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Kenneth Gergen's Social Constructionism

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of Psychology

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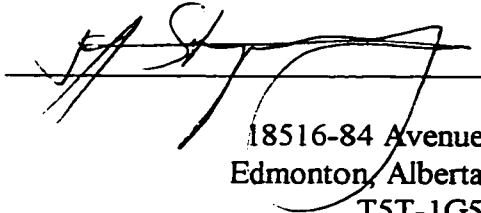
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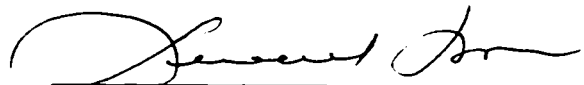
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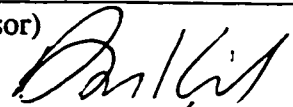
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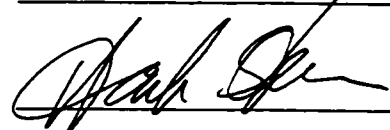
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Abstract

This thesis traces the development of Kenneth Gergen's social constructionist metatheory and discusses its relevance for psychology and more broadly the social sciences. Chapter one describes Gergen's participation in the "crisis in social psychology" drawing attention to the role that his 1973 paper "Social Psychology as History" played in this debate. Following on arguments presented throughout the 1970's, Gergen answers in the 1980's with a proposed Social Constructionist metatheory. Chapter two describes the important influences in the development of this metatheory with particular attention to the hermeneutic interpretive movement and the writings of the ordinary language philosophers. Chapter three is a discussion of Gergen's theoretical corrolary to social constructionism--relational theory. The implications of relational theory for understanding persons and political action is discussed. The thesis concludes with a critical discussion of Gergen's social constructionism and relational theory.

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Introduction

One detects a subtle but pervasive sea change occurring in psychology. Slowly but securely we are making our way into a new intellectual space. It is a domain characterized by a posture of self reflection, acute concern with the forms of intelligibility generated and sustained by psychological inquiry. It is a shift in sensibility much to be welcomed. For in many quarters of psychology reflection on the nature of theory was approaching extinction. Where theoretical debates and allegiances once excited passionate debate, such differences gradually became matters of indifference (save in matters of academic politics). Courses on theoretical systems virtually vanished from the psychology curriculum, and courses on the history of psychology were frequently reduced to bland reportage of the past--necessary lest early blunders be repeated. In striking contrast, investments in methods of research became ever more intense. Not the quality of an idea, but its evidential warrant became focal. And, while methodological sophistication was advanced manyfold, capacities for conceptual appraisal withered with disuse. The field slowly replaced the intellectual with the technical. (Gergen, 1991b, pp. 13-14)

I began this project approximately three years ago when, in a first year social psychology graduate course, I was introduced to Kenneth Gergen's papers "Social psychology as history" (1973), and "The social constructionist movement in modern psychology" (1985). Gergen's critique of psychology, and more broadly the social sciences, resonated with my growing sense that much psychological research was irrelevant to our understanding of persons as they live their lives. While the general topic of "psychology" had initially promised to provide for an interesting and compelling course of study, the increasing emphasis on methodology and research design (as one moves from undergraduate to graduate studies) proved to be overly specialized, technical, and disturbingly unpsychological. As one moves from the "real" world, where we initially confront psychological issues (in our relations with others, or our struggles with personal identity), and into the scientific laboratory, the capacity to ask questions of breadth and depth is quickly lost. This becomes especially frustrating when we, as students, are repeatedly instructed (by both our educators and surrounding social institutions) that "true" psychological knowledge must be grounded in empirical fact--that is, discovered in a controlled setting. The desire to draw our understanding of psychology from a wide range of sources--philosophical, historical, literary, and the culture more broadly--is curtailed by the call to rigor. We are taught to abandon our interests in the

sometimes vague, ambiguous, and troubling phenomenon of everyday life, for the security of a tradition bounded by rules which decide not only appropriate investigative procedures, but more devastatingly, the appropriate subject matter of study (as is becoming more clear, this means neurochemistry and cognition), and the appropriate conception that we are to have of human beings.

It is refreshing, then, to find a perspective (and as I came to learn in writing this paper, only one perspective among a growing field of related others) which demonstrates the contingency of psychology's long-held commitment to what were originally designed as natural scientific methods. This is a position which argues that the epistemological supremacy traditionally granted the experimental method (and all related practices) does not derive from an inherent, almost god-given superiority, but rather from the position that it occupies within an historical tradition--a tradition which values neutrality in scholarship, the control and prediction of human behavior, and mechanistic, atomistic accounts of human being. But then, with great excitement, it is realized that as a tradition, a convention, or a move within a space of social activity, traditional models of psychological investigation can be, if not abandoned, at least held up for unceasing scrutiny. If traditional psychological inquiry has provided us with an uncompelling body of theory, then we might begin to ask: "Why is this so?" and, "Are there alternative forms of inquiry--alternative traditions that we, in our development of psychological theory, might draw from?"

In this thesis I explore these very general questions by tracing the development of Kenneth Gergen's social constructionism; from "Social Psychology as History" (1973) in which he first criticized the seeming irrelevance of social psychological research, through a growing number of publications in the 1980's and 1990's [including two books--Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge (1982), The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of

Identity in Contemporary Life (1991)] and, more or less, concluding with Gergen's most recent book, and most elaborate account of the social constructionist position, Realities and Relationships: Soundings in Social Construction (1994).

<div align="center">A Theoretical and Historical Paper</div>

The present thesis is conceived as both an historical and a theoretical project. In the narrowest sense, it is historical in that it tells the story of the emergence of a particular metatheoretical position designed to challenge the hegemony of the traditional positivist-empiricist metatheories. It is not only the story of a shift in academic thought, but also the story of a shift occurring in contemporary culture--from modernist intelligibilities to postmodernist intelligibilities. If Gergen's social constructionism strives to revivify the role that theory plays in the social sciences, then it also strives to open up a space for a cultural dialogue. In effect social constructionism, as Gergen views it, takes the social sciences from the academic "tower" into the streets, where all members of a society can participate in the construction of social and psychological knowledge (1991a, p. ix).

Something must be said about what it means to write a theoretical paper. Traditionally psychologists have taken theory to be a sort of gathering together of empirical findings--an aspect of science which is secondary to, and dependent upon, the more important task of data collection. Indeed, psychologists have traditionally been hesitant to engage in theory construction because, it is argued, the science has not yet collected enough data out of which such theories could be constructed. Theory, then, waits on data.

