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## The Estrangement of Social Constructionism and Experimental Social Psychology: History of the Rift and Prospects for Reconciliation

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*Social constructionism and experimental social psychology represent two complementary paradigms for understanding human social behavior, but over the last quarter century they have remained oddly and unnecessarily estranged from one another. In this article, we trace the history of social constructionist thought and find that the intellectual lineage and guiding assumptions of these two subcultures of social psychology are essentially the same. Next, we clarify the philosophical and ideological bases of their divide to determine how wide the rift really is. Although the differences may appear to be unbridgeable, we argue that a rapprochement is both possible and desirable. At the level of metatheory, Donald Campbell and William J. McGuire have demonstrated that constructionist and empirical insights can be usefully integrated in social psychology. At the level of empirical research, studies of the situated self-concept, social identity, collective representation, attitudes as temporary constructions, communication and shared reality, and cultural psychology have progressed through the incorporation of constructionist themes. Similar opportunities await researchers who explore the contextual bases of history, ideology, and other shared systems of meaning and their implications for social psychology. Finally, we identify some substantive and stylistic complementarities of social constructionism and experimental social psychology and analyze their joint potential for contributing to a well-balanced discipline of social psychology that is worthy of both parts of its name.*

"In our father's house there are many rooms."  
(W. J. McGuire, 1973, p. 452)

For more than a quarter of a century, the subject matter of social psychology has been approached from two conceptual vantage points that have remained oddly and unnecessarily estranged from one another. These are *experimental social psychology* and *social constructionism*. Mainstream social psychology has been largely dominated by experimentalists who see their own methods as providing the best (and perhaps only) way of garnering cumulative knowledge about

human social behavior. In the most recent *Handbook of Social Psychology*, Aronson, Wilson, and Brewer (1998) refer to experimentation as "the workhorse of social psychological research" and "the chief method of choice for social psychology" (p. 100). They suggest that being an experimental social psychologist is both a blessing and a curse and that "part of the blessing is that experimental social psychologists are able to use their knowledge and skill to perform the appropriate research to test hypotheses ... in a solid and ... convincing manner" (p. 100). The curse is that methodological sophistication "keeps us from rejoicing" at "potentially meaningless data" (pp. 99–100).

Social constructionists object to the notion that any particular set of methods offers one an epistemologically privileged view of reality. Although Gergen's (1999) *An Invitation to Social Construction* offers no definition of the book's central term, he makes clear that "a chief aim of constructionist inquiry" is to do away with "the mantle of scientific authority" (p. 52). Within social psychology, the constructionist movement is less clearly associated with its own set of methods or postulates than it is with the rejection of scientific approaches

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to understanding social phenomena in general and to experimentation in particular (e.g., Gergen, 1985a, 1994a, 1994b; Hare-Mustin & Maracek, 1988; Ibanez, 1991; Newman & Holzman, 1996; Parker, 1989; Parker & Shotter, 1990; Riger, 1992). Social constructionists have criticized experimentalists on both methodological and ideological grounds, and they have hurled the Sartrean accusation of "bad faith." Specifically, constructionists balk at experimentalists' conceptions of their own methods and theories as universally applicable, politically neutral, and uniquely positioned to distinguish truth from falsehood.

Perhaps due to the rather extreme rhetorical forms that social constructionist critiques have taken, many experimental social psychologists have rejected virtually in toto the epistemological issues that have been raised (e.g., Greenwald, 1976; Jones, 1985; Schaller, Crandall, Stangor, & Neuberg, 1995; Schlenker, 1974; Zajonc, 1989). This is unfortunate insofar as social psychological research could benefit practically as well as theoretically from a deeper, more nuanced appreciation of epistemology, conceptual analysis, and the history and philosophy of science (e.g., Campbell, 1989, 1993, 1994; Greenwood, 1989; Harré & Secord, 1972; Jost & Hardin, 1996; McGuire, 1989, 1997). Many of social psychology's theories probably are hampered by unwarranted, unrealistic assumptions concerning individualism and universalism (see Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Miller, 1984; Moscovici, 1988; Tajfel, 1981), and many of our most common methodological approaches probably are naively simplistic and bordering on the tautological (e.g., see McGuire, 1973, 1997; Rosnow & Georgoudi, 1986; Wallach & Wallach, 1994). Could it really be that we have nothing to learn from our critics? This tale of mutual refusal (bordering on contempt) is particularly intriguing in that it belies the once close affiliation between these two perspectives, a past that is recounted briefly here. It also conceals the many shared assumptions and goals of both approaches (see also Gergen, 1998). Now, nearly three decades since the oft-described "crisis of confidence" in social psychology was brought on by the introduction of social constructionist themes (e.g., Blank, 1988; Elms, 1975; Gergen, 1973; Harré & Secord, 1972; Jackson, 1988; McGuire, 1973; Ring, 1967; Stroebe & Kruglanski, 1989), we take stock of historical and intellectual developments in our field and ask whether, at the start of psychology's second century, the time is finally ripe for reconciliation. Our own position is that much more is to be gained from a genuine and meaningful rapprochement than from continued détente.

This article is structured as follows. First, we trace the history of social constructionist thought both inside and outside of the discipline of psychology, noting that the core social-science roots of experimental social psychologists and social constructionists are essentially the same. In fact, social constructionism in

psychology largely grew out of the insights derived from experimental social psychology. Next, we discuss the divergent philosophical commitments of the two camps and comment on some extrascientific (i.e., sociopolitical) developments that have contributed to the polarization. In analyzing the major causes of the split between the two former allies, we arrive at the conclusion that social constructionists and experimentalists are in fundamental agreement with the notion human beings actively and symbolically construct the world around them (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Campbell, 1993; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Gergen & Davis, 1985; Greenwood, 1989; Hacking, 1999b; Kuhn, 1970; Markus & Zajonc, 1985; McGuire, 1973, 1983, 1997; Moscovici, 1988; Searle, 1995).

The main difference between the two viewpoints is that, because of their attraction to postmodernist thought, social constructionists have embraced the argument that representations of reality are arbitrary and relative, whereas experimentalists have maintained that processes of social construction are determined by our cognitive apparatus and by features of the social context (see also Jost & Hardin, 1996). Furthermore, experimentalists (but not constructionists) believe that (a) it is useful and worthwhile to empirically investigate the ways in which dispositional and situational factors govern the process of social construction, and (b) adhering to specific methodological standards increases the likelihood that the experimenter's (socially constructed) conclusions bear some useful relationship to external reality. These points are cogently developed by two experimental social psychologists, Donald Campbell (1989, 1993, 1994; also Cook & Campbell, 1979) and William J. McGuire (1973, 1983, 1997), both of whom have addressed and incorporated constructionist critiques rather than ignoring them.

Finally, we discuss current prospects for reconciling the goals, values, and insights of social constructionism with the methods and strategies of inquiry practiced within experimental social psychology. Because social constructionists are fundamentally correct that human thought and behavior should be understood in relation to specific historical, cultural, and ideological contexts (Campbell, 1993; Gergen, 1973; Greenwood, 1989; Israel & Tajfel, 1972; Jost & Hardin, 1996; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; McGuire, 1973, 1983, 1989; Moscovici, 1988; Ross & Nisbett, 1991), experimentalists will be in a better position to fulfill the distinctive mission of social psychology by embracing constructionist themes. Just as research programs on the self-concept (Markus & Nurius, 1986; McGuire & McGuire, 1988), social identification and collective representation (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Moscovici, 1988; Tajfel, 1981), attitudes and social cognition (e.g., Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Martin & Tesser, 1992;

Schwarz, 2000; Wilson & Hodges, 1992), and cultural psychology (e.g., Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Miller, 1984; Morris & Peng, 1994; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996; Triandis, 1989) have benefited by incorporating rather than snubbing social constructionism, attractive opportunities await historical psychologists, political psychologists, and any others who take seriously the propensity of human beings to create systems of socially shared meanings and their implications.

### **Social Constructionism as History**

#### **Common Origins**

The intellectual paradigms of experimental social psychology and social constructionism sprung from the very same soil. Such celebrated forefathers of social psychology as Hegel, Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, Cooley, Dewey, and Mead inspired both the objective, scientific analysis of social behavior and the sustained, speculative study of subjective dimensions of mind (e.g., Allport, 1962; Jones, 1985). These writers anticipated the socially constituted nature of historical reality and were among the first to address the nature of the relationship between the individual and society, especially the ways in which *individual representations* and *collective representations* are dialectically intertwined (e.g., Gergen, 1998; McGuire, 1986; Moscovici, 1988). In this sense, then, the intellectual origins of experimental social psychology and social constructionism are essentially the same.

