

## The Challenge

### *Overcoming the Problems of Dualism without Sacrificing the Psychological*

In North American and European psychology, there traditionally has been a strict separation and juxtaposition of private-individual and public-social domains. Moreover, it has been assumed that the proper object of study for psychology is the isolated individual subject. On this assumption, psychological phenomena are viewed as the products of processes or mechanisms of change that are mental aspects of the individual. These processes exist within, but nonetheless occur distinctly and separately from, the natural and sociocultural worlds.

Of course, the strict separation of individual from natural and sociocultural domains in psychology owes much to the philosophical legacy bequeathed by Descartes (1637/1960, 1641/1960). Descartes claimed that there is a distinct ontology for

human mentality that is given by each individual's capacity for rational thought and free choice, capacities that bear no necessary relation to the automatic sensations and impulses of bodily experience that he believed arise independently of rational thought. In Cartesian philosophy, mind and body are of different orders, with mind the sacrosanct realm of the individual—an immaterial reflective consciousness separate from a material body. Contemporary cognitive psychology, in particular, presumes the Cartesian dualistic metaphysics. Human thought and action are to be explained in terms of inner mental attributes of the individual, whose mind and mental development exist in ontological isolation from a metaphysically divorced, external world of natural and sociocultural phenomena.

In the latter part of this century, postmodern textualism and social constructionism have challenged the dualistic assumptions upon which most extant psychological theory and inquiry rest. According to such critiques, a host of problems issue from these assumptions, including difficulties in forging a defensible metaphysics, in explaining how knowledge can accrue from experience, in justifying a priori conceptual schema, and in posing mentalistic explanations without infinite regress. At a more ideological level, to believe in individual reason separate from physical and societal forces is said to champion an indefensible individualism. The general solution of both textualism and social constructionism has been to recognize individual psychological phenomena (such as self, autobiographical memory, reflective thought, and emotional experience) as embedded within a contingent, Cartesian tradition of sociocultural-psychological dualism, and to replace the classic dualistic construal, and the tradition that supports it, with different, less problematic ways of talking, writing, and interacting.

For textual essentialists like Barthes (1977) and Derrida (1978), the psychological self is a literary achievement. As textual constructions in an autobiographical genre, selves are cultural ideas realized through socioculturally sanctioned forms of narrative expression. Such strong textual essentialism is anathema to psychology itself because the phenomena of psychology disappear

into an expanded, inescapable text. Social constructionists like Kenneth Gergen (1994), while no fans of dualism, are not entirely happy with such a radical displacement of the psychological. They argue that psychological concepts and accounts gain their meaning through their usage, not within either minds or texts, but within sociocultural practices and relations. For the social constructionist, it is to the sociocultural embeddedness of psychological discourse that we must turn. Such theorists do not deny that something is going on in the heads of individuals, but argue that social accounts of these psychological phenomena are either all that is required and/or possible. In Gergen's (1994, p. 101) own words, "We are willing to accept social accounts of people's manners, styles of dress, and forms of religion. Why is a similar form of explanation not sufficient as well for people's accounts of their personal past?" It is clear from his writings that Gergen is happy to extend this conclusion beyond autobiographical memory to individual psychological phenomena in general.

#### OUR THESIS

We believe that there is an important sense in which these various antidualist reactions and proposals conflate individual psychological experience with plausible sociocultural explanations for such experience. What is the point in gainsaying the phenomenology of individual psychology even if its most adequate explanation may be found in sociocultural (including, and even especially linguistic) practices? Is there nothing of value to be gained by retaining something of individual psychology against the ever-present sociocultural fabric of human existence? In this book, we put forth a position we call "dynamic interactionism" that distinguishes between the mostly sociocultural origins and practices of human psychology, and individual psychological experience. We will argue that the nature of both societies and selves is emergent and mutable, as a consequence of their dynamic relation, and that the problems of classic sociocultural-psychological dualism are really problems that flow from its assumption of fixed societal

and psychological ontologies. We also argue that the kind of emergent, dynamic psychological ontology we defend is required to account adequately for human innovation and change, and is compatible with a neo-Gadamerian hermeneutics that focuses on fusions among sociocultural traditions and practices at both societal and individual levels.

We present a perspective on the emergence and development of the psychological that incorporates much social constructionist thought, but which still leaves room for bona fide psychological phenomena of agency, intentionality, self, and creativity. The major premise of our interactionist position is that in order to comprehend the nature of psychological phenomena, it is necessary to take into account both the private-individual and public-social domains that mark our existence as individual and collective beings. It is important to note from the outset, however, that both these domains are encompassed by a broader context of human development. It is only within this broader developmental context that the significance of relations between the individual and the social in human psychology can be properly understood.

