 8-9). Shotter wishes to preserve, however, the more optimistic view of people and an emancipatory goal of the Enlightenment. Rather than being innately and hopelessly evil, people could be, at least to some degree, self-determining. Shotter (1993a) states:

> It is [the] emancipatory concern of the Enlightenment that I do not want to give up. So the question I want to explore is this: by finally giving up, in social affairs, the urge for a unified system of dependencies and the urge or an explanation of everything; by giving up (partially) the "systematic spirit"; by giving up (partially) the desire for "ahistorical" decontextualized knowledge; by accepting (partially) people's dependency upon each other; by recognizing that we conduct our academic affairs from within two-sided traditions of argumentation, is it possible to further the spirit of this emancipatory concern in another more effective manner? Is it possible to fashion a new discursive "space"

> or "situation", a new discursive "activity" or "movement" (not a framework, nor a system, nor a model -- the metaphors chosen here are of outstanding importance), from within which to discuss and debate these concerns? (pp. 11-12)

To address these concerns, Shotter (1993a) develops his "rhetorical-responsive" version of social constructionism in which an understanding of the role of language in human affairs is crucially important (p. 73). His view of the role of language in human psychology is radically different from the traditional view that the primary function of language is referential and representational.

Rorty's (1979) description of the traditional understanding of language as referential and representational is often cited by social constructionists, including Shotter, when describing its shortcomings. According to Rorty (1979):

> it is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical convictions. The picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations—some accurate, some not—and capable of being studied by pure, nonempirical methods. (p. 12)

Shotter agrees with Rorty that the mind is not simply a passive mirror of Nature and that language is not isomorphic with reality. Knowledge, they agree, cannot be construed as an one-hundred percent accurate, "mirror-image" representation of Nature.

The view of language Shotter says he endorses is the one put forward by Wittgenstein in his later work. According to Shotter (1993a):

> Wittgenstein thought of [language] in his earlier and later work in two distinctly

different ways: in the *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein, 1922) its role was representation, that is, language functions to provide "pictures" of states of affairs in the world; while in the *Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 1953) its role is communication—it is *used* within certain, circumscribed ways in people relating to themselves to one another in particular *forms of life*." (p. 73)

In this view, words may be used to represent things, however, representation is but one use among many uses to which language can be put in sustaining the forms of life in question.

The study of language then, is not the study of how we talk about language in the abstract but is, according to Shotter, the study of how language necessarily shapes the everyday communicative activities in which it is involved. Here, Shotter (1993a) emphasizes that language must be studied and understood *in practice* because its influence can only be revealed "in the 'grammar' of such activities." (p. 75).

By "grammar" Shotter is referring to Wittgenstein's (1953) epigram "[g]rammar tells us what kind of object anything is" (no. 373). What this means is that words do not have a single dictionary definition that is perfectly true in each usage of that word but rather that the usage of the word or how it is used in the "grammar" of the situation reveals what is meant. Meaning then is unique to each situation and, if understanding is to occur, then research should occur *in practice* rather than in the abstract in order to see how the words are actually used.

For example, traditional attitude research is often conducted in the lab via questionnaires. That is, the research is conducted outside of the context where the

attitude is likely to be revealed in people's actual activities, e.g., in hiring practices. Consequently, this type of research not only fails in its goal to predict action but also explains nothing about why people act the way they do. Instead Shotter might recommend that the researcher be present at hiring meetings in order to see and understand how the "grammar" of the situation reveals the unique meaning of racism within that particular practice.

According to Shotter, language does not provide a single, accurate representation of Nature that is uniformly shared and understood. Words, he maintains, can be understood only relative to the situation, culture and people who are in the speaking context. Shotter (1993a) supports this view when he says:

> To state now explicitly the well-known Wittgensteinian slogan: in everyday life, words do not in themselves have a meaning, but a *use*, and furthermore, a *use only in a context*; they are best thought of not as having already determined meanings, but as *means*, as tools, or as instruments for use in the "making" of meanings — "think of words as instruments characterized by their use," (Wittgenstein, 1965, p. 67). For, like tools in a tool-box, the significance of our words remains open, vague, ambiguous, until they are used in different particular ways in different particular circumstances. (p. 79)

The consequence of this view, according to Shotter, is to utterly repudiate the assumption that words in language already have meaning independent of the circumstances of life in which they are used. In summary then, there is no single meaning for a word. Rather understanding words depends on understanding how words function in practice.

The consequence of the lack of a meaning in words that is independent of the circumstances of life is that all forms of human life are characteristically vague and indefinite. Human forms of life are vague and indefinite because there is no determined order waiting to be discovered. Shotter points out that those scientists who insist that there is an order are making "rationally-invisible" the vagueness and indefiniteness. The vagueness does not exist because we have too little information but because human life really is vague and indefinite. Shotter (1993a) states:

> No already determined order exists, just an "order of possibilities" (Wittgenstein, 1953, no. 97), an order of possible orderings which it is up to us to make as we see fit. And this, of course, if we are to act in the world and be able really to influence what happens there, is exactly what we require of language as a means of communication: we require the words of our language to give rise to vague but not wholly unspecified 'tendencies', which permit a degree of further specification *according to the circumstances of their use*, thus to allow the "making" of precise and particular meanings appropriate to those circumstances. (p. 82)

The role of the scientist changes dramatically in Shotter's (1993a) new human science. Instead of scientists as neutral, external observers, Shotter wishes to suggest that they should become "as one of a community of 'blind' persons exploring their surroundings by the use of sticks or through other such instruments" (p. 20). Knowledge would have to do with the scientists "knowing their way around in ways communicable between them" (p. 20). Further, the mind is treated as

> actively "making sense" of the *relatively invariant* (Bohm, 1965, Gibson, 1979)

> features they discover in their instrument-assisted explorations of their surroundings—a shift from a way of knowing by "looking at" to a way of knowing by being in contact, or in touch with. (p. 20)

Shotter states that he wants a shift from third-person observation to second-person "prosthetics." What he means is that

> from our new position as "blind" investigators, we become interested in the procedures and devices we use in "socially constructing" the subject matter of our investigations in concert with our fellow investigators, and in how we establish and maintain a contact with it. For the "hook-up," so to speak, between such devices and our surroundings, determines the nature of the data we can gather *through* their use. (p. 21).

According to Shotter (1993a), prosthetic devices reside on the "side of the agent." They are constructed by us and Shotter notes that we come to dwell in these constructions. Further, he states that

> we learn how to embody them as an instrumental means through which to achieve our ends. As such, they are 'transparent"— blind people do not feel their sticks vibrating in the palms of their hands, they experience the terrain ahead of them directly as rough, as a result of the stick-assisted "way" of investigating it in their movement through it; just as the carpenter "feels" the hardness of the wood, and adjusts the blows of the hammer accordingly as she or he hammers a nail home. (pp. 21-22)

With respect to other people, Shotter (1993a) says that people are not *prostheses*

but *indicators* and that, unlike prostheses, people exist not on our side but "on the side of the world" (p. 22). People, he says, must be confronted not as means but as having a *meaning* which we must interpret like a "text." Shotter (1993a) says

> rather than a means for our use, our relationship to [indicators] is a hermeneutical one; if we can interpret the information they provide—by placing all its parts suitably within a larger whole—then they present us with a meaning, a state of affairs to which we might need or want to react. (p. 22)

Shotter maintains that all human forms of life are characterized by vagueness and indefiniteness and that our relationship to other people is interpretive. Despite this general ambiguousness people believe in whole truths or complete narratives. According to Shotter, these beliefs are created and preserved through the process of *imaginative completion*. It is important, Shotter says, to remember that peoples' dealings with each other are not monologic (therefore, not entirely imaginary) but are dialogic and, with our prostheses, we detect and fill in gaps that appear in the other's speech. We do not perceive fragments but wholes. The gaps between the fragments that we glean are filled unconsciously by imagination so, Shotter maintains, we mistakenly believe we perceive wholes.

Knowing from within or knowledge of the third kind.

Shotter (1993a) prefers to use the term "intelligibility" rather than "meaning" as it draws attention to the unique understandings that develop in talk and it draws attention away from the focus on single, true meanings (p. 23). According to Shotter, intelligibility cannot be negotiated without some common understanding that grounds

talk. Shotter recruits Vico's account of the origin of a culture's "common sense" or *sensus communis* to explain what is at the root of intelligibility. Vico, Shotter (1993b) explains, believes that the social processes involved

> are based not upon anything pre-established either in people or their surroundings, but in socially shared *identities of feeling* they themselves created in the flow of activity between them. These, he calls "sensory topics" – "topoi" (Gr. topos = "place") because they give rise to "commonplaces", that is, to shared moments in a flow of social activity which afford common reference, and "sensory" because they are moments in which shared *feelings* for already shared circumstances are created. (p. 54)

Vico points out that the shared feelings give rise to "imaginative universals." Everyone running in fear of thunder is a "shared circumstance" and the idea of Jove, "the image of a giant being speaking giant words" (p. 54), is an example of what Shotter (1993b) calls an "imaginative universal."

What is important to note here is that "[t]hese first points have to do, not with "seeing" in common, but with "feeling" in common, with the "giving" or "lending" of a shared *significance* to shared feelings in an *already shared* circumstance" (Shotter, 1993b, p. 55; 1993a, p. 66).

