INTRODUCTION

FOR TWENTY YEARS, postmodernism has been having a dramatic effect on psychoanalytic theory (for example, see Benjamin 1988; Flax 1990; Hoffman 1998; Mitchell 1993; Moore 1999; Schafer 1992; Stern 1997; Stolorow and Atwood 1992). This has resulted in the adoption of varying versions of constructivist or social-constructionist ideas. Indeed, some (Modell 1990) have referred to postmodernism’s influence as constituting a major paradigm effect. Interestingly, however, most of these authors have confined their discussions to the reality of the psychoanalytic setting, particularly that of the relationship between the analyst and the patient. Since Freud’s conception of treatment rested on the analyst’s superior view of reality through which the patient’s distortions could be corrected by interpretation, understanding the experience of both patient and analyst is an important—indeed, essential—aspect of clinical theory to address.

Narrowing the theoretical discussions of constructivism and “reality” to that of the treatment session, however, continues a lack of attention to the environment that has been characteristic of analytic theory from its outset. Freud’s positivist theory of cognition understood perception to record an accurate picture of external reality that was later distorted by affect and the drives (Schimek 1975). Thus there was no need for the therapist to know much about the patient’s external world because, once the analytic process had corrected for the distortions, the patient would be able to recover the originally correct perception. Analytic theory did include a concept of “reality-testing,” but for Freud this meant whether the person knew if the stimulus in question came from the external or the internal world, which he saw as quite different entities. In 1974, Robbins and Sadow, noting that understanding reality required far more than this, suggested that psychoanalysis needed a concept of “reality-processing,” but this has not been adopted in mainstream psychoanalytic theory.
Although many aspects of Freud’s theory have been controversial, his work has served as the model from which other theories have departed. As a result, many of Freud’s conceptions have been taken for granted in subsequent work. For example, feminists and many others have been extremely critical of the Oedipus complex, but the criticism has centered on either the sexism involved or the image of fathers as being fundamentally competitive and potentially violent toward their sons. The idea that the external world is necessarily experienced as being harsh and requiring a reluctant compliance in order to ensure survival has largely been overlooked, not discussed either to affirm or to challenge it. This book addresses the role of the environment in psychosocial functioning and psychotherapy, not in psychoanalysis, but it does draw heavily on psychoanalytic theory in its formulations. As considered here, the environment, which includes the realities of social structure and nonhuman objects as well as culture and human beings, plays a highly significant—indeed, a foundational—role in the construction of human identity. It is proposed that in the course of development, human beings first construct a picture of their immediate environment and then construct their identity within that environment. This is the reverse of Freud’s assumption that the individual first develops intrapsychically and only later is confronted with the demands of an external reality to which he or she must adapt. When taken seriously, this reversed perspective, acknowledging that the environment has a major role in psychic life, has profound implications for understanding human behavior as well as for a theory of psychotherapy.

THE PROBLEM OF THE EXTERNAL WORLD

Clinical social work, as a profession, has always believed in the importance of the environment and has regarded theories of the “person-in-situation” or the “person–environment configuration” as necessary in order to understand human needs and ways of achieving a comprehension of human beings and their experiences. Yet because paradigms of Western thought separated the individual and the environment into two quite different frameworks, it has been extremely difficult to find a viable bridge between these inner and outer aspects. Thus social work theories have espoused either an intrapsychic approach or a more social approach, with the advocates of each both criticizing and
competing with those of the other—even though both sides knew quite well that a more unified approach was really needed. Skilled practitioners in social work have found ways of taking both person and environment into account when actually dealing with clients, but doing so has been a matter of “practice wisdom,” not readily translated into a theory.

While Freud paid little attention to the nature of the external world, Hartmann (1958) developed the concept of adaptation, taken from Darwin’s theory of evolution. This perspective also has been largely taken for granted within much of object relations theory. Yet there remains a problem with Hartmann’s perspective and one of which he was aware. Hartmann knew that it was impossible to speak of adaptation unless one could specify “adaptation to what?” Unable to solve this problem satisfactorily for a theory of psychoanalytic practice, Hartmann adopted the concept of the “average expectable environment”—a solution that probably was not very defensible in Hartmann’s time, but is most assuredly not in the contemporary world of complexity and diversity. Whatever else it is, the environment today cannot be described as either average or expectable.