As seen within the developmental context, human sociality provides the possibility for, and imposes certain constraints on, the nature and genesis of individual psychology. At the same time, however, it is individual human agency that makes possible, and yet constrains, the conditions provided by sociocultural milieus. Focusing exclusively on the individual elides important social relational practices essential to acquiring the psychological tools necessary for constructing our experiences as individuals, and for forging our individual psychologies. If we are provided by our cultures with the means for psychological development, our psychological constructions cannot be viewed simplistically as the expressions of wholly autonomous cognitive processes. However, while the nature of our individual psychology and subjectivity arises as something of a cultural endowment, it also is misleading to underplay our unique individual sense of agency, our individual moral accountability, and our creative, transformative capabilities.

When we think and act, we experience and understand ourselves as individuals. This experience of individuality is central to interpreting our experiences and intentions as meaningful. Much of our existential condition is undeniably individual. There is little to gainsay the experiential reality of one's vacillation in indecision, fortitude in resolve, pain in sufferance, or exhilaration in discovery. On the one hand, a view that presumes such phenomenology as resulting solely from autonomous sovereign processes would be fallaciously ideological—an overgeneralization of methodological individualism. On the other hand, a view that abjures our existential individual agency and individual transformative powers denies the reality of our experiential lives.

With social constructionists such as Vygotsky (1934/1986), Mead (1934), Gergen (1985), and Shotter (1993), we contend that the individual arises from the sociocultural. However, concurring partially with the contrasting view, as represented by cognitive constructivists such as Bartlett (1932), Piaget (1954), Kelly (1955), and Mahoney (1990), we also contend that the individual is not isomorphic with, nor reducible to, the sociocultural. But, one cannot simply conclude that both sides of an issue have merit and leave it at that. Such a declaration is not an end but merely a beginning. The hard work has just begun—that is, the work of arguing and demonstrating how positions such as social constructionism and cognitive constructivism, with fundamentally different assumptions and metatheories, might be integrated or bridged has yet to be accomplished. Indeed, what really is necessary amounts to a new theoretical approach, one with ontological and epistemological assumptions different from either of the positions to be bridged.

In creating a metaphysics permissive of this theoretical bridging, we argue that the ontological status of individual psychological phenomena is not fixed, but rather, is both emergent and dynamic. This argument carries special significance for theories of mind and behavior. It suggests that the real problem with sociocultural-psychological dualism has less to do with the drawing of a divide between societal-cultural phenomena and individual-

psychological phenomena, than it has to do with treating that which is on either side of this divide, and the divide itself, as fixed and immutable.<sup>1</sup>

Human psychological experience is not reducible to its possibly sociocultural origins. Reductive strategies achieve success only if they are ontologically informative in the sense of showing that what were believed to be two ontologically different things are actually one thing. In other words, the things themselves do not differ, even though descriptions of them do. Successful reduction is impossible if important aspects of adequate conceptions of things are lost in the reductive exercises. Such impossibility clearly is evident in attempts to reduce psychological phenomena to neurophysiological states. (For example, knowing the neurophysiological correlates of emotional experience tells us nothing about emotional experience itself.) But, it also holds for attempted psychological to sociocultural reductions. When Gergen (1994) asks why we are unwilling to explain psychological phenomena, such as individuals' autobiographical accounts of their past experience, in the same social terms that we use to explain manners, dress, or religion, he fails to understand or wishes to deny, that one's manner, dress, or religion are not the same as one's experiences of, or reasons for choosing or engaging, them. Whatever the metaphysical and epistemological problems of psychological experience and explanation, they do not deserve to be denied or dismissed in this way, unless there are better reasons to do so than to avoid postmodern philosophers' problems with sociocultural-psychological dualism.