This is true not only of voices from the distant past, but of our relatively recent ancestry as well. Contemporary work in social development, for example, builds fundamentally on the perspectives of Vygotsky and Piaget, both of whom emphasized the ways in which children grow into the intellectual life around them by constructing shared reality in the practical context of social interaction (e.g., Averill, 1980; Doise, 1989; Kessen, 1979, 1990; Moscovici, 1988). This work, in turn, provides the developmental basis for regarding people as active, expectancy-laden perceivers in ever-changing social environments, a vision that has come to be shared by experimental social cognitive researchers and social constructionists alike (e.g., Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Gergen, 1977b, 1982, 1985b; Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Jones & Gerard, 1967; Jussim, 1991; Scarr, 1985). These developments prompted Markus and Zajonc (1985) to conclude that “the hallmark of the cognitive perspective in social psychology is the constructive nature of social cognition” (pp. 212–213).

Issues of construction and meaning-making were also given new life in sociology in the 1960s and 1970s largely through the influence of three major sources: the dramaturgical approach of Erving Goffman (1959,

the landmark publication of Berger and Luckmann's (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality*, and the renaissance of *symbolic constructionism* (e.g., Manis & Meltzer, 1972). These independent efforts managed to renew general interest in questions about shared subjectivity and the social production of cultural forms, and they also pointed to microsociological processes whereby specific definitions of reality are proposed, challenged, and negotiated in the course of face-to-face interaction. Issues of self-presentation, symbolic representation, and expectancy confirmation then came to occupy the center stage of social psychology in the 1960s and 1970s in both sociology and psychology departments (e.g., Gordon & Gergen, 1968; Jones, 1964, 1985; Manis & Meltzer, 1972). By this time, historians and philosophers of science such as Kuhn (1970) had also begun to use sociological and psychological theories to describe the social conduct and cognitive products of scientists themselves. It was precisely at this point in time that social constructionism first entered the world of mainstream social psychology, and it did so with a bang.

#### **The Social Constructionist Critique of Experimental Social Psychology**

Gergen's (1973) article “Social Psychology as History” most famously juxtaposed the worlds of social constructionism and experimental social psychology. His fundamental thesis was that social psychological researchers were engaged in the study of historically contingent social and cultural practices (and their influences on groups and individuals) rather than the search for universal truths about human nature. Incorporating into his social constructionist approach the philosophical doctrines of skepticism, idealism, and relativism, Gergen (1977b) went further in proposing that “behavioral data serve much as blank slates that permit the investigator to inscribe the theoretical message of his or her choosing” (p. 168). Furthermore, consideration of the problems of reflexivity and enlightenment led Gergen (1973) to conclude that social psychology produces knowledge that will alter the very phenomena it studies.

There are really three interrelated critiques that social constructionists advance against experimental social psychologists (see also Blank, 1988; Gergen, 1977b, 1985a; Jackson, 1988). First, and most famous, there is the methodological critique that experimenters are not, as they believe, using objective methods to separate fact from fiction and to develop accurate theories of the causes and effects of social behavior (e.g., Gergen, 1999). Rather, the social constructionist rejects the notion that it is possible to use scientific methods to devise a “Mirror of Nature” (Rorty, 1979). Other objections to the ways in which experimentalists ply their trade—or, more precisely, the ways in which they conceive of their

mission—pertain to methodological individualism and abstract universalism. Gergen (1999), for instance, laments the pervasive notion in social psychology that “the process of world construction . . . takes place ‘in the head,’” and he notes that “for social constructionists what we take to be real is an outcome of social relationships” (p. 237). Furthermore, social constructionists view whatever knowledge is constructed by experimental social psychologists to be limited to specific historical, cultural, and ideological contexts (e.g., Gergen 1973), whereas experimentalists often view themselves as investigating general features of human nature.

The political critique is that experimentalists are not only epistemologically wrong about the capacity to develop universally applicable theories of the abstract individual, but they are also generally on the side of elitist oppressors (e.g., Hare-Mustin & Maracek, 1988; Ibanez, 1991; Newman & Holzman, 1996; Parker, 1989; Riger, 1992). Specifically, when experimentalists fail to see the ideological limitations of their theories, they reinforce the status quo by claiming that the way things currently are is the only way that they can be, given human nature (Gergen, 1999). Here, many social constructionists accept postmodernist critiques of science as an inherently oppressive attempt to control and master the subjects of its relentless inquiries (see also Hacking, 1999b). Thus, Gergen (1998) writes contentiously that “the sociocognitive position [favored by experimental social psychologists] never fully escapes its Western roots and thus operates subtly as a form of Western imperialism” (p. 303).

The bad faith critique builds on the political critique. It is that by suppressing its socially constructed character, experimental social psychologists misinform the public that its findings are true regardless of one’s particular perspective. Thus, experimental social psychologists are said to be guilty not only of misunderstanding their proper role but also of exaggerating and misrepresenting it to serve their own selfish ends.

### **The Mainstream Responds**

The social constructionist critique succeeded in evoking heated responses from leading social psychologists. Zajonc (1989) responded by finding it curious that the fact that “social psychology produces knowledge that will alter the very phenomena it studies” was “taken as a criticism of social psychology rather than a mark of its success” (p. 347). E. E. Jones (1985), Gergen’s former mentor, was equally resistant to Gergen’s arguments, remarking that his “pessimistic conclusions are not particularly novel,” and that “many social psychologists viewed [Gergen’s] . . . statements as intellectually irresponsible invitations to despair” (p. 99). Jones also took issue with what he called the “tendency to caricature past psychological research and to consign it to a

simple positivistic trash bin along with reductionistic learning experiments,” and he ultimately dismissed the constructionist critique as “a minor perturbation in the long history of social psychology” (p. 99).

Although disciplinary reactions varied (see Blank, 1988; Jackson, 1988), the distribution of responses was clearly skewed in the negative direction (e.g., Greenwald, 1976; Schlenker, 1974; Stroebe & Kruglanski, 1989). Zajonc (1989) complained that the epistemological “crisis” brought on by social constructionism “has discouraged promising students from entering the field and granting agencies from increasing social psychological research budgets” (p. 347). Other commentators welcomed the opening up of the field to historical, cultural, and political factors that tended to be excluded (e.g., Hare-Mustin & Maracek, 1988; Parker, 1989; Riger, 1992). Still others experienced the polemical critiques as “much ado about nothing” and saw no reason to alter their “business as usual” attitude.

Ironically, the predominant reaction of experimental social psychologists to the social constructionist crisis may have been to “close ranks” and emphasize those very elements of their approach that were criticized the most. In this sense, the constructionist critique has produced a “boomerang effect” that achieves the opposite from what was intended. Rather than encouraging openness to new ideas and the readiness to take risks and explore new possibilities, social psychologists appear to have reacted by becoming ever more cautious, risk averse, and conservative in their approach to methodology (Kruglanski, 2001). Reis and Stiller (1992) commented on the field’s reaction to the so-called crisis of the 1970s and to the criticism that social psychology is not a true science. According to these authors, social psychologists responded to the threat by becoming ever more exacting in their theoretical and empirical operations, while journals became ever more stringent. Higgins (1992) concurred, adding that this may have cultivated a prevention focus among social psychologists: “to avoid the perception of mistakes, it is best to work within traditional boundaries, use conventional paradigms and interpret results with established theories” (p. 491). Needless to say, such risk-aversion or prevention orientation is inimical to the exploration of new cultural and historical possibilities and the relaxation of scientism, as advocated by social constructionists (e.g., Gergen, 1999).

### **Does Social Constructionism Follow From the Lessons of Experimental Social Psychology?**

It is often forgotten that social constructionism as a theory of the person (e.g., Gergen, 1971; 1977b, 1982; Gergen & Davis, 1985) emerged out of the findings of

mainstream social psychology. That is, experiments about the power of the situation, fluidity of the self-concept, reconstructive memory, expectancy confirmation, and conformity pressures provided the very inspiration for social constructionist theorizing and metatheorizing in the first place. Laboratory demonstrations of the human tendency to impose our subjective worlds onto objective circumstances were elaborated and applied by Gergen and others to the domains of science and epistemology. As Gergen stated at the Princeton conference held posthumously for E. E. Jones (see Darley & Cooper, 1998) social constructionism was simply the “next move in the game.” If social perceivers are constantly finding what they want or expect to see, what is to save the experimental social psychologist from a similar fate of self-deception?

