Unfolding Social Constructionism
DESTINED FOR DISTINGUISHED OBLIVION
The Scientific Vision of William Charles Wells (1757–1817)
Nicholas J. Wade

REDISCOVERING THE HISTORY OF PSYCHOLOGY
Essays Inspired by the Work of Kurt Danziger
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UNFOLDING SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM
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By

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To the memory of my mother

JEAN M. HIBBERD
1927–1978

and father

JOHN HIBBERD
1924–2001
PREFACE

For more than half of the 20th century, psychologists sought to locate the causes of behaviour in individuals and tended to neglect the possibility of locating the psychological in the social. In the late 1960s, a reaction to that neglect brought about a “crisis” in social psychology. This “crisis” did not affect all social psychologists; some remained seemingly oblivious to its presence; others dismissed its significance and continued much as before. But, in certain quarters, the psychological was re-conceptualised as the social, and the social was taken to be sui generis. Moreover, the possibility of developing general laws and theories to describe and explain social interaction was rejected on the grounds that, as social beings, our actions vary from occasion to occasion, and are, for many reasons, unrepeatable. There is, so it was thought, an inherent instability in the phenomena of interest. The nomothetic ideal was said to rest on individualistic cause-effect positivism of the kind which (arguably) characterised the natural sciences, but social psychology (so it was said) is an historical inquiry, and its conclusions are necessarily historically relative (Gergen, 1973).

Events outside psychology converged to give impetus to the “crisis” within. Notable among these were: (i) the failure of logical positivism as a philosophy of science; (ii) the impact of treatises such as Kuhn’s The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962; 1970), Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations (1953), Feyerabend’s Against Method (1975), Austin’s How to Do Things with Words (1962) and Berger & Luckmann’s The Social Construction of Reality (1966); (iii) an increase in the perceived relevance of both Continental and linguistic philosophy, and (iv) contributions from philosophers such as Rorty and Derrida. These reinforced the judgement that the previously unquestioned aim of social psychology—to establish general laws and theories through controlled observation—rested on an “old-fashioned” and mistaken epistemology.1

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One consequence of these movements has been the development of social constructionism as a metatheory of psychology. Unsurprisingly, this development has corresponded to similar changes within other branches of the humanities and social sciences as they also have re-examined their supposed positivist foundations.

What is social constructionism? Of course, readers must read the constructionist literature if they are to gain a thorough understanding of this school of thought. But in general, social constructionism emphasises the historicity, the context-dependence, and the socio-linguistically constituted character of all matters involving human activity. The psychological processes of human beings are, it is said, essentially social, and are acquired through the public practice of conversation. Some versions of constructionism extend this emphasis to the conceptual and methodological practices of psychologists, and to the epistemological and semantic assumptions which ground these practices: to the “meta-issues” of the discipline. In this case, the position is that all (psycho-)social facts are “constructed”, in that they are constituted by human actions (usually by socio-linguistic activities such as negotiation and rhetoric). These social processes are said to produce the facts of the social sciences, and these facts are (it is alleged) sometimes revealed to be facts about social processes and the social milieu.

It is the “meta-issues” which this book examines. That is, social constructionism as an epistemology and, in particular, social constructionism as an alternative to positivist and realist philosophies of science—Hacking’s (1999) “constructionalism”. I do not dispute the view that certain features of human psycho-social life have localised causes of a cultural kind. This is not a “meta-issue”. For the same reason, I do not consider the sometimes valuable information about social groups (especially scientists) which social constructionists have unearthed in their empirical research. Nor do I consider research concerned with the nature of persons, conversational, discourse and rhetorical analysis, unless it is claimed that such findings have implications for social constructionism as an epistemology. I am not concerned with theories, methodologies or practices. For these reasons, I say little about the contributions from, for instance, Kurt Danziger or Rom Harré, significant though they may be. My intention is that of Locke’s under-labourer, “... clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge” (Locke, 1706/1924, p. 7).