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1 In all of this, it is perhaps important to emphasize from the outset that we consider metaphysics to be concerned with the nature of things that are posited to exist. As part of metaphysics, ontology sometimes is taken to connote those universal categories of things that are considered foundational and invariate. Clearly, such a position rules out the very possibility of the kinds of argument we develop herein. In our view, it is a mistake to insist on a necessarily a priori, universal approach to ontology. Such a commitment precludes what we propose as a legitimate metaphysical possibility regarding the nature of psychological and sociocultural phenomena. If the very nature of such phenomena is seen to reside in their emergent, relational properties over time, the assumption of ontology as necessarily

What is made possible by the metaphysics we propose is a coherent holding of an essentially social constructionist thesis concerning the origins of psychological phenomena, without denying the phenomenology of individual psychological experience. On this account, the phenomena of individual psychology are constituted initially through sociocultural means, assuming only a prereflectively active, biological, human organism embedded in its society, culture, and physical environment. However, once emergent from these origins, psychological beings must be understood as nonreductive, intentional, and reflective agents. What is significant about this emergent, dynamic metaphysics is its suggestion that classic, modern, and postmodern problems of dualism are not resident in dualism per se, but in the dualistic assumptions that sociocultural and psychological categories are separate, fixed, and static. Once the ongoing mutability of psychological individuals and societies/cultures is recognized and understood as an ineluctable fact of their dynamic interrelation, the substance and advantages of the kind of metaphysics that we envision and propose come clearly into focus.

We hope to explain how humans develop beyond their biological and sociocultural origins to create change and innovation. Part of our strategy is to construct a powerful synthesis of the work in this century that has been concerned with this problem in, what we consider to be, productive ways. The other part of our strategy is to articulate, elaborate, and defend two core theses of our own (what we call our "shifting ontology" and "under-determination" theses) that explain how the personal, psychological originates in the collective, sociocultural, but is not reducible to its origins. In doing both, we take a strongly developmental

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fixed unduly limits a full metaphysical examination of existential possibilities in human studies. Thus, for us, a proper metaphysical and ontological examination of psychological and sociocultural phenomena probes the existence and nature of these phenomena without a priori, universalist prejudice. We anticipate that our rejection of this prejudice may constitute, for some, an abandonment of the very essence and purpose of ontological inquiry as part of metaphysics. In response, we believe that the metaphysical argument we make contains within it sufficient rationale for our ontological approach and strategy.



perspective that, while mildly dualistic itself, avoids the difficulties created by more radically dualistic, traditional approaches to our problem.

#### SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND COGNITIVE CONSTRUCTIVISM IN PSYCHOLOGY

In psychology and social science, social constructionism (Gergen, 1985; Harré, 1984; Shotter, 1993; Shotter & Gergen, 1989) holds that psychological phenomena, from the ways in which thoughts occur to the ways in which we are able to conceive of ourselves as subjects, are at root conversational and interrelational. Psychological activity, viewed initially as a kind of conversational analogue, is seen to arise from, and to reflect our immersion in, discursive social, relational practices. It is through our involvement in such practices that we acquire, develop, convey, and confer upon others the symbolic cognitive tools through which we manage our psychological engagement with the world. The means for organizing thought and forging and expressing experiential and imaginal constructions derive from our attunement to relational practices, the most conspicuous being conversation.

The primary theoretical strength of social constructionism is that it provides a plausible account of the way in which individual psychology arises and initially becomes organized. The emphasis on the pivotal role of ordinary conversation and other relational practices in the genesis of psychological phenomena helps to demystify the source of emergent, agentic individuality, requiring nothing more in the way of biological assumptions than a set of primitive neurophysiological potentials to move about in the world of experience, and to perceive and remember some of what is experienced.

In contrast, cognitive constructivism, owing to the works of individuals such as Bartlett (1932), Piaget (1954), and Kelly (1955) presupposes a more atomistic view of psychological change. As a cognitive perspective, constructivism ascribes primacy to the role of the individual in learning and psychological development.



Constructivists conceive of hypothetical learning mechanisms or processes intrinsic to the nature of human individuals. These mechanisms or processes are believed to preside over the individual's development, serving to construct, manipulate, transform, and append the various mental representations and organizations that comprise the individual's cognitive architecture. While it is not unusual for contemporary cognitive constructivists (e.g., Mahoney, 1990) to acknowledge the importance of social influences on individuals' development, they persist in maintaining a strong separation between the individual and the social, construing individual psychological development as taking place against broader patterns of interpersonal, social, and cultural interaction, but not as constituted of such patterns and forms. The focus is on the individual and how she or he learns to negotiate individual needs and purposes in sociocultural contexts.

A major theoretical conundrum for cognitive constructivism concerns the matter of how individual minds comprehend or affect other minds, a question of obvious importance when considering any kind of psychological or educational intervention. This difficulty lies in the failure of an individually sovereign process of cognitive construction to explain how human beings are able to share so much socially, to interpret, understand, influence, and coordinate their activities with one another. How is the intricate coordination and systematization plainly ostensible in human social interaction possible, given an isolated, self-contained, individualistic picture of the process of cognitive construction? Moreover, there is the developmental question of how on one's own, without the resources of those discursive practices we employ reflexively to partition experience, an individual could come to develop a sense of self. Without such resources, it is difficult to understand how one could take up practices such as labeling experiences as one's own, and recollecting one's experiences in autobiographical fashion.

Social constructionism deals with these difficulties by revealing common social foundations for our psychological development and processes of thought. Individual psychology is grounded in, and enabled by, a shared sociality of conversational

and interrelational practices. These practices are continuously reproduced and promoted by members of a culture. They constitute a form of life. We are thrust into this collectivity from birth, and we are constrained in many ways to develop within the discursive and relational context it provides. In this light, human psychology is shown to be much less sovereign, isolated, subjective, and individually relativistic than cognitive constructivism would imply.

However, social constructionism presents its own obstacle, one that holds fundamental importance for any investigation into the transformative aspects of human development and psychology, such as those central to psychological therapy and education. The knot is, assuming the constraint of extant socio-cultural practices on what human beings can think and become, what accounts for variation or transformation in individual understanding, knowledge, and behavior? How is transcendence of conventional socially embedded and realized wisdom possible? Neither the strong possibility that the forms of our psychology are derived from conversation and other relational practices, nor the likelihood that such practices are essential to the collective evaluation and negotiation of new ideas as these are introduced to the public realm, answers the question of where new ideas come from in the first place. While social constructionism provides a convincing explanation for how we become *informed* with experience, understanding, and knowledge, it is wanting with respect to explaining how we are able to *transform* experience, understanding, and knowledge.

Indeed, a strong social constructionist reading (e.g., Derrida, 1967/1973; Gergen, 1991) would see human psychology as completely constrained by the kinds of conversation and social relation found in social experience. As merely a manifestation of conversations and social relations, especially as captured in language systems, individual agents dissolve into the dialogue and social roles in which they supposedly are created and compelled to participate. There is little of human agency here, only social relational, linguistic structures that by themselves seem to cause phenomena that give only the appearance of being psychological.

In this light, the transformative and agentic capacity of individuals appears of little relevance.

It is, however, extremely doubtful that individual agency can be made to disappear so easily. The problem is that this sort of poststructural social constructionism begs the question of what it is that social influences are acting to constrain. What is happening here is a fundamental confusion about the relation between social structures and human agency. Human agents are not merely the invention and expression of social structures. Further, social and linguistic structures are very much the invention and expression of human agents. These structures constrain the expression of human agency, but only by virtue of the fact that human agents apply their understanding of social conventions to assess the merits of their intentions and behavior. The power of social and linguistic structures and conventions derives not from their manipulation of passive human organisms, but from their use by human agents who actively adopt and interpret them in light of their own lives and circumstances.

It is true that the methodological individualism of cognitive constructivism occludes the sociocultural origins of human psychology. Consequently, cognitive constructivism misconstrues the largely social origins of psychological development. However, cognitive constructivism does recognize the importance of an active agent intimately involved in the figuring of its own psychology. While we exist in a sociocultural world of persons, a distinguishing characteristic of personhood is the possession of an individual agentic consciousness.

Individualism and selfhood are drawing a great deal of critique these days throughout the humanities and social sciences (e.g., Sampson, 1989). However, an important distinction needs to be drawn. Much critique of this kind attacks, probably rightly, an invidious sort of individualism that slights or ignores the collective aspects of human existence, severing us from an essential part of ourselves and undermining any genuine sense of community. Nonetheless, the danger here is that such critiques might lead us to ignore the very real, unique sensibilities and understandings we develop as individuals in sociocultural

engagement with others. It is difficult to imagine any form of psychological theorizing that ignores the ineluctable phenomenal sense of agency and individualism in human experience. What is required is a consideration of this kind of individual experience within the broader context of human development, including the conditions of possibility and constraint that mediate the essential interplay between the individual and society.<sup>2</sup>

### ATOMISM VERSUS HOLISM

In the more general theory and philosophy of social science, the positions of social constructionism and cognitive constructivism discussed above may be understood as instances of holism and atomism respectively. Holism is the doctrine that individuals, their identities, and their properties are entirely the function of broader systems of meaning produced by social and cultural forces. For holists, the individual is simply the vehicle through which culture and society express themselves (Durkheim, 1938). In direct opposition to holism is the thesis of atomism, which holds that the basic units of social life are separate, individual entities, essentially self-contained and independent. For atomists, all social phenomena and institutions result from the decisions and actions of human individuals (Popper, 1948). In their most extreme and oppositional forms, holists reduce individual phenomena to societal and cultural phenomena, while atomists reduce societal and cultural phenomena to individual phenomena.