### **Subjectivism and Situationalism as Shared Doctrines**

The continuity between experimental social psychology and social constructionism stems from the fact that subjectivist metatheory has, by and large, dominated the philosophical imagination of social psychologists (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Jones, 1985; Jussim, 1991; Ross & Nisbett, 1991). Although from time to time there have been objectivist movements in social psychology—such as theories of imitation, modeling, and social learning inspired by Skinner’s social behaviorism (e.g., Bandura, 1986; Lott & Lott, 1985) or the Gibsonian realism introduced into social psychology by McArthur and Baron (1983; McArthur & Ginsburg, 1981)—it is safe to say that social psychology has generally emphasized the subjective side of human affairs. This began in many ways with the famous declaration by Thomas and Znaniecki (1918) that “if men define their situations as real, then they are real in their consequences” (p. 117).

The prevailing assumption that subjectivity shapes the human condition spans such diverse research programs as that of Muzafer Sherif (and later Donald Campbell) on the emergence of social norms, Asch’s experiments on conformity, Festinger’s work on processes of social comparison and social validation, Bruner’s “new look” at perception and cognition, and Schachter and Singer’s studies on the experience of emotion and the interpretation of arousal. Conceptual and experimental work by Heider, Kelley, Jones, and their colleagues on attribution, self-inference, self-presentation, expectancy confirmation, stigma, and countless other topics in mainstream social psychology led to the conclusion that social events are “organized in categories shaped by past experiences, and they *take on their meanings as part of an active, constructive process in dealing with reality*” (Jones, 1985, p. 83, emphasis added).

The first century of experimental social psychology, then, has been devoted largely to demonstrating the *power of construal* and the *power of the social situation* (e.g., Jones, 1985; Ross & Nisbett, 1991), and these appear also to be the foundational principles of social constructionism. Little wonder, then, that Gergen has claimed that social constructionism is the logical extension of conclusions drawn from empirical social psychology. Indeed, the theory of social constructionism in many ways began as an empirical theory about the powerful ways in which people are influenced by their social and material surroundings, the ways in which immediate situations force us to see ourselves differently and to behave in new and different ways, the ways in which cultural and historical factors affect our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and the processes through which situations are defined and negotiated in the stream of social interaction. These interests correspond extremely well to the distinctive agenda of social psychology (e.g., Taylor, 1998).

### **A Common Focus on Bias and Inaccuracy**

Social constructionist claims concerning selfhood and human behavior are not only consistent with experimental social psychology, but they are in fact based on the findings of social psychological experiments. To support some of his claims about epistemology and scientific observations, for example, Gergen (1977b, 1982) described his own earlier experiments in which people’s private self-concepts were altered by public experiences, such as the presence of others, self-presentational demands of the situation, and contrasting frames of reference brought on by considering differences between the self and other people (see also Markus & Nurius, 1986; McGuire & McGuire, 1988). Thus, social constructionists have come to argue that even the most certain knowledge (such as self-knowledge) is open to contextual variation, multiple interpretations, momentary fluctuation, skepticism, and doubt. In other words, Gergen (1982) and others have drawn on experimental social psychology to argue for the “fundamental impossibility of accurate representation” (p. 146).

It does seem, in fact, that several decades of experimental research in social psychology have been devoted to demonstrating the depths and patterns of inaccuracy in social perception (e.g., Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; for a discussion see Kruglanski, 1989). This applies not only to the pioneering research by Jones, Gergen, McGuire, Markus, and others on the situated self-concept, which is constructed and reconstructed in light of contrast effects and other contextual features, but it applies to most empirical work in social cognition. The thrust of dozens of experiments on the self-fulfilling prophecy and expectancy-confirmation

processes, for example, is that erroneous impressions tend to be perpetuated rather than supplanted, because of the impressive extent to which people see what they want to see and act as others want them to act (e.g., Darley & Gross, 1983; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Olson, Roese, & Zanna, 1996; Snyder & Swann, 1978; Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977; Word, Zanna, & Cooper, 1974). Parallel research programs on reconstructive memory (e.g., Goethals & Reckman, 1973; Greenwald, 1980), the *correspondence bias* and the *fundamental attribution error* (e.g., Jones, 1985; Ross, 1977), stereotyping and nonconscious prejudice (e.g., Banaji & Greenwald, 1995; Hamilton, 1981), and cognitive heuristics and biases (e.g. Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982; Nisbett & Ross, 1980) also support the conclusion that people are notoriously inaccurate information processors. Thus, Fiske and Taylor (1991) in their scholarly review of experimental social cognition reach very much the same conclusion as do Gergen and his allies, namely that people engage in an active and motivated construction of their own realities. Viewed from this perspective, social constructionism is less of a rebellion against experimental social psychology than it is an inspired expression of the field's major lessons.

Given all of the similarities between social constructionism and experimental social psychology, one wonders whether it was really ever necessary for the partners to split. One major difference between the two perspectives is that experimental social psychology retains objectivist methods to study subjectivity, whereas social constructionists use evidence concerning the fallibility of social perception to reject the very methods of science itself. We turn now to a consideration of the key philosophical and ideological reasons for the rift in order to determine how wide it really is.

### How Wide Is the Rift?

#### The Issue of Truth

Perhaps the single most significant and enduring bone of contention between social constructionism and experimental social psychology concerns the issue of truth. To simplify things greatly, experimental social psychologists believe in truth—at least as something (like justice and beauty) to strive for—whereas social constructionists do not. As we have seen, both perspectives assume that human beings socially construct aspects of their environments, but experimentalists additionally believe that it is possible to make valid empirical statements about the social and cognitive processes involved in the construction of reality. This belief is antithetical to a core assumption of many social constructionists. Issues of truth are central to constructionists' methodological critique of experimental social psychology.

The position that objective truth is elusive and ultimately unknowable is not unique to social constructionism, of course. Rorty (1982) traces numerous parallels between 19th-century philosophical idealism and social constructionist/postmodernist theories of the late 20th-century (for a similar conclusion see also Callinicos, 1989; Jost & Hardin, 1996). However, truth's ultimate unattainability does not necessarily negate the value of truth as a regulating ideal for science (Campbell, 1993; McGuire, 1973; Popper, 1959). In other words, truth as a product of the scientific process is different from truth as a regulating ideal that may guide epistemic activity. According to this perspective, not all conceptions (whether lay or scientific) are equally acceptable, and some may be compellingly adjudged more valid than others. Whereas some social constructionist critiques imply a gamelike arbitrariness of social constructions (e.g., Gergen, 1977b, 1999; Hacking, 1999b), most experimental social psychologists believe that the formation and change of beliefs is no trifling matter. In practice, mental representation involves a complex but predictable interplay involving deeply seated motivations (at least in some cases), extant knowledge bases (prior beliefs), and the specific presentation of new information or its activation from memory within a given social context. According to this view, the belief formation process is far from arbitrary. Decades of social psychological research painstakingly document, in fact, that social and cognitive factors typically outside of the individual's control determine which beliefs and arguments they find persuasive (cf. Cialdini, 1988; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; McGuire, 1986).

Admittedly, saying that attitudes and beliefs are not arrived at arbitrarily is not the same as saying that they are true, and the question of whether some scientific statements may be considered to be more accurate or valid than others remains. Donald Campbell (1994), as we see, merged realism and social constructionism, arguing that “the world as it is” is a “co-selector” of consensual beliefs among scientists (p. 131; see also Campbell, 1993). Latour (1987) takes a more agnostic position concerning the existence of truth, arguing that successes in science are those of “scientific inscription processes, rhetoric, and alliance formation.” However, even the latter, sociorelativistic view, does not vitiate the value of science as a knowledge-producing enterprise—even if any given bit of knowledge may be ultimately questioned and supplanted by another.

