

# The Sociocultural Turn in Psychology

## *An Introduction and an Invitation*

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In recent years constitutive sociocultural perspectives have become increasingly visible and influential within psychology. Such perspectives envision psychological processes, such as the mind and the self, as phenomena that are socioculturally constituted—that is, actually made up within, as opposed to merely facilitated by, culture and society. These constitutive approaches to psychology understand cognition, emotion, memory, identity, personality, and other psychological constructs as relational entities that emerge out of interactions with others within a sociocultural context. Moreover, the perspectives included under this rubric all have a cultural-historical aspect that moves consideration of the sociocultural beyond the immediate interpersonal and social situation.

Constitutive sociocultural approaches have been articulated over the past several decades by a diverse group of psychologists and social researchers whose work has emphasized, in various ways, the inseparability of the psychological and sociocultural realms. These researchers include Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), Jerome Bruner (1990), Roy D'Andrade (1990), Pierre Dasen (1977), Yrjö Engeström (1990), Jacqueline Goodnow (Goodnow, Miller, and Kessel 1995), Patricia Greenfield (1984), Sara Harkness (Harkness and Super 1992), Edward Hutchins (1991), Vera John-Steiner (1985), Shinobu Kitayama (Markus and Kitayama 1991), Jean Lave (1988),

Hazel Markus (Markus and Kitayama 1991), Carl Ratner (2002), Barbara Rogoff (2003), Geoffrey Saxe (1991), Sylvia Scribner (Scribner and Cole 1981), Robert Serpell (1976), Richard Shweder (1990), James Stigler (Stigler, Lee, and Stevenson 1990), Charles Super (1981), Michael Tomasello (1999), Jaan Valsiner (1998), Dan Wagner (1993), James Wertsch (1998), Sheldon White (Cahan and White 1992), and many others (including the contributors to this current volume). At this writing, several major psychology journals (including *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, *Theory & Psychology*, *Culture & Psychology*, *Narrative Inquiry*, and *Subjectivity*) regularly publish work in sociocultural psychology that adopts constitutive, strongly relational perspectives. Moreover, many colleges and universities now offer courses in fields such as cultural psychology and narrative psychology; a growing number of graduate programs even afford students the opportunity to specialize in sociocultural theories and methods. Beyond psychology, these types of contemporary sociocultural approaches to psychological phenomena and issues are currently being applied widely in education, social work, psychotherapy, business, nursing, language instruction and learning, and many other areas (e.g., Hoshmand 2006; John-Steiner, Panofsky, and Smith 1994; Kozulin 1998).

However, sociocultural perspectives are by no means new. Even constitutive sociocultural approaches, such as those presented in this volume, have deep roots in several classical and early modern intellectual traditions. Richard Sorabji (2006) has recently pointed out that the ancient Greeks tended to a view of self and self-knowledge as relational not only by means of their connection to the cosmos, but also, more specifically, by means of the self's connection to social others. In contrast to the detached, inner "cogito" of Augustine and Descartes, Plato held that self-knowledge is hard to attain, and that seeing our selves reflected in others is often the best source of such understanding. Indeed, it was largely for this reason that Aristotle extolled the value of friendship, for it is through friendship that one comes to perceive and know both others and one's self, and is able to enter into the greater good.

Although many scholars (e.g., Guignon 2004; Taylor 1989) have correctly associated much Enlightenment and Romantic thought with a deeply interior, reflective, and ruminating conception of the psychological person (the infamous Cartesian self dwelling in splendid isolation from the world and others), it would be a mistake to think that relational and cultural-historical conceptions of psychological persons did not permeate much Western Enlightenment, Romantic, and modern thought prior to

the founding of disciplinary psychology toward the end of the nineteenth century. The work of eighteenth-century theorist Giambattista Vico (2000) is often cited as an important precursor to such approaches. But as Jerrold Seigel (2005) convincingly demonstrates, Vico was not unique in exploring the sociocultural sources of mind and self. John Locke, and especially his successors David Hume (see also Murray 1993) and Adam Smith, actively sought a philosophy of psychology that emphasized the importance of “points of attachment offered by life with others” (Seigel 2005:43). Seigel cautions us not to confuse the recognition that modern psychology requires individuals themselves to participate in their own self-formation with the idea that modern individuals can look only to themselves to give their psychological lives coherence and stability. Indeed, a long line of Anglo-American and Continental thinkers have held that our social relations with others have primacy with respect to our psychological existence, being an indispensably necessary source for our thinking about the world and ourselves. Such individuals include not only the English descendants of Locke, but also many German scholars (e.g., Herder, Fichte, Hegel) who stressed our dependence on social and material existence, even as they advocated that knowledge of the self could serve as a model of the world. French-speaking thinkers, too (e.g., Diderot, Rousseau, Constant), recognized the inescapable influence of social forces on our psychological lives, even while cautioning that we must shield ourselves from some of society’s more oppressive and distorting powers.

In fact, during and immediately following the founding of disciplinary psychology, this type of sociocultural and relational thinking was common to the thought of several influential psychologists and other seminal figures of early twentieth-century social thought. These include the experimental and social psychologist Wilhelm Wundt (1900–1920), developmental psychologists James Mark Baldwin (1897, 1911) and Heinz Werner (1948), psychiatrist Pierre Janet (1925, 1929), cultural-historical psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978, 1986), social psychologist George Herbert Mead (1934), philosopher John Dewey (1939, 1987), sociologist Charles Cooley (1925), and many others. Later influences on sociocultural thought in psychology and social science more generally included the works of philosophers Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953), Hans-Georg Gadamer (1995), and Charles Taylor (1989); poststructuralist theorists Jacques Derrida (1978) and Michel Foucault (1980); and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1986). The work of sociocultural psychologists is also related to other traditions in Euro-American social theory and philosophy, including those originating

from the structuralist sociology of Emile Durkheim (Durkheim 1973; Mauss 1985; Durkheim and Mauss 1967) and Pierre Bourdieu (1972), the interpretive sociology of Max Weber (1958) and Clifford Geertz (1971), and even earlier contributions by Karl Marx, Wilhelm Dilthey, and others.

Since the middle of the twentieth century, there have been influential intellectual developments in sociology and anthropology that parallel or complement the sociocultural psychologies included in this book. In sociology, the writings of Erving Goffman (1959) and the ethnomethodologists (Garfinkel 1991) are relevant, along with that of contemporary theorists such as Judith Butler (2006). In psychological anthropology, the “cultural psychology” movement (Shweder 1990, 1991; Shore 1996; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain 2001) has helped to legitimize a view of persons as being constitutively intertwined with their cultural surround. Currently there is also a renewed interest on the part of cultural anthropologists in theorizing a socioculturally constituted subjectivity (Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007). Such a move is partly a reaction against the tendency among anthropologists and social theorists, during the past few decades, to give relatively short shrift to subjective experience, dismissing it as relatively unimportant or even epiphenomenal (Fox Keller 2007).

Nonetheless, despite a long history and the backing of so many influential scholars, sociocultural, relational approaches remain underdeveloped in psychology. This is especially the case for those perspectives that adopt a strongly constitutive stance that understands psychological phenomena (such as mind, self, and agency) to be “made up” from and largely to consist in the taking up of historically and culturally established forms of social practice, interaction, and coordinated conduct. For despite a promising beginning that followed the founding of disciplinary psychology, constitutive sociocultural theorizing in psychology per se was overcome, for the most part, by the new discipline’s longing for scientific credibility, a desire that took the form of powerful methodological commitments to objectivist theories of knowledge (Bernstein 1983), operational definitions, and quantified measurements. Such ways of framing the subject matter and procedures of psychology left little room for the study of complex social and cultural phenomena and processes that could not easily be molded to fit such methodological penchants, at least as practiced by new generations of self-proclaimed psychological scientists.

However, by the last decades of the twentieth century, it was clear to most observers that the sociocultural, relational side of psychological sci-

ence had been neglected to the extent that psychology was beginning to suffer from a detachment from the social, historical, cultural, and political contexts of human life. This detachment made many of its findings and prescriptions seem overly simplistic, excessively instrumental (even market driven, in a manner consistent with a technological, “quick fix” mentality), and only marginally connected to the real struggles and challenges of contemporary existence. The present volume deals specifically with the sociocultural turn in contemporary psychology that materialized during the final decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the new century. During the past two decades in particular, various psychologists have further developed sociocultural visions of human nature and social life as means of exploring phenomena conventionally considered “psychological,” and have done so along several distinctive lines. This book brings together the work of a number of these distinguished contemporary psychological theorists, who are the architects of many of the most influential current sociocultural perspectives. Their work is divided into four types: social constructionism/discursive psychology, hermeneutics, dialogical psychology, and activity theory.

For a number of reasons, both principled and pragmatic, we have limited the contents of this collection in two ways. First, unlike some types of psychology that study social and cultural influences on the mind, self, or development, the approaches contained herein do not conceive of self, mind, emotion, identity, and other psychological entities as variables that fluctuate systematically according to the effects of a particular context or environment or set of relationships. Rather, all of the perspectives included here take a more radical approach, framing these entities as emergent phenomena that are in no sense “prior” to their sociocultural surround. While there are undoubtedly additional influential theorists whose work also reflects this vision (e.g., Bickhard 2008; Slife 2004), the group included here is a good representative sample of such approaches. Second, we have chosen to include only those constitutive sociocultural approaches that were developed primarily in academic settings (although some of the approaches included here also are widely used in applied contexts, e.g., by psychotherapists and educators). Hence, we have not included relational psychoanalytic approaches (Stolorow, Brandschaft, and Atwood 2000; Stolorow and Atwood 2002; Mitchell and Aron 1999), even though they too envision the distinctive qualities of self and other as emerging out of a relational field. We have made this choice in part because these approaches often make use of metapsychological concepts

and language that are not widely known or used, even by those psychologists who are familiar with sociocultural approaches.

Although this volume is thus not intended to be a comprehensive collection of all contemporary psychological theorists and approaches that might be called “sociocultural,” even according to our definition of the term, it does provide an introduction to many of the most prominent and influential contemporary sociocultural perspectives. In the chapters that follow, each theorist discusses in depth his or her vision of how the mind or self emerges out of social life, and the type of research that is made possible by such an approach.

These four families of sociocultural perspectives do not espouse a single, unified vision. As the reader of this book will discover, they diverge from one another in some significant ways; even those authors grouped together under a single approach evince important differences among themselves. However, in this introductory chapter we focus mainly on what these authors—be they discursivist, hermeneutic, dialogical, or activity theorists—do hold in common, as well as the ways in which their approaches complement one another. In highlighting these overarching commonalities, we also make clear the ways in which all these approaches pose challenges to “conventional” or “mainstream” approaches to understanding and studying psychological phenomena. We discuss below three themes-and-variations that run through virtually all of the contributions to this volume: (1) undoing dualisms, (2) the emergence of agency, and (3) psychology as a human science (metatheoretical and methodological implications). We then briefly discuss some points of divergence, and end with an invitation to consider the current relevance of constitutive sociocultural perspectives within the broader context of contemporary psychology.<sup>1</sup>

## Undoing Dualisms

Constitutive sociocultural approaches frame psychological phenomena in ways that call into question, and at least partly dissolve, conventionally theorized bifurcations that lie at the heart of much work in psychology. Such dualisms include the divides between the self and society, and between the individual and culture. Some of these authors frame such bifurcations in alternative terms: organism and environment, inner/private experience and outer/public action, or self and (both particular and generalized) others. Whatever terms are used, the conceptualization

of subjectivity as emerging out of “otherness,” and as enduringly permeated by it, is significantly different from how the subject is conceived in much psychological theory and research; the latter tends to frame mental phenomena as being (in the words of Harré, this volume): “*all and only* attributes of individual persons.”

Constitutive sociocultural approaches problematize “self-contained” conceptions of the mind in a variety of ways. Thus, for discursivist/constructionists Shotter and Gergen—both strongly influenced by the later Wittgenstein—mind and self are discursive formations that emerge within a relational field of “joint action.” The most extreme articulation of this notion of mind as a strategic performance is Gergen’s; he believes that relationship is prior to essence, and argues that what we describe as the self or mind, along with its contents (emotions, thoughts, motives), only takes form within the context of a relational configuration. For him, when a person articulates such states, it is primarily a performative act, rather than expressive of some deep psychic interiority. The radical implication of this is that psychological research should be transformed into the study of social coordination and the ongoing relational construction of meaning. Like Gergen, Shotter emphasizes that we use our words (including our words about thoughts and feelings) to do things. Thus he too is concerned with the performative aspect of people’s utterances, expressive behaviors, and responsive reactions. He also highlights the fact that since no two relational contexts are exactly alike, the (socially constructed) meanings generated in a given context are invariably going to be local and somewhat situation-specific. However, unlike Gergen, he does not aim to entirely jettison the notion of mind as interiority, or the study of how a self develops its distinctive and enduring tendencies.

Sociocultural psychologists do not only analyze psychological discourse’s local and performative dimensions. They also study the ways in which the mind is constituted by more enduring cultural symbols and traditions, as well as by the relations of power within a society. In their chapter on the construction of gender identity, Magnusson and Marecek highlight the fact that the discursive construction of the individual involves both local/pragmatic interactions and performances, and institutionalized/epistemic (Foucault 1971) symbols and narratives. Discourse, as it is used in the latter sense, constructs more formal systems of knowledge that both produce and limit individuals’ dispositions to act in particular ways. Magnusson and Marecek analyze aspects of “masculinity” and “femininity” that are often considered to be rooted in universal, probably biological,

tendencies, and argue that they are actually configured by the sociocultural understandings shared by an entire community or society. These horizons of understanding, or structures of knowledge, set boundaries and limits on what can be conceived as “real,” producing some distinctive realities and identities, and prohibiting others. Magnusson and Marecek, like many of the contributors to this book, are interested not only in the particular performances and activities authorized by discourse; they are interested also in how discourse engenders our experience of ourselves.

In thus facilitating analytic distance from what are generally considered (by psychologists as well as laypersons) to be taken-for-granted, essential realities, sociocultural approaches can illuminate the contingent nature of such socially produced identities. This, in turn, can lead to a recognition of the ways in which some of these identified “differences”—not only gender, but also race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation—reproduce and further extend relationships of inequality within a society. Thus sociocultural approaches can lead us to frame subjectivity as what Magnusson and Marecek call “subjectification.” This term refers to the ways in which relations of unequal social and political power are not necessarily imposed from without, but relate to gender, class, ethnic, and other aspects of identity.

The dialogical psychologist Bhatia also argues for a more critical, self-consciously “transnational” sociocultural psychology, one that takes up issues of race, oppression, and power in the context of conflicting and contested perspectives on both culture and identity. In addition, Bhatia’s analysis highlights the fluidity of identity—both self-identification and the (not unrelated) ways in which one is identified by others in one’s society or community. In so doing, he makes explicit some fundamental complexities inherent in the concept and politics of identity itself. His analysis of the ways in which South Asian immigrants to North America evolve complex self-understandings in an equally complex and changing social field demonstrates how identity (and thus subjectivity itself) must be understood in terms of the interplay between self-identification and the ways in which one is identified (and thus “othered”) by others. The identities of these postcolonial immigrants are revealed as transnational, hybrid, fluid, multivocal subjectivities that embody internal (and external) conversations and dialectics between oppression and resistance.

Reflected in such critical work is the basic idea that the sociocultural constitution of self and mind can be studied in terms of how an individual’s sense of identity, and related phenomena such as memory and emo-



tion, are patterned in terms of cultural narratives, symbols, and practices. The work of hermeneuticists Richardson and Fowers, along with that of Freeman, makes clear how cultural and historical forms shape psychological processes that are generally considered to be private, original, and (in many cases) unique. These theorists draw on ontological hermeneutics (the work of philosophers Heidegger, Gadamer, Taylor, and Ricoeur) to articulate a conception of human beings as, first and foremost, meaning-makers—self-interpreting beings who strive to make sense of themselves and the world, and whose interpretations always possess an evaluative dimension. According to hermeneuticists, humans' self-interpretations are derived from a shared background of meanings; thus subjectivity is constituted in terms of the cultural surround of beliefs and "visions of the good" into which one is born. In his work on cultural narrative and memory, Freeman offers some provocative illustrations of the ways in which psychological processes that are generally framed and studied as private and original can be fruitfully understood as culturally and historically constituted. He explores the "faux" autobiography of "Benjamin Wilkomirski," a pseudo-survivor of the Holocaust, and some early stories written by Helen Keller, to argue that both autobiographical memory and literary creation may be (and perhaps inevitably are) unwittingly emplotted in terms of a "narrative unconscious" that is laced with cultural and historical symbols.

As a number of these sociocultural theorists point out, the subject is not constituted by just one cultural discourse, or by a single relationship, but rather by a multiplicity of these sources of "otherness." Hermans and Salgado's chapter on the dialogical approach elaborates a model of thought in which both (internalized representations of) actual and imagined others populate the self. By exploring the dynamics of the relationship between these different inner others, sociocultural psychologists can study how the self is configured, how it develops over time, and how personality change might be facilitated (e.g., in psychotherapy) by means of modifying the relative prominence and influence of various inner voices. Moreover, in a world typified by increasing globalization and intercultural engagement, some sociocultural psychologists (e.g., Bhatia and Hermans and Salgado, this volume) have begun to theorize ways in which different cultural selves (or at least self positions), and dialogues among them, now often exist within the same person. Bhatia even points toward a radical retheorizing of concepts such as "culture, identity, diversity, and difference" based on this new understanding of the emerging global context. Of particular interest is the way in which these scholars continue to assert

the possibility of a substantial selfhood, possessed of an agency that matters, even within all of this multicultural multiplicity and fluidity. Where some others worry about fragmentation and displacement, they see exciting possibilities for truly transformative personal/cultural symbioses. Indeed, emphasis on such symbiotic dynamics is symptomatic of the broader assumption, apparently shared by many contributors to this volume, that persons and their societies are continuously emergent within an ongoing co-constitutive process. Nonetheless, exactly how this process of co-constitution is parsed differs across the sociocultural approaches considered, with different contributors making more or less of various social and psychological distinctions between persons and their contexts.

The formation of the mind through the internalization of cultural and sociohistorical “otherness” is also explored by the activity theorists Cole and Gajdamaschko and Stetsenko and Arieviditch. These authors draw upon and further develop the framework of Lev Vygotsky (1978, 1986), who was one of the most influential early sociocultural psychologists. Vygotsky advanced a view of the person as socially constructed through interactions with others. For Vygotsky, the crucial step in the social formation of the person involved the acquisition of capabilities of self-expression and self-reference. The psychological tools and discursive skills required for such capabilities develop in interaction with others already skilled in speaking and acting within relevant social contexts and linguistic (and other relational) practices. In this context, whenever the infant appears to attempt some intentional act, adults or older children supplement its efforts by interpreting and reacting to the child’s actions in ways that initiate the child into the social, linguistic practices and artifacts of the society. In this way, the unordered mental activity with which infants are neurophysiologically endowed evolves into the structured patterns of mature minds. Along with such socially sponsored development, the child acquires those discursive references, and linguistically mediated means for responding to its own activity, that permit it to experience and act in the world as an individual self.

At a more general level, Vygotsky (1978, 1986) distinguished human beings from other animals in terms of the making and use of tools that have radically altered their conditions of existence and their psychological makeup. Such tools are socially spawned cultural artifacts that include not only material creations such as rakes and utensils but, more importantly, social practices and language (the “tool of tools”). Such tools mediate between the functional capacities and capabilities of tool users and their tasks and goals. In this sense, culture encompasses the pool of arti-

facts and practices accumulated by a social group during the course of its historical development. Human phylogeny, history, and ontogeny were understood by Vygotsky to turn respectively on the appearance of tool use among our primate ancestors, the emergence of labor and symbolic mediation in human history, and the acquisition of language as a transformative tool of individual development within a sociocultural context.

Cultural-historical activity theorists (CHAT) Stetsenko and Arieviditch use an approach that is at once materialist and nondualist (yet also nonreductionist) by proposing that the mind exists at the “organism-environment nexus, rather than in organisms taken in isolation [from the environment].” Using the Soviet psychologist Galperin’s metaphor of mind as “object-related action,” they explore how the mind develops out of collaborative participation in goal-directed activities. Human subjectivity emerges out of such cooperative activity; at the same time, the mind that is thereby constituted plays an active role in constructing and reconstructing the world out of which it has emerged.

Yet another feature of the erosion of dualistic thinking evident in the various contributions to this volume is a tendency to consider persons acting in the world as the basic focus (unit of analysis) of psychological theorizing. Compared to most extant work in psychology, the reader will encounter relatively little in the way of “subpersonal” talk about brains doing things, emotions taking over, or attributions to particular cognitive abilities, personality factors, or neurophysiological mechanisms. Indeed, the holism evident in these sociocultural, constitutive accounts is highly reminiscent of that found in an earlier generation of sociogenetic thinkers (including Janet, Baldwin, Mead, and Vygotsky) in the first few decades of the twentieth century (see Valsiner and van der Veer 2000). To paraphrase Bennett and Hacker (2003), it is persons who think and act, not their various parts, as vitally required as these may be. None of this is to deny the importance (indeed the necessity) of our bodies, brains, and psychological capabilities to our worldly functioning—rather, it is to remind us that the primary object of psychological study is the person acting within the biophysical and sociocultural world.

## The Emergence of Agency

If the self emerges out of its sociocultural contexts, then a major challenge arises: how are we to account for agency? If relational

configurations, social structures, and cultural discourses constitute the self, then how are we to account for human beings' capacity to appraise, choose, resist, and innovate? How does the self position herself in relation to her external and internalized constituents such that she can affect her environment as much as the environment affects her? This issue is often framed in psychology as the problem of determinism (Slife 1994; Robinson 1985), and in sociology as that of structure versus agency (Giddens 1984). In psychology, determinism has not necessarily been considered something to be avoided. After all, the explicit goal of many psychologists has been (and continues to be) to predict and control behavior, and the existence of human freedom calls into question the viability of such a project. Yet in spite of such a widespread commitment to determinism, many applications of psychological theory and research in education, psychotherapy, and numerous other social institutions and situations tend to assume (at least tacitly) that human beings are capable of making choices and responding in creative and unforeseeable ways, and of asserting themselves in thought and action to improve their own lives and those of others. The general failure of disciplinary and professional psychology to reconcile the strongly deterministic, and sometimes reductive, assumptions of traditional psychological research with the seeming necessity of human agency demanded by the professional ministrations of psychologists stands as one of the most obvious difficulties currently faced by contemporary psychology and psychologists (Martin, Sugarman, and Thompson 2003). For without a viable, nonreductive, yet nonmysterious conception of human agency, psychology lacks the theoretical resources necessary to support not only its claims with respect to application and relevance, but also its status as the social science primarily concerned with an understanding of human experience and action. Even the word "action" denotes a kind of agentive intentionality that seems missing from much contemporary theory and inquiry in the discipline.

The sociocultural theorists included in this book mostly insist that meaningful human activity and experience are emergent levels of reality that cannot be reduced to a set of biological underpinnings, and therefore are not fully explicable in terms of mechanistic, cause-and-effect dynamics. They are equally adamant that the sociocultural perspective not lead to determinism of a sociological sort. That is, these theorists eschew a model of subjectivity in which the person is regarded as what Garfinkel (1991) called a "cultural dope"—someone whose mind is conceived as a passive recipient and regurgitator of relational scripts, social-structural forces,

and cultural ideologies. Having said this, it must be noted that at least one contributor to the current volume, Kenneth Gergen, advocates a radically reformulated understanding of human emancipation that attempts to do away with the problem of agency altogether by diverting the field of inquiry away from individuals and interiority of any kind and toward social relational dynamics that are always ongoing, radically contingent, and shifting in ways that prevent any possibility of unambiguous, once-and-for-all answers either to our existence or to our condition.

Given their anti-deterministic commitments, it is hardly surprising that many of the sociocultural theorists represented here are explicit and emphatic about the possibility of human freedom and agency. Indeed, the matter of moral agency has been a mainstay of sociogenetic thought in psychology both currently and in the past (Valsiner and van der Veer 2000). Thus, for example, Magnusson and Marecek assert that, while hegemonic discourses of masculinity and femininity produce, and are reproduced by, individual identities, it is nonetheless true that “people are active agents who—although invited into certain subject positions by societal forces and conversational interventions—constantly navigate and negotiate these positions in order to relocate themselves in positions they find comfortable.” They remind us that in social life, “people may take up a subject position or refuse it; they might take it up but enact it ironically.” Similarly, hermeneuticists and dialogical theorists emphasize an agency that originates in the necessity of our acting. Because we have no choice but to act, we make use of whatever understandings and practices are available to us within the traditions and ways of life that we inhabit. Thus, for hermeneutists like Richardson and Fowers, human life is a constant flow of interpretation and reinterpretation within which we take up the understandings and practices available to us within our worldly milieus, and invest them with significance and concern by applying them in our own life projects and relations with others. For dialogical theorists like Hermans and Salgado, our acting in the world is necessarily perspectival, informed as it is by a variety of positions and possibilities for being and doing. Yet it is the human agent who selects from the interpretations, practices, positions, and possibilities available to her. Although some such selection is mandated by the human condition (i.e., the necessity to act in a worldly context experienced by entities who care about their own existence), any particular selections also reflect the life projects and concerns of those whose lives are enacted within this condition. As was noted earlier, activity theorists, too, depict the emergent and evolving

self as an agent. Stetsenko and Arieviditch argue that, in CHAT, organisms are attributed with an agentic power to actively shape their own development through their own activity rather than viewed as passive recipients of environmental influences (but without assuming any inherent or inborn properties of organisms, such as mental representations existing prior to their interaction with the world).

The most fully developed account of how the agentic self emerges out of a sociocultural matrix is provided by Sugarman and Martin, with their “levels of reality” approach. Drawing upon the work of Vygotsky, Mead, and the Scottish philosopher Macmurray, they propose a model of agency as an emergent property that develops within relational fields of activity that are embedded within biophysical and sociocultural levels of reality. In social relationships, an individual learns to play many different roles, and thereby to take a variety of perspectives. One witnesses and reacts to the responses of others and learns to see and act toward oneself as others do, thus coming increasingly to know oneself as both object and subject, and to build up a repertory of perspectives that may be further coordinated, refined, and applied in ongoing interaction with others, especially in the face of challenges, problems, and conflicts. Understood in this way, agency is conditioned but not fully determined by interactions and interrelations within biophysical and sociocultural contexts, yet is constantly emergent in interaction with problems and concerns of living that resist structures, processes, practices, and understandings drawn solely from the past. In this way, agency is a conditioned, yet partially self-determined, reactivity that enables an immediate future—a future that flows not from the past alone, but also from the ongoing interactivity and reactivity of persons (who care about themselves and others) acting together.

