

A "CAMPER'S GUIDE" TO CONSTRUCTIONISMS

W. Barnett Pearce
Loyola University of Chicago

ABSTRACT

A set of distinctions are offered that clarify the relationships among constructionisms. The first set of distinctions is based on intellectual heritage; the second on forms of practice. Among forms of practice, those who focus on socially-constructed *products* are set off from those who focus on the *process* by which these products are socially constructed. Among those focusing on the process, an additional distinction differentiates those who want to make statements about the process from those who seek to join with the process.

INTRODUCTION

Many of us whose work requires us to reflect on the concepts we use believe that we have outgrown the limits of the metaphors and paradigms we inherited. Some of us have the heady sense of perceiving the shape of a "new paradigm" which is "marked by a far greater charity toward disparate voices, sharpened by a sensitivity to the processes by which knowledge claims are made and justified, with a heightened moral concern, and a keener appreciation of the communal character of understanding" (Shotter and Gergen, 1989, p. x).

Rorty (1979) locates the present as a moment in Western intellectual history in which the "ocular" metaphor of knowledge has (recently; incompletely) been replaced by the hermeneutic metaphor. I think it more useful to think of a continuing dialogue between two voices, one of which seeks to "represent" reality and the other which recognizes that these representations themselves "construct" reality (Pearce and Foss, 1990). Although the first "voice" has most often dominated the second, the present moment is not the first or only time some version of social constructionism has been articulated. This is a moment of great creativity and diversity in which many of us have experienced discontinuous changes in the evolution of our thinking. For many of us, Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is biography, not history;

Alistair MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* rather poignantly frames the problem for our staff meetings as well as analyzing the state of contemporary philosophy.

To say that there are many "schools" of thought within the contemporary "turn" to what is variously described as linguistic, interpretive, narrative, etc., would be premature. The codifications of the new ways of thinking are insufficiently precise and not yet adequately differentiated to merit the term "schools." It is more appropriate to refer to them as "camps" irregularly distributed throughout a forest, with no sharp boundaries and considerable overlap in the light and heat cast by their fires. This paper serves as a "camper's guide"; I want to sample the stews cooking above several of these fires, compare and contrast them, and invite those interested to join me at one of the smaller fires.

COMMONALITIES AMONG CONSTRUCTIONISMS

Language has long been thought to derive its meaning by a process of "referring to" or "depicting" or "mirroring" a nonlinguistic "real" world of objects. Constructionists repudiate that concept in favor of one which sees *communication* as a "formative" process in which the world is created in patterns of social interaction.

Constructionists delight in repudiating cherished virtues of "mainstream" ways of dealing with social life. We not only abandon the task of "representing" the world in our theories but claim that such a representation is in principle impossible and in practice pernicious. We construct theories which deliberately eschew a "foundation" upon which certainty can be grounded on clear, distinct ideas (Rorty, 1979; 1989). We forfeit the illusion of certainty in our theories and the dream of reality in our lives (Watzlawick, 1976; Segal, 1986).

In the place of these foresworn entities, we appeal to a new canon of virtues and make virtues of a new set of practices. Constructionists take as our "master trope" various stories about "the generation, sustenance, and social ramifications of systems of intelligibility" (Shotter and Gergen, 1989, p. x). We delight in demonstrations that the verities of our culture are the product of historically contingent social processes and the varieties of cultures have in common this process of the social construction of reality.

We find ourselves inevitably twisted into a reflexive loop, in which the perspective from which we describe systems of intelligibility is itself a system of intelligibility (Pearce and Cronen, 1980, chapter 10; Potter and Wetherell, 1987, pp. 182-184). Constructionism ultimately describes a process from the "inside;" our most eloquent descriptions are self-indexical and paradoxical. We see research as both *about* socially constructed events and objects and a specific instance *of* the social construction of events and objects. Constructionists share "a certain vision of the world and of our knowledge of it, that both consist of *activities* of various kinds ... and also a certain stance towards the conduct of research into such activity -- that of investigating its nature from a position of active involvement in it, rather than contemplative withdrawal from it" (Shotter, 1989, p. 132).

DIFFERENCES AMONG CONSTRUCTIONISMS

The commonalities among constructivists are strong and constitute an important "family" of perspectives. The conversations between constructionists and various other perspectives are the site of the most important issues in current intellectual life. In this paper, I focus on the conversations *among* constructionists. My purpose is to draw two sets of distinctions that will sharpen debate and improve communication. The first is based on intellectual heritage; the second on forms of practice.

DISTINCTIONS BASED ON INTELLECTUAL HERITAGE

All constructivists may be seen as opposed to Cartesian dualism and positivism. However, we have used very different conceptual structures as alternatives. These differences sometimes render us opaque to each other. For example, Ernst von Glasersfeld and I (in a conference in Buenos Aires, November, 1991) both asserted that "we construct our social worlds." However, as the ensuing discussion revealed, we meant very different things by the phrase. Von Glasersfeld meant (as I construed him, anyway) that we (each one of us, individually) construct (develop a cognitive image of) our social worlds (that is, our knowledge of objects based on our experience of them). I meant that we (collectively, as interlocutors with each other) construct (participate in the creation of) our social worlds (that is, the events and objects in which we find ourselves). The use of similar terms masked some fundamental differences in concepts and practices.