McGuire (1989) adopts a tragic theory of knowledge but goes on to describe the theoretical and practical utility of conducting behavioral research using *perspectivist* methods. Kruglanski (1994), too, has argued that the fact that scientific consensus represents a tentative social psychological state that is capable of changing “hardly implies that science is hopeless and unworthy of pursuit” (p. 210). Rather, its “powerful

justification [is] the construction of new knowledge, even if the fruits of our labor may only be temporary" (p. 210). Whether ultimately judged to be valid or invalid, knowledge is a necessity without which human action is unthinkable (cf. McGuire, 1973, 1989). Most experimentalists therefore hold a pragmatic view of truth that is less extreme and more reflexive than what is often ascribed to them by social constructionists. From a pragmatic perspective, science strives to produce the best knowledge of which human beings are capable, given their social and psychological constraints and the features of the world at large. Thus, whereas truth may not be ultimately attainable, the quest for truth as a Popperian regulating ideal could still be useful as a means of fueling productive efforts at theory construction and validation (see Campbell & Russo, 1999; McGuire, 1997).

Although the issue of truth is probably the biggest source of contention between experimentalists and constructionists, we argue that the divide is not as wide as it first appears. Although constructionists believe that numerous alternative representations are possible, they do not deny that people should (and do) choose among representations and adopt those that they find most compelling, or at least subjectively valid, even if only on the basis of rhetoric or other pragmatic grounds (Billig, 1987; Gergen, 1994b; Potter, 1998). Social constructionists, therefore, share at least some of the experimentalist's interest in the process of persuasion whereby certain constructions win out over others (cf. Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Kruglanski & Thompson, 1999a, 1999b; McGuire, 1986). Conversely, the experimentalists' belief in the actual attainability of truth through science is not as filled with hubris as it might appear. Although most experimental social psychologists avoid debates concerning the philosophy of science (which is, after all, outside of their immediate professional purview), their epistemological views would be best classified as pragmatic, fallibilist, and Popperian (Campbell & Russo, 1999; Cook & Campbell, 1979); they are based on the fairly modest assumption that, "We don't know, we can only guess" (Popper, 1959, p. 278).

### The Role of Language

A key feature of the social constructionist position has to do with the role of language in epistemic debates (e.g., Gergen, Hepburn, & Fisher, 1986), and this is also central to their methodological critique of experimentalism. Many constructionists feel that in the postmodern era, scientific voices should no longer be considered superior to other ways of knowing. Rather, what we have are different types of discourse. The language of science may be different from other language games, but it is not privileged in any deep epistemological sense. Some commentators have drawn on the philosophical authority of Wittgenstein

to defend this point of view (e.g., Bloor, 1983; Coulter, 1979; Gergen, 1988, 1999; Harré, 1989; Rorty, 1979; Shotter, 1991). Gergen (1994a), for example, argued that "social constructionism is a congenial companion to Wittgenstein's (1953) conception of meaning as a derivative of social use" (p. 52), and this assumption was also made by Parker (1996) in his allegedly Marxist critique of Wittgenstein.

Other commentators, however, have questioned the notion that Wittgensteinian arguments can be used to defend epistemological versions of social constructionism. The philosopher Charles Taylor (1988) argued in this connection that, according to Wittgenstein, genuine descriptions of human behavior must make reference to the broader context of language and society (see also Jost, 1995b). This does not mean that all descriptions are equally valid (Jost & Hardin, 1996; Rubinstein, 1981), nor does it mean that scientific progress in psychology is impossible to achieve (Gustafson, 1984). As experimentalists have themselves shown, the ability to construct shared representations is essential to meaningful communication about any topic, whether the topic is scientific or not (e.g., Clark, 1985; Hardin & Higgins, 1996). Campbell (1994) argued that it is an "evolutionary and psychological fact that underjustified perceptual reification of ordinary objects and movements is a widespread precursor of language, shared by many animals and that our similarity in such reifications makes useful language possible" (p. 132). Thus, far from impeding meaningful and valid forms of communication, socially shared constructions are what make understanding and communication possible. On this issue, too, social constructionists and experimental social psychologists probably agree more than they disagree. The success of discursive social psychology (e.g., Potter, 1998)—which employs empirical (but not usually experimental) methods to analyze processes of social construction in the context of language use—suggests that it is possible to bring empirical and constructionist forms of inquiry together.

### The Issue of Politics

Hacking (1999a) observes that, "If nothing else, social construction work tends to be critical of the status quo" (p. 66). Within social psychology, a key feature of social constructionism has been its "rebellious" character and the fact that it poses a challenge to received worldviews and to the social psychological establishment. Gergen's various writings (1973, 1977b, 1982, 1985a, 1994a, 1998) have been framed largely as critiques of mainstream social psychology. They fit very well with the spirit of political activism that swept through universities in the 1960s and 1970s and that entailed a progressive sense that entrenched power was arbitrary, times were changing,

and institutions and organizations could and would be arranged differently in the future. For all of these reasons, social constructionism has often appealed to psychologists of the left wing, including Marxists, feminists, and critical theorists (e.g., Billig, 1987; Fine, 1992; Ibanez, 1991; Kitzinger, 1987; Newman & Holzman, 1996; Parker, 1989).

Most experimental social psychologists are indifferent to the political agenda of social constructionists, and they see debates concerning ideological issues to be irrelevant and even inappropriate in scientific circles. Many in the mainstream believe that science should be value neutral and that there is no place for politics in social psychology. Jost (1995a) argued that the dismissal of ideological issues is a mistake, insofar as social psychological research is as relevant to society and politics as clinical psychological research is to mental health. From this perspective, we have a professional obligation to weigh in on ideological issues, policies, and decisions. Furthermore, if experimental social psychologists insist on political aloofness, then we are bound to alienate and lose many young people who entered the field because of its potential for facilitating social progress and transforming political institutions. They will be drawn to social constructionists and postmodernists who are (at least initially) more comfortable and open in discussing burning political questions of the day than are experimental social psychologists. This is arguably one of the biggest reasons for the success of the social constructionist movement in recruiting new members over the past 25 years.

It is of more than historical interest, therefore, that the core philosophical legacy of social constructionist thought—most especially the key idea that external reality is fundamentally unknowable—is not really part of the left-wing legacy at all. In fact, this perspective has had a long and checkered philosophical past associated with Berkeley, Descartes, Hume, Kant, and Hegel and especially the doctrines of *idealism*, *skepticism* and *relativism* and it has been criticized forcefully by Marx, Wittgenstein, and many others (Callinicos, 1989; Jost & Hardin, 1996; Spears & Parker, 1996). Marxism, it should be said, recognizes the role of society and history in determining ideological forms, but this is conceptualized as an objective, social, material process that can be studied and analyzed. According to Marx, ideological analysis results in a deeper social scientific understanding rather than a rejection of the feasibility of social science. Distinguishing the social production of ideas from an idealist metatheory, Marx wrote famously that, “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (as cited in Tucker, 1978, p. 4).

Furthermore, Marx & Engels (1846/1970) argued in *The German Ideology* that philosophical idealism func-

tions to preserve existing social arrangements by claiming that historical, cultural, and political problems exist only “in the realm of pure thought” which require cognitive or philosophical solutions rather than political action and social change (p. 39). The notion that there is no truth or objective reality, for example, provides a convenient objection to any claim about the (real, actual, material) existence of injustice, inequality, exploitation, and oppression. The philosophical implication is that people are not really oppressed, they just think they are. This renders the perception of injustice as just one among many equally (in)valid social constructions (Jost & Hardin, 1996; Spears & Parker, 1996).

The social constructionist movement emerged on the social science scene as a force for change and cultivated a leftist revolutionary spirit that posed a distinctive challenge to established scientific authority. By contrast, experimentalists have generally espoused more conservative and system-justifying attitudes (e.g., Jost, Kruglanski, & Simon, 1999), accepting the existing system of scientific practices and defending scientific institutions like major journals and granting agencies. Yet, as we have argued, the possibilities of progress, revolution, and social change are actually more compatible with the scientific approach than they are with the social constructionist doctrines of skepticism, idealism, or relativism. It could be argued then that it was the system-challenging attitude more than the actual contents of idealist philosophy that explains the historical alliance between left-wing psychologists and social constructionists. It has also been argued that the critique of unjust power is in fact strengthened by an awareness of empirical data (e.g., Jost, 1995a) and that there is nothing about humanistic and progressive values that excludes the utility of doing empirical research (Smith, 1994). Thus, it is possible for experimentalists to join social constructionists such as Gergen (1999) in an ideological critique of injustice and inequality in society and to use empirical methods to develop and propose alternatives to the status quo.