To make clear the distinction between social constructionism as an epistemology and the socially constructed as a feature of some (or of all) psycho-social situations, an architectural analogy may be helpful. Imagine social constructionism to be two-tiered. The upper tier is the theoretical level and consists of social constructionist accounts of a wide range of psycho-social phenomena—social meaning, linguistics, morality, feminism, power relations, the educational process, emotions, the self, cognition, motivation, clinical diagnosis, narrative in the therapeutic encounter, management in organizations, social movements, and so on.
and so on. The lower tier is the metatheoretical level. This consists of a network of philosophical assumptions, largely about semantics, upon which the social constructionist theories of the upper level may depend. Sometimes social constructionism (the metatheory) underlies social constructionist theory, but the latter can also be consistent with some other metatheory, such as realism.

This lower tier is logically (but not necessarily temporally) prior to the upper tier. It is not less fallible than the upper tier, but its assumptions, claims, proposals, etc. are of a more general kind. Having certain views about what is open to observation and putting forward particular theoretical propositions and not others is, in part, a logical consequence of the adoption of a certain philosophical or metatheoretical position, whether or not this occurs consciously. If the (tacit) metatheoretical assumptions had been different, certain theoretical claims would still have been made, but others would not. For this reason the architectural analogy is imperfect. There is no sharp distinction between the two tiers. But because the assumptions, claims, and proposals of a metatheory are of a more general kind, it cannot comment on the particular features of situations. Social constructionist metatheory cannot, for example, specify the particular conditions under which certain psycho-social events might occur. The metatheory contains no analysis of psycho-social phenomena, although this does not preclude the possibility that controversies concerning psycho-social phenomena may alert us to metatheoretical problems.

As noted, social constructionism as a theory in psychology need not be inconsistent with realism as a philosophy. But some contributors to social constructionist theory have, in varying degrees, either expanded their accounts into a constructionist metatheory or have drawn epistemological conclusions from their research. In the present book, it is this expansion which is the focus of consideration, viz. the metatheoretical aspects of social constructionism. Their resolution is vitally important to a conceptually rigorous psycho-social science. Regrettably, and ironically, I doubt that these “expansionists” will engage at all with the metatheoretical issues raised in this book. They are of the view that these issues are misconceived, functioning only to conceal the context or background or “embeddedness” from which I construct these chapters; that I am not offering, on the basis of logical argument, an objective description of certain situations; that my writings are sufficiently rhetorical as to render them literary; that I am instead trying to persuade the reader to enter with me into an imaginary world. They, and others, may argue that my focus on metatheory is grounded in a mistaken adherence to “traditional epistemology”; that Quine and others long ago demonstrated the implausibility of such an approach; that there is really nothing to debate at this “level of abstraction” and that, in focussing on such issues, I ignore the recent research (of cultural historians, anthropologists, feminists, etc.) into post-constructionist science. I, however, am not persuaded that the case against traditional epistemology, and philosophy generally, is sound. Some of the arguments involve a
mischaracterization of these so-called “traditional” areas; others trade on ambiguity, a perverse form of pragmatism, and recent academic fads (see DePierris, 2003; Haack, 1993; Siegel, 1984; Smith, 1988). There is also Aristotle’s (nd/1966) point that if the genuine critic attempts to subordinate arguments to literary criticism and rhetoric, she or he can only do so through philosophical argument. I do not, then, endorse the view that the metaphysical and epistemological claims sometimes made by constructionists should not be read as such. In particular, I do not believe that the import of these constructionist claims is only ever local and performative, never global and descriptive. Even when an author writes as carelessly as constructionists sometimes do, it is not the reader’s job to disregard what that author says, and either to guess at or to presume an alternative “real” meaning. What constructionists say should be taken literally.