Cognitive Science and Radical Constructivism

Kant's critique of reason lies behind this cluster of approaches, specifically his insistence that the world-as-perceived is structured by the qualities of mind. Piaget's studies of cognitive processes provided an empirically-grounded impetus to this perspective, and it has now developed in a rich array of specific forms.

In his history of cognitive science, Gardner (1985, p. 6) defined it as "a contemporary, empirically based effort to answer long-standing epistemological questions -- particularly those concerned with the nature of knowledge, its components, its sources, its development, and its deployment." Cognitive science is characterized by five features.

- 1) The belief that mental representations are central, and that these cannot be fully explained by either biological or cultural factors.
- 2) The faith that the electronic computer is central to any satisfactory understanding of the human mind.
- 3) The deliberate decision to eliminate factors "whose inclusion ... would unnecessarily complicate the cognitive-scientific enterprise." These include "the influence of affective factors or emotions, the contribution of historical and cultural factors, and the role of the background context in which particular actions or thoughts occur."
- 4) A predilection for interdisciplinary studies in the hope that they will blur boundaries in the emergence of "a single, unified cognitive science" (p. 7).
- 5) The claim that the issues in the Western philosophical tradition comprise the agenda which should be addressed.

Particularly features 2, 3, and 5 seem to orient cognitive science away from the world which interests constructionists. However, attempts to model the mind with simple models persistently failed, initiating a wide-ranging search for more adequate models, some of which differ so far from the originating impulse as to constitute a refutation of it. As developed in the work of Hienz von Forster, Ernst von Glasersfeld,

Humberto Maturana, Francisco Varela, Terry Winograd, and Fernando Flores, cognitive science has been the basis for the development of a "radical constructivism" which has been used, among other places, in family therapy.

Von Glasersfeld (1988, p. 83) offered these statements as "the two basic principles of radical constructivism:"

- 1) Knowledge is not passively received either through the senses or by way of communication, but it is actively built up by the cognizing subject.
- 2) The function of cognition is adaptive and serves the subject's organization of the experiential world, not the discovery of an objective ontological reality.

In Hoffman's (1988, p. 110) terms, "constructivism holds that the structure of our nervous systems dictates that we can never know what is 'really' out there ... we can only know our own construction of others and the world."

From this assessment of the perceptual/cognitive abilities of individuals, constructivists move to the analysis of social systems such as interpersonal communication, families, organizations, ideologies, nations, etc. As indicated in the subtitle of Maturana and Varela's (1987) book, the constructivist process is punctuated as beginning with the biological characteristics of human beings. The implications of this view are elaborated in a variety of different ways (Kenny and Gardner, 1988).

Maturana sees the "larger" elements in the social world through the lenses of a story about human beings as "self-organizing systems." As such, we are "functionally closed," responding to "perturbations" in the world in ways "structurally determined" by our own structure. As complex systems, humans have a "plastic" structure which is capable of rich "couplings" with the world, including other human beings.

Both language and emotion are essential aspects of human beings, according to Maturana. In describing them, however, it is important to distinguish whether we are taking the perspective of an observing system or an observed system.

The concept of structural coupling permits language to be seen as "connotative" rather than "denotative." There can be, therefore, no "instructive interactions" and communication is misleadingly described as a "transfer of information" because

"'information' does not exist ... The structure of the system fully determines its interactions by specifying the variety of interactions it can undertake while conserving its organization. The structure of the system *specifies* what it will accept as an interaction and what will be ignored" (Kenny and Gardner, 1988, p. 13).

A conversation is understood as "a flow of co-ordinations of actions and emotions that we observers distinguish as taking place between human beings that interact recurrently in language" (Maturana, 1988, p. 50). While he spends some time categorizing types of conversations, Maturana's emphasis lies on the "braids" produced by our being, simultaneously, in many different conversations simultaneously. Human communities are seen as "networks of conversations (consensual co-ordinations of actions and emotions that constitute them)" and individuals as "a node in a network of conversations" (Maturana, 1988, p. 53).

Winograd and Flores (1986) believe that our technological tradition provides better support for the development of new products than it does a good understanding of what they do. For example, the computer is a radical innovation which cannot be comprehended within the existing social framework. Its very existence creates new possibilities; an analysis of possible designs for computers creates a space in which old problems can be dissolved and new insights may be achieved into "what it means to exist as a human being, capable of thought and language" (p. 70).

Breaking with the rationalistic tradition, Winograd and Flores (p. 74) argue that human "cognizing" always presupposes a background or "pre-understanding" which "is a result of experience within a tradition. Everything we say is said against the background of that experience and tradition, and makes sense only with respect to it." Since artificial intelligence "in computers uses only background that is programmed into it, and since "the articulation of the unspoken is a never-ending process ... it can never be complete" (p. 75). Those are sharp limits to the kinds of problems for which can employ computers, and an awareness of these limits enables us to better understand what it means to be human.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionists draw from a wide array of intellectual precedents. The most

important traditions include the "other" voice in Western intellectual history (e.g. the sophists, Vico, hermeneutics, Vygotski); narrative theory (Bakhtin, Derrida, Foucault); deconstructionism (Heidegger, de Man, Fish); Wittgenstein; the American Pragmatists (James, Dewey, Mead); and the ecological epistemology of Bateson.