At first glance, it may appear that constructivism eliminates the necessity of dealing with the nature of the external world. After all, constructivism’s most fundamental postulate is that human beings cannot achieve what is sometimes called a God’s-eye view of the world, cannot know ultimate Truth. Since in postmodern theory any perspective on the external world has to be considered to be only one version of a potentially infinite number of possible perspectives, no theory of psychotherapy can claim to enable practitioners to inform patients of the “true and proper way” to deal with their problems in the world beyond the therapy setting. Further, there are theorists who believe that human beings cannot know even whether there actually is an external world, but this approach is not a very useful one for psychotherapy since clients’ problems with functioning in the environment are what has brought them to treatment.

As one of the most prominent postmodern theorists, Kenneth Gergen (1994) is highly critical of the cognitive theories that have been dominant in psychology circles in recent years as well as of claims of authority for the analyst as having superior knowledge of reality in psychoanalytic theories. Gergen calls himself a “social constructionist” and grounds his theory in a critique from postmodern literary theory that argues there is no natural relationship between words and the objects.
they represent in the external world. He then notes that words do not, in fact, capture a “true representation” of the world, although they may capture a perspective on the world that is dominant in a given culture. Gergen argues eloquently that the understanding of the world that human beings utilize is founded in social consensus and wants therapy to be understood as “enabling clients to participate in the continuous process of creating and transforming meaning” (245). Such a stance is certainly in accord with the trend toward interpersonal and/or intersubjective ideas about the relationship between analysts and their patients and with conceptions of psychotherapy as involving “the creation of meaning” (Saari 1991).

Gergen (1994) also tries very hard to avoid a theory of psychotherapy’s having any relationship to a concretely discerned environment. Noting that it is impossible for one person to know another’s experience fully, Gergen describes psychotherapy as involving “discourse about experience,” rather than experience itself (71). Such psychotherapy nevertheless involves verbal discussion, and its theory must have some way of understanding the literal content of the language used. Here Gergen indicates:

But as the emphasis shifts to the linguistic construction of reality, illnesses and problems lose ontological privilege. They cease to be “there” as constituents of an independent reality and take their place among the array of cultural constructions. Thus one may speak of problems, suffering, and alleviation, but such terms are always considered to index reality only from a particular perspective. There are no problems beyond a culture’s way of constituting them as such. (244)

But this does not avoid the problem of the therapist’s need for a view of the cultural environment in order to carry on psychotherapeutic discourse. Further, from a philosophical standpoint it is certainly true that a client’s understanding of her problems and suffering can readily be seen as representing only one particular perspective, but for that client, the problems and suffering are very real and must be considered so in any theory of psychotherapy. The need for a serious and empathic approach to the patient’s problems is one of the relatively few postulates shared by all theories of psychotherapy. Thus Gergen’s theory does not really avoid the need for an understanding of the environment, but only
requires that the therapist be aware that the meaning involved is anchored in cultural, rather than in presumed absolute, truth.

Gergen’s (1994) social-constructionist perspective, however, presents another problem for theories of psychotherapy: that of the nature of representation. Gergen relies on linguistic theory (Sausseur 1983) in his understanding of language as a system of symbols or codes that refer only to one another and do not have a privileged relationship with objects in the world. Thus words cannot accurately reflect either the external or the internal world. This is a very important claim because the ability to utilize symbols, primarily in the form of words, although not exclusively in that form, has been a centerpiece of psychoanalytic theory from its inception. Freud believed that it was the ability to link words with thought or ideas that made the difference between that which was conscious and that which was not conscious (Freud 1915/1957; Loewald 1980c). There has been a revolution in linguistic theory since Freud’s day, and there is no reason to retain Freud’s understanding of the role of language in psychotherapy, but some theory of the role of language and the symbols it provides is essential.

