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SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AS PRACTICAL THEORY
Lessons for Practice and Reflection in Psychotherapy

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Much has been written on social construction, relational realities, and the implications of these views in psychology and psychotherapeutic practice. And while many of us have devoted a good deal of time and effort to connecting theory and practice, there remains an overwhelming frustration about what we *do* differently when we operate from a constructionist sensibility. That sensibility leads us to view social construction not so much as a theory that proposes particular techniques or methods for practice, but something more akin to a relational practice, a way of making sense of and engaging with the world that invites others into dialogue. This emphasis on the ongoing co-construction of meaning renders incomplete any categorical statements about what social constructionist practice “is” or “is not”, because it excludes the response of those with whom these statements are shared: calling specific therapeutic practices more relational than individualist is, itself, a situated, relational activity.

Central to this chapter is the intriguing dilemma of articulating theory and practice in a manner that is closer to an invitation to dialogue than a closed pronouncement of how things are. The dilemma hinges on the notion that becoming a proponent of certain theories and practices has less to do with achieving the proper skill and more to do with embracing a particular vocabulary for action. Our working vocabulary for action-the manner in which we engage with others in the production of meaning-speaks more to the tenor of our practice than any specific techniques or methods. The vocabulary for action is the focus of this contribution.

We hear repeatedly that there is no constructionist method *per se*. Constructionism, itself, does not dictate specific techniques or methods. And yet, as a practical theory (Shotter, 1993; Gergen, 1999), constructionism informs us in our activities, both at the level of theoretical talk and the level of professional and everyday practices. The challenge, then, is of articulating a constructionist sensibility-a

sensibility intent on the relational aspects of meaning, including theoretical meaning--while avoiding the creation of a tightly conscripted set of techniques or procedures. My hope is that in attempting to do this here I will help to illuminate what is distinctive about social constructionism. Rather than an explanatory narrative about therapeutic change, or human nature, social constructionism is a theory about *meaning*, and more particularly, about meaning as a relational practice. Rather than prescribing certain specific therapeutic interventions, it encourages us to reflect upon what sorts of relationship practices various therapeutic theories invite us to engage. Social constructionism is, then, a theory *about* theories, and one that reminds us that theories are ultimately relational practices.

This poses some intriguing questions about 'presenting' social constructionism. Is it possible to engage others *relationally* through sharing constructionist ideas without formally listing or prescribing how to "be" relational? Is there a way to passionately embrace constructionism without it becoming dogma or truth? Do the discussions about it need to be formed in opposition to other, already well developed orientations (e.g., individualism)? Is there a way to talk about social construction without alienating other discursive forms? These questions hinge on a central distinction between talk as rhetoric and persuasion versus talk as overture, as an invitation to a dance.

Persuasion as Pervasive

Persuasion, as a cultural resource, has a powerful history and a powerful effect on our everyday activities. The discussion of persuasion is traced to Aristotle. In Aristotle's *Rhetoric and Poetics*, he argues that rhetoric is the ability to find the available means of persuasion in a situation (1954, p. 24). He proceeds to articulate the most effective means of influencing others (e.g., persuading others) which hinge on notions of rationality or logic. His perspective was guided by his belief that truth is gained by opposition and the means by which to oppose another is via formal logic.

Obviously Aristotle's work has been influential. It remains a mainstay of cultural discussion and everyday practice. Debate, a common form of public discourse in our culture, is rooted in Aristotelian logic. Debate is centered on influencing others - winning an argument through influence or persuasion, that is, through logic or rationality. But the question is *which* logic or rationality? And who gets to

decide which logic or rationality? We are hard pressed to find situations where our conversations do not take the form of persuading another to accept or buy our argument.