The "speech act" theory of J. L. Austin (as extended by his student, John Searle), focused on a class of utterances that are "performatives." Such utterances *do* things rather than *name* them. The thrust of this movement, much more than its specific analyses, created a context for social constructionism (Cronen, Pearce & Xi, 1989/1990). Berger and Luckman's (1966) *The Social Creation of Reality* was in fact an essay on the topic named in its subtitle: *A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. However, it not only provided a phrase used as an index for what social constructionists are interested in, it legitimated serious academic attention to "everything that passes for 'knowledge' in society" rather than "intellectual history" or more formal, abstract "ideas" (p. 15). Berger and Luckmann (1966, pp. 18-19) focused on "the knowledge that guides conduct in everyday life" and the "manner in which this reality is constructed." Work in this tradition includes those who have studied the practices of scientists, showing that what passes for scientific "findings" are in fact the "products" of a complex (and often laudable) process of social construction (Latour and Woolgar, 1979; Knorr-Cetina and Mulkey, 1983).

Patterns of influence and appropriation of ideas are very difficult to trace among constructionists, almost all of whom pride themselves on their freedom to cross disciplinary and institutional lines. In the absence of a genealogy, however, it is possible to note several lines of work which bear a strong "family resemblance" in Wittgenstein's sense.

The "rhetoric of inquiry" project arose as an alternative to "objectivist" accounts of how truth or good reasons for actions are developed. It focuses on those processes by which members of various communities are *persuaded* to act or believe in particular ways; its focus is on the structure and content of *arguments* (Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey, 1987; Billig, 1988; and Simons, 1990) .

Ethnomethodology names the study of the "methods" used by ordinary people to decide questions of fact, validity, application of general rules to specific cases, justifications for actions, etc. They foreground interpretive processes by which the apparent "realities" of the social world are created.

"Sociological theories assume that there is a meaningful external world independent of social interaction. This assumption is an implicit resource when such concepts as 'norms,' 'rules,' 'structures,' and 'exchange' are used. Ethnomethodology investigates the interactional work that sustains this assumption... Sociologists define 'social interaction' as a process in which people communicate using symbols with common meanings... Such definitions view meaning as a stable thing...

Ethnomethodologists treat sociologists' implicit resource of an external world independent of interaction as a phenomenon. For them, interaction is an activity that accomplishes a sense of an external world. Meaning is viewed as ceaseless sensuous activity" (Mehan and Wood, 1975, p. 4).

Ethnographers have always described the patterns of organization and action within cultures. In the 1950s, Wade Goodenough introduced "cognitive anthropology" or "ethnoscience" as a way of describing the different ways in which cultures categorize the world.

"What the learner comes up with in the end is a feel for a set of patterns and, at the same time, a feel for principles by which to select among the patterns to construct actual utterances. He has developed these principles out of his experience of the behavior of others. He assumes that they all collectively know essentially the same thing and that which he knows is the same as what they know" (Goodenough, 1971, p. 14).

The failure of this project opened the way for what Clifford Geertz called "interpretive anthropology," a sustained attempt by those of us in our culture to figure out what people in other cultures are up to when they do what they do (Geertz, 1983). One of the most interesting efforts in this line is Rosen's (1984) *Bargaining for Reality: The Construction of Social Relations in a Muslim Community*.

A particularly interesting new development is called ethnopsychology. It consists of the cross-cultural comparison of those rubrics suggested by psychology, thus transforming them from alleged "traits" to "products" of a process of social construction (Bilmes, 1986; Rosaldo, 1980). For example, Lutz (1988, p. 5) presents a book-length report on the emotions experienced by the inhabitants of a small South

Pacific island, which differ considerably from those experienced by those within the European heritage. The result is to demonstrate that emotions are social constructions (that is, to "de-essentialize" them), which opens the way for them to be studied, not as "things" but as "a cultural and interpersonal process of naming, justifying, and persuading by people in relationship to each other. Emotional meaning is then a social rather than an individual achievement -- an emergent product of social life."

Convinced that the activity of speaking is the primary social process, Del Hymes developed a distinctive form of analysis called the "ethnography of communication." Research in this tradition produces descriptions of patterns of talk which constitute the identity of speech communities, and structure the world for those who live in it. Outstanding examples of work in this tradition include Philipsen (1975), Katriel (1986), Carbaugh (1988), and Carbaugh (1990).

In the early 1970s, a group of people who shared a dissatisfaction with the orthodoxies of contemporary social science found themselves developing what they called a "new paradigm." Initially useful as a partitioning device, this label was insufficiently specific. In the 1980s, members of this group began referring to themselves as "social constructionists."

Gergen (1985) characterized "the social constructionist orientation" as "an increasingly active movement in social inquiry." Some combination of the following statements, he asserted, underlie most work in this area.