### Models of Integration: Campbell and McGuire

Despite the overt rejection of social constructionism within mainstream social psychology, many social constructionist themes have been echoed by social psychologists interested in *contextualist* or *perspectivist* epistemologies that expand on previous philosophies of science and open the doors to an understanding of recursive and dynamic effects, the incorporation of historical and cultural variables, and the consideration of multiple levels of analysis (e.g., Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1995; Campbell, 1989, 1993; Cook & Campbell, 1979; Doise, 1986; Harré & Secord, 1972; McGuire, 1973, 1983, 1989, 1997; Rosnow &

Georgoudi, 1986). These writers have sought to improve social psychology through the use of constructionist methods and concepts (see also Wallach & Wallach, 1994).

On the whole, social constructionists deserve credit for ushering in greater open-mindedness with regard to unconventional research procedures, most especially the increased acceptance of discursive, narrative, and other qualitative techniques (e.g., Billig, 1987; McGuire, 1997; Potter, 1998). They have also succeeded in raising consciousness concerning the extent to which scientists are driven (at least in part) by nonrational social, cognitive, and motivational factors (see Hacking, 1999b; Kuhn, 1970; Latour, 1987) in a manner that parallels the epistemic process of lay thinkers (Kruglanski, 1989).

There are two social psychologists in particular, Donald Campbell and William J. McGuire, who have embraced social constructionist themes without abandoning the experimental method. They both describe themselves as *postpositivists*. Campbell and McGuire have accepted the constructionist challenge to reflexively apply what we know about social cognition to understand the scientific process, and they have developed epistemological positions and specific research strategies that are informed by this reflexive application. In different ways, *evolutionary critical realism* and *perspectivism* merge social constructionism and experimental social psychology, and so they are valuable as meta-theoretical models for how to attempt integration.

### **Evolutionary Critical Realism**

Campbell accepts Gergen's (1973) radical historicism without giving up on truth as a regulating scientific ideal. He acknowledges, for instance, that

At any given time, even in the best of science, we are in a historical context and our experiments and our theoretical arguments are historically embedded. They have a historical provincialism; they are reactions to what has gone before, they are dated and uninterpretable outside of that context. (Campbell & Russo, 1999, p. 136)

The fact that scientific activity derives its meaning from historical, cultural, and political contexts leads Gergen and many others to embrace skepticism and reject the possibility of realism (that the external world is, in some sense, knowable). Campbell, by contrast, concludes that we must work even harder to minimize the effects of irrelevant social factors on scientific observation and discovery. He writes

Out of this, I want to keep the goal of truth, and to attempt to understand and foster a social system of science in which it becomes sociologically plausible that

the processes would lead to beliefs of increasing validity. (Campbell & Russo, 1999, p. 138)

Campbell's position is that there are sufficient but imperfect methodological solutions to problems of scientific bias and error. This is because he endorses an epistemological position known as *fallible realism* or *hypothetical realism* (see Campbell & Russo, 1999).

Specifically, Campbell argues that scientific beliefs are determined by many social and cognitive factors, some of which are relevant and others of which are irrelevant to drawing valid scientific conclusions. One of the relevant factors in determining scientific belief is the referent of that belief—"the world as it is." Individual researchers and the scientific community strive to increase the probability that the "real" world is acting as a "plausible co-selector of belief" (Campbell & Russo, 1999, pp. 251–256). In fact, groundbreaking methodological books by Campbell and Stanley (1963/1966) and Cook and Campbell (1979) had as their major goal the development of sound research designs that would enable social scientists to draw plausible, valid inferences even in the face of myriad threats to internal validity of precisely the kind that social constructionists of science worry about.

Campbell's (1989, 1993, 1994) philosophy of science (his so-called critical evolutionary realism) places great significance on the concept of ideational *variation*, that is, the importance of generating multiple alternative hypotheses (or representations) such that a given set of findings may be understood from multiple perspectives (see also McGuire, 1997). Campbell sees variation as akin to genetic mutation, but one need not buy into his assumption that the process of variation is driven by random factors. The second part of Campbell's evolutionary epistemology stresses the process of selective retention, that is, the practice of choosing among competing alternatives to arrive at accounts that are most compelling, by means of careful research design. From this perspective, the difference between the constructionist and experimentalist positions may turn out to be a matter of relative emphasis rather than a matter of principle: Constructionists emphasize variation over selection, whereas experimentalists tend to reverse the priorities.

Campbell, therefore, accepts the arguments made by social constructionist historians of science that a plethora of extrascientific historical, cultural, and political factors influence scientific conduct and belief. But he argues further, in a manner that is consistent with Marx's social materialism (e.g., Jost & Hardin, 1996), that certain social conditions are more likely to be conducive to accurate scientific understanding than are other social conditions. Following Popper and others, Campbell argues that a democratic, free society of secular humanists is most likely to produce good science through the social-evolutionary mechanism of selective retention:

A social ideology emphasizing independence from political or religious authority, the rituals of experimentation, with the ideology of each believers' being free to replicate the experiment, and so on, might increase the likelihood that "the way the world is" could influence belief selection. (Campbell, 1999, p. 254).

Thus, he accepts the basic social constructionist point that science (and other social cognitive activities) are constructed in the sense that they are not uniquely determined by features of the world and are subject to the influence of social conditions, but he rejects the skeptical epistemological conclusions that are often assumed to follow from social constructionism. This allows him to state firmly that "socially constructed does not entail invalid" (Campbell & Russo, 1999, p. 249). He concludes, therefore, that because the "world as it is" partially determines scientific belief and that certain methods and social systems increase the likelihood that useful and accurate scientific ideas will survive, social constructionism is compatible with validity in science after all.

### Perspectivism

McGuire's (1973, 1983, 1989, 1997) perspectivist epistemology, like Campbell's, is postpositivist. McGuire begins with the pessimistic assumption that all knowledge is tragically flawed (in part because of its context-boundedness), but he also sees hope and progress in the researcher's ability to construct meaningful theories and findings from his or her own perspective. McGuire avoids the social constructionist assumption (e.g., Gergen, 1999) that all perspectives are equally useful for perceiving and interpreting the world, and his epistemological position is probably best characterized as pragmatic fallible realism. McGuire acknowledges the historical, cultural, and ideological limitations of scientific knowledge and of individual scientists, but, like Campbell, he offers numerous methodological recommendations for how to conduct creative, rigorous science and to assess the empirical robustness of one's theoretical ideas, wherever they came from.

During the crisis period of social psychology, McGuire was sympathetic to many of the epistemological, ideological, and ethical criticisms raised by social constructionists and others, but he retained his faith in experimental social psychology as a useful and valid form of knowledge seeking. In his famous (1973) article "The Yin and Yang of Progress in Social Psychology," he wrote

In our father's house there are many rooms ... there is a place for the philosopher of mind and the social philosopher, as well as for the scientific psychologist. ... But the scientific psychologist can offer something beside and beyond these armchair thinkers in that we

not only generate delusional systems, but we go further and test our delusional systems against objective data as well as for their subjective plausibility. (p. 452)

Thus, McGuire acknowledges the socially constructed character of the scientists' theories (or delusional systems) without rejecting the methodological ideal of objectivity with regard to hypothesis assessment. These ideas were subsequently developed into a broader view that was first referred to as *contextualism* (McGuire, 1983) and later as perspectivism (McGuire, 1989, 1997).

In McGuire's (1989, 1997) perspectivism, the main emphasis is on developing methods for the creative generation and multiplication of novel hypotheses—Campbell's variation. One aim of perspectivist inquiry is to generate a plausible hypothesis and then to explore the full richness of its insights and, using the logic of moderation and the tools of research, to discover the limitations of its applicability. Empirical efforts are geared not toward "discovering the truth" but rather toward "detecting patterns of covariation in reality." Researchers are encouraged to use as many different methods as possible; there is no sanctity accorded to the experimental method. McGuire's own empirical research strategies reveal an increasing preference for open-ended, qualitative measures that allow the research participant to construct his or her own data, indicating that he anticipated and embraced to some extent the discursive, qualitative turn initiated by social constructionists.

### What Does the Experimental Social Psychologist Gain by Incorporating Social Constructionist Themes?

Social constructionists deserve credit for elevating the level of debate concerning theoretical and metatheoretical issues having to do with the social constitution of mind and behavior, epistemology and philosophy of science, and the role of values, politics, and ideology in social science. We have seen that Campbell and McGuire, for instance, responded to the introduction of constructionist themes by developing richer and more sophisticated methods and strategies for conducting and evaluating relevant, meaningful empirical research programs in social psychology and the behavioral sciences more generally. Their respective contributions stand as models for what can be achieved by incorporating rather than dismissing the methodological and ideological critiques offered by social constructionists.