As an illustration, last week I had an interesting conversation with a colleague. He teaches courses in argumentation informed by classical rhetoric. I teach courses in dialogue processes informed by social construction. The meeting evolved into a discussion of some longstanding issues in our department, and the challenge we faced was to proceed in a manner that promoted constructive mutual dialogue on the topic. My colleague, the expert in argumentation, claimed that when we discuss things as a department we need to start with the *facts* and from there our job is to persuade each other by bringing evidence to the fore. Whichever argument succeeds, dictates how we go on together. I questioned his claim by asking, “But, whose facts? Facts by what standards? And what would count as evidence?” The answer, “*The* facts. *The* evidence.” Well, I wondered out loud, isn’t it the case that what counts as a fact is what is constructed in activity (language) with others. Thus, when any subgroup in the department gathers “evidence” on an issue, they are in the process of *creating* a fact, *creating* evidence, and thus *creating* what will count as good, as bad, as right, and as wrong. Incommensurate beliefs emerge within one small, academic department. If we consider that everyone is potentially creating a different rationality, could we use this recognition to *begin* our conversations from a stance of curiosity or interested inquiry? Might we not come to the table with genuine questions about what counts as a fact or as evidence to each other? And if we did that, how might our “deliberations” be different?

Frustrated, my colleague informed me that the world operates within an argumentative model. We persuade. And it is the judgment made by the group concerning the quality and validity of the argument (based on the facts and the evidence) that determines the course of action. To him, discussion of what will count as a fact would detract from efficiency and prevent us from moving forward as a group. (As someone who consults to organizations, I hear this critique of dialogue quite often.) In the spirit of multivocality, of embracing multiple viewpoints, I chose not to attempt to refute my colleague’s assessment. I did, however, invite him to consider the potential efficiency of spending a good chunk of time every once in a while clarifying the various beliefs, meanings, values, and so forth of group members

because the time taken to do this might help to establish relationships that recognize and value difference rather than relationships that either deny or exaggerate difference. Once appreciative relationships are established, members have additional resources available for connecting with each other, for understanding how others might respond or operate in a particular moment. The mutual exploration of values, commitments, moralities - as well as the relational communities which give the values, commitments, and moralities sustenance - can offer provocations for future engagement. In effect, my response was an overture to dialogue, to a mode of meaning making founded on a mutual going forward, a collaboration rather than a rivalry.

Providing a Conversational Arena

As you can probably tell, persuading you (the reader) to “buy” my argument for social construction and relational practices is a job I wish not to take on here—a job not in keeping with the constructionist premises that inform my work and this chapter. The main premise of social construction is that meaning is not an individual phenomenon. It is not located in the private mind of a person, nor is it unilaterally determined by one person. Meaning (and thus reality), to the constructionist, is an achievement of people coordinating their activities together. And so I believe my colleagues and I might have more success “going on together” if we approached issues as “challenges in co-construction” rather than as facts to be contested and countered. We might not always agree on the meaning of an action, a situation, or a relationship, but whatever meaning we construct is always an emergent byproduct of what we do together. Thus, one person alone can not control the outcome of any conversation, relationship, or situation. And therein lays the intriguing challenge of this chapter. To convey theory is to make meaning, and I cannot make meaning alone. How you take up my words is as critical to what this conversation produces as the words I commit to paper. I cannot prevent you from reading this chapter as propaganda or persuasive rhetoric designed to convert you to social constructionism. All I can do is attempt to provide a *conversational arena* where multiple logics, coherences, realities can be coordinated.

From my story about my conversation with my colleague, I think you may appreciate how institutional life, and indeed the wider society, tends to operate on the principle that “good arguments”

begin with “good facts” and “good evidence.” But whose “good” are we using? This is the question that often, when handled in an adversarial manner or when posed as a debate, can fracture and divide relationships. This is not to suggest debate and argument are “wrong”; it is only to say that there are always limits to the utility of any way of acting. Not only is it difficult to be sensitive to the multiplicity of moralities and beliefs in any community, but it is difficult to forge new ways of relating that value such multiplicity. At this moment, you and I are confronted with the same limitations. How can text, that once published remains unaltered, invite many voices and possibilities and not be read as the “truth” or the “facts” or the “evidence?” My hope is that by sharing the conversations within which many of these issues arise for me, by writing in a mode that might be viewed more as an invitation into conversation than as an “authoritative voice,” we might together approach an on-going conversation where multiple possibilities can emerge. Towards that end, I invite you to view this offering, and others like it, as openings, invitations, challenges, or proposals into new ways of relating together.