1. What we take to be experience of the world does not in itself dictate the terms by which the world is understood. What we take to be knowledge of the world is not a product of induction, or of the building and testing of general hypotheses.
2. The terms in which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people.
3. The degree to which a given form of understanding prevails or is sustained across time is not directly dependent on the empirical validity of the perspective in question, but on the vicissitudes of social processes (e.g., communication, negotiation, conflict, rhetoric, etc.)

4. Forms of negotiated understanding are of critical significance in social life, as they are integrally connected with many other activities in which people engage.

Harré (1989, p. 23) argued that language "is our medium for being as persons." He noted that "we English-speaking heirs of Judaeo-Christian civilization and the schism between Protestant and Catholics" have a particular set of beliefs (centered on autonomy, agency and histories) which make possible "certain kinds of lives" which are "closed" to people who believe otherwise because they are heirs to a different heritage. "The social constructivist line on all this,' Harré explains, "is that what I call 'beliefs' are carried by the learning of grammar. Or to put the matter clearly, we could express in the rhetoric of belief part of the grammar of certain kinds of discourses."

Shotter and Gergen (1989, p. ix) stressed the role of "texts" in constructing identities. "The primary medium," they said, "within which identities are treated and have their currency is not just linguistic but textual: persons are largely ascribed identities according to the manner of their embedding within a discourse -- in their own or in the discourses of others. In this way, cultural texts furnish their 'inhabitants' with the resources for the formation of selves; they lay out an array of enabling potentials, while simultaneously establishing a set of constraining boundaries beyond which selves cannot be easily made."

Pearce and Cronen's (1980; see also Pearce, 1989) theory of "the coordinated management of meaning" foregrounds conjoint action. Distinctive ideas in their approach include multiple levels of context; an emphasis on time (both the location of events in specific historical moments and the durative unfolding of events in sequences of actions); interactional contingency, such that the meaning of any act derives from its participation in a sequence of interactions; and reflexivity.

Such genealogies are useful in understanding different "camps." For example, Harré draws on Austin and Wittgenstein; Shotter uses Bakhtin, Vygotski, Vico and Wittgenstein; Gergen is influenced more by the deconstructionists and, like Rorty, valorizes literary criticism; Pearce and Cronen employ concepts from Wittgenstein, the American Pragmatists, and the ecological epistemology of Gregory Bateson. However, the utility of such genealogies can be exaggerated. Most of us

unhesitatingly prune our intellectual family trees or exuberantly swing from one tree to the next.

DISTINCTIONS BASED ON FORMS OF PRACTICE

In contrast to the venerable myth that words have meanings because they represent either things "out there" in an objective world or "in the minds" of their users, constructionists emphasize the formative function of language and its inseparability from human actions. However, some constructionists foreground the *products* of the formative process, focusing on the events and objectives of the social world that exist. Others foreground the *process* of formation itself, exploring the question of *how* these events and objects are brought into being.

Focusing on Socially Constructed Products

Most constructionists focus on the *products* of the process by which construction occurs. That is, they focus on language as an entity which establishes the parameters for identity and action; on personal identities or emotions which result from the formative process; or on the scientific findings or common-sense knowledge which is produced by social processes of interaction. Even though they may examine situated practices -- that is, specific activities rather than activities in general -- they use these as the *units of observation* (that is, as "data") rather than as the *units of analysis* (that is, what they are really interested in understanding or about which they want to say something).

For example, Potter and Wetherell (1987, p. 1) use "language" as a collective term for "social texts of all kinds; that is, the conversations, newspaper stories, novels and soap operas which are a central and inescapable part of everyday life." Having thus identified their unit of analysis, they ascribed agency to it. "This book is about language and its importance for social psychology. It looks at the subtle ways in which *language orders our perceptions and makes things happen* and thus shows how language can be used to construct and create social interaction and diverse social worlds" (emphasis added).

Harré's (1986, p. 4) discussion of emotions treats language as deterministic. As a constructionist, he first sets aside the notion that emotions are found things:

"Psychologists have always had to struggle against a persistent illusion that in such studies as those of the emotions there is something *there*, the emotion, of which the emotion word is a mere representation. This ontological illusion, that there is an abstract and detachable 'it' upon which research can be directed, probably lies behind the defectiveness of much emotion research. In many cases the only 'it' is some physiological state which is the basis of some felt perturbation. Swayed by the ontological 'illusion, it is easy to slip into thinking that the state is the emotion."

This "old paradigm" way of thinking is contrasted with the new: "But in the case of emotions, what is there is the ordering, selecting and interpreting work upon which our acts of management of fragments of life depend. *We can do only what our linguistic resources and repertoire of social practices permit or enable us to do*" (emphasis added).

Four consequences derive from the choice to focus on socially constructed *products*:

First, this sort of social constructionist work is closely connected to the mainstream rubrics of the academic disciplines. That is, a product-oriented constructionist can explain his or her work as an alternative way of addressing familiar topics: identity, emotions, cognitions, social structures, and the like. This similarity has its usefulness. Within the politics of the academic world, and when engaging people using ordinary language, it is possible to explain clearly what one is up to as a constructionist. Further, the results of this work stand as sharply defined alternatives to more orthodox ways of approaching the same topics. This work has usefully reconceptualized concepts of "selfhood," "personhood," "identity," and "emotion" by treating them as the products of a social process of construction.