Another visible and enduring sign of social constructionists' progress is the advent and success of journals that are sensitive to the philosophical and metatheoretical underpinnings of social psychological research. Journals that are dedicated almost exclu-

sively to these issues include the *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, *Theory & Psychology*, *Feminism & Psychology*, and *Culture & Psychology*. In Europe, even primarily empirical journals such as the *European Journal of Social Psychology* and the *British Journal of Social Psychology* reflect an awareness of and openness toward historical, cultural, philosophical, and ideological concerns. Of the 42 articles published in the *European Journal of Social Psychology* in the year 2000, 6 of them (Higgins, Schwarz, Fiske, Kashima, Holmes, & Semin) focused on social psychological metatheory. This amounts to an average of one article per issue or 14.3% of the total. For the *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 7 of 36 articles published in 2000 (Antaki; Bangertner; Dickerson; Dixon & Durrheim; Hepburn; Markman; White) were metatheoretical in nature, for an average of 1.75 per issue or 19.4% of the total. These included expository essays on the social psychological significance of Mill, Bartlett, and Derrida, as well as more typical constructionist themes such as culture, language, ideology, and discourse analysis. Many additional articles published in these journals touched on key metatheoretical issues in the course of reporting on experimental studies, which suggests again that *rapprochement* is possible.

Of course, the fact that some journals are publishing social constructionist analyses or that some researchers are combining constructionist and experimental methods does not necessarily mean that social psychology as a discipline is gaining or improving. In the remainder of this section we point to several areas of substantive research that we believe have benefitted from careful consideration of social constructionist themes. These include thriving empirical research programs on personal identity, social identity, collective representation, attitudes, communication, and cultural psychology.

### **The Situated Self-Concept**

As mentioned earlier, social constructionism in psychology began as a theory of personhood and identity (e.g., Gergen, 1971, 1977b, 1982; Gergen & Davis, 1985). Specifically, it was claimed that the self-concept is *socially constructed*, meaning that it emerges and changes in the context of social interaction with others. Rather than being fixed, stable, and unitary, therefore, the self-concept was hypothesized to be flexible, dynamic, and multifaceted. This insight, which was central to the symbolic interactionist movement in sociology, gave rise to fruitful empirical research on the situated self-concept. For instance, a large research program summarized by McGuire and McGuire (1988) on the "spontaneous self-concept" demonstrated that children describe themselves very differently from one social context (e.g., home) to another (school). Specifically, they define themselves according to characteristics that are unique or distinc-

tive in relation to others in the immediate situation. Work by Markus and Nurius (1986) similarly stressed the capacity of individuals to construct *multiple selves* in relation to different possible circumstances. The notion that different features of the self-concept are activated and constructed in response to different social environments remains a central tenet of social psychological theory.

### **Social Identity**

Social constructionist critiques of narrow, decontextualized experimentation that had appeared to grip North American laboratories served to energize many European social psychologists, who had begun to take exception to "social psychology in a vacuum" (e.g., Israel & Tajfel, 1972; Moscovici, 1972). Gergen's (1973) pleas about the significance of history, culture, and politics in the determination of social behavior served to embolden those who in the 1970s and 1980s were developing theoretical research programs on social identification and intergroup relations (e.g., Tajfel, 1981; Turner & Oakes, 1986) and on social change and the transmission of social representations (Moscovici, 1976, 1988). Hogg and Abrams (1988), for instance, write that "it was Europe that most eagerly took up the gauntlet thrown down by the [social constructionist] critique" and that "the social identity approach has developed as a spearhead of this attack on individualism in social psychology" (p. 13). Innumerable experiments have demonstrated that individual behavior is determined by a variety of contextual features, including the norms and characteristics of social groups with which people identify, the history and nature of relations between groups, and structural features of the situation in which groups find themselves (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel, 1981; Turner & Oakes, 1986). Social identity researchers have brought about a veritable transformation in the study of group dynamics and intergroup relations by investigating the fluid, socially constructed character of identification processes.

### **Collective Representation**

Taking his metatheoretical impetus from the work of Durkheim, Moscovici (1988) advanced a theory of social representation that is contrasted with individual, cognitive theories of mental representation. Specifically, studies of social representation are intended to demonstrate how and why groups create and use shared abstractions as a means of communicating and coordinating activities. The theory of social representations, like social identity theory, exerts a major influence on social psychology throughout the world, in large part because it resonates with many of the theoretical and metatheoretical assumptions of social constructionism (see Deaux & Philogene, 2000). These theories wel-

come the critique of individualistic reductionism, but they stop short of rejecting experimental methods and other efforts at hypothesis testing. In fact, much of current European social psychology presupposes a viewpoint that is both social constructionist and yet empirical (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). This development is a further indication that reconciliation between experimental social psychology and social constructionism is worthwhile and feasible.

### **Attitudes as “Temporary Constructions”**

In a recent review of the literature on attitudes and social judgment, Schwarz (2000) concluded that over the last 20 years researchers have moved increasingly toward a conceptualization of attitudes as “temporary constructions.” This follows from independent but convergent research programs on construct priming and attitude accessibility, assimilation and contrast, context effects in survey research, the disruptive effects of introspection on attitudinal self-report, and momentary metacognitions about feelings and other internal states (see Jost, Kruglanski, & Nelson, 1998; Martin & Tesser, 1992; Schwarz, 2000; Wilson & Hodges, 1992). From this exhaustive body of empirical research, Wilson and Hodges (1992) have distilled the central tenets of a constructionist approach to attitudes. Their argument is that rather than calling up a previously recorded attitudinal judgment from memory, people draw on a partial subset of potentially relevant data (including moods, beliefs, and behaviors) in order to construct their attitudes in relation to specific social contexts. Thus, a great deal of experimental work on attitudes and social cognition not only supports social constructionist assumptions, but it also sheds light on some of the processes involved in the construction of social judgments (see Martin & Tesser, 1992).

### **Communication and “Shared Reality”**

Consistent with the social constructionist emphasis on developing a discursive, “relational” theory of mind (e.g., Gergen, 1994b, 1998), several prominent social psychologists have argued that cognition arises from interpersonal communication (Hardin & Banaji, 1993; Higgins, 1981; Markus & Zajonc, 1985). This fits well with a Wittgensteinian perspective on social psychology (e.g., Jost, 1995b; Jost & Hardin, 1996), as does the notion that members of a given linguistic community must share “common ground” in terms of background beliefs and assumptions to communicate with one another (e.g., Clark, 1985). The theory of shared reality, as proposed by Hardin and Higgins (1996), makes an even stronger claim, which is that people cannot interpret stimuli in meaningful ways in the ab-

sence of a socially shared basis for interpretation. Thus, social psychologists have made theoretical and empirical progress by attending to the ways in which perception, cognition, language, and communication depend on the socially shared construction of reality.

### **“Dynamic Constructivism” in Cultural Psychology**

The “cross-cultural challenge to social psychology” (Bond, 1984), which followed on the heels of the social constructionist challenge to social psychology, appears to have taken hold. Over the last decade, a great number of successful research programs have emerged to address interrelations among culture, cognition, and behavior (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996; Triandis, 1989). Specifically, researchers have devised increasingly clever ways of exposing cultural variation in the ways in which social and physical reality is represented (e.g., Miller, 1984; Morris & Peng, 1994). Experimental methods predominate, but the emerging metatheoretical perspective is referred to as *dynamic constructivism* (Hong et al., 2000). Thus, cultural psychology represents one of the most successful and sustained attempts to integrate experimental social psychology and social constructionism.

### **Stylistic and Substantive Complementarities of the Two Enterprises**

In addition to complementarities that have been largely realized in studies of identity, language, attitudes, social representation, and culture, there are several other ways in which experimental social psychology and social constructionism may be profitably combined. Here we see opportunities at the level of substance and the level of style (cf. Doise, 1986; McGuire, 1997; Zajonc, 1989). With regard to substantive research, historical and political psychologists could be as successful as social and cultural psychologists have been in recent years if they are willing to bypass individualistic paradigms to get at the shared historical and ideological contexts that help to explain individual and collective behavior (e.g., Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Hong et al., 2000). In addition, experimentalists and social constructionists should team up to make parallel progress on issues of representational content as well as process (see Deaux & Philogene, 2000). Finally, social constructionists might benefit from experimentalists’ proclivities to develop general principles to describe and understand how reality is socially constructed (see Higgins & Kruglanski, 1996).