How is it that the individual becomes able to capture or express personal experience or meaning in a system of linguistic signs, the reference of which is based on social consensus and which derive their meaning from their relationship to other words in the lexicon? Were this not possible, surely psychotherapy would have been abandoned as worthless shortly after Freud first conceived of it. Yet there is also considerable evidence, particularly from clinical experience, that a patient can use a word, such as guilt, that is accurate in terms of its lexical definition and grammatical placement without experiencing the internal state to which it is expected to refer—the consistent use of words in this manner has been called alexithymia, which literally means “words without feelings” (Krystal 1988; Nemiah and Sifneos 1970; Saari 1991).

Nelson’s (1985) important work, on which much of the theory in this book has been based, has made it possible to reconcile both Gergen’s (1994) contention that words refer only to other words and the clinical understanding of the importance of a client’s being able to link inner experiences with words. A developmental psychologist, Nelson has formulated a tripartite theory of meaning that consists of (1) the cognitive representation of meaning for the individual, (2) the communicative context through which the meaning of a word in a specific occasion of use is determined for the individual and that person’s interactive part-
ners, and (3) the conventional meaning of a word in the lexicon and in the cultural community at large. Children first learn the use of a word from others in their immediate environment, then come to establish a cognitive referent for the word, and finally learn the interrelationships that the word has within the system of linguistic symbols used in their culture. I have hypothesized elsewhere (Saari 1991) that psychopathology can be seen to involve these three aspects of meaning differentially. Nelson would agree with Gergen that the acquisition of this tripartite meaning system depends on social interactions. Yet Nelson’s theory does make the assumption of an existing external world.

Current psychoanalytic theories are similarly unable to avoid the need for a conception of environment. For example, Hoffman (1998), who is probably the most scholarly constructivist among analytic theorists, indicates in a footnote that he disagrees with Gergen’s and other theorists’ view that reality is “only a function of social consensus” (xxiii). Hoffman does not, however, proceed to discuss how he does view reality. Moore (1999), however, points out that psychoanalysis can hardly expect to help patients with their everyday problems while maintaining a solipsistic view of reality and is quite explicit about the need for an understanding of the nature of the environment within psychoanalytic theory:

The shift in focus referred to is the by now familiar one away from the evaluation of subjective experience by an objective reality and toward the acceptance of subjective experience as the sole experience of reality to which psychoanalysis has access. Once this shift is accepted, it remains necessary to select from a variety of ways to regard the existence of an external world. Without this selection, no shared theoretical frame of reference for a constructivist psychoanalysis is possible. Construction must be of something, else there is no contextual framework for subjectivity. (139)

Moore, however, then basically sidesteps the problem of that external world by defining the world external to subjectivity as “potential experience” (140). Some years ago, Von Bertalanffy (1968) said that in order to be useful in adaptive behavior human conceptions of the world need not be exact: “It is sufficient that a certain degree of isomorphism exists between the experienced world and the ‘real’ world, so that the experience can guide the organism in such way as to preserve its existence”
Nevertheless, more attention needs to be paid to conceptualizations of person–environment interactions and their effects than has been done so far. Three major psychoanalytic writers have paid more attention to the role of the external environment than has usually been the case: Harold F. Searles, Donald W. Winnicott, and Hans W. Loewald.

SEARLES’S NONHUMAN ENVIRONMENT

HAROLD F. SEARLES (1960), who was known primarily for his highly skilled work with psychotic patients, devoted an entire book to the environment before the time of postmodernism’s influence on analytic theory:

The thesis of this volume is that the nonhuman environment, far from being of little or no account to human personality development, constitutes one of the most basically important ingredients of human psychological existence. It is my conviction that there is within the human individual a sense, whether at a conscious or unconscious level, of relatedness to his nonhuman environment, [and] that this relatedness is one of the transcendentally important facts of human living [italics in original]. (6)

Searles (1960) documented numerous instances in which the environment plays an important role in human life, including concern for pets and the use of similes and metaphors referring to the environment in Romantic poetry. He also said that Harry Stack Sullivan had considered the human being as a part of the world of culture, but that he was saying that humans are “an indissoluble part of the fabric of all created matter” (23). Searles indicated that the nonhuman world makes significant contributions to healthy development through (1) a sense of stability and continuity of experience; (2) the provision of a practice-ground in which the child can develop useful capacities for later interactions in interpersonal relationships; (3) a place in which to find “peace, stability, and companionship at times when his interpersonal relationships are filled with anxiety and loneliness”; (4) the ability to see, in relation to the nonanimate environment, that he is “in various ways powerful, but not omnipotent”; and (5) the ability to create a mature sense of being distinctively human as a part of the natural world (78–99).
In relation to severe pathology, Searles (1960) said:

I have repeatedly gotten the impression in clinical work that to the seriously ill patient the threat of impending psychosis, for example, conveys terror not merely in that it will bring with it bizarre and frightening and confusing experiences (hallucinations, delusional distortions in his perception of himself and other persons, and so on), but that it will mean the loss of familiar relationships with other persons (family members at home, co-workers, and so on) and of the familiar nonhuman environment [italics in original]. (19–20)

WINNICOTT’S CONCEPT OF TRANSITIONAL PHENOMENA

The second writer who paid unusual attention to the environment is Donald W. Winnicott, who indicated in the introduction to Playing and Reality (1971a) that “cultural experience has not found its true place in the theory used by analysts in their work and in their thinking” (xi). Winnicott proposed that there are three areas of experiencing: an objective view of the external world, a subjective inner world, and a third area that is located between these first two:

It is usual to refer to “reality-testing,” and to make a clear distinction between apperception and perception. I am here staking a claim for an intermediate state between the baby’s inability and his growing ability to recognize and accept reality. I am therefore studying the substance of illusion, that which is allowed to the infant, and which in adult life is inherent in art and religion, and yet becomes the hallmark of madness when an adult puts too powerful a claim on the credulity of others, forcing them to acknowledge a sharing of illusion that is not their own [italics in original]. (3)

Winnicott’s work as both a pediatrician and a psychoanalyst in a hospital in the impoverished East End of London surely brought him into close contact with harsh realities. He refers to “overcrowding, starvation, infestation, the constant threat from physical disease and disaster and from the laws promulgated by a benevolent society” as “the common persecutions” (1971a:142).

Winnicott, however, did not just see the environment as harsh,
although he knew that even the best of mothers inevitably falls short of meeting all her infant’s needs. When the mother fails, the infant must seek soothing elsewhere and ordinarily encounters useful inanimate objects in the environment, such as a blanket or soft toy, that are more subject to the child’s wishes since they have no desires of their own. The infant then can use her own creativity to imbue the object with the soothing qualities of the mother. Henceforth this “transitional object” can be used for consolation whenever the mother is not available. Winnicott’s major focus is on the ability of the infant to use environmental objects for play and for creativity. Reality for Freud had a somewhat static as well as a rational character, and the goal of treatment was to liberate human beings from illusion, but, as Greenberg and Mitchell (1983:201) have indicated, Winnicott emphasized almost the precise opposite—a freedom to create illusion.

Winnicott also located culture within the realm of the third area of experiencing, but at times seems to mean the “high culture” of art and religion rather than the everyday culture that directs the mundane activities of life. At other times, he talks of the third area of experiencing as entirely individual. Referring to objective external reality and psychic reality, he said: “By contrast with these, I suggest that the area available for manoeuvre, in terms of the third way of living (where there is cultural experience or creative playing) is extremely variable between individuals. This is because the third area is a product of the experiences of the individual person (baby, child, adolescent, adult) in the environment that obtains” (1971a:107). At still other times, culture for Winnicott seems to involve something more like the human meaning system stressed in postmodern theories:

I have used the term cultural experience as an extension of the idea of transitional phenomena and of play without being certain that I can define the word culture. The accent indeed is on experience. In using the word culture I am thinking of the inherited tradition. I am thinking of something that is in the common pool of humanity, into which individuals and groups of people may contribute, and from which we all may draw if we have somewhere to put what we find [italics in original]. (99)

The place to which Winnicott referred in the italicized section of the quotation is what he called “potential space” between the infant and the
mother, a space that exists if the mother is able to respond to the baby’s needs and the two can be “alone together.” Winnicott’s third world of experiencing clearly has roots in social interaction.

