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Editorial
Social Constructionism in Community and Applied Social Psychology

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INTRODUCTION

Social constructionism may be seen as one response to the crisis in social psychology that some saw as emerging in the 1960s and 1970s (McGarty & Haslam, 1997). Partly because it was a response to a crisis it was sometimes very critical of mainstream social psychology and is now most often seen as part of critical social psychology. At the same time its influence has been resisted by those of more traditional persuasions who see psychology as a science and as a natural science at that. Too often debates about social constructionism focus on the methods of science, and particularly debates about quantitative versus qualitative methods. No doubt such debates have their place, but they are well worked, and well known, and we do not wish to repeat them here. The purpose of this Editorial is first, to introduce social constructionism, and to locate it in certain philosophical traditions;
secondly to explore further; what is distinctively social about social constructionism; and finally (and briefly) to show how the articles in this special issue fit into this general framework.

PHILOSOPHY, SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION, AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS

'Social constructionism' (as we see it) refers to a loose concatenation of theoretical frameworks
that emphazise both the constructive powers of human minds and their origins in conversations, conventions, and cultural traditions (Hosking & Morley, 1991; Morley & Hosking, 2003). Such frameworks have developed from long-standing philosophical traditions,
and they provide a background to at least two contemporary debates: one that contrasts psychology as a natural science with psychology as a moral science, and one that contrasts individual psychology with collective psychology. Often, but not always, those

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who see psychology as a natural science want to reduce social psychology to individual psychology. Often, but not always, those who see psychology as a moral science see psychology
as concerned with reasons rather than causes and with forms of self-expression
that are constituted in conversations, unique to certain times and places.

There is some precedent for dividing the key ideas in philosophy into two main historical traditions or paradigms or meta-theories, each with its own root metaphors or voices. Two examples will suffice. The first comes from Capaldi and Proctor (1999) who contrast meta-theories based on mechanism with meta-theories based on contextualism. The mechanistic voice is one that asserts science is about the search for objective truth, and that explanations in terms of reasons are to be rejected (although any self-respecting cognitive
scientist would claim that reasons are causes). This has led some to argue that psychology is dominated by the search for things that happen to us. Shotter (1975) took this view; so too did Kirk:

> Thoughts, feelings and intentions are no longer presupposed as a basic type of explanatory principle with general applicability to natural events. Instead, they have become something whose existence itself seems to stand in need of explanation. (Kirk, 1999, p. 18)

The contextualist voice is really a set of voices that emphasize historicism, phenomenology, and hermeneutics (Morley & Hunt, 2004). The intention is to change the kinds of ways in which we think about epistemology and about science. Most analytical philosophers would, for example, wish to maintain a sharp distinction between contexts of discovery (the province of psychologists) and contexts of justification (the province of philosophers). Historicism makes the former relevant to the latter. The phenomenological voice is one that asserts a key task of psychology is to focus on the world of our ordinary understanding—as we live it—rather than the world as abstracted and interpreted by science. The hermeneutic voice is one that emphasizes a concern with the presuppositions built into language, because history is articulated in linguistic traditions. Taken together, the cumulative affect of these voices is to assert the primacy of the social and the historical over the natural and the scientific (Morley & Hunt, 2004).

The second example comes from Pearce (1992), who reworked some of the themes from Rorty's (1979) Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. However, whilst it is clear what Rorty wished to reject it less clear what he wished to assert. He wanted to reject first, the language of British Empiricism, because he did not believe in the notion of sense data, given immediately to the mind; but he also wanted to reject, second, the view that thoughts are propositional, and that in some sense, the structure of a proposition mirrors the structure of the world. This view was most famously presented in Wittgenstein's (1922) Tractatus Logico Philosophicus. Against this, Pearce sets a voice—strictly a set of voices— that espouse some version of the root metaphor that people do not just represent reality. Rather, they espouse some version of the view that in 'representing' reality they construct reality. This is sometimes translated into the slogan that people do not discover reality— they invent it.

To sum up: we may infer that social constructionists are likely to be contextualists who are critical of some of the distinctions built in to traditional philosophy and who, despite internal differences, think that what we say does not just mirror the world but in some sense helps to constitute that world. If you find it difficult to see exactly what this might mean (and it remains the subject of considerable philosophical debate) one way to introduce it may be to consider Tsoukas' (1994) description of the concept-dependent character

of social systems. In his introduction he argues that social systems are:

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concept dependent (or as some philosophers put it, they are linguistically constructed). What this means is that unlike most natural systems, social systems do not have an existence independent of human beings, but are (in part at least) what they are because of the particular ways human communities
define them. As Taylor (1985, p. 34) observed: 'The language is constitutive of the reality, is essential to its being the kind of reality it is'.

Historically, such observations are not new. They may be traced to eighteenth century critics of the Enlightenment, such as Vico. Indeed some of the main themes evident in Vico, have served as clarion calls to social constructionists, although not all agree with all of them. Berlin (2000) lists seven key themes (see pp. 8–12) and we shall add an eighth. We have paraphrased them and put them into more psychological language, at the risk of losing something that Vico intended. But we are less interested in textual analysis than in a general explication of the programme Vico was trying to follow. The eight themes are:

(1) Worlds are artificial and constructed by people. As people change their constructions they transform their worlds, and in doing so change themselves.

(2) Those who create something have some sort of privileged access to their own creations. They are able to understand them in ways other people cannot.

(3) We invent some things, such as mathematics, and our knowledge of such things has to be understood as different from our knowledge of the external world.

(4) To understand human history we need to understand cultural change. To understand cultural change we need to understand forms of life. Forms of life are explicable solely in terms of certain purposive activities.

(5) Invention is a natural form of self-expression rather than an instrumental product.

(6) Such creations are to be understood by 'a correct grasp of the purpose and therefore the peculiar use of symbols, especially of language, which belong uniquely to their own time and place' (p. 10).

(7) There is a new category of knowledge, that of reconstructive imagination, sometimes called fantasia.

(8) The laws of mathematics are only true, Vico says, because they are invented and, in some sense, we have made them true. He states this in the slogan that 'The true [verum] and the made [factum] are convertible'.

The first three themes remind us of the contrasts later articulated by Rorty and by Pearce. The fourth theme is very reminiscent of the conclusions ofWittgenstein (1953) in his Philosophical
Investigations. The fifth theme is very much part of twentieth century phenomenology as practiced in continental philosophy. The sixth theme, and also the first, remind us of themes in the philosophy and sociology of symbolic interactionism (pointing out that identities are situated, perhaps constituted, in relationships and that as relationships change, so identities change). The seventh theme is not only familiar to students of cognitive psychology (through the work of Bartlett, 1932) but is something that has been embraced by those of a more discursive turn (Middleton & Edwards, 1990).

This latter point is important, if only because it is important to realize what is distinctive about social constructionism. It is not that social constructionism concerns interpretive activity and that mainstream psychology does not. Claims of this kind mostly infuriate academic psychologists of all persuasions. These days all psychologists recognize the creative power of the mind. We are no longer in what some have called the Stone Age of behaviourism. Furthermore, major attempts have been made to show how varieties of purposive behaviour may be mechanized (in cybernetics, classical artificial intelligence, cognitive science, and most recently debates about situated robotics, and the nature

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and power of embodied minds: see Harre´, 2002; Morley & Hunt, 2004). So there is a sense in which all psychologists are constructionists. For example, Donald Norman, who is one of the most resolute mainstream (mechanistic) psychologists has said that modern cognitive psychology has promoted an image of the human mind as a device (note) that has evolved to the point that it is 'exquisitely tailored to make sense of the world. Give it the slightest clue and off it goes, providing explanation, rationalisation, understanding' (Norman, 1988, p. 2).

This is a very powerful image, but it is the image of a black box given certain causal powers. Social constructionists want to talk about interpretation in very different ways. Our own take on this has been to start with the following contrast (Hosking & Morley, 1991; Morley & Hosking, 2003). The image of remembering given by Bartlett was constructive.

He did not just talk about memory: he talked about remembering as a reconstructive and imaginative process. He talked about the ways in which minds went beyond the information given, so that each kind of thinking was an 'extension of evidence, in line with evidence, and in such a manner as to fill up gaps in evidence' (Bartlett, 1932). In some respects this sounds like Vico, but this misses out talk of 'forms of life' and remains individual psychology. In his later work, Thinking: An Experimental and Social Study, Bartlett (1958) began to realize that the extensions of evidence were guided by social norms instantiated in 'a persistent framework of institutions and customs' (p. 255). What Bartlett's studies of Thinking added to his earlier work was 'a much greater appreciation of the constraints placed by social interactions (conversations) and social convention (norms) on what counted as evidence, on what counted as legitimate inference and on what counted as filling gaps in the evidence' (Morley & Hosking, 2003, p. 45).

But there are two kinds of ways in which we may construe all of this. One way is to reinstate the mechanistic metaphor, adding social causes to physical causes. In some respects this is attractive, and we have indulged in a little of this ourselves. Thus, when we said that making sense of the world is social rather than solitary it is possible to see this as a story about social causes. We might have said, for example, that there is a lot of experimental literature in social psychology that seemed to us to lead to the conclusion that 'What we learn and how we express that learning is very much affected by those we meet, where we meet them, and by our relationships with them' (Hosking & Morley, 1991, p. 26). And we might have given that a more social turn by saying that 'cognitive processes function to extend evidence, in line with evidence, so that what is said is acceptable to an ordinary member of a reference group' (as in Morley & Hosking, 2003, p. 45).

If this is all we had said it may have been explained mechanistically in terms of some such concept as cognitive tuning (Cohen, 1961), so that changes in relationships tuned us in to different aspects of the normative context. But this would be to neglect other aspects

of the social that make social constructionism distinctive. The first aspect is that we do not always know what is acceptable to an ordinary member of one of our reference groups. This is something that is established in conversations that are pointed or partisan because they combine the cognitive and the social, and therefore the political, in various ways. When such conversations occur we believe that they are best described as negotiations within and between groups. The second aspect is that we need to be more willing to incorporate
different voices into social psychology (Shotter & Gergen, 1989; Pearce, 1992).
This does not mean that 'anything goes', although many social constructionists are relativists in some sense. It means that we should not start with definitions of groups that define groups in terms of shared goals. If groups share goals, that is an achievement,

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and one that is hard won, not a defining characteristic of a group. Much of experimental social psychology defines groups in terms of shared goals and thus makes political processes seem deviant in various ways (Sarason, 1972). Let us take this as the establishment view, and let us remind ourselves that Vico saw himself as a critic of establishment views. When we talk of conversations and norms we are recognizing that social constructionism has a critical aspect. To some extent this means that much of social constructionism should be regarded as explorations of the ways in which political activity is bound up with intellectual
activity. Perhaps for these reasons, perhaps for others, critical philosophy, critical sociology, and even critical psychology, have become well-established social categories.
Finally, let us note that as we take a conversational turn, and emphasize the role of the social in invention rather than discovery we may be moving towards a different conception of truth than that espoused in mechanistic science. To return to Vico, or at least to Berlin's account of Vico, if inventions 'are to be called true and false, it must be in a sense widely different from that in which those words are applied to statements' (Berlin, 2000, p. 41).
We shall consider each of these three themes in turn.

WHAT MAKES SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM DISTINCTIVELY SOCIAL?

Conversation and argument

The first set of themes may be set out under some such headings as 'reasoning, representing, and discursive commitment' (Brandom, 1994), or 'articulating reasons' (Brandom, 2000), or 'disputation, negotiation and change' (Morley & Hosking, 2003). Much of the work under these headings may be seen as concentrating on the explicit articulation of sense-making processes and the ways in which such processes are realized in and through processes of giving and asking for reasons. Our own view is that there are cognitive (intellectual) and political (social) aspects to such processes. The first aspect concentrates on how people negotiate how they are willing to describe their worlds, given that they are motivated both to find a common language and to find descriptions that favour themselves or their own reference groups. The second aspect concentrates on those processes by which participants decide how to commit themselves to lines of action, in environments that may involve mixed-motives. For obvious reasons we have given the name 'language-action' frameworks to such general points of view. There are other variants (e.g.

Winograd & Flores, 1986), but once again we are concerned with the general picture rather than the detail.

It is evident that writers choose different vocabularies in which to make their points, depending on the contexts in which they are writing. Thus, Morley and Ormerod (1996) described language-action perspectives in terms of three axioms: an ambiguity axiom, a reference group axiom, and an incompleteness axiom. The language is that of a mechanistic world view. But the term axiom should have been in 'scare quotes'. The points that were being made were that social actions are inherently ambiguous and require interpretation; that the interpretation has to be from a particular (partisan) point of view; and that interpretations have to be passed on to others in summary form. Such points may be incorporated with a mechanistic framework but they may also be seen as the preconditions that make a discursive psychology possible.

One main point is that political actions arise when people think differently (language) and want to act differently (action). Thus, politics is about commitments (to descriptions

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and to actions) and the ways in which those commitments are created, mobilized, maintained, and changed. The process is one of negotiation and we have described it in terms of the metaphor of 'writing social history'. The 'writing' part reminds us that negotiations are conducted in the context of existing rules and that the point of negotiation is to change some of the rules, by adding to them or by amending them. The 'history' part reminds us that changes have to be explained to other people, accepted by them, and implemented by them. Because of this, one important outcome of a negotiation—perhaps the most important outcome—is an agreed story about what has happened and why (Morley, 1992). Such stories function to link past, present, and future in ways that show why they fit together, and why the fit is seen as appropriate. Unless such a rationale is forthcoming, agreements will not stick.

To recapitulate: our first theme concerns the ways in which people make sense of their world through conversation. We do not wish to ignore the importance of tacit knowledge in the analysis of social interaction, but we think that the central focus in social construction should concern the ways in which processes by which we make sense of our worlds have to be construed within a context of the ways in which we make explicit our reasons for action.We intend, now, to elaborate some of these ideas by reference to the work of the philosopher Robert Brandom (1994, 2000).

One of Brandom's main concerns has been to distinguish the conceptual from the nonconceptual.

He has done this by saying that what makes something conceptual is its role in a social framework in which people work out (or perhaps negotiate) the consequences of describing the world in this way rather than that. Social descriptions, we may say, are never neutral. As Brandom (2000) has put it:

> The master idea that animates and orients this enterprise is that what distinguishes specifically discursive practices from the doings of non-concept using creatures is their inferential articulation. . . . It is a rationalist pragmatism, in giving pride of place to practices of giving and asking for reasons, understanding them as conferring conceptual content on performances, expressions and states suitably caught up in those practices. . . . And . . . it understands expressing something, making it explicit, as putting it in a form in which it can both serve as and stand in need of reasons: a form in which it can serve as both premises and conclusions in inferences. Saying or

> thinking that things are thus-and-so is undertaking a distinctive kind of inferentially articulated commitment: putting it forward as a fit premise for further inferences, that is, authorizing its use as such a premise, and undertaking responsibility to entitle oneself to that commitment, to vindicate one's authority under suitable circumstances, paradigmatically by exhibiting it as the conclusion of an inference from other commitments to which one is or can become entitled. Grasping the concept that is applied in such a making explicit is mastering its inferential use: knowing (in the practical sense of being able to distinguish, a kind of knowing how) what else one would be committing oneself to by applying the concept, what would entitle one to do so, and what would preclude such entitlement. (pp. 10–11)

Thus, when we say that something is tacit we are saying, implicitly, that conversation functions to help us work out (perhaps negotiate) the ways in which we are willing to make our implicit commitments explicit commitments. Such explanations are rationalist in the sense that they 'understand concepts as norms determining what counts as a reason for particular beliefs, claims and intentions' (Brandom, 2000, p. 25). In some respects what would count as 'normal science' in social constructionism would be an exploration of the ways in which norms function as texts whose meanings would have to be negotiated and renegotiated within and between groups. Mainstream critics would be all too willing to say that what is happening is more like 'market' research (because it is so parochial) than basic research (which is concerned with eternal verities).

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But one aspect that makes social constructionism social is its emphasis on concepts as having inferential meanings that link intellectual understandings to social actions (as in language-action theories) via participation in normative contexts. Such concepts are not only articulated in social contexts (perhaps part of a causal story) but have their being in discourse (part of a constitutive story). Social constructionists such as Ernest (1998) explicitly link this line of argument to the writing of philosophers such as Bakhtin, Hegel, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein (in his Philosophical Investigations). The importance of such links may be summarized by saying that 'an increasing number of fields of thought, especially in the social sciences, are adopting conversation as a basic metaphor' (Ernest, 1998, p. 162).

Different voices

What we have described earlier is part of what is sometimes called the rhetoric of inquiry. According to Pearce (1992) the point of such inquiry is to focus on 'those processes by which members of various communities are persuaded to act or believe in particular ways' (p. 145). It is an exploration of the ways in which intellectual beliefs and commitments to lines of action are sustained or challenged by the norms and practices of reference groups. Some of this enquiry is critical in the sense that it examines whether mainstream psychology helps to reinforce and sustain the values of certain dominant groups, and whether it should continue to do so. It could, instead, examine the potentials inherent in the domains that are being considered. Such 'what if' scenarios are common in other social sciences (such as history) but in social psychology this sort of emphasis has been associated most obviously with social identity theory, and particularly with the work of Moscovici, Billig, Reicher. According to Haslam (2001):

> . . . individuals belong to groups that are meaningfully differentiated on a range of important dimensions (e.g. class, power, material wealth) and . . . this social structuring has important consequences.
>
> . . . Part of the appeal of social identity theory is not only that it accounts for such

phenomena, but that it does so by appreciating rather than denying social and political forces. (p. 42, own emphasis)

Part of the original appeal of social identity theory was that it seemed to recognize the importance of culture, society, and role relations whilst still giving people their due as intelligent social actors. In this respect it seemed to challenge some of the individualistic assumptions built into mainstream psychology. And it is this challenge to individualism that some take to be the key characteristic of critical social psychology.

Nightingale and Neilands (1997) set out the position as follows. In contrast to individualism, they say that:

critical psychology generally views the individual and society as so fundamentally intertwined that they cannot be separated from one another in any way that makes sense. Individuals and the social world they inhabit are one and the same thing: two ways of looking at the same phenomenon. The problem then becomes explaining this reality, not in terms of a relationship between two separate phenomena, but in terms of some sort of totality or whole. (p. 73)

In our own attempt to characterize a social psychology of organizing (Hosking & Morley, 1991) we attempted to show how there was a direct line of development from some of the historical icons of social psychology, such as Asch (1952), that led to social

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constructionist theories of social action, such as those of Harre´ (1979). If we were able to add to what we have said, we would say that part of the reason for the increased importance of social constructionism is that it has been seen as a response to the 'crisis' in social psychology in the 1960s that paid more attention to the core metaphysical principles instantiated in Asch's seminal work (also see McGarty & Haslam, 1997).

The net effect was to place increasing scrutiny on what it meant to say that minds were social minds (Billig, 1997; Gardner, 1993; Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000). Social constructionists
(with some exceptions) took the view that minds were constituted in conversations, and that individualism was based on a distinction between subject and object that went back to Descartes. The root of the objection may be located in two propositions. The first is that Descartes set the agenda for much of philosophy of mind as practised in the twentieth century; the second is that Cartesian philosophy gave epistemological priority to statements set out in the first person singular form (Morley & Hunt, 2004). Some think that it is just this opposition that prevents us appreciating that minds are social minds, and that it is just this opposition that provides the major motivation behind positions such as those described as 'critical relational constructionism' (Hosking & Bass, 2001; Hosking & Bouwen, 2000; Hosking, Dachler, & Gergen, 1995).

Once this opposition has been removed it has been thought that the way is clear to shift the focus from individuals to relationships, and thus to locate talk of power in relationships situated in particular social contexts. However, we should say, speaking more strictly, that people participate in many such contexts, that overlap in ways that intrigue and surprise, so that there are many situated realities. Furthermore, the picture is complicated because people enter into those realities in a variety of personal and a variety of representative

roles. One result of these complexities is that people may face dilemmas between their roles as those who describe the world (as scientists), or as those who participate in the world as moral actors (defending threats to core values or seeking opportunities to advance core values of the reference groups they see as important). Those of certain critical persuasions will emphasize what might be rather than what will be or what must be. But, whatever the perspective, the key theme is that there are likely to be important implications
for the ways in which we view stability and change in organizations. When we wrote A Social Psychology of Organizing we were exercised greatly by the contrast between organization (as a noun) and organizing (as a verb), wanting to emphasize the latter, and so emphasize the ongoing construction of stability and change. Recent work in history, philosophy, and sociology has confirmed that social constructionists are wise to think that self-identities and other-identities are co-constructed in ways that are complex because they involve the ways in which social actors try to solve the dilemmas of articulating individual, social, practical, and cultural concerns. This is what Hosking has described as 'articulating multiplicity', and she thinks that if this articulation is thoroughgoing,
it will help to give voice to practices and possibilities that usually are muted, suppressed or silenced (Hosking, 2004).

One major shift of thinking in social psychology, at least in the latter part of the twentieth century, has been that from seeing social interaction as concerned with strategy and tactics to seeing social interaction as concerned with messages and meanings (Putnam, 1985). This shift has done much to help move away from individualism towards an emphasis on 'local' dialogues involving many people, and an emphasis on processes of collective construction, as people compare and contrast and work through multiple interpretations
just as they might compare and contrast multiple interpretations of a text (Morley & Hunt, 2004).

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Science, objectivity, and truth

Some social constructionists emphasize polyphony to the point that they seem to have lost all concern with objective truth. What is true seems simply to be what is certified by the core members of particular social groups. This has led those of a traditional persuasion to say that social constructionism is more like history or sociology than natural science. Some have gone much further and equated recent developments in social epistemology as 'subjective, relativist, obscurantist, scientifically illiterate, and ideologically motivated' (Morley & Hunt, 2004) that have resulted in 'dumbing down standards of evidence and of arguments from evidence' (Boghossian, 1996).

Much of this debate concerns the nature of twentieth century continental philosophy and how it differs from analytical philosophy. One way of putting this is to say that continental philosophers are much more likely to suppose that there is some sort of essential connection between who we are and the social and historical circumstances in which we live (Wachterhauser, 1986). On this view, our epistemic activities must be grounded in history because to develop historically as human beings is to internalize the practices of particular social groups. This is not just something contingent—something that reflects the particular practices of this or that reference group—it is something that implies that the meanings of knowledge claims, and the tests of their

validity, are inextricably bound up with the 'local' and 'situated' identities of those who formulate such claims and of those who evaluate them (see Morley & Hunt, 2004).

Debates of this kind are extremely complex, and allow mechanists and contextualists to have quite different views of the world. Much of the debate concerns the ways in which the terms objectivity and truth are to be used. Aristotle set out the first detailed account of scientific method. It consisted of philosophical argument about the nature of the world, the nature of science, and the nature of argument (Glymour, 1992). What he said led to a tradition in which the purpose of science was to explore the reality that lay behind the world of experience. It was a precondition of doing so that the methods of science had to be free from individual bias, so that what was certified as true was seen to be independent of the values and interests of particular social groups. In contrast, social constructionists argue that our epistemic activities must be grounded in history—because they have developed historically and because to develop as a human being is to internalize the practices of particular social groups.

Such views are not necessarily incompatible with scientific realism—and may even presuppose it, if Searle (1995) is correct. Nevertheless, the dominant idea is that 'objective' knowledge is objective in the sense that it is free from influences that are idiosyncratic. We can be confident that this is the case because when we participate in particular forms of life we commit ourselves to conversations that function to validate those forms of life. Ernest (1998) has put the point as follows, in his description of the epistemology of mathematics:

> The argument for accepting that conversation has a special role to play in epistemology is that language and discourse play an essential role in the genesis, acquisition, communication, formulation, and justification of mathematical knowledge. Conversation is the dialogical deployment of language, and its social exchange dimension—in the form of acceptance, elaboration, reaction, criticism, and correction—is essential for feedback. This dimension underpins the justification of mathematical knowledge and the ratification of personal knowledge. Without conversation and its feedback mechanisms, the individual appropriation of collective knowledge cannot be conducted or validated. (Ernest, 1998, p. 166)

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We take it that this is what social constructionists mean when they say that objective truth is not absolute truth but socially certified truth.

Social constructionist approaches to community development and change

Social constructionism in some form is well established in philosophy, sociology, organizational psychology, and social psychology. It has yet to have as much impact in the areas covered by this journal. But the applied message we have to give is very important. It is that conversations matter. If we pay more attention to the structure and process of conversations we may be able to bring new insights to change in individuals, groups, and communities.

Suppose that we really take seriously the claim set out earlier 'that the meanings of knowledge claims, and the tests of their validity, are inextricably bound up with the "local" and "situated" identities of those who formulate such claims and of those who evaluate them'. It follows that if we pay more attention to the structure of such dialogues we may be able to help create different kinds of relationships and different kinds of selves.

Development and change and 'power to'
One common construction of relations has been called a 'subject-object' construction. This privileges the subjects' constructions whilst silencing Other as object. Commentators have spoken of this as a relationship of 'power over', that is, as power of Subject over Object (e.g. Gergen, 1995). From a social constructionist point of view, this is just a possible but not a necessary construction. For example, inclusive, non-hierarchical ways of relating can be constructed in processes that treat multiple different relational realities as different but equal. Non-hierarchical ways of relating can construct 'power to' in the sense of power to sustain multiple interdependent local ways of 'going on' in 'different but equal' relation (see Gergen, 1995; Hosking, 1995). This is a key theme in relational change-work (as can be seen in contributions to this special issue)—how to give free play to multiple local realities or 'forms of life' without imposing one form or voice on others.
In outline, change-work of this sort might include (a) opening up to possibilities rather than closing down through problem identification, solutions, and generalized change programmes
and (b) constructing a community-based view of rationality. Social construction processes may also be seen as (c) the location for constructing '(im)moral' (and all other) criteria. Given this, perhaps the 'best' that many can do to be 'reasonable' and 'moral' is to give space to multiple community-based rationalities.
Some generic themes seem to be instantiated in work of this kind. They may be outlined as follows.
Knowing and influencing are treated as 'two sides of the same coin'
Inquiry and change-work may recognize and give importance to the influence potential of all acts—asking questions, voice tone, words used, posture . . . including 'artefacts'—interview findings, percentage summaries, diagnostic classifications . . . Any and all of these have the potential to contribute to the social construction of reality. All acts can be seen to have the potential to change how processes go on and change agency is located in ongoing processes and 'wholes' (see earlier) and not in an individual change agent.
One implication is that space is given for simultaneous inquiry and transformation.
'Appreciative Inquiry' and related 'Imagine a City' projects give emphasis to both (see e.g. Bliss Browne, this issue); social psychological practices may become more

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critical in the sense of emancipatory, liberationist, or transformative (e.g. Howarth, this issue; Drewery, this issue).
Multiple, equal voices. Development and changework may attempt to generate and work with multiplicity rather than to suppress or homogenize it through the application of statistical procedures or through drives to 'consensus'. In general terms, polyphony may be constructed in non-hierarchical ways that recognize and support difference and that construct 'power to' rather than 'power over'. This may mean including everyone who has an involvement in some issue through participative change-work. However, it must be stressed that the point of participation is not to increase the likelihood of acceptance of someone else's decision, or to increase the quality of a (consensus) solution.

Rather it is a way of including and enabling multiple local realities in different but equal relation.
Possibilities and positive values are centred. The view that relational processes construct realities has major implications for all change work. For many (though not all) it means working with what is positively valued, i.e. working ‘appreciatively’ (Cooperider & Shrivastva, 1987) rather than re-constructing a world which IS problematic . . . a world of deficits, failure, and blaming. The shift to possibilities invites, for example, change work that helps participants learn how better to improvise and helps participants to imagine new ways of going on together (see, for example, Bliss Browne, this issue Sheila McNamee, this issue). This can also mean evaluating participatively and appreciatively, building in reflexive evaluation as an ongoing quality of change work (see van der Haar & Hosking, in press).Q1
Questioning and listening are formative of relations and realities. Given a social constructionist
way of thinking, asking questions, how they are asked, why, and by whom, all are seen as contributions to some construction process. This means that questioning can be seen as forming and good questions might be those that help to enlarge possible worlds (see Harding, 1998) and possible ways of being in relationship. For example, Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Shrivastva, 1987) gives very careful attention to the appreciative question around which the process will be based. Equally, careful attention to listening to Other is a key feature of many dialogical approaches such as the Public Conversations Project, the MIT Dialogue Project (Isaacs, 1993), and Inter-Logics’ work with ‘conversational architectures’ (http :==www:inter-logics:net). The ‘point’, so to speak, is to give space to Other rather than doing something to or making use of Other.
Constructing in conceptual language and action. This concern with careful questioning and listening has a broader connotation when the social constructionist account embraces both conceptual language and what we have here called ‘action’. Social processes may often construct subject-object relations. Many practitioners work with how people talk with, to, and about one another and construct their wider realities and relations. For example, attention may be directed to ‘othering’ practices and to ways in which particular
identity constructions are ‘put out into the world’ through educational practices, treatment and therapy programmes etc. In addition, there are approaches that shift the emphasis away from conceptual language to e.g. (re)enacting local realities (such as youth drug cultures), for example with the help of professional actors, or through narrative approaches in which participants learn how to re-story their lives—perhaps learning

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how to open up to new possible ways of ‘going on’ in relation (e.g. Performance of a Lifetime). Learning how to learn, getting ‘unstuck’, constructing ‘power to’ are central to these approaches.

SOME APPLICATIONS

The earlier themes and concerns are variously reflected in the contributions to this special

issue. Drewery's article explores the consequences of a social constructionist view in an educational context. Her article is an attempt to show how the management of conversations may help to solve the problem that certain ethnic groups are more likely than others to be suspended or excluded from schools. But she is aware that what she is doing is participating
in a moral science rather than a natural science. The lessons she draws are lessons that would look out of place in some scientific journals, but they are extremely important nevertheless. As she says, 'we need new processes for entering and maintaining respectful dialogue'. She has in mind communities that have learned to understand that 'meanings are negotiated, and that this can take both time and patience'—a lot of time, and a lot of patience.

Howarth's article deals with a similar problem, but is explicitly linked to the theory of social representations. It is an attempt to explore 'how people collectively negotiate and contest the instutitionalized discourses and practices that inform their social identities'. Her main claim is that those who work in the tradition of Moscovici need 'to invite a more participatory and so less elitist and divisive approach to the conditions of human wellbeing'.

Bliss Browne's Imagine Chicago project invites us, as McNamee's commentary makes clear, to turn our curiosity towards the conversations that create the problems, the successes, and the lived realities in communities. As she says, 'we must consider how to give voice to the multiple discourses present and to the movement of conversations in and around our communities'.

The article by Horrocks and her colleagues deals with the topic of situated identities in the context of treatments for drug misuse. Her article themes concern the contrast between individualism and social constructionism. Her article concerns the nature of identities that are both situated and negotiated, but makes us realize that, in certain circumstances, our social identities are all too fragile.

The article by Craps and his associates deals with issues of multi-party collaboration in the management of natural resources. They suggest that certain 'paradoxical' dilemmas result from the contrast between different 'communities of practice' involving 'local' and 'expert' knowledge. Their article is an attempt to show how theories that are social constructionist may help to explain why such dilemmas occur and why they are so hard to resolve.

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