I will therefore refrain from saying that social construction is the answer to the world’s problems, or telling you that a certain set of practices illustrate social construction in action and others do not. I will, instead, try to address the question of what we mean by the term social construction, why many refer to social construction as a generative or practical theory, and what difference this might make in our day to day lives.

Social Construction

When someone asks me what I mean by social construction I feel a rush of anxiety. Why? Because I wonder how to describe social construction without having my conversational partner either glaze over in a sea of abstraction or nod enthusiastically saying, “Oh yes, that’s just common sense. You mean being ‘open-minded.’”

It is precisely this problem of meaning that is the central issue of social construction. For the social constructionist, meaning does not reside within individuals, requiring competent or accurate communication to convey one’s meanings to another. I am not holding the correct interpretation of social construction and using my words here to convey my meaning to you. Rather, I am attempting to use

terms that invite us all to generate new resources for action, new ways of making sense that will support us in our actions. My hope is that my words serve as openings to new understandings, to confirmation of understandings we might already carry, to provocations, to questions, to a wider range of possibilities. Meaning is created in the coordination of activities among people. To that end, the meaning of social construction is *actively* coordinated by *us* in our on-going activities-including the writing and reading of this chapter. At this very moment, you and I are engaged in an active process of coordination. Later, as you converse with others who have read these words, the meaning of those very words has the potential to change, shift, and alter all the more. Meaning is never fixed. It is not stable and unchanging. There is, then, no way for me, *once and for all*, to tell you what I mean. My colleague, John Shotter, captures the indeterminacy of meaning whenever someone asks him what he means. He responds, "I don't know. We haven't finished talking yet!" No meaning is fixed for all time. We often operate on the principle that we have "settled the issue once and for all," but new conversations, new relationships, new situations will continue to transform meaning.

Film director Arthur Penn recently offered me a beautiful illustration of this point. He was talking about his film, *Little Big Man* starring Dustin Hoffman. In the story, Dustin Hoffman's character is accepted, as a white man, into a Native American tribe. In fact, he is allowed to marry into the tribe. After a bloody battle leaving the tribe depleted of its males, Hoffman's pregnant wife - a member of the tribe - asks him to engage in sexual encounters with her sisters in hope of impregnating them and thereby ensuring the continuation of the tribe. An action that would otherwise be considered immoral and certainly inappropriate to this community, is now transformed into a positive and necessary action. As Penn describes it, "As conditions change through (in this case) tragedy, we see that values, language, and morality change as well. It is the elasticity of meaning that is important to recognize and this, to me, is what social construction is about" (personal communication, May 2001). I think that Arthur Penn has beautifully captured this relational appreciation for meaning. It shifts not willy-nilly to suit one's needs but rather cautiously and curiously to address the complexities of life.

Re-orienting ourselves away from a view that meaning is in our heads requires a significant shift. And, it is a difficult shift to make. Let me spend some time on this issue, hopefully phrasing it in terms that invite some new conversations to take place among us.

Meaning as Relational

It seems only natural to us to accept the idea that meaning is an individual's possession. After all, when I look at you, I see a body that is separate from my own and others. I see eyes that are yours, hands that are yours, gestures that belong to you, and even peculiar phrasings, intonations, and quirky movements that *are* you. Who would want to question if you have private thoughts, ideas, motivations, intentions, aspirations, emotions, and more? And is it not the wide variation among our private motivations, intentions, ideas, and so forth that makes living so difficult? Are not all the problems of the world, of social life, linked to the problem of meaning? Poor performance in school is a sign of a student's inability to grasp the correct meaning of the material. Social injustices, like prejudice, are easily explained as the byproducts of those who do not "understand" what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong. Genocide, economic instability, religious oppression would cease to exist if we could control meaning.