Moreover, says Shotter (1993a):

> The sensory topic from which the image of Jove originated is thus a 'topos', a place in which it is possible to "refeel" everything which is present at those times when "Jove" is active. And, as such feelings are slowly transformed into more

> external symbolic forms, the inarticulate *feelings* remain as the "standard" against which the more explicit forms may be judged as to whether they are adequate characterizations or not. (p. 65)

At the root of what Shotter means by "knowing from within" or "knowledge of the third kind" is *sensus communis*. Shotter (1993a) says that these terms refer to knowledge of "the circumstances" as a special kind of knowledge and that:

> Such a form of knowledge cannot be formulated in terms of facts or theoretical principles ('knowing that'), for it is a form of practical knowledge, relevant only in particular concrete situations. But it is not practical knowledge in the technical sense of a craft or a skill ('knowing how'), for it is knowledge which only has its being in our relations to others. It is a separate, special kind of knowledge, *sui generis*, which is prior to both, and, in being linked to people's social and personal identities, determines the available forms of these other two kinds of knowledge. Indeed, unlike the other two kinds of knowledge, it is knowledge of a *moral* kind, for it depends upon the judgments of *others* as to whether its expression or its use is ethically proper or not — one cannot just have it or express it on one's own, or wholly within one's self. It is the kind of knowledge one has *only from within a social situation,* a group, or an institution, and which thus takes into account (and is accountable to) the *others* in the social situation in which it is known. (p. 7)

Although "knowledge of the third kind" is shared by people, this does not guarantee perfect predictability of outcomes. According to Shotter, what is centrally

important and what has been overlooked is that people are responsive to each other. With "knowledge of the third kind" rooted in *sensus communis*, what is still crucially important is the nature and character of people's responsiveness to each other. Shotter has called this responsiveness "joint action." According to Shotter (1993a), joint action

> designates a third category of activities (or events?) lying in a zone of uncertainty somewhere in between the other two spheres of interest that have occupied our attention in the past. It lies neither wholly in the category of human *actions* (what "I" as an individual agent do, explained by my giving my reasons) nor in that of natural *events* (what merely "happens" to, in, or around me, outside my agency as an individual to control, explained by their causes), but shares (as we shall see) features of both. It is its very lack of specificity, its lack of any predetermined final form, and thus its openness to being specified or determined by those involved in it, that is the central defining feature of joint action ... it is worth pointing out that the need for such a concept arises when human action is viewed not as the deliberate execution of a well-defined sequence of component actions -- as in the monologic following of a script or plan – but when we act spontaneously, say, on the basis of what we "vaguely felt" was "required by the situation" we were in at the time. Although we do not find it easy in such cases to give a well-articulated account of why we acted as we did, we would still claim to be acting sensibly, in a way appropriate to our circumstances. (p. 4)

Shotter's "rhetorical-responsive" theory of social constructionism attempts to avoid the problems of traditional psychology by rejecting the notion that language is

isomorphic with reality. Instead, Shotter intends to develop a psychology that studies language in practice in order to create a moral rather than a natural science.

According to Shotter, people share what he calls "knowledge of the third kind." This kind of knowledge arises from people sharing circumstances and feelings which form a culture's "common sense" or *sensus communis*. Shotter considers *sensus communis* to be the root of intelligibility. Although people share *sensus communis* and so have grounds for making themselves intelligible to each other the world is, according to Shotter, still inescapably vague and indefinite and people rarely if ever understand one another.

Influences contributing to this vagueness include the fact that *sensus communis* is continually evolving and that coherence in individual's accounts is achieved through the process of "imaginative completion" during which fragments of meaning are coalesced into a sensible whole in the minds of individuals. What is made intelligible then, is coherent for each individual but is not necessarily the same for all people participating in a conversation as people may "complete" their narratives differently.

What Shotter Means by Social Constructionism

The theory of language employed in Shotter's constructionism, although different in some superficial ways, is, in many respects, the same as Gergen's theory of language. What may be misleading in Shotter's theory is the well articulated social aspect of his theory that convinces one that his theory is truly social when it cannot be. For instance, his discussions of *sensus communis* and "topoi" present plausible accounts of how people come to understand and share meanings that develop in shared social situations.

However, while these and other social aspects of his theory seem to provide a basis for a sound social theory, they do not. Even though people supposedly share circumstances and feelings, they cannot communicate meaningfully, in Shotter's view, about those circumstances or feelings. Meaning, or intelligibility as Shotter prefers, is still personal interpretation only. A person's interpretation takes the form of a coherent narrative which Shotter maintains is forged out of meaning fragments during the process of imaginative completion.

What gets socially constructed in Shotter's theory of constructionism is "reality," which is continually created, he maintains, in "joint action" occurring in talk. We have seen a similar description of the creation of "reality" in talk when Gergen tells us that "reality" is created in talk during processes of coming to agreements and consensus about what is "real."

Conclusion: What do Social Constructionists Share? How Do Social Constructionists Differ?

In their initial statements of their intended goals, the social constructionist theories of Berger and Luckmann, Gergen and Shotter resemble one another. Each shares an interest in rejecting the traditional practices involved in disciplines of sociology and psychology respectively, and each develops a theory intended to replace the previous problematic theories. Significant differences begin to emerge when the theories of language employed in each theory are examined.

Berger and Luckmann maintain that the natural world into which people are born is also a social world. The development of a uniquely human social world is facilitated

by language use which mediates human interactions with the physical world. Through language use, different human realities are created that are influenced but not dictated by the natural world. As was noted earlier, all people are born into a natural world and a social world. Universally, human biology dictates that food must be eaten in order to survive. What is different between societies and socially constructed is the kind of food eaten, how food is gathered, prepared, etc. Human biology may dictate that people must eat to live but people sometimes choose to die by deliberately starving themselves for a variety political or social reasons. Language also allows people to understand one another, that is, language makes people intersubjective.

Gergen, in his ultra-rationalist mode, does not take for granted either the world or other people. "Reality" becomes merely an entry in the discursive practices of a culture that is made up in language just as everything else is made up. Language cannot be related to reality as there is no such thing but is instead the mechanism by which "reality" is created in processes of agreement and consensus. The role of language in human life is not to mediate but to create or construct "reality." Shotter's view is essentially the same. "Reality" is constructed in "joint action" and language does not refer to reality but rather constructs it.

Some serious problems with the constructionist theories of Gergen and Shotter may be apparent by now. In beginning to specify these problems, we now turn to criticisms from the literature directed at revealing the problems associated with relativist positions.

Chapter 3. The Problems of Relativism: Ancient and Modern

Both Gergen and Shotter have been taken to task for their relativism. Terwee (1995) and Parrott (1992) outline the self-refuting consequences of Gergen's and Shotter's theories, respectively, and their particular criticisms of constructionism are summarized below.

The relativism that characterizes some forms of constructionism is an obvious problem and easy to attack. In order to demolish modern forms of relativism, one need only recruit the arguments that were used to effectively demolish ancient skepticism and apply them. Parrott's (1992) and Nussbaum's (1994) descriptions of the similarities between ancient and modern forms of skepticism reveal that the similarities between ancient and modern skepticisms allow criticisms of Pyrrhonism to apply equally well to some forms of modern constructionism. Relativist theories, ancient and modern, are not only logically incoherent but also are impossible to successfully put into practice although both ancient and modern relativists have tried. Both Gergen and Shotter maintain that their theories are applicable to practice and their claims will be discussed below.

A more difficult and interesting task than applying old criticisms to "new" theories is to examine how the theories of Gergen and Shotter became relativist in the first place. Not all theories of constructionism are relativist as we have seen with Berger and Luckmann's theory. It will be informative to understand where the differences between realist and relativist versions of constructionism lie. Chapter 4 will explore the development of constructionist forms of relativism and will provide some suggestions as

to how Berger and Luckmann avoided relativism.

At the close of this chapter, it will be clear, I hope, that the social constructionist theories of Gergen and Shotter are not viable on both logical and practical grounds.

The Problems of Relativism in Modern and Ancient Skeptical Theories

Terwee (1995) specifically addresses the relativist constructionist theory of Gergen. He provides the example of a study conducted by Gergen that demonstrates that the personality terms created by traditional personality psychologists to unambiguously describe fixed, inner traits in persons are, in fact, ambiguous when used in isolation. Gergen's study demonstrates that these terms can be used to refer to many different personalities and characters. Further, the study demonstrates that artificially constructed situations like many testing situations produce ambiguous knowledge.

Terwee (1995) argues that this information is useful and could have been used effectively by Gergen to criticize the detrimental effects of decontextualization that often occurs in traditional personality research (p. 189). Gergen, however, puts his findings to quite a different use. Instead of claiming that some uses of personality terms in some situations are ambiguous, Gergen argues that *all* personality terms and their uses are ambiguous in principle, regardless of their context. Gergen, Terwee (1995) maintains, interprets his findings as "evidence for the openness of all interpretation" (p. 190). By taking this stance, Gergen's position becomes self-refuting because if nothing can be known for certain and is open to interpretation then Gergen precludes the possibility of being certain about his own conclusion!

Shotter is taken to task for his relativism by Parrott (1992) which, like Gergen's

relativism, ends up becoming self-refuting. Parrott (1992) states:

> The arguments advanced in support of social constructionism are so powerful that they are usable against constructionism itself. The theory of social constructionism asserts that there can be certainty that we cannot believe anything with certainty. The theory claims that there is mystery and vagueness at the heart of our epistemological and moral worlds; but the theory claims to be exempt from this vagueness. (p. 217)

The skeptical belief in "mystery and vagueness at the heart of our epistemological and moral worlds" is present, Parrott notes, in both modern and ancient forms of skepticism. Ancient skeptics challenged the Stoics and the Epicureans on the grounds that there were no infallible tests for truth just as modern skeptics challenge science among others. Ancient skeptics held several other beliefs similar to modern constructionists as well:

> (1) the same thing appears different to people in different relative positions and to people from different cultures, (2) any proposition must be supported by another proposition, which leads to an infinite regress, and (3) dogmatists take unproved assumptions as their starting point in order to avoid this infinite regress (De Lacy (1973) in Parrott, 1992, p. 217)

These beliefs led Ancient skeptics to be careful not to contradict themselves by insisting that they were certain that nothing can be known for certain. Instead, the ancient skeptics suspended judgement on every issue. Here, modern skeptics differ from the ancient skeptics; Shotter and other relativist social constructionists, Parrott points out, are not similarly careful. They insist that nothing at all can be known for certain.