With regard to research styles, we think that experimentalists are generally better than social constructionists at persuading their opponents to change opinions, mainly because experimentalists are more concerned with using consensually accepted methods (e.g., Aronson et al., 1998; Cialdini, 1998; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Greenwald, 1976; Jones, 1985; McGuire, 1973, 1997; Ross & Nisbett, 1991). Social constructionists, on the other hand, have plenty to teach experimentalists in at least two areas. First, constructionists are more adept than are experimentalists at entering public discourse and participating in cultural dialogue concerning important, timely matters (e.g., Fine, 1992; Gergen, 1994b, 1999; Hacking, 1999a, 1999b; Hare-Mustin & Maracek, 1988; Kitzinger, 1987). They are also more willing to engage in grand theorizing, which presumably entails the acceptance of greater risk but the possibility of bigger payoffs (e.g., Harré & Secord, 1972; Kruglanski, 2001; McGuire, 1997; Moscovici, 1988; Tajfel, 1981). For all of these reasons, we feel that social psychology would be stronger if the two camps entered into a meaningful reunification.

### **Complementarities of Substantive Research Interests**

**History, ideology, and the “social” level of analysis.** On the level of substance, social constructionists have been more open than experimentalists to historical and ideological factors in accounting for human behavior (e.g., Gergen, 1973, 1977a, 1985a, 1994a, 1999). There are many reasons for this difference in emphasis. One reason has to do with experimentalists’ greater loyalty to individualistic paradigms, which may lend themselves better to experimental investigation than do collective, contextualist paradigms. Nevertheless, cultural psychologists have managed to find creative ways of demonstrating the contextual effects of local and national culture on thinking and behavior. Historical and political psychologists could be equally successful by adopting a less individualistic, more contextualized perspective, as social constructionists have long advocated.

Another reason that experimental social psychologists have neglected the role of historical and ideological factors in the constitution of mind and behavior is their keen interest in associating themselves with “hard” sciences like biology and distancing themselves from “soft” sciences such as sociology. This is ironic in that what is distinctive and unique about a social psychological perspective seems to have much more to do with sociological variables (e.g., Allport, 1962; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Billig, 1987; Bond, 1984; Clark, 1985; Darley & Cooper, 1998; Doise, 1986; Gergen, 1971, 1973, 1994b, 1999; Greenwald, 1980; Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Jones, 1985; Jones & Gerard, 1967;

Jost, 1995a; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; McGuire, 1986; Miller & Ratner, 1998; Morris & Peng, 1994; Moscovici, 1972, 1976, 1988; Mugny, 1982; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996; Potter, 1998; Ross & Nisbett, 1991; Snyder & Swann, 1978; Tajfel, 1981; Triandis, 1989) than with evolutionary and biological processes (e.g., Buss & Kenrick, 1998). Nevertheless, sociobiology threatens to dominate sociopsychology—apparently with the consent of social psychologists—in providing popular explanations for behavioral differences stemming from gender, status, power, and other factors that are historically, culturally, and politically constructed. Social constructionists remind us of the plasticity of human nature, and their conviction here comes partially from laboratory demonstrations of the power of local situations to shape and influence attitudes, behavior, and the self-concept.

Cynics might suggest that social psychologists have embraced evolutionary biology (while simultaneously spurning theoretical sociology) at least in part because of the more “scientific” neighbor’s greater prestige and influence in attracting grant money. Regardless of motives, if social constructionists and experimental social psychologists could agree on at least some common methods and assumptions, they might offer an interesting and viable alternative to sociobiological accounts of human behavior. Perhaps it would be better for the science of social psychology if experimentalists would own up to the historical and political variability that accompanies at least some of our subject matter and content ourselves with becoming experts in, among other things, the effects of historical, cultural, and political contexts on attitudes, feelings, and behaviors. There is no shame in investigating the social level of analysis on its own terms, that is, without trying to reduce it to other, lower levels.

**Content and process.** A second difference, which could prove to be useful, is that social constructionists have generally emphasized the significance of different contents of lay beliefs or narratives, whereas experimental social psychologists have typically focused on the processes whereby people perceive and think about others, engage in social interaction, form and dissolve groups, and carry out intergroup relations. This is a generalization, and there are exceptions that prove the rule. Experimental social psychologists—at least before the “cognitive revolution”—focused on attitudinal contents such as authoritarianism and prejudice for their own sake. Some social constructionists—especially those who adopt empirical methods—investigate processes whereby shared (or conflicting) perceptions of reality are constructed through acts of conversation or collaborative remembering (e.g., Billig, 1987; Middleton & Edwards, 1990; Potter, 1998). Nevertheless, experimentalists are generally more interested in processes of categorization and meaning-mak-

ing (e.g., Aronson et al., 1998), whereas social constructionists are generally more interested in the contents of socially shared representations (e.g., Deaux & Philogene, 2000).

Although contents—almost by definition—are specific and local, and processes are relatively general, both contents and processes are essential to understanding human social behavior in its manifold forms. Within cultural psychology, we have seen that constructionist preoccupations with the contents of shared representations have influenced mainstream social psychology (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Miller & Ratner, 1998; Morris & Peng, 1994; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996), where, appropriately enough, they have been approached via empirical (and often experimental) research. Along these lines, there has been intriguing work on the specific structures of various lay concepts, such as child development, anger, intelligence, understanding, ideals, and oughts. Social developmentalists (e.g., Averill, 1980; Kessen, 1979, 1990), social representationalists (Deaux & Philogene, 2000; Doise, 1989; Moscovici, 1988), and, more recently, social cognitivists (e.g., Dweck, 1999; Higgins, 1987; Jost et al., 1998) have focused increasingly on the contents of mental representation.

Because attitudinal contents are local, specific, and malleable, they pose several problems for social psychological researchers. For one thing, it is necessary to justify the choice of the particular contents of a social construction elected for study. Given that there is a near-infinite number of possible constructions available for study (e.g., Gergen, 1999; Hacking, 1999b), the choice of a particular social construction (or a particular aspect of a social representation) should be carefully justified in terms of its significance. Significance could be established in relation to different objectives (e.g., on theoretical, social, or political grounds), but its demonstration is essential because in the absence of a justification the investment of time and resources in depicting a given construction would appear to be senseless and arbitrary in light of the vast number of possible alternative constructions that could have been chosen instead.

**The search for general principles.** Another difficulty facing social psychologists who wish to take representational content seriously is the challenge of specifying the processes whereby a given group of people at a particular time and place come to represent the world in a certain way. This relates to our mission as social psychologists to divine the general principles (of rhetoric, persuasion, judgment formation, etc.) whereby social constructions are formed and altered as function of many variables (including motivation, information, peer pressure, leadership, etc.). As social psychologists, we are expected to provide answers to the question of why a given individ-

ual (or group of individuals) embraces specific beliefs. Why do people forge these specific social constructions and not others, and under what circumstances might their belief systems change?

There is no a priori reason why we should not theorize about the general processes involved in the social construction of reality (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The difficulty of verifying our statements about process is neither greater nor less than the difficulty associated with defending our statements about the specific contents of lay beliefs or constructions (Kruglanski, 2001). There is no reason, furthermore, why social psychologists should not study general processes experimentally (or in other empirical ways), even though it is granted that our methods do not guarantee the truth of our conclusions. General social processes associated with representation, communication, influence, and persuasion have been central to the concerns of mainstream social psychology for decades (e.g., Allport, 1962; Aronson et al., 1998; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Jones, 1985; McGuire, 1986; Taylor, 1998), and so we are arguably in the best possible position to develop general principles pertaining to the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). By understanding both the specific contents and general processes of social construction, our collective ability to address significant social phenomena will be greatly enhanced.

### Complementarities of Research Styles

**The rhetoric of experimentation.** Social constructionist and experimental perspectives complement each other well with regard to the strategy as well as the substance of research. Although it is often overlooked, the purpose of conducting experiments is to persuade one's opponents on the strength of evidence derived from consensually shared methods (Abelson, 1995). Thus, the research enterprise is inherently rhetorical (see also Campbell & Russo, 1999). In our view, social constructionists could benefit by adopting some of the rigor in hypothesis assessment that characterizes the experimentalists' approach and makes it possible for some hypotheses to be rejected on the basis of empirical results. Persuading one's audience that a given social construction is worth investigating or that its contents (presumed to exist in at least some people's minds) are associated with a particular lay theory (or integrated belief system) requires the provision of evidence that is compelling and hard to refute, and this is something that experimentalists have elevated to an art form (e.g., Aronson et al., 1998). Social constructionists ignore the rhetorical value of experimentation when they are dismissive of the need for methodological rigor and the potential for hypothesis disconfirmation.