The problem is that we cannot control meaning. And by locating meaning within individual heads, we contribute to the complexity of the problem. If only we could design the *right* therapeutic technique, we could eradicate depression. If we could create pedagogical practices that work for particular topics or types of people, we could educate the masses. These hopes are heavily layered with that sense of rationality and logic which we inherit from the influence of science in our culture. There is a simple method that will lead us to truth - not only to truth but to truth with assurance.

Just as the portrayal here of meaning as relational represents a discourse that invites certain ways of thinking and acting, so does the portrayal of meaning as residing within individuals. This latter discourse has a very long history, and is exceedingly pervasive within the institution of psychology. It is manifest in the belief that professionals know what it means to be psychologically healthy and are able to

recognize signs of mental instability through the actions of clients. It proposes that years of experience on the part of professionals yield effective therapeutic practices and correct diagnoses.

When we entertain a relational view of meaning, these premises take on a very different light. If we talk about meaning as a byproduct of our coordinations - our joint actions - with others, then what is the job of the therapist? More generally, what does the field of psychology, from this relational orientation, offer? Social construction, with its relational focus, presents a challenge to traditional notions of expert knowledge and professional neutrality.

If meaning is constructed in the joint activities of persons in relation, then any theory or model is not a truth telling but is a very *local* way of understanding. It is local in that it is produced in relation to others in the immediate circumstances (even if they are only virtually connected). The ‘telling’ that this chapter represents is an example of just this: in the local junction of you as reader and me as writer, meaning is constructed, to be taken forward to other encounters with other persons at other times and in other places. And that meaning is inevitably a function of the cultural traditions, local conventions, historical canons and so forth that speak through our tongues and listen through our ears. This view leads us away from the mutual trumping that accompanies a competitive quest for the truth. Instead, we are faced with the question of how to live together in a complex world inhabited by so many differing beliefs, truths, values, and so forth. The task at hand is one of coordination, and our curiosity is drawn to therapy as a site of coordinated meaning making.

From Method to Daily Engagements (Performances)

On a broader scale, the discourse of science as the privileged and trustworthy approach to *discovering* knowledge, truth, and (perhaps most important) solutions, still permeates the culture at large. We need only go to our local bookstores and glance at the recent best sellers. Titles promising ten steps to remedy families, marriages, businesses, neighborhoods, and organizations are profuse. Add to this the bind many of us confront when we attempt to argue for the “legitimacy” of our work within the boundaries of traditional scientific discourse. If we dismiss the criteria (i.e., refuse to acknowledge) scientific discourse - of modernism - as the ultimate and pure form of legitimation we are very quickly

disregarded. It is worth noting that many graduate students and young professionals interested in postmodern discourse feel frustrated by the oppressive demands placed upon them by those championing the individualist tradition. I believe the frustration and failure to open generative dialogue with those who are more traditional in their orientation has little to do with the traditionalists' lack of interest in or respect for such dialogue. Rather, I believe the frustration and failure that emerges from these conversations is couched in the confrontational and accusatory approach that often accompanies such dialogues. The very same approach that those of us attracted to postmodern discourse (and social construction) find limiting (i.e., the debate format where one truth oppresses another -- all couched in that old tradition of persuasion), is unfortunately used to argue in favor of postmodernism. In the language of Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch (1974), postmodernists attempting to champion the case for postmodernism by arguing *against* modernism is a first order change - simply substituting one action with another similar action thereby maintaining the pattern rather than changing it. Now, instead of modernism with its focus on individualism being "true," postmodernism with its focus on the relational construction of meaning is "true." The actual point of postmodernism is that neither is "true" in the traditional sense. Both are *discursive options* and to put it this way is to achieve, I think, second order change (change of the argument entirely).

