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Reconstructing the Psychological Subject

INQUIRIES IN SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Series editors

Kenneth J. Gergen, John Shotter and Sue M. Widdicombe

Inquiries in Social Construction is designed to facilitate across disciplinary and national boundaries, a revolutionary dialogue within the social sciences and humanities. Central to this dialogue is the idea that all presumptions of the real and the good are constructed within relations among people. This dialogue gives voice to a new range of topics, including the social construction of the person, rhetoric and narrative in the construction of reality, the role of power in making meanings, postmodernist culture and thought, discursive practices, the social constitution of the mental, dialogic process, reflexivity in theory and method, and many more. The series explores the problems and prospects generated by this new relational consciousness, and its implications for science and social life.

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Reconstructing the Psychological Subject

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edited by
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Introduction: Reenchanting Constructionist Inquiries

Betty M. Bayer

Extricating ourselves from the debilitating pessimism accompanying the failure of modernist straight-line trajectories seems to involve some creative wandering. Not deterministically going forward or panglossianly staying behind means reenchanting, redoing, and reenlightening the fields of inquiry we have inherited from the past.

(Barbara Maria Stafford, *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images*)

By many reads of popular culture, everyday discourse and intellectual debate, social construction seems to have come of age. From those experimenting with body morphing and simulated communities in virtual worlds of the internet through to our cultural fascination with resculpting not just the face but also the body such that "something other than flesh is being altered" (Siebert, 1996: 20), talk about subjectivity as fixed, immobile, determined, essential, or integral seems at odds with the very pulses of late-twentieth-century life psychological, social, and cultural. Emerging all around us is a discourse on subjectivities, selves, and bodies that places its accent on the *hows* of transforming or remaking our selves, bodies, and relations, and so on fluidity, multiplicity, and partiality. Leaving in their wake the modern subject, such discourses, often called postmodernist, prompt "creative wandering" afield of disciplinary bounds for rethinkings on and remakings of psychological subjects and subjectivities.

Although many regard social construction as having arrived, it would be rash to suggest either that social construction is a finished disciplinary composition, or that it goes unmet by resistance or wanton rejection. There are certainly struggles and contests over meanings and meaning making amongst social constructionists, not to mention between constructionists and nonconstructionists. For alongside such discursive transformations there beats an oppositional heart of nostalgia for the social, cultural, and psychological comforts of an imagined age of innocence in everyday life and the profession of psychology. While feminist gains are everywhere evidenced, they are encircled by anti-feminist rhetoric and political counteraction. Whereas cyberspace reconfigures time, space, mindbody relations, and embodiment, it

also often works to reinstate and even intensify conventional configurations of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Running parallel to the pro-feminist men's movement there exist reentrenchments of traditional versions of masculinity, such as those found in the Iron John movement or the Promise Keepers (Quinby, 1997). Such tensions between

the "lore" of yore and changing tides of cultural and psychological life are what make discussion of subjects and subjectivities so politically charged, so vital at this time of transition, for what is in the cultural air is most surely rippling through the very individual, social, cultural, and professional ground on which we live out our lives. And this is precisely why it is important for psychology to be engaged in the changing discourses and politics of our times. Quite simply, it is about who we are as psychological subjects and what we are about, our subjectivities. This book is a timely venture into changing discourses on and constructive transformations in selves and bodies webbed together objects/subjects in relation, to each other, to technologies, and to the socio-politics of everyday life.

ReViewing Constructionism

Having stated and restated how psychology's history is revealing of its place and part in the culturalpolitical swings of sensibilities and subjectivities, we might well ask what looms on the horizon for social construction in psychology. Just as social constructionists claim to have supplied one and another transformation in our understanding of psychology's disciplinary practices, so the question arises as to the transformation of constructionism itself, its disciplinarity and its practices. Is social construction above or beyond the very entanglements of culture, history, technology, or politics that it so astutely unravels in psychology's theories of the subject, its epistemology or disciplinarity? Is social construction sufficiently reflexive to supply a critique of its own workings and to move from these to transformation?

Querying the interchange between cultural moments and social constructionist formulations means thinking through their mutually constitutive relations rather than positioning social construction as a way to see (from above or outside) the social and cultural terms of psychological life. Such queries might look something like the following. If *fin de siècle* Vienna worries and anxieties about splits, fragmentations, and multiplicity were part of the stirrings helping to call out Freudian splits in consciousness (Showalter, 1990), then what might our own century's end-time discourse of fragmentation and multiplicity translate into for social constructionists? If the soil of industrial America, including the early twentieth century's "wave of industrial unrest," helped to ready the way for behaviorism and to shift psychology to the prediction and control of behavior (Collier et al., 1991; Samelson, 1981), then what social constructionist spaces are being opened by

the closing of the mechanical age and the dawn of what many deem the age of electronics or virtual reality? If Maslow's humanist self-actualization "rested self-consciously on the type of environment that the postwar United States allegedly offered: a society of abundance" (Herman, 1995: 279), then what seeds of constructionist transformation are sown by our late-twentieth-century emphasis on flexible and adaptable bodies, psyches, workers, economy, workhome sites, and the world wide web

(Lifton, 1993; Martin, 1994)? And, if the cyberworld in disrupting mindbody dualisms and transforming the body and embodiment suggests the obsolescence of the "psychoanalytic narrative of gendered subjectivity" (i.e., where "castration anxiety is replaced by the possibility of a systems crash;" Foster, 1996: 281), then how might cyberspace discourses revamp social construction's constituting forces of subjects and subjectivity?

The point here is that in revealing the historicized "nature" of shifting and changing subjectivities of twentieth-century psychology, and in trying to restore to psychology's subject that "anaemic and lopsided creature, an asocial and ahistoric monad" (Staeuble, 1991: 420) cultural flesh and blood (materiality) commingled with cultural signs (discourse), social construction cannot claim any special residency outside of culture, history, movements, technology, or politics. Indeed, as a force of critical resistance to psychology's mandate of a positivist paradigm, social constructionism gained an initial foothold, however precarious, amidst 1960s American counter-cultures of second-wave feminism and the civil rights movement. As Herman writes, "For feminists, who understood keenly the danger of reducing women's social status to the psyche, the challenge was to link the dots between self and society, between the personal and the political, without making either appear to be a by-product of the other" (1995: 303). For social constructionists, the connecting links between self and society became pre-eminent too, albeit via different outlets, such as sociology of knowledge, symbolic interactionism, and Wittgensteinian philosophy. Different theoretical and philosophical approaches brought within a constructionist purview how the life of a word carries the life of culture, linguistic practices the transport of social relations, and theory the vehicle of prevailing worldviews. Inherently inter-disciplinary, social constructionism displaced psychology's penchant for a generic subject with the promise of a more interesting and lively psychological subject, one who would be construed as more fully in and of the world, and given the amenabilities of discourse, one who could presumably issue in new possibilities for self and social life, personal and political emancipation.

Despite the fact that social construction has made inroads into innumerable areas of psychology, there remain stubborn core-psychology-minded types who seek beyond any *reasonable* doubt a universal subject who, like one of Darwin's butterflies, can be snatched from its habitat, pinned to a stable (monochrome) backing, and placed on eternal display. That social constructionism has never positioned itself as a core psychology has been and