Their certainty that the world is uncertain is their undoing and this contradiction is, according to Parrott (1992), the central fallacy of constructionism (p. 217).

Parrott (1992) does not address whether the Ancient skeptics who tried to suspend judgment were successful which inadvertently suggests that maintaining a skeptical position might be possible through suspending judgement. And, if it was possible for ancient skeptics to maintain their skepticism, then this leaves open the possibility that constructionists might be able to do so if they adopt the strategy of reserving judgement. Nussbaum (1994), however, reveals that, with respect to human action, suspending judgment is impossible.

Nussbaum (1994), it should be noted, does not address social constructionism specifically. Nussbaum (1994) addresses the relativist writings of Stanley Fish (a legal theorist) and Jacques Derrida (a literary theorist) who, like constructionists, endorse forms of modern skepticism. The similarities between the positions of Fish, Derrida and social constructionists allow her criticisms of Fish and Derrida to apply to constructionists as well.

Nussbaum (1994) points out that ancient skeptics were aware that once one was convinced by skeptical arguments and once one began to doubt, then the same arguments began to erode one's newly-found certainty about the skeptical beliefs as well (p. 721). Going through skeptical arguments is like climbing a ladder to a high place and then kicking the ladder away. Nussbaum (1994) explains that, in ancient times, people disputed the possibility of living a skeptical life. She states:

It was frequently objected in the ancient world that no person could live and act

> like this. For it would appear that action requires beliefs, including beliefs about what is good and bad, better and worse. Skeptics deny this. In doing away with commitments about the way things really are, they have not, they insist, done away with all motive forces that produce action. Many living creatures move and act without belief. Animals are moved by the way things strike them. They have no commitments about what is correct, but they are still moved in various ways: by their faculties, their habits, and even their memories (pp. 721-722).

The problem is that human action is nothing at all like the so-called actions of animals. An example of supposedly skeptical behaviour that is provided by Nussbaum (1994) will help illustrate this point more clearly. She recounts that:

> One afternoon Pyrrho's colleague Anaxarchus falls into a swamp. Pyrrho sees him floundering, but walks on by without helping. When others blame Pyrrho, Anaxarchus himself ... praises Pyrrho's lack of normative commitment and his freedom from emotion. (p. 715)

The problem is that Pyrrho's act cannot be construed as indifference that demonstrates that he lacks normative commitment. Pyrrho *chose* not to help and in so doing displayed his commitment to skepticism. Further, the fact that others blamed Pyrrho while Anaxarchus praised him demonstrates that his purposefully negligent act was interpreted in light of social meanings. Pyrrho's act, far from displaying a lack of normative commitment, was meant to be overt evidence for his adherence to skepticism, and Anaxarchus understood this.

In a sense, one could say that Pyrrho (and human beings in general) lack the

inability to act in the uniquely human use of the word. Had an animal passed Anaxarchus while he was drowning and rescued him (or not rescued him) the animal would not be subject to the same judgements and ascriptions of responsibility (or negligence) that were placed on Pyrrho because animal behaviour is not informed by shared social meanings. People cannot be construed to behave as animals do because human action is integrally linked with choice and meaning.

Nussbaum (1994) illustrates that ancient relativism is not only logically self-refuting but also impossible to put into practice. The modern skeptical theories of Gergen and Shotter, it will be argued here, are similarly problematic although for somewhat different reasons.

Gergen, rather than recommending that one reserve judgement in order to live a skeptical life, argues that all positions must be judged to be equally valid. There are, he argues, no universally valid criteria by which to judge positions and judging all positions to be valid will be liberating for people because all positions will be respected. His claims are enthusiastically positive but when examined closely it can easily be seen that it is neither desirable nor possible to treat every point of view as being equally valid.

Treating every point of view as being equally valid seems desirable and liberating at first. Indeed, the position has been liberating for some people whose points of view have been unjustly denigrated and who have come to see their views treated with respect, e.g., First Nations peoples. However, a blanket policy of treating all points of view as equally valid also has the seriously undesirable consequence of elevating points of view that oppress us to the same respectable level. For example, sexist or racist points of view

would be as respected and valued as those points of view endorsing equality! It would be possible if people's views remained views, that is, if people only held views but did not act in accordance with them. However, in dealing with each other, people necessarily act in accordance with their views which affects, for better or worse, other people. This key point is overlooked by Gergen and Shotter.

Respecting all points of view when views are put into action is impossible. People in their activities together cannot, for instance, simultaneously respect both the racist point of view that a particular group should be refused employment while respecting the view that equal opportunities must be made available to all.

Shotter's theory is no more successful. He maintains that people must distinguish real possibilities from fictitious ones. In order to do so, however, standards or foundations by which to judge the real from the fictitious must be established but Shotter denies that such foundations and standards exist. As well, it should be pointed out that Shotter's emphasis on "joint action" and the "moves" or "moral repositionings" supposedly made possible by it fails to account for the numerous situations where action is anything but joint. That is, there are some situations where action is better described as being unilateral rather than joint, for instance, when people are prevented from speaking or if allowed to speak, their words "fall on deaf ears."

Joint action cannot account for, among other things, the experiences Shotter (1993a) himself recounts about his employment at an British aircraft factory (pp. xi-xii). He describes the power differences between the bosses and workers where the workers were subjected to "little degradations" and overt demonstrations of power differences,

e.g., the insertion of windows into toilet stalls, segregated lunch rooms, limited possibilities for advancement, etc. Had Shotter or any individual talked to the bosses about addressing these inequalities it is unlikely that the working conditions would have changed. Class differences in England pervade not only factories but other aspects of life and cannot be resolved by joint action occurring in talk between a few people.

These kinds of problems are significant in the lives of many people. People are obviously embedded in and are directly affected by their interpersonal relations. However, individuals and their interpersonal relations are just as embedded in societal conditions, such as class differences, which may facilitate or limit the choices available for individual action.

Shotter's theory of social constructionism does not address how relations such as class differences become institutionalized or how and why power differentials arise between people. Nor does his theory address how institutions are maintained or how to dismantle them once they are established. A serious problem with Shotter's theory is that he presumes that people are entirely equal in their abilities to participate in joint action. Although Shotter recognizes situations where action is not joint, as he reveals when he describes his factory experiences, there is no aspect of Shotter's theory that accounts for those instances where factors external to the actual individuals are more important in influencing action than are the words spoken. In Shotter's conception of joint action, all people are equally able to persuade or move each other; in practice, people are often in relations that are unequal.

It is clear that maintaining relativism, ancient or modern, in theory or in practice,

is impossible. With respect to the constructionist theories of Gergen and Shotter, the easiest and most obvious method to discredit them is to attack the relativism that characterizes them. However, to do so leaves untouched a deeper problem. It will be argued in the next chapter that the theories of Gergen and Shotter are more accurately described as solipsist rather than relativist.

Chapter 4. How Some Constructionists Become Relativist: An Illustration of Their Solipsism

Before beginning it should be pointed out that how language is conceived in a theory has profound implications for the development of other interrelated aspects of a theory. For instance, it has been pointed out that some common conceptions of language encourage problematic epistemologies. It will be argued that the view of language employed by Gergen and Shotter does just that. We have seen in Chapter 3 that Gergen and Shotter have been criticized for the relativism to which they admit. However, it will be argued in this chapter that the relativism from which they suffer is of a more profound kind. That is, their view of language not only encourages relativism but guarantees solipsistic consequences such that the world is not conceived to exist "out there" but is known only as an object of one's consciousness, that is, the world is considered not real but "real" only.

Like epistemology, theories of social functioning are crucially linked to the theory of language employed in their development. The theories of Gergen and Shotter are often described as being interpersonal theories of social functioning in that they focus on unique meanings that are created in dialogue during spontaneous, face-to-face encounters. Gergen emphasises processes of agreement and consensus while Shotter emphasises processes of joint action. If they are relativist theories, then it makes sense to discuss the social theory that follows. However, if the epistemology at the heart of constructionism is solipsist, then the possibility of any social functioning is eliminated. What happens then to the social in social constructionism?

At this point, the reader might ask why theorists like Terwee (1995) and Parrott (1992) who criticize Gergen and Shotter for their relativism do not also discuss their solipsism. It will be argued that there is some confusion in constructionist theory and the literature criticizing it that arises from confusing the two kinds of reality that were distinguished in Chapter 2. That is, critics and sometimes constructionists act as if what is constructed by language is reality instead of "reality." The consequence of this confusion is that the inherent solipsism of the constructionist positions presented by Gergen and Shotter becomes obscured.

How Relativist Constructionists Arrive at Their Theory of Language

Terwee (1995) and Button and Sharrock (1993) discuss how relativist constructionists arrive at the view that language constructs "reality." Terwee (1995) argues that relativist constructionists misconstrue Wittgenstein's adage that "meaning is use" (Wittgenstein, 1967) and that this misconstrual is at the root of the problem.

The adage, Terwee (1995) explains, is about the fact that the same words and expressions may be used in quite different language games and different forms of life and, further, in order to understand the meaning of a word or words fully, one requires that the context of use also be understood. Relativist constructionists, however, erroneously conclude from this adage that people cannot refer to the world at all and that concepts of truth and knowledge become obsolete (Terwee, 1995, p. 192). Meaning, in the constructionist interpretation of Wittgenstein, in a sense, becomes only use. Gergen (1991) displays his adherence to this view when he states:

One's words remain nonsense (mere sounds or markings) until supplemented by

> another's assent (or appropriate action). And this assent, too, remains dumb until another (or others) lend it a sense of meaning. Any action, from the utterance of a single syllable to the movement of an index finger, becomes language when others grant it significance in a pattern of interchange. (p. 157)

The adage is taken too literally to mean that meaning is created entirely spontaneously in face-to-face conversation as if it were possible that words could be entirely meaningless prior to their use in a conversation.

Terwee (1995) grants that the adage "meaning is use," when taken in isolation, is ambiguous with respect to Wittgenstein's view of truth and knowledge. However, he maintains that the adage's meaning, when read in the context of Wittgenstein's other writings, is clear. Wittgenstein, it cannot be doubted, is committed to truth, knowledge and the referentiality of language. Wittgenstein (1967), for instance, states:

> The idealist will teach his children the word "chair" after all, for of course he wants to teach them to do this and that, e.g., to fetch a chair. Then where will be the difference between what the idealist-educated children say and the realist ones? Won't the difference be only one of battle cry? (no. 414.; 1980, II, no. 339 in Terwee, 1995, p. 192)

and, far from providing evidence and arguments denying the possibility of truth and knowledge, Wittgenstein states:

> It seems to me: if one can't really know whether someone is (for instance) irritated, then one also cannot really believe or surmise it... Wouldn't it be ridiculous if a lawyer in court were to say that a witness couldn't know that

someone had been angry, because anger is something inner? – Then one also cannot know if hanging is punishment. (pp. 84-85, in Terwee, 1995, p. 192)

With respect to Gergen's relativistic conclusions, Terwee (1995) states that they only superficially resemble Wittgenstein's notion of context-dependence as there is a fundamental difference. Gergen's claim is that the multitude of actual and possible contexts makes it senseless to speak of meaning in *any* context. Wittgenstein does not argue that language is meaningless. Rather, he argues that part of understanding what is meant by any utterance involves understanding the context in which the words are used.

Button and Sharrock (1993), like Terwee (1995), also believe that some constructionists misconstrue Wittgenstein. It should be noted that their criticisms are addressed to post-Berger and Luckmann constructionist sociologists whose theories more closely resemble the theories of Gergen and Shotter than to the theory of their predecessors in sociology. To the extent that current theories of constructionist sociology and psychology are similar they are subject to the same criticisms so the criticisms made by Button and Sharrock apply equally well to both disciplines.

In their analysis, Button and Sharrock do not distinguish between reality and "reality." It is not a distinction that is required in order to make their particular criticisms, but omitting the distinction tends to give credit to constructionists where credit is not due. That is, failing to make the distinction makes it easy to mislead oneself that constructionists are relativists by obscuring the inherent solipsism implied by their theory of language. In describing Button and Sharrock's arguments, I will not distinguish between "reality" and reality until the end of the description where an

explanation of what is obscured and how it is problematic will be provided.

Button and Sharrock (1993): The Preservation of Dualism and the Origin of Solipsism

Button and Sharrock (1993) maintain that constructionist sociologists who claim to be taking a "practical turn" towards studies of language and culture in the pursuit of a new kind of sociology instead take a "cognitive turn." This turn, the authors' argue, succeeds only in perpetuating rather than eliminating the dualist Cartesian tradition that was to be rejected and replaced. Button and Sharrock (1993) remind us that a defining feature of Cartesianism is that it "presumes that the problem that has to be addressed is one of obtaining cognitive access to a pre-given, external reality" (Button & Sharrock, 1993, p. 3). Constructionists, they maintain, do not give up the question: "how do we acquire access to reality?" but rather they merely adjust the relation between the knower and the known. The adjustment changes how language is conceived but preserves the essential dualism that characterizes Cartesianism.

In the traditional view, they explain, the truth about the nature of external reality is revealed to us through scientific study. That is, the world exists "out there" and we, through our subjective cognitive processes, come to know it and describe it in language. Constructionists, Button and Sharrock maintain, turn their focus on language to examining processes of agreement and consensus. For example, the constructionist sociologists Latour and Woolgar (1979) study scientific investigations in order to understand how processes of agreement and consensus create scientific "reality."

For constructionists, Button and Sharrock point out, cognitive operations no longer reveal the nature of external reality but

> now come to constitute 'it'. "Reality" becomes the constituted or achieved product of cognitive operations. (Button & Sharrock, 1993, p. 3)

As Latour and Woolgar (1979) claim:

> Argument between scientists transforms some statements into figments of one's subjective imagination, and others into facts of nature. (p. 4, in Button and Sharrock, 1993, p. 5)

In the constructionist's view, the traditional view becomes in a sense inverted. Instead of words being identical with or isomorphic with reality, reality is constructed in talk, that is, reality becomes isomorphic with the words that are spoken.

Despite the constructionist emphasis on language, discourse and rhetorical devices, Button and Sharrock (1993) point out that constructionists have not provided an account or explanation of how linguistic construction achieves agreement and consensus (p. 7). Button and Sharrock (1993) believe that constructionists are unable to do so because constructionists construe language as a "medium of representation in an almost pictorial sense", that is, language is believed to represent the form of the world (p. 8). It is this mistaken belief about the relationship between language and the world that is the source of a confusion over the role of agreement and consensus in scientists' activities.

Button and Sharrock (1993) point out that this representational model of language is similar in two ways to the view of language that appears in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Relativist constructionists usually claim to reject this earlier view of language (as Wittgenstein himself did) and state that they adhere to the view of language found in his later works. Constructionists and early Wittgenstein both maintain that there is an

essential isomorphism between language and reality. In addition, constructionists believe, like early Wittgenstein, that "the limits of language mean the limits of my world" (p. 8).

Constructionists take issue with the view of language held by orthodox scientists that suggests that the "form that the world takes exists independently of the accounts that are given of it" (Button & Sharrock, 1993, p. 8). In contrast, constructionists argue that because facts are constructed through reaching agreement and consensus between scientists, and because reaching agreement is itself a process in language, then facts are only artifacts of social processes and the products of language. Reality then, is considered by constructionists to be entirely dependent upon language (Button and Sharrock, 1993, p. 8). This view is similar to early Wittgenstein in that the idea that there is an isomorphic relation between language and reality is preserved.

With respect to the idea that "the limits of language are the limits of my world", Button and Sharrock explain that Wittgenstein did not mean that language alone determines the form of the world. What Wittgenstein intended was that

> language is both a "momentary" thing, and something that is dependent upon the consciousness of an individual. It is the consciousness of a "me" that judges the world, and measures things in the world. Thus, what that world is judged to be and what that world is measured as, depends upon the concepts I use to measure and judge it by; is dependent upon the sense of the concepts I think at this moment, on this occasion. (Button & Sharrock, 1993, p. 10)

So rather than constructing reality, language, provides people with a way to describe and

talk about their experience of reality. Different languages provide different criteria and categories for judging and measuring and so the world is constructed differently by people speaking different languages.

With respect to the view of language presented in Wittgenstein's later work, Button and Sharrock (1993) rely on Hacker (1986). Hacker says that an important dimension of Wittgenstein's later work involves his argument about the autonomy of grammar. Grammar, for Wittgenstein, does not project or represent reality. Reality is not pictured in language, it is just that through grammar we give explanations of the meaning of things in the world, of what it implies to speak of language and reality. How we understand things in the world is tied to the explanations we give of them and thus the form of the world is settled in the concepts we use to describe it. For Wittgenstein, that something is the colour brown is not an empirical fact rather, the fact that "brown is a colour" is a rule of grammar.

Although this may seem to imply that Wittgenstein is also retaining the idea that language and reality are isomorphic, it does not. What Wittgenstein meant by arguing that "brown is a colour" is a rule of grammar is that language is not entirely dependent on reality, that language does not sample or picture reality but rather that it is autonomous from and independent of reality. According to Hacker (1986, in Button and Sharrock, 1993, p. 11), the interpretation of Wittgenstein's argument that reality is dictated by language is mistaken.

As evidence for Wittgenstein's opposition to the view that language dictates reality, Button and Sharrock (1993, p. 12) present Wittgenstein's exploration of pain that

occurs in *Zettel* (Wittgenstein, 1967). This exploration provides an invented natural history of an imagined society's use of the concept pain where, for this society, a person can only be considered to be in pain if they have a visible injury. If someone said they were in pain but had no visible injuries they would be told that they only thought they were in pain.

What Wittgenstein intended with this example is to illustrate that the sense or lack of sense of something is relative to language. It may be tempting, say Button and Sharrock (1993) to conclude that what Wittgenstein means is that the form of the world depends on the grammar of language in the sense that the form of the world depends upon the description that we give of it. However, Wittgenstein does not imply that whether or not someone is in pain depends on the description given. Rather, a person in pain (in the common usage of the term) would be in pain even if they were in the society that defined pain differently although their feeling may be called something else.

Taking this idea even further, Button and Sharrock (1993) explain that different groups within a society might produce different descriptions or give different accounts of something. Then, if reality is relative to language in the sense that reality is tied to the descriptions we give of it, we could imagine a situation where reality is constantly changing depending upon which group is doing the talking. Similarly with constructionist view of scientists. When it is possible to persuade members of that culture that something is the case, then by describing it in just that way it becomes the case. So, the making of "a fact" is relative to our agreement that something is a fact. In other words the argument that sense is relative to and dependent only upon language

becomes an argument to the effect that facts depend only upon language (Button & Sharrock, 1993, p. 12).

This, however, is a misconstrual of what Wittgenstein intended. Button and Sharrock (1993) argue that Wittgenstein was addressing what it makes sense to say. It makes sense in our society to say that someone is in pain when they engage in those activities that we have learned go with being in pain. If after a person has stated they were in pain, but 10 minutes later they are spied frolicking and gambolling then we may suspect that they were not in pain but only fishing for sympathy. What Wittgenstein was discussing is that intelligibility is relative to language not reality (Button & Sharrock, 1993, p. 13). The intelligibility of saying that "brown is a colour" is the issue that is relative to language, not the reality that brown is a colour.

The mistake lies in placing intelligibility in the hands of individuals' momentary, spontaneous interpretations, where situated agreement constructs knowledge (Button & Sharrock, 1993, p. 13). Wittgenstein, however much constructionists wish to quote him as being supportive of their views, intends to explain how language is meaningful and how people understand one another rather than the opposite, that language is meaningless and that people are prevented from ever understanding one another.

Button and Sharrock (1993) clearly demonstrate how relativist constructionists invert the traditional dualist relation between the knower and the known. Constructionists argue that individual subjectivities impose their cognitive processes outwardly, thereby creating reality. In the traditional view, it is the other way around. That is, knowledge about the external world becomes imposed upon a previously empty

subjectivity.

What remains to be done in this chapter is to show how Button and Sharrock inadvertently obscure a more serious problem of constructionism by not distinguishing between reality and "reality." To review, a convention was established in Chapter 2 such that *reality* is considered to exist independently of any cognitive processes while *"reality"* is considered to be the product of cognitive processes. The distinction is important because it allows us to distinguish between those cases when reality is considered to exist from those cases when "reality" is denied, and therefore, becomes in essence, a figment of an individual's subjective language processes only.

Button and Sharrock (1993) depict the traditional view of language in diagrammatic form as follows:

scientific knowledge <------------- the natural world

The constructionist view is drawn:

scientific knowledge ------------> the natural world

What Button and Sharrock seem to be inadvertently suggesting is that the natural world actually *is* made real in talk. If the natural world is somehow made real in talk then there is something for people to come to agreement and consensus about. It is sensible, if this is so, to discuss coming to agreement and consensus because there is something about which to agree.

However, it is the existence of reality that is shared in common between people that is denied by constructionists. Reality is considered to be a construction or, as Gergen has put it, merely an entry in the discursive practices of a culture. In the views of

Gergen and Shotter, language allows people to make personal interpretations but not necessarily to communicate with others. Supposedly, it is impossible for people to understand each others' utterances because meaning is subjectively achieved in the mind of an individual and consists solely of personal interpretation. Gergen maintains that utterances are subject to an infinite regress of interpretations and Shotter maintains that "narrative coherence" is due to individual imaginative processes. But if this is so, how do people come to agree, disagree or construct anything when they cannot understand one another at all? Ultimately, the theory of language presented by Gergen and Shotter effectively isolates minds from each other. The "reality" produced is a personal illusion only, one that cannot be shared between people. No one can know what another is doing or saying; each only constructs an interpretation. Given such a theory of language, the ability to come to agreements and consensus or to participate in joint action is logically precluded. In that "reality" is the product of an individual mind that does not have contact with the real world or with other people, the constructionist theories are demonstrated to be solipsistic rather than relativistic. Relativism includes an assumption about the existence of reality, as knowledge is relative to something that is taken to exist whereas solipsism excludes that assumption.

The Ramifications for the Development of a Social Theory

The ramification for the development of the social aspect of a theory based on the solipsistic conclusion that "reality" is isomorphic with language is easy to see: The theory precludes the possibility of any real social relations. Doubting the existence of the world means that an individual should also doubt the existence of others except as an

imaginary product the individual's cognitive processes. Second, even if the existence of others could be granted for a moment, there is no way, according to such a theory, to make oneself understood by another because each utterance is subject to an infinite regress of interpretations.

Ultimately, social constructionism is more properly labelled *solipsistic* rather than *relativistic*. Making clear the distinction between reality and "reality" reminds us that "reality" is the product of a single mind with no method by which to make oneself understood or by which to understand others. By this point, one wonders why Gergen and Shotter adopt "social constructionism" as the label for their theory. As we have seen, their view of language does not allow anything real to be constructed and when language prevents people from communicating (even if their existence is granted), the basis for any social relations, except imaginary ones, is eliminated.

Conclusion

In summary, Terwee (1995) as well as Button and Sharrock (1993) maintain that at the heart of constructionism is a misconstrual of Wittgenstein. Terwee shows how Wittgenstein's adage that "meaning is use" has been misconstrued to signify that language is meaningless in any context. Rather, Wittgenstein intended to reveal how understanding the context of use was crucially important in understanding meaning because the meaning of words can change when used in different contexts.

Button and Sharrock (1993) maintain that relativist constructionists, in proposing that "reality" is isomorphic with language rather than language being isomorphic with reality, provide a theory of language that is only marginally different from the traditional

view. That is, the central dualism is preserved in that, at the heart is the relation between individual subjective knowers and the external known world. In the traditional view, knowledge stems from studying the external world in order to learn the universal truth about it which then resides in our subjective minds. In Gergen and Shotter's view, the direction is reversed. Subjectivities or knowers impose their notions outward which become "reality." Their "new" view is essentially the old view reversed which, with no method by which to be certain of any reality or to communicate, must be considered to be a form of solipsism.

Where do we stand?

In a sense, the view of language presented by Gergen and Shotter causes more problems than it solves. The inversion of the dualism found in the traditional view of language preserves the dualism that was to be rejected and eliminates the possibility of social relations in that it is solipsistic. At least when language is considered to be isomorphic with reality, the possibility exists of sharing information between people!

It will be argued that the conception of language glimpsed in Berger and Luckmann's theory is more promising with respect to the development of a viable alternative theory of human psychology if it were employed in the development of such a theory.

Their theory, it will be argued in the next chapter, looks at language from a different context and, in so doing, Berger and Luckmann encourage the development of a realist theory in which people are intersubjective instead of a solipsistic theory where people are intrasubjective. What is different about their theory of constructionism will

be discussed next, along with an alternative theory of psychology.

Chapter 5. Overcoming the Problems of Social Constructionism and An Alternative

As it stands, neither of the social constructionist theories developed by Gergen or Shotter provides a satisfactory alternative to traditional psychology although both theorists should be applauded for clearly articulating the problems inherent in traditional psychology. If neither traditional psychology nor psychological constructionism are satisfactory theories what theory might prove a viable alternative?

Berger and Luckmann's theory of social constructionism, on the surface, is preferable to the theories presented by Gergen and Shotter. Their approach does not suffer from either epistemological relativism or solipsism and it provides a rich, complex theory of social functioning including both interpersonal relations and the societal relations in which they are embedded. It is not, however, a theory of psychology. That is, their theory was not intended to influence people's actions except for guiding the limited scope of activities performed by sociologists. The purpose of Berger and Luckmann's theory was to provide a framework by which sociologists can understand and record information about the societies that they study. However, sociologists, according to Berger and Luckmann are to avoid any discussion of moral issues, assessments of right or wrong, or judgments about whether a particular way of doing things is better or worse than another. These matters are the proper topic of moral philosophy but often become relevant in psychology as well because psychological theories and practices affect people's treatment of each other. For example, Gergen and Shotter both criticize traditional psychological practice for causing harm to the very people psychologists claim they are helping. The problem is that their social

constructionist solutions to the problems they so clearly articulate are not viable for the several reasons explored in the previous chapters. A more adequate theory is still required.

In conceiving a viable theory of psychology some important things can be learned and borrowed from Berger and Luckmann. They must be criticized, however, for not fully explaining why the foundations of knowledge in everyday life that they explicate are foundational. That is, what they propose is quite different from previous theories, but they do not explain how or why their theory overcomes problems inherent in previous theories. As noted, on the surface, their theory is preferable to Gergen's and Shotter's. But could it be that because the details, or the foundations of the foundations, are left obscure, their theory rests on assumptions and ideas that, once subjected to scrutiny, will prove to be as logically and practically faulty as the theories of Gergen and Shotter?

It will be argued here that Berger and Luckmann's theory is preferable to the theories presented by Gergen and Shotter not only on the surface but in the details as well. The foundations that their theory rests upon are only glimpsed in their book. There is sufficient detail, however, to recognize that others share similar views. Fortunately, some of the others sharing these views take care to discuss the details.

An example may help to clarify. A significant problem that Berger and Luckmann overcome is dualism. In their book, they do not even acknowledge dualism as a problem nor do they employ much fanfare to accompany the few short statements that effectively undermine the dualism that has characterized traditional philosophy and science for so long. Berger and Luckmann (1966) are absolutely and unequivocally

certain that reality exists. There is no discussion in their theory about how an empty human subjectivity "in here" comes to be filled with knowledge about the objective, external world "out there." Instead they simply lay down as the first foundation of knowledge that:

> Consciousness is always intentional; it always intends or is directed toward objects. We can never apprehend some putative substratum of consciousness as such, only consciousness of something or other. (pp. 20-21)

It is perhaps not immediately clear how these statements make Berger and Luckmann unequivocal realists or how they overcome dualism. These statements reveal that, in Berger and Luckmann's view, knowledge of one's self or subjectivity is had only concomitantly and simultaneously with knowledge that there is something apart from one's self. One can be confident about the existence of the objective world because it is, in a sense, an integral part of the definition of subjectivity. Dualism is overcome by recognizing that subjectivity and objectivity are not a duality but a unity, with subjectivity being dependent, in a sense, on objectivity. Indeed it may be said that subjectivity is a special form of objectivity.

A second problem that is overcome with the recognition that consciousness is intentional is the meaninglessness of language. Language became meaningless in the dualist theory proposed by Gergen and Shotter in that it did not refer consistently to anything. Further, according to Gergen and Shotter, language does not convey meaning because meaning is made up and is a matter of personal interpretation. Intentionality, in its association with action that occurs in the world becomes the grounds for an

intersubjective theory of language representing a distinct improvement over the intrasubjective – and thus solipsistic – theory of language proposed by Gergen and Shotter.

Berger and Luckmann do not discuss intentionality or action further, nor do they discuss how language is intersubjective although they maintain that it is. Macmurray (1957), however, shares a similar view in some respects to Berger and Luckmann, and he explains in detail the advantages of recognizing that consciousness is intentional while Simon (1982) provides a detailed theory of action which has, as its central task, the analysis of human action using the vocabulary of intentionality

Macmurray (1957): Intentionality, Action and Language

Macmurray (1957), unlike Berger and Luckmann, overtly rejects the dualist perspective that has come to characterize traditional philosophy. He maintains that dualism is rooted in thought, which, he notes, "proceeds as though the Self were a pure *subject* for whom the world is *object*" (p. 12) and he points out that his stance is not a necessity for philosophy but is rather is a generally unconscious presupposition that has become implicit in philosophical procedures. Macmurray's goal, as he puts it, is to shift this traditional theoretical focus of philosophy to a practical focus that has action, not thought, at the heart of it.

Macmurray (1957) in arguing for the replacement of thought with action as the standpoint of philosophy explains that

> most of our knowledge, and all our primary knowledge, arises as an aspect of activities which have practical, not theoretical objectives; and that it is this

> knowledge, itself an aspect of action, to which all reflective theory must refer. (pp. 12-13)

One matter must be clarified before proceeding further. Macmurray's theory is directed at thought while constructionists' theories examined in this thesis involve not thought but spoken language which is related but not identical. It is not clear yet that Macmurray's arguments against using thought as the starting point of a theory are applicable to the theories of Gergen and Shotter which begin from the starting point of spoken language.

Macmurray (1957) concedes that the shift in focus from thought to talk in some kinds of philosophy is a distinct improvement; however, he maintains that it would be a mistake to stop there. He states that his purpose is

> to show how the personal relation of persons is constitutive of personal existence; that there can be no man until there are at least two men in communication. This conclusion has clearly a positive relation to the current linguistic philosophy. Both are concerned to stress the centrality of language for philosophy. To transfer the task of logic from the analysis of thought to the analysis of language is to take a step towards the recognition of the mutuality of the personal and its implication, the primacy of action. But to rest here, to conceive philosophy as simply the logical analysis of language, is to fail to see the implications of this step, and to remain stuck in the presuppositions of the philosophical tradition from which it could release us. (p. 12).

As we have seen, Gergen and Shotter "remain stuck" in the presuppositions of

dualist philosophy. The improvement that can be achieved by focussing on talk rather than thought, Macmurray (1957) explains, is that:

> Speech is public. It is at once thought and action, or rather a unity of which "mental" and "physical" activity are distinguishable but inseparable aspects; and as a result it establishes communication, and introduces the "you" as the correlative of the "I." For if the "I think" logically excludes the second person, the "I say" makes the second person a logical necessity. The "I say" is logically incomplete. To complete it we must formulate it as follows: "I say to you; and I await your response." (p. 74)

Macmurray goes on to say that the crucially important difference between thought or language and action is that it is only action that makes a change in the world. That is, action is practical whereas thinking and, in part, talking are theoretical. Macmurray explains that:

> To exist is to have a being which is independent of thought; and what depends on thought for its being is no *thing* but a mere *idea*, like the unicorn. To say that it has an ideal existence is simply a confusion of categories, which can only mislead us. Unicorns do not have an ideal existence. They do not exist. There are no such things. To put it otherwise, to exist is to be part of the world, in systematic causal relation with other parts of the world. Thinking, however, is non-causal; it "moves nothing" as Aristotle said. If it is an activity, it is an activity which is without effect in the realm of existence ... In a word, in distinguishing between action and thought I distinguish between existence and non-existence. (p. 80

Talking, Macmurray is saying, is less theoretical than thinking in that it establishes communication and it requires a second person, however, talk is not causal like action is. It may seem that talk is causal when orders or suggestions are followed or when a friend proves that he is a "man of his word" by acting upon his stated intentions. However, what is meant by the adage that "talk is cheap" is that it is easy to promise to act, however, it acknowledges that actions do not necessarily follow. It is more costly, in a sense, to act than it is to talk. Similarly, an "empty threat" and an "empty promise" are neither harmful nor helpful, respectively, as the words are not followed through. Talk then, must be considered to be a limited form of action only. For this reason, the shift undertaken in philosophy and science must be not only from thought to talk but to action.

With respect to the intentionality of an individual's consciousness, Macmurray states:

> Consider now the Self in relation to the world. When I act I modify the world. Action is causally effective, even if it fails of the particular effect that is intended. This implies that the Self is part of the world in which it acts, and in dynamic relation with the rest of the world. On the other hand, as subject the Self stands "over against" the world, which is its object. The Self as subject then is not part of the world it knows, but withdrawn from it, and so, in conception outside it, or other than its object. But to be part of the world is to exist, while to be excluded from the world is to be non-existent. It follows that the Self *exists* as agent but not as subject. (Macmurray, 1957, p. 91)

Macmurray (1957) goes on to point out that thought is derivative of action and that there can be no Subject without having first been Agent (pp. 100-101). In what sense is thought derivative of action? It helps if one tries to picture the first communication ever and the conditions in which the need for communication would arise. It is impossible to think that it was necessary to develop a method to communicate in order to convey a message to one's self. That is, the original purpose of language was to communicate with another person: it requires another person. The need to communicate arose in the course of doing some activity together in which communicating became important. It is here that we can see that communication and language are linked inextricably with action and that doing came before speaking or thinking. Communication was about the doing and it is in this sense that thought is derivative of action.

Some clarifications are necessary here. When using the terms consciousness, intentionality and action it should be made clear that these terms are being used to describe particularly human characteristics. That is, animals and even human infants are different from most adult humans as they do not have a consciousness, they do not and cannot act intentionally and they simply do not act *in the same sense* that an adult human is capable of doing. Having consciousness should be distinguished from just being conscious, which animals and infants certainly are. Consciousness, although it is subjectively experienced, must be considered a social phenomenon in that it does not and cannot develop until socialization occurs, in particular, when language learning occurs during the course of doing activities.

What is meant by intentionality should be clarified as the term "intentional" has

both a specialized use in philosophy and a colloquial use. Intentional human action, in the philosophical usage, includes *but does not only* refer to those actions that a person intends to do. Rather, it is because human action is intentional that allows people to be held responsible for the consequences of actions that they did not intend. More detail about this point is provided below in the section about the social nature of action. Briefly, what is meant by *intentional* in philosophy is that it is within a person's power to do or not do some act and that responsibility for the action's consequences are attributable to the person who chose to do or not do what she did. So, a person who neglects to do something and thus causes harm can be held responsible for her actions because she could have (and ought to have) done otherwise. Further, that human action is intentional does not guarantee that an intentional action will be successful because one may fail to achieve what one intended.

What is Action?

It is important to distinguish between the term "action" in this specialized particularly human context and the commonly understood, colloquial usage. With respect to the meaning of the word "action," Macmurray (1957) explains that

> the term is loosely used, and can give rise to serious ambiguity. We talk of the actions of animals; we even refer to the action of an acid upon a metal. When we use the term in this way, we are employing an anthropomorphic metaphor ... In the strict sense of the term only a person can 'act', or in the proper sense "do" anything. (pp. 88-89)

Simon (1982) also distinguishes the common usage of the word "action" from the

specialized usage (pp. 10-11) and gives a detailed account of action theory. Action, he insists, is not to be construed as just physical movement. While Simon is vague about whether every action must include a bodily movement, it is clear that although bodily movements are often associated with actions, they are not necessary conditions for actions to occur. Simon states that an action:

> involves somebody *doing* something, whereas a bodily movement connotes merely a *happening*. To say that there is a difference between an action and a bodily movement is to say that there is a difference between Jack closing his fist and Jack's fist closing. Whether or not every action entails some bodily movement or other, it is clear that the converse does not hold, even in the case of a movement that carries the same description as one that *is* an action. Not every movement of my arm or leg is an action I perform. My actions comprise only those movements that I *make* happen. (p. 10)

With respect to actions that seem not to include physical movements, what is more important than the physical movement is that the person is doing something. Causing or preventing a dire consequence by seeming not to act in certain circumstances must be considered to be acting in that the actors are doing something. People are held responsible for actions that do not entail physical movements. For example, a person deemed negligent is believed to have caused a dire consequence through not acting. A positive example involves the victim of a crime who prevents her murder by not further enraging an attacker by fighting back which might plausibly escalate a mugging to a murder. Actions are not reducible to physical movements because there are common

incidents, like those mentioned above when it is the lack of physical movement that is the causal event producing the change in the world. What is crucially important to remember is that what makes these non-movement actions into actions is that an effect was intentionally achieved.