Second, *some* constructionists substitute "made things" for "found things" in theoretical and explanatory structures which bear more than a passing resemblance to those used in "mainstream" forms of social science. These constructionists claim to be able to meet the standardized canons of rigor, reliability and validity. Instead of a covering law, some constructionists offer a culturally-determined pattern as a

generalization ("Why did that occur?" "Because that's the way people in that culture act!" "Oh! I see."); instead of, e.g., the necessity of dialectical materialism, they offer a version of linguistic determinism ("Why did that occur? Because the linguistic resources of her language allowed her to do no other! "Oh, I see.").

Third, certain confusions result. There is an asymmetry between the *activity* of socially constructing a description of the process of social construction and the *products* of that process. The former is assumed to be malleable by experience (that is, the researcher at least believes it possible that she or he might learn something new by engaging in the activity); the latter is assumed to be sufficiently robust that it does not change (too much) as a function of or during the process of being observed. I believe that this asymmetry is the impulse which has led many constructionists to question their methods (or whether any methods are possible), to engage in creative modes of inscribing their work, and to struggle with the whole issue of how to "represent" a process which they believe is not itself primarily representational.

Fourth, because it is insufficiently differentiated from the dominant paradigm's rubrics for study and rhetoric of inquiry, this product-oriented version of constructionism forestalls a more radical break with the recently-dominant "positivist" strands of Western intellectual history.

Focusing on the Process of Social Construction

These constructionists focus on the specific, local, situated *activities* of the social construction of reality, not as datapoints or illustrations of more general matters, but as themselves appropriate objects of inquiry. This distinction was expressed in the difference between *The Social Creation of Reality* (Berger and Luckman, 1966) and *The Creation of Social Realities* (the subtitle of Pearce and Cronen, 1980): the former stresses that which has been constructed; the latter the process by which it happens.

This is by far the more radical approach, not to be adopted lightly. Musing about one of Wittgenstein's enigmatic phrases is one way of describing the sensibility which finds it preferable to foreground the continuing process of social construction. In the *Philosophical Investigations* (#104-124), Wittgenstein (1953) claimed that "our grammar is lacking in" the "sort of perspicuity" which affords "a clear view of the use of our words" (#122). Philosophical problems occur when we "predicate of the thing what lies in the method of representing it" (#104); "a *picture* held us captive. And we

could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably" (#115). To avoid unconscious projections of our *grammar* onto the world of events and objects, thus confusing the logic of our ways of putting things for the structures inhering in those things, Wittgenstein urged us to abandon attempts to produce theory and to "do away with all *explanation*" (#109). We should, instead, "describe" the "actual use of language" while leaving the world "as it is" (#124).

For my purposes, the key passage is in section #109, where Wittgenstein notes that "philosophical problems ... are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language."

Let us assume that Wittgenstein (and others) have succeeded in demonstrating that our intelligence has been bewitched by our language. Where does this illumination take us? Has the "battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language" been won once and for all by showing that the events and objects of our social worlds are products of a constructive process, or is it a battle which, by virtue of the nature of human beings, language, and the world, must be a continuing one regardless of what language we use? Is the "bewitchment of our intelligence" the result of one particular false picture -- that which gave shape to the philosophical tradition which Wittgenstein labored so hard to debunk - or is it inherent in the process of the social construction of reality itself?

I believe that "mystery" is a universal component of human life (Pearce, 1989). Language liberates us from "mere facticity" by enabling us to create human worlds (not just physical spaces) of significance. However, an inevitable consequence of this liberation is being "ensnared" in just those webs of significance prefigured in the languages we use. We can remain comfortably enmeshed in those languages but it is also possible to experience a "second liberation," this time *from* language. This liberation does not consist in escaping the snares of language but in understanding, and thus becoming able to transcend, them.

Shotter (1990, p. 54) develops a similar argument; starting with the basic Wittgensteinian insight:

...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,' he says in *The Blue Book* (1969, 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 ... This is utterly to repudiate the assumption that words in language *already* have a meaning independently of the circumstances of life in which they are used."

The metaphor of the tool-box permits a radical re-interpretation of the "bustle" of vague and unfinished activities that we observe in everyday life.

"Everyday human activities do not just *appear* vague and indefinite because we are still as yet ignorant of their true underlying nature, but ... they are *really* vague ... the fact is, there is no order, no already determined order, just an "*order of possibilities*" (1953, no. 97), an order of possible orderings which it is up to us to make as we see fit. And this, or 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*, and thus to allow the 'making' of precise and particular meanings appropriate to those circumstances" (Shotter, 1990, p. 56).