Contributions to social constructionist metatheory are disparate in several respects. Some are less radical than others, some are complex and wide ranging, some involve a denial that their exposition is metatheoretical, and some consist of little more than an assumption or two. The present book does not ignore the varieties of social constructionist metatheory—where relevant they, and the work of Jonathan Potter (and his colleagues) and John Shotter in particular, will receive attention. However, in psychology, one particular theorist has dominated social constructionism—K. J. Gergen. In 1985, Gergen published what is now referred to as a “landmark” paper in twentieth century psychology (Rychlak, 1992). Entitled The Social Constructionist Movement in Modern Psychology, the paper introduced mainstream psychology to social constructionism and advocated that social constructionism replace positivism as a metatheory of psychological knowledge. Since then, Gergen has developed social constructionist metatheory to the extent that it now exemplifies a post-modernist research program (see Rosenau, 1992). In particular, he has repeatedly pronounced on the status of psychology’s theoretical and observational statements, and on the ontological status of psychosocial phenomena. His position involves arguments which go to the heart of social constructionism’s lower tier.

This emphasis on Gergen’s metatheory may not please those who deem it unworthy of discussion. However, it is not at all obvious that those constructionists critical of Gergen’s metatheory do, in fact, repudiate the ideas which he defends and which, I maintain, are problematical. Whereas some do not endorse Gergen’s metatheory (Harré and Stam are cases), other accounts of social constructionism often echo it. In fact, general descriptions of the constructionist “paradigm” typically rely on the main features of Gergen’s metatheory, though its more radical elements and its exclusive focus on discourse are sometimes rejected (e.g., Burr, 1995; Cromby & Nightingale, 1999; Potter, 1996a; 1996b). Moreover, Gergen is far more explicit than others about his metatheoretical commitments, and about why he thinks social constructionism (and not realism) is a viable alternative to positivism. To some extent, he explains and gives reasons for his
commitments, whereas others sometimes simply state them, and still others (e.g., Potter et al.) deny having them. Much to the chagrin of his constructionist colleagues, Gergen does not, to the same degree as other constructionists, pretend that his is not a theoretical position, nor does he always pretend that such a position involves no commitments of this kind. Thus he makes the metatheory more accessible, giving the critic ample material with which to work. An evaluation of Gergen's metatheory, despite (or because of) its radical nature, turns out to be particularly instructive for social constructionism and for the philosophy of psychology generally.

In the examination of social constructionism, three matters are addressed. Firstly, most critics of social constructionism maintain that it is relativistic and, therefore, incoherent. Secondly, critics and proponents alike judge it to be antithetical to a positivist philosophy of science. Thirdly, its proponents maintain that realism is not a contender for the metatheoretical "space" which has become vacant since the decline of 20th century empiricism, because realism is too similar to positivism. These notions are pervasive not only in psychology, but in the social sciences generally. I show that each of the three claims is false. Most theoretical and social psychologists, despite recognising some of the many defects of 20th century psychology, have not perceived important similarities between "old-fashioned" positivism and contemporary versions of social constructionism, and have, in consequence, unwittingly perpetuated some of the failings of the very metatheoretical system which they believe themselves so staunchly to oppose.

The philosophical system which underpins my analysis is realism. This requires comment because there is a sharp contrast between it and a widely held view of realist philosophy—that in seeking universal laws, realism ignores the particular and, therefore, ignores context. On the contrary, realism does not involve "the epistemological fiction of [an] ahistorical, decontextualized, emotionless subject" (Apfelbaum, 2000, p. 1010). The system of philosophy which permeates this work was developed and introduced into Australia in 1927 by the Scottish philosopher John Anderson. It is known as "direct realism", but might more accurately be referred to as "situational realism". Its most distinctive thesis is: whatever there is, is an occurrence or situation in space and time. Moreover, the located situation is surrounded (Fr. environner), and the environment in which the situation occurs will act upon that situation. Thus, every situation is contextualised. There is nothing above the situation; there is no God's eye view. Individuals cannot stand outside or above society; they do become caught up in social processes, of which they are sometimes unaware.

It may be tempting to dismiss this philosophy as anachronistic—as something which belongs to the 1920s or 1930s—of historical interest, but of no relevance to the current intellectual climate. That would be a mistake. Anderson's realist philosophical system has certain striking commonalities with social constructionism, i.e., social constructionism as a metatheory. For example, both: