



## Conversations, Conferences, and the Practice of Intellectual Discussion

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**Abstract.** This paper analyzes a conference panel discussion entitled “Identity in Crisis: The Issue of Agency in Social Constructionism and Postmodernism” in order to identify some limits to intellectual discussion. The panel participants made a deliberate attempt to engage in a self-reflexive language game about the language game of intellectual discussion in the conference format. This attempt revealed the highly sedimented nature of discursive practice in the conference setting, at least, and perhaps more generally. This analysis of the extent to which sedimented practices limit the exercise of agency highlights academic practices which typically are hidden or considered too obvious to merit attention.

It cannot be denied that words are of excellent use, in that by their means all that stock of knowledge which has been purchased by the joint labours of inquisitive men in all ages and nations, may be drawn into the view and made the possession of one single person. But at the same time it must be owned that most parts of knowledge have been strangely perplexed and darkened by the abuse of words, and general ways of speech wherein they are delivered (Berkeley, 1710/1975, p. 85).

The words of Bishop George Berkeley, published in 1710, capture succinctly a significant problematic for contemporary scholars of philosophy and the social sciences: the relationship between knowledge and the general ways of speech wherein it is delivered (Foucault, 1972a, b, 1973; Gaonkar, 1993; Huspek and Radford, 1997; Levine, 1987; Myers, 1990; Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey, 1987; Prelli, 1989; Rorty, 1979, 1989; Shotter, 1993a, b; Shotter and Gergen, 1989; Simons, 1990). Scholars such as Stanley Deetz (1973, 1977, 1982), Michel Foucault (1972a, b), and Jurgen Habermas (1970, 1979, 1984), have proposed the view that communication operates to *constitute* knowledge for a given communication community through the ongoing accomplishment of human interaction. Language is no longer seen, to use Rorty’s (1979) terminology, as a mirror of autonomous reality. Rather, the claim is made that “truth [is] made rather than found” (Rorty, 1989, p. 3). The concept of communication, as opposed to the concept of method, plays the key role in this making of truth and its constitution of knowledge. Knowledge does not simply accompany or

exist alongside people's capacity to communicate, but resides *in* that capacity (Apel, 1972; Carey, 1977, 1982; Deetz, 1973, 1977). An understanding of knowledge, therefore, lies in the explication of the *practices of making knowledge claims*, the conditions in which such claims are produced, and discursive forms that such claims take. This approach is not directly concerned with the aspect of reality that the knowledge claim refers to. Rather, it describes the object of knowledge as it is constituted in the communicative act of claiming it to be an object of knowledge.

It is only recently, however, that communication scholars have come to pay serious attention to the discursive forms of their own scholarship and the attendant norms and mechanisms that give shape to that discourse (see Blair, Brown, and Baxter, 1994; Conquergood, 1991; Krippendorff, 1993a, b, 1997; Langsdorf, 1997; Shotter, 1993b, 1997; Tracy, 1996; Tracy and Baratz, 1993). Descriptions and critiques of the ways of speech of academics are themselves exercises in speech production, produced under the constraints of the institutions in and for which these accounts are presented. As such, these forms become appropriate objects for description and critique. They are, as Foucault (1972a) self-reflexively describes, "facts of discourse that deserve to be analyzed beside others" (p. 22). Conquergood (1991) articulates this problematization as follows:

It is ironic that the discipline of communication has been relatively unreflexive about the rhetorical construction of its own disciplinary authority. It would be illuminating to critique the rhetorical expectations and constraints on articles published in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, or *Communication Monographs*. What kinds of knowledge, and their attendant discursive styles, get privileged, legitimated, or displaced? How does knowledge about communication get constructed? What counts as an interesting question about communication? What are the tacitly observed boundaries – the range of appropriateness – regarding the substance, methods, and discursive styles of communication scholarship? (p. 193).

Tracy (1996) and Tracy and Baratz (1993) addressed questions such as these through a field study of the intellectual discussion that took place in and around a weekly colloquium held in the Communication Department of a large urban university. They concluded that the institutional context, in terms of status definitions of the participants, strongly influenced the discursive styles of both speakers and respondents. There were definite boundaries that limited what could and what could not be said, and in what manner, in the context of the scholarly colloquium setting. At first glance, the claim that context constrains talk may seem an obvious and trivial one. However, it proves to be a significant problematic because the acknowledgment of such a relationship contradicts a general cultural belief that intellectual discussion is a forum in which ideas are considered only on their merit.

Blair, Brown, and Baxter (1994) provide a critique of this belief and offer a description of some of the mechanisms by which it is maintained and legitimated within academia. For these authors, the relationship between institution and discourse is far from trivial. Rather it is repressive, exclusionary, and grounded in a masculine ideology. Blair, Brown, and Baxter (1994) conduct their critique by purposefully violating those norms which dictate how academics should speak. They cite the reactions of reviewers to this breach of etiquette, and demonstrate how the practices of the blind review process impose these norms and marginalize any intellectual discussion that does not comply with them.

Far from being a forum where ideas are judged solely on their merit, intellectual discussion is shown to be a form of talk shaped by principles of exclusion reinforced by a whole strata of practices such as pedagogy, the book-system, publishing, libraries, and learned societies (see Foucault, 1972b, p. 219). In response, Blair, Brown, and Baxter (1994) offer the following challenge:

[the] practices that mark what counts as scholarly discourses in this field must not be maintained without scrutiny. It surely is incumbent upon the adherents of any field to scrutinize and evaluate their own rules of engagement and practice. It is the more so for scholars of rhetoric and communication (p. 402).

This paper takes up, in part, Blair, Brown, and Baxter's (1994) challenge. However, whereas Blair, Brown, and Baxter offered an analysis of written discourse based on reactions to a journal submission, this analysis examines constraints upon academic discourse present in an oral setting, the academic conference panel. *Identity in Crisis: The Issue of Agency in Social Constructionism and Postmodernism* was the title of a panel given at the 1994 Annual Convention of the Eastern Communication Association in Washington, D.C. The participants were four leading scholars on the subject of social constructionism: Vernon Cronen, Kenneth Gergen, Barnett Pearce, and John Shotter. The reason this particular panel is of interest, as opposed to any other held at the same conference, is that the participants were going to go beyond the traditional presentation format. Even more significant is that this transgression would be informed by the theory of social constructionism that the participants would be addressing. According to Shotter and Gergen (1994), the conversation of everyday life "is the context in which everything of intellectual importance both originates and is judged as worthy or not of further discussion; such importance develops in the activities occurring *between* people" (p. 4). As such, the social constructionist will "focus upon the influences at work in the context of people's words as they are spoken, the influences determining their fate in the living moment of their use" (p. 4). Following these tenets, the participants in this panel would self-reflexively

invoke a language game to talk about language games. The usual conference format of a series of 10–15 minute presentations of prepared statements would be foregone. Not only would this language game provide a description of the social constructionist position on agency from the outside (Pearce's [1994] "third person perspective"), it would also be an example of communication in action from the inside (Pearce's [1994] "first person perspective"). The participants' communicative practices would abide by the tenets of their own theory. Ideas would be deemed worthy or not of further attention in the living moment of the panel discussion. The audience would witness, and possibly take part in, the production of ideas in the give and take of conversation. The participants would converse, share, and possibly change in a display of "joint action" (Shotter, 1984).

Speaking from the perspective of an audience member, the experience of the panel discussion was enlightening in showing the sedimented nature of intellectual language games. This paper represents a second-order discourse of the discursive practices of the panel. The analysis draws upon a Habermasian ideal speech situation (Habermas, 1970, 1979) as a basis of comparison. However, no normative judgement concerning "better or worse" or "right or wrong" is made here. It is not being suggested here that scholars drop one form of interaction for another that is somehow better or preferable. Identifying an appropriate normative standard for communication situations such as the academic conference panel is fraught with difficulty and would itself be framed in terms of systems of ideology and power. Deetz (1993) suggests that "most scholars have given up on the attempt to privilege certain forms of communication or social organization on philosophical grounds" (p. 75). The idealized speech situation can only stand in opposition to real-world contextual constraints of power and ideology such that rational consensus is held up against forced consensus. As Huspek (1991) makes clear, the point is to dissolve the tension in real terms as theoretically supplied concepts are brought critically to bear on a currently existing communicative practice; in this case, intellectual discussion in the academic conference format. The contours of this practice are discussed in the following section.

### **The Practice of Intellectual Discussion**

Intellectual discussion as a form of talk distinguishes academia from other institutions. Tracy and Baratz (1993) suggest that "it is through people's engaging in intellectual conversations (and writing) that ideas are born, get shaped, and die" (p. 301). For Shotter (1993b), the goal of intellectual discussion is to produce "a rational body of speech or writing, a set of *ordered* statements, that provides a way of representing . . . a particular kind of knowledge about a topic" (p. 471). These sets of ordered statements, or accounts as they will

be referred to here, represent the end product of an academician's labor. Certain accounts are afforded status through a formal process of peer evaluation and published as journal articles or books, or presented at academic conferences. The account is transformed from the ebb and flow of the intellectual discussion into the concrete existence of the written text. Blair, Brown, and Baxter (1994) argue that such a process effectively strips the discourse of the convictions, enthusiasm, or anger of the authors in the interests of achieving an "impersonal, 'expert' distance and tone" (p. 383). Also removed are the circumstances and activities of the work's production. The account becomes an object, a freestanding and autonomous text, to be classified, stored, retrieved, compared, critiqued, incorporated into other texts, or forgotten.

The achievements of intellectual discussion are commemorated by the monument of the academic library. Garrett (1991) describes the library as "one of the most visible and important temples" to the work of the scientist and the intellectual. According to Radford (1992), texts, organized and made available by the structures of the academic library, have a major role to play in the formation and maintenance of academic discourses. The library institutionalizes the arrangement of texts that provides the appropriate spaces in which new accounts can be located and given meaning. To comprehend the nature of a discipline such as communication, for example, it is not enough simply to collate the finite number of theories and findings that communication scholars have produced; rather, one must immerse oneself in this discourse to grasp the patterns and arrangements of their knowledge claims, its systems of constraints and legitimation, and to locate one's own discourse within it. Shotter (1993b) has argued that all academic discourse begins with reading texts (and learning how such reading might be done) and in the writing of further texts (and also learning how this writing should be done). Thus, "it is by reference to the textually formed subject matter of the discipline that teachers 'police' its boundaries" (Shotter, 1993b, p. 473).

Intellectual discussion is thus a particular and systematically distorted type of speech, whose subject matter has distinct and textually controlled boundaries. Langsdorf (1997) notes that intellectual discussion "most resembles the sort of conversation that occurs in classrooms, doctors' offices, and census taking interviews" (p. 82). Langsdorf (1997) continues: "In these settings, we typically find one discourse partner who sets an agenda and another who responds to that agenda within the bounds of typical expectations" (p. 82). The participants in intellectual discussion are bound by certain rights and responsibilities in the manner in which they converse. Foucault (1984) suggests that:

The person asking the questions is merely exercising the right that has been given him: to remain unconvinced, to perceive a contradiction, to require more information, to emphasize different postulates, to point out faulty

reasoning, etc. As for the person answering the questions, he too exercises a right that does not go beyond the discussion itself; by the logic of his own discourse he is tied to the questioning of the other (p. 381).

For Foucault (1984), the intellectual discussion is a game “that is at once pleasant and difficult – in which each of the two partners takes pains to use only the rights given to him by the other and by the accepted form of the dialogue” (p. 381). The game of the intellectual discussion imposes significant constraints on the talk of the participants, constraints which they must take “great pains” to adhere to if a successful product (an account) is to be produced.

The nature of intellectual discussion can also be understood by contrasting it with a Habermasian ideal speech situation (Habermas, 1970, 1979). Habermas (1970) defines ideal speech as “intersubjective symmetry in the distribution of assertion and dispute, revelation and concealment, prescription and conformity among the partners of communication” (p. 371). These symmetries are presented as linguistic conceptions of truth (unconstrained speakers satisfy consensually agreed upon truth standards), freedom (unimpaired self-representation), and justice (universal norms). When these symmetries exist, communication is not hindered by constraints arising from its own structure. Each and every interaction assumes this ideal speech situation as a background for every act of communication. The ideal is counterfactual; it is rarely, if ever, fully realized in practice. But Habermas argues that the ideal is immanently present among all speakers, in all speech communities, and is a necessary anticipation even when violated. If a speaker’s ideal capacities are not fully realized, it is because society constrains speakers in ideological or other ways to produce systematically distorted communication. Shotter (1997) expresses the constraints of intellectual discussion as follows:

Most of us [academics] must function in a culture of domination, of hierarchy, a Cartesian culture of mastery and possession, and we experience a certain anxiety when we begin to speak out against it, to ‘speak truth to power.’ As such, it tends to disorient us, to distract us from what we feel us important to say, to rob us of the words we need; we find ourselves saying what we know will be acceptable, rewarded; it is an anxiety that tends, differentially, to silence us; we tend to speak of some things but not others, in certain styles but not others (p. 18).

According to Shotter (1993b), intellectual discussions do not range over all the *topoi* available to a person’s common sense, but focus upon a particular subject matter. Also, while the subject matter of ideal speech is wholly contingent upon its circumstances and its interlocutors, the subject matter of intellectual discussion is pre-determined. The tangible end product of an ideal

speech situation is mutual understanding derived intersubjectively with a conversational partner. However, as Shotter (1997) explains, intellectual discussion is “intrinsically disrespectful of, and unresponsive to, the (unique) being of an other” (p. 18).

A tension arises when the attempt is made to conduct an intellectual discussion which aspires to an ideal speech situation *since these are qualitatively different forms of communication* with their own particular array of opportunities and problems. The tension is further foregrounded when the purpose of the discussion is to identify problems or features of the communicative process. Pearce (1989) points out that the purpose of an intellectual discussion about communication would be to stand outside the process in order to speak about it in an intellectual way. However, the manner in which this is done is always inside a particular communicative process. The dialectic of outside and inside means that the attempt to talk about forms of communication quickly becomes “reflexively convoluted” (Pearce, 1989, p. xvi). It raises questions such as the following: In what form of discourse may forms of discourse be described? Are forms of communication equal in their ability to describe forms of communication? Are some forms of communication inherently restrictive in their ability to describe other communication forms? Shotter (1993b) characterizes the problem as follows:

Conversation is a kind of ultimate reality for us. We cannot turn it around to understand its nature in terms of any particular models, theories, rules, or conventions, for, unless we can discuss such entities conversationally, we have no way of justifying to each other that we are indeed applying them aright. Thus they cannot themselves be a prior condition for such joint discussions; rather they must be a consequence of them (p. 459).

The goal of understanding communication through the communicative practice of the intellectual discussion is problematic since the theory and the practice blur. The appropriate products of intellectual discussion, i.e., accounts in terms of models, theories, or rules, are a consequence of the conversational practices for which those rules seek to account. In other words, these accounts do not necessarily represent communication (although they might). They are products of a particular conversational context which may, or may not, have relevance for other communicative situations. According to Shotter (1993b), there is no way of knowing for sure.

Being informed of these tensions by the tenets of their own theory, social constructionism, the organizers of and participants in the ECA panel chose to bypass the traditional format for intellectual discussion in the conference situation for another more closely resembling the conversational practices of an ideal speech situation. The events of that panel are described in the following section.

### The Panel

The moderator opened by saying that the panel would consist of the members interacting with each other, and ultimately with the audience, without the aid of prepared notes, such that ideas would arise and comprehension gained in a spontaneous fashion. Unlike the traditional conference presentation, one person's act would be completed by the complementary act of another. However, before this interaction took place, the moderator proceeded to give brief introductions to the work of each of the panel members, which took approximately thirty minutes. This opening monologue set the tone for the conversation that was to follow.

The objective of the introduction was to make the ensuing conversation comprehensible to the general audience. The result, however, was to construct the speakers as agents and owners of particular thoughts and ideas. Ideas were characterized in terms of people's names such that it was now appropriate to speak of *John Shotter's position* and *Kenneth Gergen's position*.

The panel also had a facilitator who would manage the conversation. The role of the facilitator foregrounded the tension inherent in speaking intellectually about communication and agency. The facilitator described how the panel members must dispel the notions of pre-existing theoretical positions or categories of thought. She stated, for example, that *Kenneth Gergen's position* was not to be thought of as a characteristic of *Gergen's mental makeup*.

The panel proceeded on the basis of short monologues by each of the speakers. Each speaker was formally given a turn. Barnett Pearce began by speaking to a short paper he had distributed. John Shotter was invited to respond to some of the issues raised by Dr. Pearce's monologue. However, Dr. Shotter stated that before he proceeded to accept the invitation, he would first like to outline some important themes from his own position. He produced a monologue of his own on the nature of meaningful theory and its relationship to practice. Of interest here is the style in which the communication in this panel was taking place and the context this formed, in which further utterances would be made. The constraints of the work inherent in intellectual discussion were shaping the communicative practice. At the end of John Shotter's short presentation, the moderator introduced two-way interaction by asking questions. Answers were given, but Vernon Cronen and Kenneth Gergen had yet to speak. With time running short, Dr. Cronen gave a monologue concerning the use of alternative vocabularies for agency. The lack of conversation was further highlighted when, instead of interacting with any of the ideas presented previously, the moderator stated that Kenneth Gergen still had to "do his spot," after which Dr. Gergen also gave a short monologue. This ending to the panel indicated clearly the traditional institutionalized forms of intellectual discussion. Despite its aims, the panel had followed the traditional form of the conference presentation. Each speaker gave short monologues, and a short time was



available at the end for questions from the audience. The panel did not follow the forms of conversational style. Was this just a failure of this particular panel to follow the tenets of social constructionism, or is it a reflection of something more fundamental? In the following section I suggest that the latter is the case.

### **Authors, Ideas, and Agency**

Even proper names themselves do not seem always spoken, with a design to bring into our view the ideas of those individuals that are supposed to be marked by them. For example, when a Schoolman tells me *Aristotle hath said it*, all I conceive he means by it, is to dispose me to embrace his opinion with the deference and submission which custom has annexed to that name. And this effect may be so instantly produced in the minds of those who are accustomed to resign their judgement to the authority of that philosopher, as it is impossible any idea either of his person, writings, or reputation should go before (Berkeley 1710/1975, p. 85).

Again, the writings of Bishop Berkeley provide a useful touchstone for this analysis. The theme of the panel discussion was agency. Although the panelists advocated that the locus of identity was in conversational practices rather than self-contained within individuals, the conduct of intellectual discussion demands precisely the opposite. At the academic conference, ideas are identified with authors. The name of the author signifies ownership and, ultimately, responsibility. When it is said that this paper is *by* John Shotter, for example, the name of the author is as much a part of the paper as the ideas that are expressed within it. The name of the author is more than a simple label attached to a piece of work. It is also the equivalent of a description. To follow Berkeley's (1710/1975) example, when the Schoolman says "Aristotle hath said it," he could be using the word "Aristotle" as one or a series of definite descriptions of the type: "the author of the *Analytics*," or the "founder of ontology," and so forth. Foucault (1977) argues that the importance attributed to the name of the author is a historical and cultural phenomena:

There was a time when those texts which we now call 'literary' (stories, folk tales, epics, and tragedies) were accepted, circulated, and valorized without any question about the identity of their author. Their anonymity was ignored because their real or supposed age was a sufficient guarantee of their authenticity. Texts, however, that we now call 'scientific' (dealing with cosmology and the heavens, medicine or illness, the natural sciences or geography) were only considered truthful during the Middle Ages if the name of author was indicated. Statements on the order of 'Hippocrates said . . .' or 'Pliny tells us that . . .' were not merely formulas for an argument based on authority; they marked a proven discourse (pp. 125–126).