Rather than seeing the formative function of communication as a process which constructs "things," Shotter (1986, p. 212) describes

"speaking and writings ... as 'giving,' or 'lending' to states of affairs, situations, or circumstances a form or structure appropriate to their having currency, so to speak, in the way of life in which the language is used. In other words, something that is only partially specified, and thus

open to further specification, is given further specification linguistically, *but only according to communicative requirements*, that is, only in a way that promotes, as Mills (1959, p. 904) says, "the coordination of diverse action," or, in Wittgenstein's (1953, no. 241, p. 226) terms, the living of a certain 'form of life.' Thus our ways of speaking and writing work to formulate the 'topics' of our discourse, the common places within the otherwise indeterminate flow of activity between us, the *commonplace* 'things' (Gr. *topos* = place) in terms of which we conduct our lives, and give them a structure that otherwise they would lack."

From this perspective, words and actions not only derive their meaning from the contexts in which they occur, they create those contexts.

All human actions 'point to,' or are simply 'related to something other than or beyond themselves'; actions seem to imply, posit, or intimate *in* their execution a realm of next possible actions, a world of opportunities and barriers, of enabling-constraints, relative to the activities' continuation. Thus people in the 'joint actions' (Shotter, 1980, 1984), in their activities together, can be seen as creating (as an unintended consequence) a shared context that, because it cannot be traced back to the wishes or desires of any individual, appears to them as an 'external' reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). As a result, in their everyday practical activities, rather than acting out of any 'ideas,' 'scripts,' 'plans,' or 'inner mental representations,' people can act in a seemingly thoughtless, 'natural,' or spontaneous way *into* settings that they themselves, all unaware, have to an extent themselves created" (Shotter, 1986, p. 213).

From a similar perspective, Pearce and Branham (1985) noted that the relation between "texts" (actions performed in any given moment) and "contexts" (the circumstances in which those actions take place) is inherently unstable. That is, each derives its meaning from and thus constructs the other in a reflexive coevolutionary process. Our emphasis was on the *relation between* text and context, because fore-grounding either alone - that is, treating either as if it were a *static product* of construction -- leads to problems. For instance: Those who foreground "texts" as if they were produced freely, independent of pre-existing webs of significance or (usually unequal) relations

of power may well wind up "blaming the victim" for acting in ways which perpetuate patterns of abuse or exploitation and may, by analyzing disembodied "texts," become unintentional conservatives, producing work which reproduces existing patterns of oppression to which it is insensitive. On the other hand, those who foreground "context" as if they were immutable, determining the possibilities of but not determined by the "texts" which occur in them, may well wind up oblivious to the potential power of specific acts. Of greatest concern, they have a trained insensitivity to the processes by which patterns of social relations ("context") are sometimes transformed by the actions of those in them - including those who are disempowered with respect to the terms in which "power" is constructed *within* the existing context.

Foregrounding the activities in which things are socially constructed leads to several consequences, among them:

First, it introduces a new set of rubrics as the "content" for what we should deal with. In general, these are verbs rather than nouns; activities *per se* rather than those who perform activities or the institutions in which those activities are performed. Simply put: "doings"; "activities"; "situated accomplishments"; or "persons-in-conversation" are the units of observation and analysis. While the product-oriented camps of constructionists cast new light on, e.g., what it means to be a person, the process-oriented camps cast new light on, e.g., what it means to be caught up in a paradox. For example, Cronen, Johnson and Lannamann (1982) described "strange loops;" this is what paradoxes look like when "translated" from an atemporal world of disembodied logical relations to a temporal, spacial world of social activity. In addition, the process-oriented constructionists permit a richer analysis of activities such as "understanding:" instead of an intrapsychic matter of cognitive "agreement" between mental pictures in the mind of one person and those in the mind of another, understanding is seen as the *quality* of particular social activities. In the same way, "remembering" is seen as a social process, not a matter of neurophysiological stimulation (Middleton and Edwards, 1990; Shotter, 1990).

Second, foregrounding activities necessarily commits one to an unfinished, incomplete set of research practices for describing any given situation. This contrasts sharply with the formal, final image traditionally associated with a "good" theory. Shotter (1986, p. 213) said that this commitment diverts attention from either "knowing how" (a technical skill) and "knowing-that" (the content of a theory) in favor of "knowing-from" (a kind of practical knowing that exists "within a situation that takes

into account, and is accountable in, the situation in which it is known.") This kind of knowing has less to do with "finding" that which already exists and is hidden from us than it does with "making," or "bringing into existence something that is as yet only intimated or implied in what is currently in existence."

Third, the focus on activities of which the observer is a part necessarily involves us in a moral universe of discourse. Taylor (1971, p. 51) said that the "interpretive" or "human" sciences are

moral sciences in a more radical sense than the eighteenth century understood ... [T]heir successful prosecution requires a high degree of self-knowledge, a freedom from illusion, in the sense of error which is rooted and expressed in one's way of life; for our capacity to understand is rooted in our own self-definitions, hence in what we are.

DISTINCTIONS BASED ON PURPOSE: SAYING SOMETHING ABOUT OR JOINING WITH?

A final distinction among constructionists involves their purpose. Many constructionists want to *say something about* the products or processes of construction; others want to - or feel that their activities as researchers inevitably constrain them to - *join with* the processes that they study.