### Psychology as a Human Science: Metatheoretical and Methodological Implications

According to sociocultural theorists, a defining feature of humans is that they are self-interpreting beings whose psychological properties emerge out of particular relational contexts. Thus the aims and methods of sociocultural inquiry diverge significantly from those championed by psychologists who desire to emulate what they call the “natural sciences”—this in spite of the fact that these natural sciences are far more diverse and heterogeneous than is generally clear from the image of them

that circulates in the cultural imagination (see Geertz 2000; Rorty 1991; Shweder 2001; Toulmin 1987). Rather than seeking to construct cause-and-effect models, to predict and control behavior, or to “carve nature at its joints” (a phrase generally attributed to Plato, and also found in Bacon [1955]), sociocultural theorists are more likely to envision their purpose as the achievement of an increasingly adequate (though never perfect, timeless, or completely unambiguous) understanding of phenomena of interest. Such understanding is often framed as the development of the capacity to communicate with those whom one is studying (Geertz 1971), and to participate in their forms of life (Wittgenstein 1953). For discursive and constructionist psychologists such as Harré, Shotter, and Gergen, this might mean acquiring the ability to take part in language games or ritualized joint action. Hermeneuticists such as Richardson and Fowers, and Sugarman and Martin, frame the aim of such inquiry in terms of the fusion of the researcher’s own situated, culturally constituted horizon of understanding with the life-world of the other, such that an enhanced (but still situated) appreciation of the phenomena under scrutiny is achieved. Many sociocultural theorists, including activity theorists, agentic hermeneutists, and dialogical psychologists, also pay explicit attention to the genesis of the mind and self—to the developmental processes and dynamics by which subjectivity comes to be constituted out of micro- and macrosocial relationships.<sup>2</sup>

A second metatheoretical theme that runs through these sociocultural approaches is that all knowledge about humans is situated and perspectival. Just as the mind is constituted by the social, cultural, political, and historical contexts in which it emerges, so also is this true of the mind’s products, including psychological knowledge itself. As Magnusson and Marecek put it, “Knowledge is always perspectival, always situated in some way. Knowers necessarily see from a particular angle of vision. They are always located in social and cultural forcefields. For example, we see history from our standpoint in the present and we necessarily bring present concerns and meanings to our analyses of the past. Moreover, knowledge is ‘interested’: that is, there is a reason why a particular question is of interest.” Of course, sociocultural theories themselves are no exception to this rule: they, too, emerge out of particular sociocultural contexts. Both the relational theorist Gergen and the hermeneutists Richardson and Fowers make this point when they illustrate the affinities between the concepts and methods of modern psychology and the contours of modern life itself (Toulmin 1992, 2001). Activity theorists also contend that all

knowledge—be it the everyday “knowing how” of laypersons in everyday life, or the formal systematic theories and methods developed by social researchers themselves—is produced within particular sociocultural fields. For Stetsenko and Arieviditch, this means that all knowledge serves as an adaptation to social and material environments. Cole and Gajdamaschko make a somewhat different point about the sociocultural embeddedness of activity theory: they demonstrate how the “cultural borrowing” of the original Vygotskian notion of “context” by North American psychologists resulted in a significant alteration of its meaning and use by researchers.

Related to this awareness of the inevitably situated and “interested” dimension of knowledge is the recognition that sociocultural theory and research (indeed, all psychological and social research) must be appreciated not only as theory, but also as practice. The ways in which we theorize the mind, the self, and the world inevitably have practical effects, delineating and legitimizing certain realities and forms of identity while obscuring or delegitimizing others. For example, the very idea that psychological entities like mind and self emerge through interactions with others suggests the possibility of constructing modes of psychological being and acting capable of supporting valued communal goals and goods, as opposed to passively accepting current states of affairs as somehow unavoidable because of essential aspects of our natures that are pre-given and immutable. Gergen even goes so far as to argue that the consequences of a particular theory—its practical outcomes—should replace “traditional issues of truth and objectivity” as the criteria of a theory’s validity. This is a controversial pronouncement, one with which many of the other contributors to this book would not fully agree. But all of these authors do share the view that, like the mind itself, sociocultural theories are the products of multiple contexts, and in turn produce effects on those contexts. In addition, they are in accord that it is essential that psychologists build an awareness of such contexts into all aspects of their work.

Another sensibility shared by sociocultural psychologists is an aversion to foundational metadiscourses (theories that analyze all psychological phenomena in terms of a single metaphor, or reduce them to some deep structure). There is a similar rejection of the search for general laws or universal principles of human nature. Thus, Shotter’s Wittgensteinian sensitivity to the contingency of all discursive practices leads him to assert that there should be no “prior system or framework of foundational propositions in terms of which to conduct investigations.” For him, the aim of sociocultural inquiry is to articulate the shared conventions (and impro-



visations) by means of which social life is lived in particular, local contexts. What has merit is what functions to illuminate and further our lives as understood and enacted within particular contexts and ways of being. There is no need in any of this to assert general truths that go beyond our discursive practices and conventions. Once progress in advancing our projects and moving beyond particular difficulties is achieved, nothing is gained by adding superfluous statements such as “and that’s the truth.” Along similar lines, the hermeneuts Richardson and Fowers suggest that sociocultural psychologists eschew general laws of human nature, motivation, and development. Their rationale for this is that human nature and selfhood vary depending on the historical and sociocultural contexts out of which they emerge. As Sugarman and Martin put it, “much of what we humans share in common is not a definable essence or a discoverable nature, but rather the existential condition of preexisting societies and cultures into which we are born, develop, and act.”

### Some Points of Divergence

In this chapter we have introduced constitutive sociocultural perspectives by emphasizing the themes and commitments that they share. There are undoubtedly many ways in which the approaches presented throughout this volume could be compared and contrasted. We hope that readers will actively engage with the rich array of ideas that follows, in order to draw their own conclusions regarding whether, or in what ways, these approaches might be integrated, or viewed as complementary or supplementary to one another. Here in this section we highlight just a few of the ways in which they diverge from one another. In particular, we note that theorists deal with the themes of “meaning” and “culture” in several different ways. We also note that they vary in the degree to which they emphasize humans’ embodiment, and that they are not of one mind in their treatment of political or ethical themes.

As we have discussed, these sociocultural psychologies are characterized by efforts to undo the conventionally accepted, strong distinction between “self” and “otherness.” But exactly what that “otherness” consists of, and in what sense it pervades the self, varies depending on the theory. Thus, for example, discursivists exhibit a tendency to dissolve the self-other bifurcation by envisioning “mind” and “self” as performances that function to promote social coordination, rather than as entities or

experiences located inside some interior mental space. By contrast, most of the other theorists writing for this volume (and even some discursive psychologists) do retain some version of an interiorized subject, albeit a subject that is populated by actual and imagined others (which may be framed in terms of relationships, cultural traditions, or additional forms of “otherness”).

As has also been noted, “meaning” is a core theme for sociocultural psychologists. Some of these theorists study “discourse,” while others focus on “activity.” In either case, a diagnostic feature of the phenomena under consideration is that they are both social and meaningful. But just as philosophers and others who study language do not unanimously endorse a particular theory of meaning, so also are there differences among some of the theorists represented in this book. For a neo-Wittgensteinian such as Shotter, cultural meanings are local, and often fleeting or ephemeral. For Gergen, who also makes use of Wittgenstein (though not in exactly the same way), stability and transparency of meaning are beside the point: communication between two discrete selves, in the conventional Cartesian sense, is not what language is for. By contrast, the ontological hermeneuts (Richardson and Fowers) and narrative theorists (Freeman)—who draw upon Gadamer as opposed to Wittgenstein—tend to associate cultural meanings with shared traditions. Hence the well-known hermeneutic likening of culture to a “text,” with its connotations of stability and coherence, as well as the possibility of some degree of intersubjective understanding. The mind or self that has internalized cultural symbols and patterns, therefore, is likewise considered to possess a narrative and ethical coherence. (It should be acknowledged, however, that for hermeneuts, too, meaning is always considered to be indeterminate, in the sense that it arises out of the interaction between a “positioned” reader and the text.). Dialogical theorists (Hermans and Salgado, Bhatia) also envision subjectivity in terms of a socially spawned interiority, but they are less concerned than ontological hermeneuts with envisioning that subject in terms of an integrated coherence. For dialogical theorists, a defining feature of the subject is its multiplicity and heteroglossia. They consider this multiplicity to be an essential, and quite positive, feature of subjectivity, since it is what enables all manner of individual and sociocultural change.

Finally, activity theorists (Cole and Gajdamaschko, Stetsenko and Arivitch) have their own way of reconciling the tensions between meaning-located-in-an-interiorized-subject and meaning-as-performance, and between subjectivity-as-coherence and subjectivity-as-multiplicity. For

these neo-Vygotskians, the interactions and collaborative activities out of which the self develops are certainly routinized and ritualized. Hence they are, in a sense, cultural “texts.” But there is also an awareness that improvisation and innovative performances are both inevitable and essential. For example, Cole and Gajdamaschko take issue with understandings of Vygotsky’s developmental theory as involving “a kind of ‘social learning,’” pointing out that it is the child’s active and dynamic participation and problem-solving within social situations that creates the “social situation of development.” This is a theme echoed in Stetsenko and Arieviditch’s rendering of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)—“the *evolving dynamics of activity* that connects the two [individual organisms and their environments] in a constantly unfolding, ever-shifting, give-and-take, dynamical interaction.”

Another way of parsing the differences among these four approaches is to note that some of them are less inclined than others to emphasize human embodiment. Hermeneutic approaches, as well as at least some of the discursive/constructionist theories, tend to emphasize language and related symbolic forms of social coordination to such a degree that they sometimes seem to suggest that we really are language “all the way down.” By contrast, dialogical and activity theories—while in no way denying the importance of linguistic and interpretive processes of psychological constitution—also place considerable emphasis on our embodiment. Our bodies are the sites at which particular modes of psychological being are taken up. It is because we act and interact in the biophysical and sociocultural world through our bodies that we are able to become objects to ourselves once we have been so constituted by our engagements with others in sociocultural practices that define mind and self at different historical times and places. As has been noted, most activity theorists are heavily influenced by the writings of Lev Vygotsky and the broader Russian tradition of dialectical materialism, so that they also highlight, in addition to our biophysical and sociocultural embodiment, the importance of our active engagement with those material artifacts of a culture that serve particular social and psychological functions. Dialogical theorists, on the other hand, tend to be more interested in the ways in which we embody positions and practices of mind- and self-making that we encounter through our interactions with a diversity and plurality of others. A strong emphasis is placed in these approaches on the multiplicity of voices and perspectives readily evident in contemporary multicultural existence.