The attribution of discourses to authors as a mark of authority is a fundamental part of the dissemination of ideas through intellectual discussion. It is inevitable that this attribution should be present as part of this panel. The names *Vernon Cronen*, *Kenneth Gergen*, *Barnett Pearce*, and *John Shotter* carry significant authority within the discourse of social constructionism. In the context of the panel as conversation, however, the authority implied by the name of the author poses a serious problem. These names not only represent particular individuals, but authoritative discourses. They take on particular values that would not be present if *Gary P. Radford* were speaking. This difference is not just a matter of these people being more famous or more widely published and read. The *names* themselves have a currency which give the discourses attached to them a certain value with respect to other discourses. Foucault (1977) argues that:

An author's name is not simply an element of speech (as a subject, a complement, or an element that could be replaced by a pronoun or other parts of speech). Its presence is functional in that it serves as a means of classification. A name can group together a number of texts and thus differentiate them from others . . . The author's name characterizes a particular manner of the existence of discourse. Discourse that possesses an author's name is not to be immediately consumed and forgotten; neither is it accorded the momentary attention given to ordinary, fleeting words. Rather, its status and its manner of reception are regulated by the culture in which it circulates (p. 123).

There is an important difference between those authors to whom the production of a text or a book can be legitimately attributed and those more consequential figures who author much more than a book, but rather theories, traditions, or disciplines in which other books and authors will in turn find a place. Foucault cites Marx and Freud as two exemplars of this phenomenon. Similarly, the works associated with the name *John Shotter*, for example, have a currency in the academic culture of communication studies that is very different from that of *Gary P. Radford*. The name and discourse are fused and this fusion is carried over to the conference panel situation. Many in the audience were present to hear John Shotter speak and, for the most part, would have known in advance what kinds of topics Dr. Shotter would speak about. If any were unaware of what the name *John Shotter* meant in this context, the moderator went to great lengths in the opening monologue to define the relationship between the name of the author and a particular discourse.

*Vernon Cronen*, *John Shotter*, *Barnett Pearce*, and *Kenneth Gergen* take on importance as symbols in a particular discursive practice. The panel produced a particular way of speaking by virtue of the authority vested in the names of its authors. It is not a neutral forum for free conversation because *John Shotter* is not a conversational partner, nor is he expected to be in this context. *John Shotter* is a reference point. The person John Shotter is present at the panel as a ultimate representative of the discourse *John Shotter*.

### The Masked Philosopher

If the link between the name of an author and the invocation of a particular intellectual discourse is as powerful as Foucault (1977) suggests, then a logical step to move toward an ideal speech situation in an intellectual discussion context would be to lessen or remove the authority of the name of the author. What if the name *Kenneth Gergen* were removed from the situation entirely? If *Kenneth Gergen* functions to define and impose limits upon the discourse that is expected once the name is invoked, then the removal of *Kenneth Gergen* is a step to loosening, if not removing, those constraints. This does not mean removing the person Kenneth Gergen from the panel, just *Kenneth Gergen* from what is spoken about. In other words, the panel members would interact anonymously.

Foucault experimented with such a strategy with respect to the reception and discussion of his own work. Between 1979 and 1984, the newspaper *Le Monde* published a weekly series of interviews with leading European intellectuals. On April 6–7, 1980, an interview with Foucault was published in which he opted for the mask of anonymity by declining to reveal his name. Foucault's objective was to demystify the power that is sometimes ascribed to the name of the intellectual. Foucault (1988) writes:

Why did I suggest that we use anonymity? Out of nostalgia for a time when, being quite unknown, what I said had some chance of being heard. With the potential reader, the surface of contact was unrippled. The effects of the book might land in unexpected places and form shapes that I had never thought of. A name makes reading too easy (p. 323–324).

The claim that Foucault's work might "land in unexpected places" and "form shapes [Foucault] had never thought of" invokes the enhancement of joint action between the intellectual and his/her audience. With the name of the author removed, the reader (or listener) is less inhibited in joining the discourse because the roles and expectations attached to the name are also removed. Foucault remarks that the addition of the name makes "reading too easy." It provides the context in which that work should be read and interpreted, and excludes other possible ways. Foucault (1988) continues:

If I have chosen anonymity, it is not, therefore, to criticize this or that individual, which I never do. It's a way of addressing the potential reader, the only individual here who is of interest to me, more directly: 'Since you don't know who I am, you will be more inclined to find out why I say what you read; just allow yourself to say, quite simply, it's true, it's false. I like it or I don't like it. Period' (p. 325).