According to a standard holistic view, culture equates with a complex of shared beliefs, values, and concepts that enables

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2 In a recent review of Burr's (1995) introduction to social constructionism, Lagache (1997) asks why, to date, social constructionism has failed to hold a dialogue with the work of Bourdieu, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and others who have attempted to employ theories of social practice, existential philosophy, and interpretive phenomenology to argue that human reflexive agency arises from, but is not exclusively, the product of social practices such as language. As will become clear, such a dialogue constitutes a large part of our approach in this book.

collectives to comprehend and direct their activities. On this standard view, society is the system that coordinates these communal activities. More recent versions of holism picture culture as a text whose grammar and vocabulary come to be read by its members through a process of enculturation that enables human individuals to become the persons they are. In all of this, society functions as a set of interlocking structures that enables the appropriation and internalization of culture without reference to meanings, intentions, beliefs, and desires. For example, systems theory draws no fundamental distinction between a thermostatic system and a social system in its nonagentic, strictly functional use of terms like "communication." By conceiving of culture and society as things that determine their members, holists leave little room for the kind of agency that atomists attach to the activities of human individuals.

However, a small number of scholars have sought to compromise the extremes of atomism and holism in a manner that leaves room for both sociocultural determinism and individual human agency. A compromise (bridging theory) that bears considerable similarity to that proposed here (with respect to psychology) has been developed recently by philosophers of social science such as Giddens (1984) and Fay (1996). The key to this bridging of atomism and holism is to treat societies and cultures not as things with formal causal powers, but as dynamic interrelational processes through which social and psychological practices are ordered over time. On this view, societies and cultures just are the dynamic working through of patterns of interaction among agents whose identity and relative position change constantly because of an ever-mutable sociocultural and psychological interconnectedness.

On the processural view of Giddens and Fay, the influence of societies and cultures consists of enabling and constraining rules and roles that require interpretation by those who act in terms of them. Without such interpretive activity, societies and cultures never would be realized. Societies and cultures provide "the conditions for the possibility of action and guides as to how actions are to be performed, but it is agents who produce and

reproduce this structure by means of their activity" (Fay, 1996, p. 65). Giddens (1984) calls this interplay in which structures enable actions, and actions produce and reproduce structures, "structuration." Again, on this view, society and culture are not things but processes of structuration and its consequences.

The holist view of culture as a text to be learned exaggerates the power of any sociocultural tradition to inscribe itself on its members—witness the great variability in individuals within a given sociocultural tradition. It thus confuses learning with absorption. Human learning requires a phenomenology that includes the individual's interpretation and reinterpretation of sociocultural meanings. But, it also is important to remember that our sociocultural traditions are imposed on us in ways that we do not choose, especially during our initial contacts with them. Even as we develop more sophisticated, complex interpretive capabilities, our sociocultural traditions continue to enable and to constrain us. It is through this process of enabling and constraining, which itself requires the activity of interpreting agents, that our identities emerge, not through a deterministic holism that stamps us uniformly into sociocultural molds. However, such partial independence and indeterminacy also should not be exaggerated. "Agents become agents only by being enculturated and socialized into a particular culture and society—processes which pre-date them, and which continue to provide the means in and through which agents can act" (Fay, 1996, p. 69).

The views of contemporary philosophers of social science like Giddens (1984) and Fay (1996) are similar to many of those views expressed below. However, for us, the key to overcoming difficulties with sociocultural-psychological dualisms (whether construed as holism versus atomism or social constructionism versus cognitive constructivism) does not lie in abandoning any such distinctions. All that is necessary is that these distinctions be understood to reference emergent, mutable processes in dynamic interrelation. What this means is that neither the sociocultural nor the psychological can be treated as fixed ontological categories. With this metaphysics in place, the emergence of

psychological phenomena in the life span of a human individual may be seen to originate and evolve within a process of socio-cultural embeddedness, which enables and constrains the emergence of a genuinely reflexive psychological self—a self that continues to be enabled and constrained by sociocultural and interpretive practices and means. Further, sociocultural traditions themselves emerge and evolve over a much longer time line in dynamic interaction with the activities of a myriad of individual and collective psychological agents. In what follows, we summarize the metaphysical picture of dynamic sociocultural-psychological interactionism that is thus revealed.