Finally, all the positions presented in this volume embrace some significant possibility for enhancing personal and collective well-being. However, they are not of one mind regarding exactly what such well-being entails, or how it might best be promoted. In particular, there are some interesting differences of emphasis when it comes to how these various theorists appraise the ethical or political effects of the sociocultural constitution of identity. While all consider our emergence out of a sociocultural medium to be a fundamental and inescapable aspect of the human condition, some theorists focus on the ways in which this situation enhances human well-being, whereas others are more concerned with demonstrating how the sociocultural constitution of meaning and subjectivity also serves as an oppressive force. This issue is related to (yet not identical with) the question of how humans can possess free will and exert agency if self and mind emerge out of a sociocultural matrix. Although all of these theorists consider human freedom, choice, and responsibility to be indispensable, the question of how much, and in what ways, humans should be critical of their culture or society is more contentious. For example, ontological hermeneuts emphasize how the long-standing cultural traditions that live within us sustain structures of meaning and morality that are required for both individual virtue and social harmony. Modernity and postmodernity thus come under criticism from some hermeneuts, precisely because those forms of social life may have less to offer when it comes to promoting a shared vision of the good. Moreover, even as they attempt to straddle the tension between the need for cohesion and intelligibility served by shared sociocultural traditions, on the one hand, and the desire to foster mutually enriching openness to dialogue between divergent moral visions, on the other, theorists like Richardson and Fowers nonetheless tend to privilege cultural tradition in ways that may lessen the transformative potential of critical cultural analysis. By contrast, the feminist discursivists Magnusson and Marecek and the dialogical theorist Bhatia highlight some oppressive aspects of cultural discourses (both traditional and contemporary) that inescapably shape the self. They emphasize that sociocultural analysis should serve a different kind of critical function: it should raise our consciousness about the fact that some social groups are not as free and equal as contemporary democratic ideology would have us believe, and that resistance to the status quo (which exerts its hegemony largely through the way it shapes our subjectivity) may be both possible and necessary.

A somewhat different rendering of this basic democratic ethical stance is detectable in the developmentalist visions present in agentive hermeneutics and in CHAT. While neither of those approaches posits a specific, substantive endpoint toward which all humans, and all cultures, move, both do suggest a natural tendency to evolve toward higher and “better” ways of being. For the agentive hermeneuts, this is a movement toward individual and communal agency (with goals and goods emerging within collective engagement and problem solving with others), whereas for CHAT theorists, it is a movement toward a society built on “a foundation of social justice and equality.”

### An Invitation

All of the sociocultural perspectives discussed in the various chapters of the current volume envision human beings’ basic condition as one in which we act, and are formed, within practices and traditions of living; thus, they consider psychological persons to be contingently constituted through relations and interactions with others. Such an orientation and emphasis should not be confused with strong forms of social determinism, and they certainly are incompatible with attempts to reduce our psychological being to our biological bodies and brains. Both society and biology are absolutely necessary conditions for human activity in the world, and therefore for the sociocultural, relational constitution and emergence of psychological being and understanding. However, such conditions stop well short of full determination, and the emergence that continually characterizes our ongoing worldly interactivity is transformative of both our selves and our societies. Nonetheless, the sociocultural practices and traditions within which we develop as psychological beings provide pragmatic warrants for our understandings of our selves, our experiences, and our condition.

Surely it is not mere coincidence that these sociocultural perspectives have become elaborated in new ways, and sparked intensified interest, at a time when biological approaches to psychology are in greater ascendance than ever before. Although neuroscience and behavior genetics, along with the methods and technologies that accompany these endeavors, hold enormous promise for the advancement of knowledge, and for human betterment, they also engender concern on the part of psychologists and many others. In part this is due to their association, both in

the public imagination and in the minds of at least some scientists, with reductionism and strong versions of determinism that discount the possibility of a human agency that matters. But even more worrisome is the prospect that the increasing visibility and power of such approaches will erode awareness that there are viable and robust perspectives on human being and social life that are fundamentally compatible with materialism yet also do justice to humans' deeply sociocultural and historical nature (Harrington, Deacon, Kosslyn, and Scarry 2001; Kirschner 2006; Martin 2000; Shweder 2001). Thus it has never been more important to promote conversation about what kind of beings we are, and what kind (or kinds) of psychology are most adequate to study, understand, and support human flourishing.

As was noted in the preceding section, across the various approaches discussed in subsequent chapters, there exist disagreements about the extent and exact manner of our ability to interpret and transform our lives. But whether formulated explicitly in terms of discursive/constructionist, hermeneutic, dialogical, or activity theorizing, all of the perspectives presented are, at least implicitly, morally, politically, and socially concerned in ways that go well beyond what is typically the case in much extant psychological theory and practice. At the same time, such concerns are not addressed with the goal of achieving once-and-for-all conclusions, but instead take much more situated, contextualized, particular, and tentative forms. It is far from clear how satisfactory all of this is, and obviously has a great deal to do with the expectations that we might reasonably hold about psychological theory and inquiry. Thus, in inviting readers to consider critically the various perspectives that follow, we also encourage reflection on what it is possible to expect of psychological theory and how it relates, and ought to relate, to our lives as psychological persons in interaction with others.

## Notes

1. We must emphasize that our purpose is not to squeeze all of the approaches discussed in our volume into a single theoretical framework. Rather, our goal is to present a variety of social and cultural perspectives within psychology in the words of their leading proponents. Our discussion of areas of convergence and divergence in the remainder of this introduction is consistent with this aim, as is our classification of the approaches discussed as social constructionist/discursive, hermeneutic, dialogical, and activity theory. In no way do we want to either over-

or underemphasize commonalities or distinctions within and across these classifications. What we do want is to allow the authors of the chapters that follow the freedom to present their work and ideas in the ways they deem most appropriate. Our commentary in this introduction (along with our organization of the essays and approaches included) is intended only to assist the reader in grasping the breadth and power of contemporary sociocultural approaches in psychology.

2. In accord with these somewhat diverse aims, the sociocultural psychologists included in this book make use of a plurality of methods, including discursive, interpretive, ethnographic, literary, critical-psychological, poststructuralist, and other types of social and cultural analysis. It will be clear from this list that the metatheoretical vision articulated here leads to a favoring of qualitative methods. Nonetheless, at least some of these writers do not categorically reject the use of quantification as well, if such methods are deemed useful for particular purposes.

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