But when, for example, contributors to the recently established journal Theory and Psychology speak about theory, they often do not place it in such peripheral perspective. Rather, theory takes on a metatheoretical role in which the foundations, assumptions, and practices of psychology are critically addressed. Theory becomes the reflective tool

which aims to undermine the taken for granted--the conventional. But theory is also more than this. It does not merely stand above the discipline instilling ferment and debate, but in its articulation, theory has the capacity to transform the way that we understand ourselves and the lives that we lead. Where theory and metatheory might once have been considered an exercise in abstraction--necessary to explanation and providing direction for the discipline, but of no immediate consequence-- it now becomes a practical activity. If, as many postmodern perspectives hold, language is the medium in which we constitute reality, then theory serves to shape and reshape our activities and relations to others. As such, theory does not stand second to data collection, but rather stands as the body of discourse out of which we live. Data collection is not the basis for understanding and explanation, but rather it is a movement within a theoretically constituted space of human activity.

Kenneth Gergen's Social Constructionism

In the last thirty years, perhaps initiated by Bergen and Luckman's (1966) seminal volume The Social Construction of Reality, there has been a proliferation of social constructionist metatheories, theories, and methods. Though differing in their assumptions and aims, many critics of traditional social science research would agree that there are no objective, value-neutral, foundations for knowledge. That is, social scientists do not, as it were, "arrive on the scene" to observe a prestructured, independently meaningful reality. Rather, what we take to be psychological, sociological, or political facts are constructions negotiated within communities of language users. In our conversations with each other we construct a meaningful reality in which we live with one another.

It is not enough to say, then, that Kenneth Gergen is a social constructionist. As is evidenced by ongoing conversations in academic circles, and specifically theoretical

psychology circles (e.g., see Theory and Psychology, Recent Trends in Theoretical Psychology (Vols. I, II, and III), Problems in Theoretical Psychology) there is much debate as to what it means to take a social constructionist stance. Some would argue that a social constructionist position inevitably, and thankfully, leads to the dissolution of theory construction (Shotter, 1996), others would supplement a constructionist position with a Marxist argument (Parker & Shotter, 1990), and yet others would take the implications of social constructionism to be that we are in a position to construct any form of reality that we choose, moving psychology into what sometimes seems to be the domain of fiction, or even science fiction (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 1997). Something then must be said of Gergen's position within this vast field of constructionist discourse.

While the present review begins with Gergen's (1973) critique of social psychology, his professional career extends back at least as far as 1961. Initially trained as an experimental social psychologist, Gergen researched such social psychology topics as interpersonal perception (1961), and self presentation (1965,1967, 1969). However, even in these early years, and consistent with the focus of the later social constructionism, Gergen moved outside of the research laboratory to address questions of greater social interest. This is reflected both in the subjects that he was willing to address: international relations (1974, 1971,1970), race relations (1967), and gender relations (1974), as well as in the fact that he would not only publish in professional journals, but also popular magazines: Trends Magazine (1970), Psychology Today (1974, 1972). Even before Gergen was explicitly critical of the ivory tower mentality which characterized the discipline, he sought to extend his research findings "beyond the data," to phenomena which could not be controlled in the laboratory, and to further communicate his ideas to people other than fellow professionals. In one sense, then, Gergen's critique of social

psychology, and the subsequent articulation of a social constructionist position, can be read as an effort to clear a space for a renewed form of social and psychological inquiry, to develop a set of theoretical tools which could be used to understand and address issues with which Gergen had long been concerned. In its emphasis on experimental rigor, and its unwillingness to address issues that were socially and politically charged, traditional social psychology had proven inadequate to these goals.

My review of Gergen's position is developed across four chapters. In the first chapter I focus on the period between 1973 (when Gergen published "Social Psychology as History") to 1980 when, with Jill Morawski, Gergen proposed a "socio-rationalist" metatheory to challenge the prevailing positivist-empiricist metatheory (1980, p. 344). Under the banner of socio-rationalism, Gergen and Morawski challenge the view that social psychological knowledge is grounded in empirical fact, and argue that our accounts of social life are value laden social constructions. Here I also introduce Gergen's concept of "generative theory," in which he proposes to replace the traditional ideal of theoretical accuracy (all theories must be grounded in experimental evidence) with an ideal of generativity, in which theory serves the dual role of undermining convention and providing refreshing theoretical alternatives (1978, p. 1344).

In chapter two, I describe what I take to be the central assumptions of the social constructionist position. Here I note the importance of the transition from a socio-rationalist metatheory to a social constructionist metatheory, arguing that the shift implies a move from a dualistic conception of human being (wherein we are conceived as subjects who engage an independent and objective reality) to the view that all forms of knowledge (including this dualism) are social constructions with no prior ontological merit. I also draw attention to the important role that Gergen's conception of language plays in the development of his social constructionism. At first, Gergen draws on an

hermeneutic-interpretive model of language and social science, but later rejects this for a pragmatic conception of language (grounded in the ordinary language philosophies of Wittgenstein and Austin). This moves social constructionism to a critique of the individualism which has occupied much of psychology's history, and then to a focus on the patterns of relationship in which our knowledge is embedded. The discussion of the pragmatic conception of language paves the way for a renewed conception of the role that theory is to play in the social sciences.

In chapter three, I review Gergen's (1991) book The Saturated Self, in which he proposes a relational conception of self to challenge the traditional individualistic conceptions of self. On Gergen's view, in the postmodern era, the self is dissolved in the immediacy of relationship, thereby losing its traditional sense of coherence and integrity. Chapter three concludes with a review of four assumptions which I think are central to Gergen's proposal for a social constructionist metatheory and its corollary relational theory. The four points serve as the departure point for the critique that I offer in chapter four.

Where the first three chapters serve as a relatively straightforward exposition of Gergen's position, in chapter four I step back and consider critical challenges to social constructionism and relational theory. Convinced that Gergen has proven the weaknesses of the traditional social science perspective I do not consider critiques offered from within the mainstream. Rather, I turn to ongoing discussions within theoretical psychology.