For Winnicott, the environment could have negative influences through “environmental impingements” or interferences with the infant’s quiescent states by demanding that the infant pay attention to the needs of the caretaker. Such impingements, if characteristic of the relationship between the caretaking environment and the infant, were expected to result in developmental impediments and ultimately in the creation of a pathologic false self, which would serve to protect the true self but could prevent the individual from having a connection with a sense of aliveness and creativity in life. If, however, the mother could allow the child the freedom to play and to create illusion while being protected from such impingements, the development of a true self would be nourished. Winnicott called the facilitating environment that the mother could create for her infant the “holding environment,” and then extended these ideas to the environment of the treatment setting by seeing that also as ideally a holding environment.

Winnicott noted both objective external reality and inner psychic reality, but his investment was in the third area of experiencing. There remains a vagueness to the way in which this third area is described—perhaps even almost a mystical character. The engaging manner in which Winnicott described these ideas enhances this character, conveying to the reader that this vagueness is intended and that the third area of experiencing is not to be measured by objectivist, hard science standards. Here, Winnicott, perhaps unknowingly, presaged contemporary theory in both its constructivist and its intersubjectivist turns.

The realms in which Winnicott’s ideas about the environment have been useful are far too extensive to take note of here, although they range from the field of child welfare, in which he was an expert, to that of working with elderly nursing home patients who need to retain treasured objects from their home environments in order to maintain contact with a sense of self. Neil Altman’s book *The Analyst in the Inner City* (1995) deserves special note as a fine examination of the influence of the environment on psychodynamic psychotherapy in public mental health clinics. Altman does not directly cite Winnicott as a source in his formulation of what he describes as a “three-person” model for treatment: the client, the therapist, and the culture. Yet Winnicott’s ideas are so close to some of Altman’s that it would be hard to believe that the
existent formulation of Winnicott’s third area of experiencing did not have at least some influence in Altman’s work.

There have, of course, been some criticisms of Winnicott’s work. Lorenzor and Orban (1978), for example, indicated that “the inner and outer do not make up this intermediate area; instead they differentiate themselves out of it [italics in original]” (475).

It is for a closer look at a conception of this possibility that we now turn to Loewald’s work.

LOEWALD’S VIEW OF EGO AND REALITY

HANS W. LOEWALD’s work was influenced by the ideas of the philosopher Martin Heidegger, who posited, among other things, that the truth of a text is in the interaction between that text and its reader—a precursor to the concept of intersubjectivity (the meaning created in the interaction between two people). Heidegger also saw mind and world as fundamentally inseparable. Loewald’s work is, therefore, closer to postmodernism than is the work of other psychoanalysts of his time. In one of his earliest papers, Loewald (1980a) criticized Freud’s view of reality as a harsh external world to which the individual must adapt. He noted that Freud’s view of reality implies a “fundamental antagonism” (3) between human beings and reality, something he did not believe to be the case:

Ego, id and external reality become distinguishable in their most primitive, germinal stages. This state of affairs can be expressed either by saying that “the ego detaches itself from the external world,” or, more correctly: the ego detaches from itself an outer world. Originally the ego contains everything. Our adult ego feeling, Freud says, is only a shrunken vestige of an all-embracing feeling of intimate connection, or, we might say, unity with the environment. (5)

In other words, the psychological constitution of ego and outer world go hand in hand.

In “Ego and Reality” (1980a), Loewald was addressing primarily the experience of schizophrenic individuals. He pointed out that, because the ego and reality develop together out of a state of primary narcissism,
a loss of reality is always also a loss of ego. For this reason, Loewald asserted, the ego need not defend itself from reality, but from the loss of reality. Actually, human beings do at times need to defend themselves from reality, as Freud (1920) recognized in his formulations regarding signal anxiety. Yet, as Loewald pointed out, the threat of the loss of a sense of reality is more fundamental, far more disturbing to human functioning than any threat that is experienced as existing in that reality. Searle's (1960) clinical work, documented in *The Non-Human Environment*, illustrated patients suffering from severe mental illness who either had little ability to comprehend the features of their environment or experienced themselves as little different from the nonhuman aspects of their environment. Human beings need an understanding of their surroundings and an explanation for why events in that reality occur. Indeed, if there is no apparent cause or organization in the environment, humans will make one up and use it even if they know that aspects of this understanding are not quite correct. We cannot survive psychologically without such an understanding.

Loewald (1980c) also believed that there are different levels of organization and differentiation of ego/reality functioning that occur as successive stages during the course of a child’s development. Severe regression, as occurs in a psychotic breakdown, is the result of a regression of the organization of ego and reality in which the boundary between the two became fused. Interestingly, however, Loewald saw psychic health not as residing at a pinnacle of differentiation from reality, but as resulting from an ability to draw on, flexibly and harmoniously, all the different levels of ego/reality organization in accordance with the nature of the task at hand. Like Winnicott, Loewald understood psychological health to be something more than Freud’s rationality.

Reality for Loewald (1980c) also was not the static concept of an average expectable environment, but was conceived of as dynamic:

The psychoanalytic investigation and understanding of ego development and ego structure, as it progresses, will also lay the foundations for an understanding of the dynamic nature of reality. The clearer the distinction between integration as such and defensive types of integration becomes, the more apparent also will be the difference between the idea of an alien, hostile reality (a finished product imposed on the unsuspecting infant from there on and forever after) and the integrated, dynamic reality (forever unfinished).
on the elaboration and organization of which we spend our lives.

The integration of ego and reality for Loewald, therefore, becomes a far more complex relationship than is seen in other psychoanalytic theories.

THE PLAN OF THE BOOK

FOLLOWING THIS INTRODUCTION, the text is separated into three parts, each containing three chapters. Eight of the nine chapters include case illustrations.

Part 1 discusses psychoanalytic and developmental theory, showing that such theory ordinarily has assumed the existence of an environment, but the role of the environment has been taken for granted and therefore unexamined. Concepts of affect, cognition, language and meaning, and culture and identity—as these are understood from a postmodern perspective—are discussed, with a focus on the place of the environment in each. Theories of attachment, social referencing, event representation, and linguistic theories are used in these discussions. Part 1 comes to the conclusion that the environment is so significant to human functioning that a person must first construct an understanding of the immediately surrounding environment before he or she can construct a personal identity.

Part 1 ends with the introduction of Michel Foucault’s theory of social control, which becomes the theoretical framework for part 2. Foucault saw psychoanalysis as a mechanism through which the dominant power system could perpetuate itself through the creation of subjectivities. Here, however, I argue that psychotherapy can either dominate or liberate the client, and the three chapters of part 2 focus on ways in which this can occur. Apart from issues of social control, this discussion must be central to current theories of psychotherapy because, once interpretation to a known truth has been disavowed theoretically, some understanding of how to judge what content is therapeutic and what is potentially damaging becomes essential.

Building on the conclusions reached in part 2, part 3 focuses more directly on the implications of an inclusion of environmental considerations for the practice of psychotherapy. These chapters focus on the con-
cordance, or therapeutic culture, created jointly by the client and the therapist, on the importance of the relationship for treatment, and on the place of language and symbolization for treatment.

Finally, in a conclusion, I give additional consideration to a theory of psychotherapy that takes the environment seriously—in particular, a unified theory for all modalities of treatment (individual, couple, family, and group)—and to a theory of the effects of social repression.