Action, Simon (1982) goes on to state,

> must be conceived as a logical primitive, as a concept that is irreducible to any other concepts that do not themselves presuppose the notion of action or agency. (p. 7)

In further discussing the bodily movements in actions Simon explains that it is important to separate the kinds of bodily movements that can be parts of an action from those bodily movements that are not actions at all (p. 8). Involuntary movements such as tics and reflexes are bodily movements that are not actions. Tics and reflexes are not intentional and it is not possible that a person could do otherwise.

A logical primitive, Simon (1982) explains, often refers to the smallest component that a phenomenon can be reduced to; however, this does not apply to actions. In action theory, an action includes both the movement and the thought that informed the movement. Simon does not discuss Macmurray, but it will be helpful to include an excerpt from Macmurray (1957) that clarifies the relation between thought and action. He writes:

> The Self that reflects and the Self that acts is the same Self; action and thought are contrasted modes of its activity. But it does not follow that they have an equal status in the being of the Self. In thinking the mind alone is active. In

acting the body indeed is active, but also the mind. Action is not blind. When we turn from reflection to action we do not turn from consciousness to unconsciousness. When we act, sense, perception and judgement are in continuous activity, along with physical movement. When we think, we exclude overt bodily movement at least; what more we exclude depends upon the denotation we choose to give to the term "thought," which in its usage is highly ambiguous. But perhaps we may say that the "purer" our thought becomes, the more it excludes not merely perception, but all sensuous elements, and move in a shadowy world of abstract and general ideas. Action, then, is a full concrete activity of the self in which all our capacities are employed; while thought is constituted by the exclusion of some of our powers and a withdrawal into an activity which is less concrete and less complete. Indeed, when we consider the contrast in this fashion, it tends to present itself as an abstract duality; in which action and thought are the positive and negative poles of a personal experience, which moves, in its actuality, between them. In a somewhat analogous fashion black and white present themselves as absolute contraries, though in reality they are the ideal limits of a series of grey tones. In the case of visual experience, too, one of the limits is positive and the other negative. Both are ideal limits; but while pure white is the complete fulness of light, black is its complete exclusion, so that the darker the tone the nearer we are to an exclusion of light, and so to the exclusion of the possibility of vision. A man born blind does not see only black. He does not see at all. It may indeed be said that pure white means the total

exclusion of darkness. This is true *in the abstract*. Yet, in fact, the exclusion of darkness is merely a double negative. It means the exclusion of the exclusion of light. (p. 86-87)

Macmurray (1957) asks us to treat "acting" and "thinking" as the ideal limits of personal experience. As with the pure white and pure black, neither actually exist but both are useful abstract concepts as are the abstract concepts of pure action and pure thought. The concept of action is, he says, inclusive. That is, it includes "all the capacities of the Self ... in full and unrestricted employment" (p. 87). An ideal which cannot be achieved as we are never fully active, without restriction or qualification, in our experience as agents. What is important to note here, maintains Macmurray, is that the notion of "action" without thought is self contradictory (p. 87). So action includes thought but thought, Macmurray explains, is exclusive (p. 88) in that it does nothing in the world but is subjective only. Anything at all can happen in one's thoughts, murder and mayhem may abound, but because thought is entirely abstract it is harmless. Action he says is "primary and concrete, thought is secondary, abstract and derivative" (p. 89).

Thoughts, then, are in a sense, limited to individual minds in that no others are privy to an individual's particular thoughts at the time of thinking. When a person acts, however, thoughts are made manifest in that action. In this manner, thoughts and intentions are given a physical, objective form in the world.

Simon explains that the same action can be associated with different bodily movements (p. 8). There is, after all, more than one to way to skin a cat! As well, the same movement may be part of different actions. For example, raising one's arm is

involved in hailing a cab, signalling the desire to ask a question, or stretching, among other things (p. 9). Because the same movement can be part of different actions it is often impossible to identify an action by just giving a description of the movement. It is easier to tell what action a particular movement is part of when the context of acting is known (p. 9). Pulling down a lever counts as casting a vote only when certain conditions are met: the lever must be part of voting machine, Simon (1982) reminds us, and there must be an election actually being held, etc. (p. 10).

In addition to clarifying the relation between people's thoughts and actions, Simon takes care to emphasize that the distinction between what a person does and what merely happens is crucially important to human life because the distinction is at the core of all ethical and legal systems, and is relevant for every society that employs any sort of concept of individual or collective responsibility (p. 22).

We are interested in and concerned with action (not with mere happenings or occurrences) because we are interested in the rationale, the morality and legality, and the social significance of actions in general. Social significance and meanings are crucially important in action theory.

The social nature of action.

If the meaning of an action is to be grasped, Simon maintains, the action must have subjective and intersubjective meanings that are understood by the actor and by others who are to understand the action. This is a quite different approach to meaning than the one we have seen in theories of Gergen and Shotter where meaning is purely personal, a matter of interpretation occurring in an isolated mind.

Simon stresses, however, that the key to determining the meaning of any action does not simply lie in correctly identifying the actor's intentions. That is, the meaning of an action is no more reducible to intentions than it is to physical movement. Understanding the meaning also depends on the existing system of social relations. In determining the meaning of an action, Simon (1982) holds that all actions are meaningful. He notes a problem, however, in determining which of several ways of describing any action that occurs is the one which properly expresses the meaning of an action (p. 31).

One widely held view is that the meaning of any action can be found only in the mind of the person performing it and that actions consist of the things that the person intended to do. A person then, could not be said to have performed an action if she did not know she was performing it or did not intend it.

Another similar view holds that the actor is privileged with respect to his intentions and that there should be "limited liability" for actions. That is, one should only be held responsible for what one knowingly brings about. Against this view Simon (1982) argues that

> actions have meanings that go beyond the agent's subjective intentions, that the concept of action needs to be construed more broadly than is done by an account that restricts a person's actions to acts that an agent believes himself to be performing. (p. 31)

A broader construal is required because people can be and are credited with performing acts even though they may have been unaware that these were their actions. A politician

may genuinely believe that accepting favours in exchange for enacting policies favourable to the donor is not bribery; however, this belief does not mean that the characterization of bribery is incorrect. Simon (1982) points out that neither the legal system nor our everyday concept of committing an act requires that the agent must agree to the characterization of the act she has done when it is socially recognized (p. 32).

It is extremely important, according to Simon, to acknowledge the link between action and responsibility. Acknowledging that the meaning of an action can extend beyond what the actor intends to include socially-assigned meanings allows the link between action and responsibility to be made. A person, then, is sometimes ascribed responsibility for occurrences that he did not perceive himself as enacting.

Simon next takes on the idea that it is by the consequences of an action that each action should be judged. An example is a cook who does not intend to prepare poison mushrooms for his guests but is held to be responsible for their illnesses if his mistake is due to carelessness or negligence, that is, if it was within his power to prevent the poisoning. Only in the case where it was not possible to avoid the consequences of an act is a person not held to be morally responsible. If a person is morally responsible for an event happening, Simon notes that the agent and his agency must be connectable to the event. Intentions, in Simon's view, are necessary for actions only in the sense that every action requires some intention or other.

This means that it is not necessary that a person intend to do everything that he does. It is necessary, however, that a person be responsible for any action correctly ascribed to him. We are responsible (but not always blamable) for the foreseeable

consequences of our actions. In those cases when we ascribe responsibility for an unforeseen or unintended consequence, we assume that the person ought to have known or that she could reasonably be expected to anticipate the consequences. Simon (1982) states that there are

> actions can correctly be said to perform that we do not specifically intend to do, and there are occurrences for which we are responsible that we do not intend to enact; but there is never responsibility without the possibility of action, nor is there action, in the sense being discussed, without the possible imputation of responsibility. Actions are kinds of occurrences for which agents bear responsibility and the ascription of responsibility makes sense only in the context of action. (p. 34)

In summary, Simon points out that the study of intentional human action must deal not with bodily movements or intentions alone but with actions or behaviour that is endowed with meaning both for the actor and for others. Further, he argues that the fact that the individual is not the sole arbiter of the meaning of any behaviour must be confronted and dealt with within any social science arising from such a study of action that had as its intention to play an important role in efforts to fully understand human behaviour. It is an important role because people may not always be aware of the nature of their own actions, it is sometimes the case that an outside observer is in a better position to provide a characterization. Inquiry in social science, according to Simon (1982), "pursue[s] meanings without having to rely exclusively on agents' testimony for the interpretation of actions" (p. 37).

Simon's analysis of action makes clear that it is important to retain the unity of action in discussions of human activity. Gergen and Shotter can be seen as having done what Simon recommends avoiding, that is, they separate intention or language from the physical movement which gives the intentions an objective form in the world. In so doing, Gergen and Shotter strip language of its ability to share meaning between people. Actions are, in effect, words in the world and they can be shared among people in the meanings ascribed them in social knowledge.

Although Simon provides a detailed description of the social nature of action, his analysis stops a little short. It is true that action is social in that other people understand and judge each others actions. Further, to the extent that, in our actions we accomplish things, it is through knowledge of how "things" are accomplished in our particular society, that we know what it is we should do. For example, in order to demonstrate that I appreciate having been asked over for a meal, I know that in this culture, sending a thank-you note is an appropriate token of appreciation. This social knowledge guides my actions. In other cultures, notes may not be appropriate but social knowledge exists that prescribes other methods of acknowledgement, for example, an appreciative, well-timed burp or an invitation back to the invitee's home for a meal.

Action is also more profoundly social than just examining how the actions of individuals are understood and judged. There is a real sense in which, to put the case strongly, a person's actions are prescribed by the society in which the person lives. This sounds as if actions are dictated but the case is not so strong as that. Actions are not dictated by the social knowledge of a society as people can choose whether or not to act.