It may appear I am proposing we give up the dominant individualist (scientific, modernist) discourse. I am not. Instead, I propose we augment the individualistic discourse with a alternative discourse - in this case, the relational discourse proposed within a constructionist sensibility. Wouldn't a conversation be inviting if it were not claiming that individualism is inherently wrong or bad? The job we have as social constructionists is to invite ourselves and others into conversations that allow all voices to be heard. To remain open to a multiplicity of views on practice is not to offer a blanket endorsement, and it is also not to selectively dismiss. By not being dismissive, we continue to construct meaning together, making it possible to keep the conversation going.

When we refigure meaning as relational, we regard it as a practice, a *performance* that inevitably involves more than one participant. This draws our attention to the *process* of meaning making as well as

the *relationship* within which meaning is constructed. We are less focused on the “proper” or “best” way to be professionals or provide information. Our focus, instead, is centered on the multiple ways in which social transformation can take place. Further, our focus is centered on the participants engaged in the immediate moment and the wide array of both common and diverse voices, relations, communities, and experiences that each brings to the current context.

Social Construction as Practical Theory

We have choices as theorists and practitioners about how to use the theories that inform our work. We can approach theories and perspectives, be they individualist or relational, as telling us the “truth” about the way the social world operates. On the other hand, we can ask ourselves when it might be useful to draw on resources offered by one theory or approach as opposed to another. To ask this question, requires a sensitivity to the interactive moment, to the historical and cultural conditions that construct our worlds, and to the multiple voices that participate in shaping who we are and what we are doing. Social constructionism encourages us to consider how any particular idea or discourse converts to practice in the performance of *a specific* moment, in relationship with another--rather than turning to a canonical truth that prescribes Theory A or Model B.

I hope that this very brief description of social construction is not read as yet another truth telling. Social construction, like any other theory, is a form of coordinated activity among persons in relation. To that end, every theory is about practice. We need to spend more time, I think, asking what sorts of practices are invited by the different stories each theory tells. I have tried to sketch the ways in which social construction could offer a set of fluid resources for action that do not eliminate or demonize other traditions. Those of us who adopt social construction are not attempting to claim a preferred mode of life or to discover the best way for a person, a relationship, an organization, or a community to develop. Social construction, instead, urges us to attend to the traditions, the communities, the situated practices of the participants at hand--to local understandings--in identifying what becomes real, true, and good. To attend to traditions, communities, and situated practices requires a constant flexibility on the part of those involved. Where the purpose of modernist theory and practice is to solve problems, cure illness, achieve

social, environmental, and scientific advancement, the purpose of social construction, as a discursive option, is to explore what sorts of social life become possible when one way of talking and acting is employed versus another. The alternative that social construction offers is a relational discourse - one that views meaningful action as always emerging within relationship (whether those relationships be “real,” imagined, or virtual). The purpose is not to determine whether the modernist focus on individualism or the postmodern focus on the relational should dominate.

The metaphor of meaning as performance is useful because it makes a ritualized practice familiar. It cuts meaning from a focus on methods for conveying knowledge to a process which is attentive to the ways in which participants create meaning together. As we engage with each other in therapy we not only create a sense of who we are but also a sense of what is valued. We create -- perform *together* -- a world, a lived reality.

The metaphor of performance provides the opportunity for us to engage in self reflexive inquiry about our own resources for action that are not being utilized but that might aid in creating ways of going on together (see McNamee and Gergen, 1998). If meaning is a byproduct of relational engagement (conversation, performance), then we are free to pause and ask ourselves what other ways might we talk about this topic, this issue, this problem. Performance as a metaphor enhances self reflexivity by legitimizing it. In so doing, we open ourselves to listening, reading, talking, and writing in more “generous” modes - remaining open to the relational coherence of diverse ways of acting. We thereby avoid speaking with a sense of certainty that the world is or should be one way. And in so doing we open possibilities for the coordination of multiple ways of being human and of, as Wittgenstein (1953) says, “going on together.”

Suggested additional readings:

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