"Saying something about" closely resembles the dominant intellectual tradition. In my judgement, "joining with" is the more radical, interesting, and consistent mode of practice for social constructionists. This form of research differs from the forms and criteria inherited from positivism in ways not yet fully articulated (but see Pearce and Chen, 1991, for an attempt). As a result, this research often confuses non-constructionists who read it. For example, Pearce and Cronen (1980) described an interaction between "Dave" and "Jan." Our purpose was to understand just these two people at this time and this place; our description stressed the incompleteness, vague nature of their interaction, which we take as characteristic of social interaction in all situations. Our claim was that our ability to join with them in the co-construction of the meaning of that event attested to the utility of the practices we were developing.

This claim was not accepted as a legitimate purpose of inquiry by some of our colleagues, who persisted in asking (slyly) "Who were they really?" (as if the value of the study derived from the importance of the participants) or (puzzled) "Now, just what general principles are supported by this data?"

Systemic social constructionist therapy consists of activities which are intended to join with, e.g., a specific family in a specific time and place. In early versions, systemic language was used to describe how the therapist "joined with" the client; a more robust description is afforded by social constructionist language, in which it is clearly understood that the therapist and the family "co-construct" whatever happens in therapy. Within this language, a rich array of practices have been developed, including "observing teams," "circular questioning," and "reflecting teams" (see McNamee and Gergen, 1992).

Freire's (1982) "participation research" is another example of work that intends to join with particular activities. Its activities are designed to facilitate a joining between a researcher and those studied in order that they might collaboratively develop knowledge which is useful to the people being studied. "Participation research" resists codification in any of the terms familiar to mainstream research manuals, and its purpose appears bizarre when articulated in those discourses. In the same way, the techniques and purposes of systemic, social constructivist therapy seem bizarre and irrational when articulated in the language of, e.g., psychoanalysis, and, they resist neat formulation on a handbook of research methods.

The commitment to engage particular social processes has important implications for research, theory, and practice. It commits us to a form of "practical" theory (Cronen, in press). We are more interested in making claims such as "prefigurative force is a useful concept which, if applied by a theorist, opens up a wide array of activities so that the theorist can engage them"; we are less interested in statements like "all activities have prefigurative force" (which we take as true but uninteresting) or "prefigurative force necessarily varies as a function of [specified variables]" (which we take as interesting in particular cases but untrue in any sufficiently broad generalization). This perspective commits us to an interactive methodology in which we *engage* with the activities we study. Particular methods vary, from interviews to textual analysis. In every case, however, the task for us is to resist twin temptresses: on one hand, the seductions of objectivity with its myth of dispassionate non-engagement in which the observer is unobserved; and on the other hand, the seductions

of becoming a participant in the activity, accepting a prefigured role and only reinforcing the pattern. The former is a mystification, the second a captivation; either deprives the researcher/theorist the unique role of engaged researcher or theorist.

In my judgment, the focus on specific activities with an intention to engage them is the *least* well-worked-out version of constructionism. It is a contrary (not a contradiction) of other approaches and a complement to them. I believe that it provides a basis for useful and unusual roles for social theory and research.

Requests for reprints should be addressed to: Professor W. Barnett Pearce, Department of Communication, Loyola University Chicago, 820 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60611.

REFERENCES

- Berger, P.L. and Luckmann, T. (1966). *The Social Construction of Reality*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday.
- Billig, M., et. al. (1988). *Ideological Dilemmas: A Social Psychology of Everyday Thinking*. London: Sage.
- Bilmes, J. (1986). *Discourse and Behavior*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Carbaugh, D., ed. (1990). *Cultural Communication and Intercultural Contact*. NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Carbaugh, D. (1988). *Talking American: Cultural Discourses on Donohue*. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex.
- Cronen, V.E., Johnson, K., Lannamann, J. (1982). "Paradoxes, Double-binds, and Reflective Loops: An Alternative Theoretical Perspective." *Family Process*, 20: 91-112.
- Cronen, V.E., (in Press). Coordinated Management of Meanings: Practice Theory for the Complexities and Contradictions of Everyday Life." In J. Siegfried, ed. *The Status of Common Senses in Psychology*. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex.
- Cronen, V.E., Pearce, W.B. & Xi, C. (1989/1990). The Meaning of "Meaning" in CMM Analyses of Communication: A Comparison of Theories, *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 25, 37-66.
- Freire, P. (1982). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gardner, H. (1985). *The Mind's New Science: A History of the Cognitive Revolution*. New York: Basic.