On the other hand, many experimentalists seem to have carried the ideal of methodological rigor a bit too far, and to a degree that hampers our ability to broadly theorize and address topics for which no precise data are yet available. As several commentators have observed (e.g., Higgins, 1992; Kruglanski, 2001; Reis & Stiller, 1992) our scientific culture is risk averse and “prevention-focused,” and we are extremely careful not to make statements that go beyond the limitations of our data. Such risk aversion may exact a price. Specifically, our professional community has fostered a tendency to focus only on the particulars and to miss the theoretical whole and therefore to be continuously “rediscovering the wheel.” Miller and Pedersen (1999) identified this problem as “first on the list of impediments to scientific progress in contemporary social psychology” (p. 150). They go on to argue that “contemporary social psychology is rife with implicit, but unsubstantiated claims of discriminative construct validity” (p. 150). We are so reluctant to extrapolate from a specific methodological operationalization to general social phenomena that our individual research programs often yield isolated pockets of inquiry rather than cumulative, integrative knowledge about the social world.

**Entering public discourse.** Experimentalists’ emphasis on exactitude and the specificity of our operational definitions may also hamstring our ability as a field to partake in general intellectual debates concerning societal issues. As Gergen has argued repeatedly, social psychology could play a “coloratura role” in the exciting cultural dialogue about values, policies, and goals. Social psychology should have “the capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is ‘taken for granted’ … and thereby to generate fresh alternatives to social action” (Gergen, 1994b, p. 109). Unfortunately, social psychology has not yet fulfilled its potential as a distinctive and lively participant in public discourse (see Kruglanski, 2001). For better or for worse, social constructionism has certainly made its voice heard in “the American culture wars” (see Hacking, 1999b). Greater involvement in societal debate would most likely lead empirical social psychologists to diversify their research methods and to place more value on ecological realism relative to internal validity (e.g., Campbell & Stanley, 1963), as social constructionists have been urging for decades (e.g., Elms, 1975; Gergen, 1973; Ring, 1967).

**Grand theorizing.** Social psychologists have been underrepresented in public discourse and cultural debate in part because of a constitutional reluctance to engage in grand theorizing. Social constructionists are not generally possessed of this same limitation (e.g.,

see Gergen, 1999). Although there is something to be said for theoretical and professional modesty, a case can be made that experimental social psychologists have been overly circumspect (Kruglanski, 2001). A greater willingness to extrapolate from our data to the social world at large could increase the impact of social psychology. Contextualists and social constructionists have been less afraid of grand theorizing in the sociological tradition, and their intestinal fortitude could come in useful. McGuire (1997) has put in a plug for audacious, “quixotic” theorizing as a way of stimulating creativity in social science. A hybrid style that combines social constructionist theorizing (and metatheorizing) and the careful, rhetorical methods of experimentation (and quasi-experimentation) would be most adaptive for ensuring that social psychology will have a future that is successful, distinctive, creative, and socially relevant. Presumably, these professional goals are shared by experimentalists and social constructionists alike.

### Conclusions: On the Benefits and Prospects of Reconciliation

We have argued that, appearances aside, experimentalists and social constructionist share the same intellectual heritage and are in fundamental agreement that people actively and collectively construct representations of their social environments. Because of these commonalities, the social constructionist perspective has benefitted from the theories and findings of mainstream social psychology, and it has also enriched and benefitted mainstream social psychological theory and research in important ways. Although the two disciplinary subcultures of social psychology have at times pursued diametrically opposed trajectories of inquiry, our view is that a rapprochement now is both possible and desirable, especially if social constructionists are willing to weaken their postmodernist allegiances.

### Differences in Emphasis

In general, we find that the seemingly unbridgeable divide between social constructionism and experimental social psychology with regard to truth and method has been exaggerated and is probably more a matter of relative emphasis than of principled incommensurability. Whereas social constructionists emphasize ideational variation, experimentalists focus on the methodological process of selecting among more and less valid ideas; each side incorporates the other’s views, even if only as “ground” to its preferred figure. Reared on Popper’s philosophy of science, Campbell’s evolutionary epistemology, and McGuire’s perspectivist methodology, the pragmatic

position of today's experimental social psychologist is a far cry from rash positivism.

Experimentalists realize well that multiple alternative hypotheses (or constructions) might be put forth to account for most empirical findings, that such findings themselves are theory laden, and that our ability to select the most compelling account is fallible and subject to potential revision (Campbell, 1989, 1993; McGuire, 1983, 1989, 1997). Although most experimentalists (and many of their constructionist counterparts) do believe that there is a world "out there" (see also Hacking, 1999b; Searle, 1995), the possibility of proving its character definitively is retained as a useful regulatory ideal (Popper, 1959) rather than a readily attainable aspiration (McGuire, 1983, 1997). Social constructionists, for their part, recognize the rhetorical power of the notion that some social constructions are more pragmatically useful or persuasive (to some audiences at some points in time) than are other constructions, thereby endorsing a selection process of sorts (cf. Gergen, 1994a). It does not seem to be the case that constructionist epistemology is necessarily more compatible with humanistic values and progressive political attitudes than is the scientific, realist epistemology that fuels experimental work. On the contrary, historically it was Marx and his followers whose materialistic approach supported the social scientific gleaning of hard facts and who rejected idealist philosophies, the tenets of which could be easily exploited in defense of the status quo.

### The spirit of inclusion

Fortunately for those who hope for reconciliation, the social constructionist movement is *inclusionary* by definition. Insofar as all forms of knowing are linguistic representations that can be more or less useful, no way of knowing (including the knowledge produced by experimental social psychology) should be banned from consideration on a priori grounds. Gergen (1994b) has stated this point clearly: "[empiricist] endeavors ... offer a significant alternative to many contemporary ways of framing the world and may thereby offer new alternatives for action. In this sense much 'empirical' research ... furnishes an effective way of lending vivifying force to various accounts of reality. It translates abstract theoretical language into the argot of daily life, thus rendering that life anew" (p. 141). Developments in discursive social psychology similarly indicate that at least some social constructionists are open to certain forms of empirical investigation and hypothesis assessment (e.g., Potter, 1998).

We do not mean to suggest that the differences in emphasis that separate experimentalists from social constructionists are trivial or inconsequential. But rather than reflecting an unbridgeable rift, the two perspectives are in many ways complementary in both

substance and style, and they are jointly capable of contributing to social psychology's scope and impact as a field of study. A number of thriving research programs have incorporated social constructionist insights into the empirical study of attitudes, collective representation, language, the self-concept, social identity, and cultural psychology. These successes provide some evidence of the potential payoff that would come from increased integration.

### Recommendations

Experimentalists, we have suggested, would do well to intensify their efforts to study socially relevant attitudinal contents as well as processes, and social constructionists could benefit from spinning theories about general social psychological processes involved in the shared construction of reality. Social constructionists might pay greater attention to justifying the constructions they choose to study and employ greater methodological rigor in arguing for the specific nature of their characterizations of lay theorizing as against alternative hypotheses. Experimentalists might embolden their approach to theorize (at least occasionally) beyond their immediate data, discover the common "forests" lurking behind the disparate "trees" and relate our conceptions and findings to broader social and political issues. All this would lend us a stronger and more unified disciplinary voice in public discourse about society and the world at large.

There are, therefore, both scientific and practical reasons for experimental social psychologists and social constructionists to overcome their differences in rhetorical and research styles. By working together, we have a better chance of making serious, creative, and lasting progress on our long-standing and mutual mission to analyze the profoundly symbolic and contextual bases of human social behavior (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1971, 1973; Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Israel & Tajfel, 1972; Jones, 1985; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; McGuire, 1973, 1989; Moscovici, 1988; Ross & Nisbett, 1991; Tajfel, 1981). As Taylor (1998) observed, "Our special expertise has always been an understanding of the impact of the social environment on the individual and how the individual constructs meaning from social situations" (p. 86). This is the crux of social psychology, and it is what distinguishes our field from other knowledge-producing endeavors. In the vast world of ideational variation, this is the notion that we have all selected and retained.

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