I know how to show my appreciation for a dinner invitation but I do not have to. It is just that if I want to act in the society in which I live and that I share with others I know how to be causally effective, that is, how to achieve that thing I aim for, from the social knowledge that is shared between us. A well-timed, appreciative burp, if delivered after a meal in this culture is not considered appreciative but rather rude.

The example of tokens of appreciation is an illustration about governing interpersonal relations but actions must be examined from the perspective of a broader social or societal level as well. With respect to certain kinds of actions, possibilities must exist in broader society in order for individuals to participate in that action. It is, for example, impossible for a person go to university in a culture in which universities do not exist. In this extreme case, there is no possibility of it even though the person's actions are free in other respects.

A more moderate example from within our own culture involves attributions of the cause of unemployment among certain groups of people. The attributions can involve social and societal explanations. The prevalence of unemployment in the Atlantic provinces has been attributed to laziness and lack of initiative on the part of the inhabitants. The account in this case suggests that it is possible for these people to get work but they do not want to work. Another account of the prevalence of unemployment in the Atlantic provinces maintains that there are no jobs. That is, societally there exists no work for these people to do even though they are willing to work. Shotter revealed that he was aware of such societally prescribed limitations to action in his discussion of his own work at the aircraft factory. He left his work there because he recognized that

his ability to act, with respect to advancement, was limited if he remained. Technically, there was no barrier to his advancement. It was not, for instance, physically impossible for him to apply for other jobs; however, management jobs were not available to members of the social class to which he belonged. These examples are cases where possibilities for action are limited not by interpersonal relations but by societal relations.

Studying Humans and Society

Even though Gergen and Shotter claim to account for interpersonal social relations, it has been argued here that their theories fail to account for even this level of human interaction in that their theories are solipsistic. Neither theorist attempts to account for broader societal influences on people's actions, although it is clear that at least Shotter at times recognizes that these influences exist.

A viable theory of psychology must overcome the dualism that characterizes both traditional psychology and the social constructionist theories of Gergen and Shotter. In recognizing that "consciousness is intentional," Berger and Luckmann take the first crucial step toward getting rid of dualism by recognizing that subjectivity and objectivity are known simultaneously through intentionality. A crucial aspect of the intentionality of human action is that, in a sense, people's intentions, formed out of the social knowledge of the society in which they live, are given objective form in the world when they are made substantial through action. Actions, in that they are "out there" in the world which people share are understood and judged by others. Meanings are intersubjective in that communication arises in the activities we do together and we share the meanings developed.

How would one study human activity from the standpoint of action and provide a viable theory of psychology? German Critical Psychology, not to be confused with the Frankfurt School or other critical theories, provides a method of studying action that incorporates some of the key assumptions discussed above. Critical psychologists analyse what they call *action potence*. Briefly, an analysis of action potence assesses the real possibility that exists for people to participate in the society in which they live.

Critical Psychology begins by pointing out that people do not satisfy their needs individually. That is, each person is not responsible for growing and preparing their own food, sewing their own clothes, building their own shelters, etc. People, as societal beings, do not confront the sources of need satisfaction directly but through a structure of meanings (Tolman, 1994, pp. 101-102). For example, people do not simply eat the next edible thing that they happen to run across; rather there are societal structures that mediate between the individual and getting their need for food met. The existence of supermarkets is one of this society's solutions to the problem of food distribution. Control over need satisfaction for beings living a societal existence can only be satisfied with and through others.

Actions are not governed by the object itself but by the meaning structure created in the society for governing that need. In this society, actions satisfying the need for food, for the most part, involve shopping at stores, using money, etc. Since it is not a necessity that humans satisfy the need for food in this way as (people could grow their own food or steal it) the meaning structure for food provides a possibility for action but not a law dictating action (Tolman, 1994, p. 103). It should be noted though, that

choosing an alternative method to satisfy a need when most of society does it another way, is quite difficult if not impossible. If, for instance, I decided to reverse the sides of the road on which I drive, I would find it practically impossible to do so as no one else would be doing so. It is not impossible for me to try, I am free to do so, but the society in which I live would make my decision difficult if not impossible to carry out.

Intersubjectivity is important here in that the interdependence of people is highlighted in the participation of people in a society. People are acting to satisfy individual needs which are the needs of everyone else as well. Individuals need not attend to each need directly because needs are satisfied collectively. That is, I may work as a bank clerk, so I play a role in the maintenance of the societal meaning structure of money. As a clerk, I earn money to buy food, clothes, etc. which are created by others participating in different meaning structures.

Awareness of and confidence in the existence of others may be taken for granted when the system works smoothly. However, when the system breaks down and, for instance, food becomes scarce and expensive, people are reminded of their interdependence with others. Holzkamp (1983) states:

> At the level of the conscious relating-to the reciprocity of social relations assumes the human quality of reflexivity by which, from the standpoint of my world- and self-view, I simultaneously take into account *the other's* world- and self-views, such that a level beyond that of simple social manoeuvring is achieved, namely that of the *reflective entwining of perspectives* that is characteristic of the human species. (p. 238, in Tolman, 1994, p. 107)

Although people may live in the same society, it is not the case that all people can participate in satisfying their needs equally. An individual's ability to act is referred to by Critical psychologists as *personal action potence*, which is defined as

> participation in the control of the general process of societal production and reproduction, including the particular requirements relevant to one's own life (Holzkamp, 1983, p. 240 in Tolman, 1994, p. 108)

In analysing action potence, an important element is each individual's perception of the action possibilities that they believe are available to them, which is referred to as the individual's subjective situation. It is not uncommon, Tolman (1994) notes, to find different people assessing similar objective circumstances differently (p. 109).

Society is complex, and different people do different things in order to satisfy their needs. Different positions develop for individual members and that position often influences the immediate life situation of an individual. That is, where one lives and works, goes to school, etc., often represents a "small spatial-temporal slice of the overall societal structure and process of which I am a part" (Tolman, 1994, p. 113).

What is often different between different positions in society is that different action possibilities become associated with them. So, for instance, mine owners often have more certainty than miners do with respect to continued participation in society through keeping their jobs when coal prices drop (Tolman, 1994, p. 113). Their higher salaries allow them more opportunities for buying the things they need as well.

These issues pertain to the actual objective conditions. For instance, without money one cannot buy things and if one has less money one can buy fewer things.

However, with respect to action potence it is sometimes the case that people limit their possibilities unnecessarily or, at least, without objective conditions that limit the potential for action.

The extent to which people believe that they are capable of taking advantage of action possibilities is described by Critical psychologists as *subjective functionality*. If a person believes, for example, that their possibilities are limited when in fact they are not, then a problem exists. People will only do what is for them subjectively functional (Tolman, 1994, p. 113).

The analysis of action potence overcomes the most important problem plaguing social constructionism. By taking action rather than language alone as the starting point, German Critical psychologists are firmly connected to the world which they recognize is socially constructed. The recognition that the world is socially constructed through our shared activities not through sharing language alone saves Critical Psychology from suffering from the problems of relativism or solipsism and the meaninglessness of language that affect the constructionist theories of Gergen and Shotter.

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to examine the social constructionist theories of Gergen and Shotter in order to reveal whether either theorist succeeded in their goal of developing a viable alternative theory to traditional psychology. Their theories were presented against the background of Berger and Luckmann's theory of social constructionism and it was revealed that the theories developed by Gergen and Shotter share little in common with Berger and Luckmann's theory.

The presence of one commonality, a focus on the importance of language in accounts of human activities, might lead one to expect a certain amount of commonality developing among theorists who share this goal. However, when reading different theories of constructionism one rapidly learns that what is meant by language differs between theorists, and which accounts for the development of significant differences in other aspects of each theory.

For instance, with respect to epistemology it has been argued that the conception of language chosen by a theorist is influential. Terwee (1995) and Parrott (1992) both explain how the theories of Gergen and Shotter, respectively, suffer from the problems associated with relativism. Subsequent to the presentation of these criticisms it was argued that the theories of Gergen and Shotter lead directly to solipsism not relativism.

The confusion about whether these theories are relativist or solipsist arises from confusions around what exactly gets constructed in theories of constructionism. Theorists like Terwee (1995), Parrott (1992), and Button and Sharrock (1993) seem to granting that, when language is said to construct reality it actually constructs something real. However, given the theories of language espoused by Gergen and Shotter in the development of their constructionist theories, it becomes apparent that it is not reality that is constructed but "reality." "Reality" is the product of an individual mind and it cannot be shared with others (who, if we are to be consistent, should be presumed to be only "real" anyway).

Berger and Luckmann, on the other hand, are realists and while one could wish that they would articulate in full how they arrive at their realism, they provide at least a

guide to developing a viable alternative form of constructionism. The most important glimpse into a more viable theory arises in their overcoming dualism by acknowledging that consciousness is intentional. The embeddedness of language in intentional human action gives language, in essence, an objective existence in the world allowing language to be intersubjective rather than merely intrasubjective.

The study of action is involved with interpersonal relations and judgements about the actions of individuals; however, it must be recognized that these individual and interpersonal actions are inextricably involved with the societal relations in which they are embedded. Societal relations may provide or deny possibilities for action to people living within a particular society. German Critical psychologists provide insight into how these relations may be assessed in their discussions of action potence and subjective functionality.

It is this kind of psychology that recognizes several levels of social functioning and which sees that the role of language in human life is in making people intersubjective. It is through participating in the activities made available to us by the society in which we live that the promise of a viable alternative to both traditional psychology and the social constructionist theories of Gergen and Shotter will be found.

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