- Geertz, C. (1983). *Local Knowledge: Further Essay in Interpretive Anthropology*. New York: Basic.
- Gergen, K.J. (1985). "The Social Constructionist Movement in Modern Psychology," *American Psychologist*, 40: 266-275.
- Gergen, K.J. (1985). "Social Constructionist Inquiry: Context and Implications," in K. Gergen and K. Davis, *The Social Construction of the Person*. New York: SpringerVerlag.
- Goodenough, W. (1971). *Culture, Language and Society*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Harré, R. (1989). "Language-Games and the Texts of Identity," in J. Shotter and K. Gergen, eds., *Texts of Identity*. London: Sage.
- Harré, R. (1986). "An Outline of the Social Constructionist Viewpoint," in Rom Harré, ed., *The Social Construction of Emotions*. New York: Blackwell, pp. 2-14.
- Hoffman, L. (1988). "A Constructivist Position for Family Therapy," *Irish Journal of Psychology*, 9: 110-129.
- Katriel, T. (1986). *Talking Straight: Dugri Speech in Israeli Sabra Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kenny, V. & Gardner, G. (1988). "Constructions of Self-Organizing Systems," *Irish Journal of Psychology*, 9: 1-24.
- Knorr-Cetina, K.D. & Mulkay, M. (1983). *Science Observed: Perspectives on the Social Study of Science*. London: Sage.
- Latour, B. & Woolgar, S. (1979). *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts*. London: Sage.
- Lutz, C. A. (1988). *Unnatural Emotions: Everyday Sentiments on a Micronesian Atoll and Their Challenge to Western Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McNamee, S. & Gergen, K.J. (1992). *Therapy as a Social Construction*. London: Sage.
- Maturana, H. (1988). "Reality: The Search for Objectivity or the Quest for a Compelling Argument," *Irish Journal of Psychology*, 9: 25-82.
- Maturana, H. & Varela, F. (1987). *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding*. Boston: New Science Library.
- Mehan, H. & Wood, H. (1975). *The Reality of Ethnomethodology*. New York: Wiley.
- Middleton, D. & Edwards, D. (1990). "Conversational Remembering: A Social Psychological Approach," in D. Middleton and E. Edwards, eds., *Collective Remembering*. London: Sage pp. 1-11.
- Mills, C.W. (1959). "The Sociological Imagination". Oxford University Press.
- Nelson, J.S., Megill, A., & McCloskey, D.N. (1987). *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences: Language and Argument in Scholarship and Public Affairs*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Pearce, W. B. & Chen, V. (1991). "Even if a thing of beauty, can a case study be a joy forever?" presented to the Speech Communication Association, Atlanta, Georgia.

- Pearce, W. B. & Foss, K. (1990). "The Historical Context of Communication as a Science," in Gordon L. Dahnke and Glen W. Clatterback, eds., *Human Communication: Theory and Research*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, pp. 1-20.
- Pearce, W. B. (1989). *Communication and the Human Condition*. Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press.
- Pearce, W. B. & Branham, R.J. (1985). "Between Text and Context: Toward a Rhetoric of Contextual Reconstruction." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 71: 19-36.
- Pearce, W. B. & Cronen, V.E. (1980). *Communication Action and Meaning: The Creation of Social Realities*. New York: Praeger.
- Philipsen, G. (1975). "Speaking 'Like a Man' in Teamsterville." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 61: 13-22.
- Potter, J. & Wetherell, M. (1987). *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behavior*. London: Sage.
- Rorty, R. (1989). *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, R. (1979). *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rosaldo, M.Z. (1980). *Knowledge and Passion: Illongot Notions of Self and Social Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rosen, L. (1984). *Bargaining for Reality: The Social Construction of Social Relations in a Muslim Community*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Segal, L. (1986). *The Dream of Reality: Heinz von Foerster's Constructivism*. New York: Norton.
- Shotter, J. (1990a). *Knowing of the Third Kind*. Utrecht: ISOR/University of Utrecht.
- Shotter, J. (1990b). "The Social Construction of Remembering and Forgetting," in D. Middleton and D. Edwards, eds., *Collective Remembering*. London: Sage, 120-138.
- Shotter, J. (1989). "Social Accountability and the Social Construction of 'You'," in J. Shotter and K. Gergen, eds., *Texts of Identity*. London: Sage, pp. 133-151.
- Shotter, J. (1986). "Speaking Practically: Whorf, the Formative Function of Communication, and Knowing of the Third Kind," in Ralph L. Rosnow and Marianthi Georgoudi, eds. *Contextualism and Understanding in Behavioral Science: Implications for Research and Theory*. New York: Praeger.
- Shotter, J. (1984). *"Social Accountability and Selfhood"*. Oxford, England; New York, USA: B. Blackwell.
- Shotter, J. & Gergen, K.J. (1989). "Preface and Introduction," in J. Shotter and K. Gergen, eds. *Texts of Identity*. London: Sage, pp. ix-xi.
- Simons, H. W., ed. (1990). *The Rhetorical Turn: Invention and Persuasion in the Conduct of Inquiry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Taylor, C. (1971). "Interpretation and the sciences of man," *Review of Metaphysics*. 34: 1 - 51.
- von Glasersfeld, E. (1988). "The Reluctance to Change a Way of Thinking," *Irish Journal of Psychology*, 9: 83-90.

- Watzlawick, P., ed. (1984). *The Invented Reality: How do we know what we believe we know?* New York: Norton.
- Watzlawick, P. (1976). *How Real is Real: Confusion, Disinformation, Communication: An Anecdotal Introduction to Communications Theory.* New York: Random House (Vintage).
- Winograd, T. & Flores, F. (1986). *Understanding Computers and Cognition: A New Foundation for Design.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical Investigations.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell. G. E. M. Anscombe, trans.