Foucault's characterization of the response of the reader may be oversimplified in terms of the options Foucault ascribes to them, but it does bring out an

important point: the possibility of dialogue. Foucault has captured the beginning of a dialogue situation that is untainted by the name of the author.

Foucault's scenario is, of course, a double-edged sword. Anonymity is already a fundamental part of the mechanisms of constraint deployed by institutions which control academic discourse through the procedure known as blind review. Myers (1990) has provided an extensive account of the role the blind review process plays in the formation and legitimation of knowledge claims in the field of biology. Essentially, the authors in Myers' study wrote with the explicit intent of pleasing reviewers and editors as well as articulating knowledge claims. By examining the process of review and rewrite, Myers describes how knowledge is essentially negotiated between the individual and the institution. If a successful negotiation cannot be reached, then the piece is not published. Similarly, Blair, Brown, and Baxter (1994) describe and cite reviewers' comments on a previous draft of their paper and attempt to show them to be:

overt displays of ideological mechanisms that . . . approve the themes of the masculinist paradigm . . . [and] buttress its privilege by advancing what can count as approved (and disapproved) identities, readings, and politics within the discipline (p. 397).

The same structures of power may also pervade the anonymous conference panel. It is debatable whether anonymous agents are more likely to encourage an idealized conversation. In this case, the name of the author is the significant draw. Would anonymous agents be enough to bring together a group of participants and listeners? It is only within the knowledge provided by the discipline that socially constructed agents such as *John Shotter* come to have any meaning, and going to hear them speak has any relevance. Yet once this institutionalized definition and sanction is imposed, authentic conversation ceases to be a realistic possibility since now it must take place within the terms set by that institution. It becomes trapped.

The experience of the ECA panel serves to foreground the tension that participants in academic discourse must experience when expressing individual ideas and having them conform to institutionalized demands. Foucault (1972b) expresses this tension between individual and institution perfectly when he writes:

I don't want to have to enter this risky world of discourse; I want nothing to do with it insofar as it is decisive and final . . . Institutions reply: 'But you have nothing to fear from launching out; we're here to show you discourse is within the established order of things, that we've waited a long time for its arrival, that a place has been set aside for it – a place which both honours and disarms it' (pp. 215–216).

Any work presented or published in formal academic forums such as journals or conferences is simultaneously both "honored and disarmed." Honored because it has been recognized by their peers as works of value.

Disarmed because it has been forced to conform to the constraints, boundaries, and limits imposed by the discipline. Both the article by Blair, Brown, and Baxter (1994) and the panel presented at ECA attempted to be honored without being disarmed. Their significance in this discussion, however, lies not in their success or lack of success in achieving their stated goals, but in the fact the attempt was made at all and the limits identified. These works foreground that which other academic discourses keeps hidden and treat as obvious. They further reveal and justify the contours of at least three new problematics that deserve further serious attention from scholars: (a) what makes knowledge about communication possible? (b) why should other forms of knowledge and practice be considered impossible? (c) what can be done to change this situation?

### Conclusion

The turn to view communication studies seriously as a problematic in its own right is extremely positive. As Jansen (1993) remarks, the resistance to such analyses “excuses practitioners from participating in the very difficult, conflict laden dialogues that are a necessary prologue to articulating ways of knowing that are no longer secured in categories of domination and submission” (p. 138). Blair, Brown, and Baxter (1994) represent a clear example of the “difficult, conflict laden dialogues” that Jansen refers to and the institutionalized strategies which work to suppress and silence them. This analysis presents a case where the attempt to produce such a dialogue was systematically distorted in the Habermasian sense by sedimented practices of intellectual discussion. The distortion was the result of the participants following internalized and normalized ways of speech such that having a conversation in an academic context proved to be extremely difficult. The participants brought to bear the principles of a particular theoretical position, that of social constructionism, and inserted them into the practice and context of intellectual discussion. What was learned from this panel was not contained in anybody’s monologue, but rather in the observation and analysis of the participants’ *practice*; in particular the powerful sedimented practices that were revealed when one form of communication (conversation based on the principles of social constructionism) was conducted in the context of another (intellectual discussion in a conference panel setting).

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