Chapter One: From Positivist-empiricism to Socio-rationalism

...it is quite possible with the emergence of a new paradigm that the forthcoming decade will witness a level of unparalleled intellectual stimulation within social psychology. With a fundamental alteration in the grounding rationale for the discipline, we may anticipate a revolution in theoretical activity, new forms of social investigation, fresh proposals concerning what it is "to practice" social psychology, innovative forms of advanced training, and a rejuvenated sense of the discipline's significance. (Gergen & Morawski, 1980, pp. 345-346)

In contrast to the constructive chapters to follow, the present chapter is an attempt to trace Gergen's "deconstruction" of experimental social psychology. That is, the critiques offered here are not merely designed to reorient traditional research practices, but to undermine the assumptions upon which these practices have been built. Social psychology has failed to discover laws of social behavior, and to produce useful technologies, not because it is a young science, or because its method is unrefined, but because it labors under a distorting model of social science. The present chapter then is a necessary step in facilitating the move toward social constructionism. It challenges the foundations upon which contemporary social psychology is built, therein clearing space for the articulation of a renewed form of social inquiry.

The review covers a period of approximately seven years, with specific reference to five published papers organized here to reflect a critique which develops its strength in three steps. The first two papers question specific assumptions of extant social psychological practices. In "Social Psychology as History" (SPH) Gergen (1973) argues that social psychology cannot discover timeless laws of behavior like those in the natural sciences, and must recognize that its theories are historically bounded. SPH is of particular significance because of the influence that it had on the "crisis in social psychology"--a period of self reflective appraisal in the 1970's described by Manis (1976) in the following quotation.

> Some have been disappointed by a recognition that despite the hard work of the past decades, we have not produced much in the way of practical knowledge to help in the solution of pressing social problems. Other critics have been concerned that our field

may indeed have practical implications, but that they are most likely to be realized by people in positions of power, who may use research ("pure" or otherwise) to stabilize and enhance their personal well being at the expense of the less powerful....the ethics and intellectual content of the "fun and games" approach to research, in which elaborate deceptions may be mounted in the interest of "scientific progress," have been widely criticized (Can a serious intellectual enterprise be securely anchored in a methodology that leans heavily on dramatic lies, told to college sophomores?) Other critics have worried about the disparagement of theory, the notion that "ideas are cheap," and the continued dominance of laboratory experimentation. (p. 371)

As a participant in the "crisis debate" Gergen's paper inspired an 88 page, 12 author symposium published in the Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin with the aim to "clarify what it is that social psychology can reasonably aspire to accomplish" (Manis, 1976, p.372). Further, the paper earned recognition as a social science citation classic, and might also be discerned as the point at which Gergen dedicated his writings to developing a renewed form of social psychological inquiry. Continuing the emphasis on the historical embeddedness of social psychological research, I next review "Experimentation in Social Psychology: A Reappraisal" (ESP) where Gergen (1978a) challenges the hegemony of experimental methods, opting for a democratized social psychology in which various forms of inquiry are encouraged.

The second move in this critique develops in "The Positivist Image in Social Psychological Theory" where Gergen (1979) steps back from specific critiques of social psychology to describe the positivist-empiricist metatheoretical framework in which the discipline is grounded. The assumption of ahistoricity, and the reliance on experimentation exert their influence not because they are ontologically superior to alternative approaches, but because they are tied to philosophical positions long entrenched in Western culture. This metatheoretical critique adds strength to Gergen's position by showing that traditional research practices are historical artifacts best abandoned by psychologists.

In the third step of this critique, I describe Gergen's efforts to develop an alternative

metatheory for social psychology. The metatheory is foreshadowed in "Toward

Generative Theory" where Gergen (1978b) suggests that psychologists turn to developing

theories which undermine commonsense assumptions about human behavior; emphasis is

placed on theory building as opposed to data collection. In the final paper considered here

" An Alternative Metatheory for Social Psychology" Gergen and Morawski (1980)

outline a metatheoretical alternative to positivist-empiricist metatheories. Drawing from

four movements which challenge empiricist philosophies of knowledge, they propose a

"socio-rationalism" in which, congruent with the goal of generative theory, premium is

placed on the knowledge generating capacity of the social scientific community (p.343) .

There are a number of reasons that I have set aside these five publications for review

in a single chapter. As already mentioned, the tone of these years is predominantly

deconstructive rather than constructive. Gergen reveals the "taken-for-granted" in social

psychological research thereby clearing space for an historically aware social

psychology. A second theme which dominates this period is the historicity of social

psychology. Social psychology, the experimental method, and positivist-empiricist

metatheories are criticized because they are insufficiently reflective of the degree to

which their practices are wedded to historical circumstance. It is significant then that in

the 1980's the historical argument is overshadowed by a linguistic argument. Gergen

retains the view that we are historical beings, but the nature of that history is negotiated,

and renegotiated, in language. This emphasis on language takes social constructionism in

the direction of the ordinary language philosophies of Wittgenstein and Austin. Third, the

period which I have chosen to summarize in this chapter is unique because Gergen's

critique is focused on social psychology. This changes in the 1980's when he extends the

argument to include developmental psychology (Gergen, 1982), cognitive psychology

(Gergen, 1984), and more broadly the social sciences (Gergen, 1985). Socio-rationalism, the alternative metatheory for social psychology becomes social constructionism, the alternative metatheory for the social sciences.

Social Psychology as History

...the continued attempt to build general laws of social behavior seems misdirected, and the associated belief that knowledge of social interaction can be accumulated in a manner similar to the natural sciences appears unjustified. In essence, the study of social psychology is primarily an historical undertaking. We are essentially engaged in a systematic account of contemporary affairs. We utilize scientific methodology, but the results are not scientific principles in the traditional sense. In the future, historians may look back to such accounts to achieve a better understanding of life in the present era. However, the psychologists of the future are likely to find little of value in contemporary knowledge. (Gergen, 1973, pp. 316-317)

Gergen's (1973) argument in SPH rests on the premise that social psychologists have traditionally misconceived of their subject matter. Caught up in the hopes for a unified science, early social psychologists tailored their research efforts after the goals of the positivist philosophers of the Vienna circle. Successes in the natural sciences had led these early twentieth century philosophers of science to assume that all behavior, both natural and social, could be understood according to more basic principles, perhaps invisible to the naked eye, but nevertheless common to all of reality. Social psychology was collapsed under the larger category of natural science, and the aim was to discover the timeless laws which governed social interaction.

Social psychologists had yet another motive for embracing the vision of science endorsed by the positivist philosophers. Employing the experimental method advocated by the positivists, natural scientists had met with great success first in discovering immutable laws of behavior, and second in applying these laws to control and predict behavior in the natural world. These successes were most visible in the creation of technologies of widespread use. The medical sciences brought disease under control, and the physical sciences proved their worth through the production of, among others, travel and communications technologies. Drawing their inspiration from these successes, social

psychologists hoped that they could discover immutable laws of social interaction which would result in the ability to control and predict human behavior, and consequently eliminate social ills--for example, gender and race discrimination.

The lament of the "crisis" debate centered around the realization that despite decades of research social psychologists had been unable to realize these goals. Social psychologists had been unable to provide any explanations like those provided in the natural sciences and, as a result, had no reliable technologies to show for their efforts. While some claimed that this failure presented itself only because the social sciences were very young in comparison to the natural sciences (Schlenker, 1974), Gergen traces this failure to a more fundamental difference between the natural and the social sciences. The attempt to collapse the social sciences into the natural sciences disregards the fact that, unlike in the natural sciences, social behavior is always wedded to the historical situation in which it is embedded. It is because the subject matter of the natural sciences are unaffected by the passage of human history that stable and enduring laws can be discerned. In contrast the subject matter of the social sciences--human behavior--changes across history thereby undermining attempts to discover timeless laws.

The argument has bearing first on the way that social psychologists conceive of the aims of their science. If patterns of human behavior change across history then it seems unlikely that timeless laws of social behavior could ever be discovered. What in one instance is described as a law, is years later seen to be an historical artifact--a descriptor of behavior during a particular historical period. Subsequently, the prediction and control of human interaction becomes problematic. The "laws" described in one historical period fall away with the passage of time, and the scientific ideal of universal law is undermined. Perhaps more significant is the implication that the argument has for the role that social psychology plays within a society. Gergen conceives of the subject matter of

social psychology as historical precisely because the relationship between social scientists and their subject matter is different from the relationship between natural scientists and their subject matter. Where natural scientists stand apart from their subject matter, social scientists are in a position to influence the behavior of their subject matter. It is to this relationship between social science and society that Gergen addresses the bulk of SPH.

Traditionally, the relationship between science and society is conceived as unilateral. In social psychology, aided by the experimental method, scientists observe social interactions in a controlled and presumably neutral environment thereby developing scientific theories. The participants in this research have no input into the questions posed by scientists, or the theories which grow out of the research. When research findings are communicated to the public it is for the purpose of controlling and predicting behavior. In these cases scientific knowledge will be passed onto government administrators, educational institutions, or individuals, the aim being to improve the well-being of a society. Schlenker (1974), an advocate of scientific social psychology, writes:

> One of the practical benefits of any type of scientific inquiry is the gathering of information about the world which will help us to perceive alternatives accurately and behave in a personally and socially rewarding fashion. (p. 12)

But on the traditional view, if social psychological research is often conducted in order to improve a society, the research certainly does not depend upon the society. While the research may be altruistically motivated these motivations themselves do not shape the development of theory. In fact, they are better left aside so as to ensure that theory is not prejudiced or biased. Gergen argues the opposite, suggesting that social psychological research is unavoidably wedded to the society in which it practices. The dissemination of knowledge is not optional but rather constitutes the discipline in a "feedback loop" between science and society (1973, p.310).

From one perspective of the feedback loop scientific theory influences social behavior. While it is traditionally held that scientific theory is value free, Gergen argues that social scientists have value commitments which are inevitably reflected in theory. He writes:

> As scientists of human interaction, we are engaged in a peculiar duality. On the one hand, we value dispassionate comportment in scientific matters. We are well aware of the biasing effects of strong value commitments. On the other hand, as socialized human beings, we harbor numerous values about social relations. It is the rare social psychologist whose values do not influence the subject of his research, his methods of observation, or the terms of description. In generating knowledge about social interaction, we also communicate our personal values. The recipient of knowledge is thus provided with dual messages: Messages that dispassionately describe what appears to be, and those which subtly prescribe what is desirable. (1973, p. 311)

Gergen continues:

> Herein lies a fundamental difference between the natural and the social sciences. In the former, the scientist cannot typically communicate his knowledge to the subjects of his study such that their behavioral dispositions are modified. In the social sciences such communication can have a vital impact on behavior. (p. 313)

Social psychologists have long been aware of the fact that research participants, picking up on subtle cues communicated by the researcher, may lead these participants to tailor their behavior to either confirm or disconfirm researcher expectations. But the fact that people are capable of altering their behavior upon reflection has traditionally been taken as a nuisance which interferes with the more important scientific goal of discovering immutable laws of behavior. To counter these nuisances, sophisticated research methods have been developed so as to ensure that research participants remain naive about research goals. In contrast, Gergen takes this observation seriously, arguing that social psychology can never lay claim to universal law because people, when enlightened about psychological theory, can alter their behaviors. This becomes especially important when research findings are communicated to the society as a whole. When sensitized to factors which influence their behavior people may actively seek to change their responses to

these factors. Gergen (1973) provides an example:

> Most general models of social interaction also contain implicit value judgments. For example, treatises on conformity often treat the conformer as a second-class citizen, a social sheep who forgoes personal conviction to a free with the erroneous opinions of others. Thus, models of social conformity sensitize one to factors that might lead him into socially deplorable actions. In effect, knowledge insulates against the future efficacy of these same factors. (p. 311)

The point is emphasized when Gergen argues that in Western cultures great value is placed on freedom and individuality. This provides an additional motive for recipients of psychological knowledge to change their behaviors so as to "invalidate theories that ensnare us in their impersonal way" (p. 314). In part then, it is because social psychological theory is prescriptive, and people are motivated to change their behaviors given psychological knowledge, that claims to universal laws of behavior are undermined.

Where from one perspective Gergen argues that social behavior is influenced by social science theory, from a second perspective he argues that social psychological theory is shaped by the historical period in which it is produced. That is, the behaviors of interest to social scientists, and the explanations given of those behaviors are influenced by concerns unique to a particular historical period. The historian of psychology Kurt Danziger (1990) reaches the same conclusion when he argues that the production of psychological knowledge is determined by the concerns of the society in which the science is practiced. For example, in the United States psychologists met with the most success by producing knowledge which could be of use in the administration of everyday life--academic testing, military recruitment, and engineering. Placing the argument in social psychological context Gergen suggests that the phenomenon of interest to social psychologists, and the factors deemed relevant to explaining these phenomenon, change as the interests of a particular society change. Gergen illustrates:

Social psychologists have been much concerned, for example, with isolating predictors of political activism during the past decade.... However, as one scans this literature over time, numerous inconsistencies are found. Variables that successfully predicted political activism during the early stages of the Vietnam war are dissimilar to those which successfully predicted activism during later periods. The conclusion seems clear that the factors motivating activism changed over time. Thus, any theory of political activism built from early findings would be invalidated by later findings. (1973, p. 315)

On this view, particular social psychological theories do not change because older explanations have been scientifically invalidated, but because these theories have lost their explanatory appeal to a society. As long as social psychology seeks to explain social behavior it will also be forced to adapt its theories to the interests of a society, thereby undermining any efforts to secure universal laws of behavior.

It seems then that social psychological research and the goals of traditional scientific research come into an inevitable conflict. A psychology which seeks to be socially relevant must compete with the fact that people can change their behavior to reflect their understanding of theory, and that social psychological theory must continue to re-think itself so as to keep up with societal expectations.

Bruner (1990) draws attention to two assumptions contained in Gergen's critique:

But, he added, there are two generalities that need, nonetheless, to be taken into account in interpreting findings such as these: both of them universals having to do with man's way of orienting toward culture and the past. The first is human reflexivity, [italics added] our capacity to turn around on the past and alter the present in its light, or to alter the past in the light of the present. Neither the past not the present stays fixed in the face of this reflexivity. The "immense repository" of our past encounters may be rendered salient in different ways as we review them reflexively , or may be changed by reconceptualization. The second universal is our "dazzling" intellectual capacity to envision alternatives [italics added]--to conceive of other ways of being, of acting, of striving. So while it may be the case that in some sense we are "creatures of history," in another sense we are autonomous agents as well. (pp. 109-110)

Conceived in this way Gergen's argument comes close to humanistic critiques of experimental psychology, which typically argue that experimental psychology denies

people their innate ability to shape their own lives in accordance with their free

will(Maslow, 1966; Rogers, 1969). Schlenker (1974) criticizes Gergen on this point:

> An implicit theme in Gergen's article is the notion that people can, within reason, do
> anything they want anytime they want and there is nothing that a scientist or his
> theories can do to stop them. And if this is the case, how can universal theories of
> behavior be possible? Many students of social psychology feel compelled to dismiss
> the possibility that psychology could ever be a "real" science because people make
> decisions and behave in accord with their "free will"....By free will, most people
> mean that they can and do make choices between alternatives based upon what they
> want at the time; and no scientific law is going to tell them that they cannot. The basic
> confusion derives from the notion that behavioral laws compel or coerce people to
> behave against their will; these laws fatalistically determine what a person...will do
> and nothing can be done to escape the consequences. While this fatalistic
> determinism position is what many people regard to be the basis of science, it is a
> complete misunderstanding of the nature of scientific explanations. (p. 11)

Gergen is thus characterized as a humanist who goes wrong because he misunderstands

the nature of scientific explanation. At present I will let the critique stand against the

previous review of Gergen's argument, but will say that if there is any confusion over

whether Gergen is offering a traditionally humanist critique this confusion will be cleared

up in the sections which follow. By approaching social psychology from an historical

perspective Gergen moves away from traditional determinist-free will debates preferring

to place such debates in a social-historical perspective. Rather than asking: "Are human

beings free or determined in their actions?" Gergen begins to ask "How does this type of

debate reflect historically bound assumptions about human behavior?"

The Inadequacy of Experimentation

> Experimentation may be an invaluable technique under certain circumscribed conditions.
> However, the continued presumption that experimentation is the single best means by which we
> can attain knowledge of social behavior seems both misleading and of injurious consequence to
> the field and to those who look to the profession for enhancement and understanding. (Gergen,
> 1978a, p. 509)

Gergen's (1978a) critique is elaborated in "Experimental Social Psychology: A

Reappraisal" (ESP) where he argues that the experimental method, traditionally adopted

in social psychological research, distorts the historical character of social action. If SPH

described the way that social psychology is historically embedded, this paper elaborates the view that behavior must be understood from within the socio-historical context in which it occurs. We must take into account the "highly complex network of contingencies" that give behavior meaning for the participants involved (Gergen, 1978a, p. 509). These contingencies are not limited to immediately present stimuli but rather, in memory, reach backward in time and, in anticipation, forward into the future. An event acquires its meaning for a person only as it is embedded in a history of other events. Further, the network of contingencies which constitute the meaning of a given behavior shifts between individuals, across history, and across cultures. For example, the range of factors which might lead a person to perceive an insult and respond to another in anger are shaped by individual history or cultural accounts of insult and anger. Gergen writes:

> In another sense we may say that it is only by taking into account the range of attendant circumstances that the stimulus gains 'meaning' for the members of the culture. If [a raised] fist is that of a child of three in response to his mother's admonishment in the privacy of their own home, the response has far different social implications than if the fist is that of a thirty year old Puerto Rican on a street in Spanish Harlem. In effect, social stimuli are typically embedded in broader circumstances, and reactions to the stimulus complex depend importantly on the meanings which they evoke. (1978a, p. 510)

For Gergen, then, the starting point for social psychological research should be the context in which social behavior unfolds.

Traditionally, social psychologists have sacrificed an understanding of the complexity of everyday social interaction for the rigor of the experimental laboratory--the two of which cannot be reconciled. In the laboratory primary emphasis is placed on describing casual relations between a behavior and the causes of that behavior. Under experimental logic such causal relations can only be discerned when the researcher exercises full control over the behavior under study--something which cannot be achieved outside of the laboratory. This has the dual effect of limiting the range of factors which are

considered in theoretical explanations, and of further limiting the research to short periods of time (half hour experimental sessions). In effect, a behavior which is normally embedded in a rich scenario consisting of an indeterminate number of factors is, in the experimental situation, reduced to a limited number of variables only present in the immediacy of the experimental situation--the normally occurring meaning of the behavior is distorted in the laboratory.

If, as Gergen argues, behavior becomes meaningful only in a sequence of events which are themselves embedded in a framework of meanings, then the experimental situation is its own sequence of events, which embed and give meaning to the actions that occur in the laboratory. Where the experimenter typically assumes that the behavior in the experimental laboratory is a purified simulation of normal behavior, it is more likely anything but normal behavior for the participant. Gergen (1978a) writes:

> In the attempt to isolate a given stimulus from the complex in which it is normally imbedded, its meaning within the normative cultural framework is often obscured or destroyed. When subjects are exposed to an event out of its normal context they may be forced into reactions that are unique to the situation and have little or no relationship to their behavior in the normal setting. In more dramatic terms, Harre (1974) has termed the experimentalist, 'tragically deceived' and has concluded that 'experiments are largely worthless, except as descriptions of the odd way people carry on in trying to make social sense of the impoverished environment of laboratories' (p. 146). (p. 510)

The experimental laboratory creates a gap between the meaning of participants behavior, and the scientific explanations which are provided for that behavior. The irony here is that experimental researchers assume that they are investigating a normal or an idealized instance of behavior, but in fact are constructing an image of normal behavior. Indeed, as Gergen argues, the adept psychologist can arrange the experimental situation so as to demonstrate the validity of any reasonable account of behavior. Gergen (1978a) writes:

> In this sense, hypothesis are not so much as the experimenter searchers for (or is aware of) the appropriate social context in which the validity of what is purported to

be a general hypothesis can be demonstrated....If one were to commence with a consideration of the extended culture and its patterned complexity, testing unbridled hypothesis about general reactions to cognitive dissonance, imbalance, group pressures, social attraction, bystanders in an emergency, inequity, aggression and so on would seldom occur. (pp. 511-512)

If Gergen is right, the social psychologist, though constrained by the experimental laboratory, is more like a writer of fiction than a scientist.

Both SPH and ESP describe social psychology's failure to develop a body of theory which is relevant to understanding contextualized behavior. Alongside each of these critiques Gergen offers a number of suggestions for a renewed social psychology. As explored here, these suggestions stand in contrast to the increasingly radical revisions which Gergen proposes following his later investigation of positivist-empiricist metatheories.

Gergen (1973) first argues that robbed of its claim to ahistorical explanation psychology should abandon its aspirations to prediction and control. In place of its predictive capacity he suggests that social psychology operate to sensitize people to the factors which may influence their behavior in a given situation. "Psychological theory can play an exceedingly important role as a sensitizing device. It can enlighten one as to the range of factors potentially influencing behavior under various conditions" (1973, p.317). Gergen (1978a) extends this suggestion in ESP when he argues that social psychology can serve to alter people's consciousness. A cleverly designed experiment can reveal factors influencing behavior of which people are not normally aware. He writes:

> However, upon occasion the experiment can be used to unsettle our common understandings of 'the way things are.' They may generate a constructive self-consciousness, an enhanced awareness of various inequities or irrationalities built into our institutionalized ways of viewing things, or an increased caution before commitment. Some excellent examples of experimentation in the service of such 'consciousness raising' would include Asch's (1956) research on conformity,

Milgram's (1963) initial study on obedience to authority, the early work of Festinger (1957) on cognitive dissonance. (1978b, p. 522)

The emphasis on consciousness raising becomes, under the later name of "generative theorizing," a guiding principle for social constructionism (1978b, p. 1344).

Second, Gergen's focus on the distinction between the subject matter of the natural and the social sciences leads him to promote a psychology which could better explicate the point at which stable and unstable behavior meet. In SPH he argues that social psychologists should strive toward developing a "continuum of historical durability with phenomena highly susceptible to historical influence at one extreme and the more stable processes at the other" (1973, p. 318). This would point social psychologists toward behaviors which are more like those in the natural sciences, and as such more susceptible to prediction and control. If for example "Man's reliance on a concept of deity has a long history and is found in numerous cultures" it is likely that religious sentiment would continue to be an important factor in social psychological understanding of human behavior (1973, p. 318). Similarly, in ESP Gergen (1978a) suggests that social psychologists attempt to explicate "bio-social relationships" (p. 522). Social behavior is both influenced by, and influences, biological processes. Unlike the plasticity of social behavior, biological systems are relativity stable and as such provide an "enduring backdrop for the shadow-show of mores, style and custom" (1978a, p. 522). Like in his continuum of historical durability, a sensitivity to bio-social relationships would point researchers in the direction of stable factors which are relevant to understanding social behavior in all historical periods. While Gergen returns to this suggestion a number of times in his early writings, its significance is highlighted by the fact that it is dropped in his later writings (Gergen, 1985; Gergen, 1994). When he later adopts a "linguistic" argument, the focus shifts from the distinction between stability and instability, or the

natural and the social sciences, to the generative capacity of language. On this view, the natural and the social sciences are both conceived of as linguistic constructs tied up in the social order, and the question of stability becomes irrelevant to the goal of overcoming conventional epistemologies.

The most significant move that Gergen makes in these early papers has already been mentioned. Namely, the shift from a conception of social psychology as value-free investigative practice, to social psychology and human behavior as embedded in social process. Psychology is prescriptive thereby influencing the subject matter which it seeks to explain. While on the one hand social psychology values neutrality in its practices, on the other hand it denies that the discipline is value laden.

Positivist-empiricist Metatheorics in Social Psychology

When psychologists embraced the positivist program for scientific conduct, they simultaneously absorbed its underlying concept of human psychological functioning. As a result, contemporary social psychology has been significantly limited in the range of its concerns, in the types of behavior singled out for study, in the selection of explanatory constructs, and in its vision of human potential. By elaborating on how the discipline has been influenced and on the nature of the effects, the deterioration of normative assumptions may be hastened. (Gergen, 1979, p. 194)

Thus far I have presented two critiques of social psychology which share in the general aim of sensitizing social psychologists to the contingency of their theories and research practices. Underlying the discussion is the suggestion that the ahistorical view social psychologists assume of their theories and subject matter is in some way related to the experimental method. Indeed, the experimental method is a justified form of psychological research because it attempts to eliminate the confounding variables of history, value, meaning, and personal bias. In "The Positivist Image in Social Psychological Research," Gergen (1979) elaborates the relationship between the assumption of ahistoricity and the experimental method, arguing that they are both grounded in a larger movement in twentieth century philosophy of science--positivist-empiricist metatheories. It is not only that these metatheories establish the criteria for

good scientific practice but, despite their claims to value neutrality, they unwittingly prescribe a particular model of psychological functioning. In its acceptance of positivist-empiricist metatheories social psychology already buys into a particular conception of human behavior. Here social psychology is not conceived as providing innovative theories, but rather of filling in the details of a psychology already implicit in positivist-empiricist metatheories. It should be added that the arguments presented in this section stem from "The Positivist Image in Social Psychological Research" but I have included a number of references from Gergen's (1980, 1982) later writings in order to better focus the discussion.

Something has already been said of the type of science prescribed by positivist-empiricist metatheories. Under these metatheories it is assumed that both natural and social behaviors are governed by lawful causal relations. The aim of science is to discover these lawful relations. This is achieved by reducing the phenomenon into more basic units, the interaction of which are observed in controlled settings. For example, in the study of Chemistry matter is reduced to atomic and then to subatomic units, the relations between which are studied in a controlled laboratory setting. It is central to the procedure that the scientist exercise control over all of the variables under study. This allows the scientist to make causal statements about the relationship between variables. Thus the positivist-empiricist assumes that a conceptual move can be made from that which is observed by the "naked eye," to hypotheses about the mechanisms which regulate behavior at a more basic level. Presumably, if this practice is followed false hypotheses are discarded and true hypothesis are retained, thus resulting in the accumulation of a body of scientific facts. The four concepts which are central here are that: a) there is an experiential world independent of the scientist which is composed of lawful causal relations; b) this experiential world is accessible to all of those trained in

scientific observation; c) adherence to the scientific method is necessary so as to ensure the elimination of confounding variables; and d) as various hypothesis are confirmed or disconfirmed scientific knowledge accumulates, growing increasingly secure in the accuracy of its representation of the natural world. Using Gergen's early writings I have attempted to show that social psychologists have traditionally attempted to adhere to all of these prescriptions, but in doing so have also failed to develop a compelling scientific product. Social psychology's failure to do so has composed the bulk of Gergen's critique up until the point we are now at in this review.

A second form of critique, foreshadowed by Gergen's (1978a) suggestion that social psychologists are in the position to raise consciousness, now emerges. In addition to prescribing the rules for rigorous science, positivist-empiricist metatheories prescribe a certain model of psychological functioning. Social psychological theory, then, is limited in what it can say about human behavior by taken for granted assumptions. Gergen draws attention to three prescriptions which have gone unquestioned in social psychology.

First positivist-empiricist metatheories propose "a central distinction...between the experiencing individual and the object of experience"--a dualism traced to the influence of Rene Descartes (1979, p. 196). In the laboratory the scientist stands as the experiencing individual, and the phenomenon under question stands as the object of experience. The task of the scientist is, through controlled experimentation, to eliminate all personal biases so as to provide a perfect representation of the objective world. The assumption presents itself in human psychology as the view that human beings possess a mind which acts as a mirror for representing events in the objective world. A second assumption is the centrality of cognitive processing in human experience. Logic and abstraction are valued as the tools which scientists use to "remove themselves from the press of immediate sense data" thereby providing a means by which generalizations about

the objective world can be made (1979, p. 196). In psychological theories cognitive

processes are prioritized because they allow human beings to set aside desires and

impulses which might lead to faulty reasoning and maladapative behavior. Third,

cognitive processes are distinguished from non-cognitive, or affective (emotions, values,

desires, and motives) processes. "For the positivist, processes in the affective domain are

either irrelevant or antithetical to understanding in the cognitive mode" (1979, p. 196).

Affect serves the necessary conceptual role of motivating the cognitive system, but once

processing has begun interferes with the putatively more important task of abstract and

logical analysis.

Gergen supports his review by describing the presence of these assumptions in

popular areas of social psychological research. He draws particular attention to George

Kelly's construct theory which, on Gergen's view, stands as a clear link between

"empiricist metatheory and psychological functioning" (1982, p. 124). Gergen (1982)

writes:

> As Kelly says, "When we speak of man-the scientist we are speaking of all mankind
> and not merely a particular class of men who have publicly attained the stature of
> 'scientist'" (p. 4). And this view of the scientist is the now-familiar once: "Each
> individual man formulates in his own way constructs through which he views the
> world of events. As a scientist, man seeks to predict, and this control the course of
> events. It follows then that the constructs which he formulates are intended to aid him
> in his predictive efforts. (p. 12)(p. 124)

Thus Kelly's theory, a concrete example of the assumptions which underlie psychological

theory, regards human beings as subjects in an objective world whose task is to, in

cognition, perfectly mirror objective reality so as to increase predictive capacity thereby

adapting to the natural and social environment in which they find themselves.

Gergen argues that the above assumptions about human psychology are not grounded

in scientific truth. Much like the beliefs that are shared by a religious community, the

assumptions of the positivist-empiricist metatheories and the psychologies which they

promote, are based on socio-cultural values subject to historical change. The psychological research community did not discover the existence of a cognitive and affective system. Nor did the psychological research community discover that the world can be divided into subject and object. Rather when adopting positivist-empiricist metatheories social psychologists adopted a particular model of human psychology. On Gergen's view, social psychology has not advanced our understanding of human action, but has only filled in the details of a psychology implicit in the positivist-empiricist metatheory. Gergen (1980) writes:

> In adopting the program far more has been acquired than a set of rules for appropriate scientific conduct. Simultaneously one tacitly accepts the underlying conception of psychological functioning and its optimal state. To 'do science' in the positivist model is to gain the superiority of philosophically proclaimed superiority. At the same time, it is to accede to the underlying assumptions concerning the nature of common psychological functioning and its prescription for optimal utilization. (p. 198)

To broaden the argument, we can embed the positivist-empiricist metatheories in a period in Western history called "modernism." While the assumptions underlying modernism will be further discussed in chapter three, it is enough to say at present that modernism emphasizes the view that human beings are rational, mechanistic beings, who, when functioning optimally, have transparent access to objective reality--both in the natural and social worlds. On this view, psychology not only buys into a scientifically sanctioned conception of psychological functioning, but also a culturally sanctioned, almost commonsense, conception of what it is to be a human being.

Gergen's metatheoretical paper puts us in a better position to develop a renewed social psychology. The most basic metatheoretical assumptions which ground the discipline, and which provide it with its rhetorical power, are understood as historical artifacts. Gergen (1979) describes the importance of this metatheoretical critique when he writes:

One significant means of reducing the grip of any theoretical structure is through encapsulation by theory of broader scope. Once a given habit of understanding is viewed as an entity within a broader perspective, it becomes objectified, and discussion of its various assets and liabilities is facilitated. With objectification, the conversion from "accepted truth" to hazardous approximation" is hastened. In this sense there is much to be said for the development of a metatheoretical analysis within the social sciences. Much needed is a corpus of inquiry in to the character of theory itself. Until recently psychologists have relied largely on positivist philosophy to furnish the criteria of analysis..Required then is the development of an indigenous body of metatheory, one that speaks to the specific concerns of psychologists in general, and in this case to social psychologists in particular. (p. 210)

Methods and theories which are oftentimes taken for granted are placed in their historical

perspective, thereby loosening their grip on social psychology.

Generative Theory

It may be useful, then, to consider competing theoretical accounts in terms of the[generative capacity, that is, the capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is "taken for granted," and thereby to furnish new alternatives for social action]. (Gergen, 1978b, p. 1346)

Before saying more about the metatheory which Gergen intends to replace positivist

empiricist-metatheories, I want to take a step back to discuss a paper published in 1978:

"Toward Generative Metatheory." The paper captures the spirit in which the forthcoming

"socio-rationalist" metatheory is offered (Gergen & Morawski, 1980, p. 343). Gergen

(1978b) contrasts the stranglehold which positivist-empiricist metatheories have placed

on the discipline, with a theoretical ideal in which premium is placed on the capacity to

undermine prevailing assumptions and to generate uncommonsense theories.

Gergen begins by drawing attention to the philosophical distinction between

empiricism and rationalism. Empiricism places "preeminent ontological status" on social

fact (1978b, p. 1344). The social world is a thought of as an objective space, like the

natural world, which contains mysteries to be unlocked through scientific investigation.

Meaning resides in a world independent of the observer. In contrast, rationalists argue

that the world is assigned meaning in the concepts which human beings develop in

thought. The world is shaped to reflect human understanding. Gergen draws out the

significance of the distinction when he compares European social psychology--

traditionally entrenched in rationalism--with American social psychology--traditionally

entrenched in the positivist-empiricist metatheories described in the previous section:

> The distinction in orientation furnishes important insight into the ironic discrepancy between the seminal contributions emerging within the recent European, as opposed to the contemporary American, context. In spite of the relatively vast professional ranks and supporting resources within the latter context, theoretical contributions have generally been far less provocative in their effects. Few American contemporaries have been able to match the intellectual ferment furnished by such figures as Freud, Durkheim, Marx, Mannheim, Piaget, Levi-Strauss, Weber, Kohler, Veblen, and Keynes, among others. American social psychology appears to suffer the same malady. Most general treatments of theory in the field typically devote primary attention to Freud and Lewin; for many Fritz Heider's richly suggestive work is deserving of equal status. Role theory has played a historically important part of the development of American social psychology, yet many of its roots may properly be traced to the early contributions of Durkheim. Similarly the symbolic interactionist perspective may be traced to the early European training of its initial spokesmen (Jones & Day, 1977). In terms of general perspectives, only learning theory may be indigenous to American soil. In effect, the strength of contemporary social psychology does not seem to lie in its capacity for engendering theory of major scope and challenge. More generally, it would appear that corespondent with the hegemony of the positivist-empiricist orientation has been a diminution in catalytic theorizing. (1978b, pp. 1344-1345)

Not only have the rationalist theories challenged understanding within the discipline, but

they have also "challenged the assumptive bases of social life, with profound catalytic

effects both within the profession and without" (1978b, p. 1345).

American psychologists have traditionally defended against these types of challenges

by arguing that they have sacrificed enriched theoretical accounts for the more important

goal of assuring theoretical accuracy. Positivist-empiricist metatheories, and their

reliance on the experimental method, assure social psychologists that their theories are

accurate representations of an objective reality, which in turn assures the development of

a body of knowledge which can be used to predict and control social behavior. But as we

have already reviewed, Gergen challenges this, arguing that the focus on objective fact,

the close ties maintained between theory and data (in order for a theory to be offered it must be supported by laboratory observations), the assumption of temporal irrelevance (human behavior can be understood independently of the context in which it normally occurs), and the view of scientist as neutral observer (whose theories, it is held, are not prescriptive) disregard the complexity of meaningful social behavior, and reproduce long-standing traditions in scientific thought. Given that Gergen has shown these scientific practices to be historical ideals rather than ontological truths, it might be better to consider modeling social psychology on a rationalist philosophy which places less emphasis on experimental rigor, thereby allowing for a proliferation of challenging theoretical accounts.

Consistent with the successes of rationalism Gergen suggests a renewed social psychology could takes as its ideal "generative theory" (1978b, p. 1344). The goal of generative theory is twofold: a) to undermine prevailing assumptions about human conduct, and b) to offer fresh alternatives to conventional theoretical accounts. Generative theory stems from the argument offered in ESP (1978a) that no single theory could capture the complexity of human behavior in all of its historical and cultural manifestations. Even the rationalist theories from which Gergen draws inspiration distort the complex character of human behavior. He writes:

> In the act of theorizing, one translates experience into symbol, and the conceptual replica is inevitably a distortion of such experience. By nature a concept treats separate entities as equivalent, entities that may vary in numerous ways unrecognized by the concepts in question; any conceptual system is by nature incomplete (1978b, p. 1357).

If our goal is to capture the ever shifting seemingly indeterminate nature of social behavior then it seems that we should not rely on any single, inevitably distorting theory, but rather take an approach in which theoretical variability is encouraged. We find this in "generative theory" where the aim is to continually undermine theories that are taken for

granted, and to open up a space for the development of theories which may offer a new understanding of the phenomenon. The new theory is no less distorting than the one which it unseats but in encouraging variability generative theory does "[engender] a flexibility that may enhance the adaptive capacity of the society" (Gergen, 1978b, p. 1357). Rather than assessing theory by its accuracy in representing objective fact, theory is to be assessed by it capacity to generate innovative accounts of social life.

The adoption of a generative ideal also serves a pragmatic purpose. Social psychology, as it traditionally exists, reproduces commonsense assumptions about human behavior. It does not struggle with stimulating intellectual issues, but rather has come to focus its attention on relatively technical, and uninteresting, methodological issues. "The field may wither out of ennui, and its efforts may be curtailed because it offers few new insights" (1978b, p. 1356). Gergen continues:

> The lament that the field too often duplicates common sense has long been echoed, and from the present standpoint, it may continue, so long as the traditional mold for "doing science" prevails. With the loosening of such strictures and the development of generative theory, the long-standing lament may recede. (p. 1356)

While the discipline has previously received recognition because of its scientific rigor and advanced understanding of experimental methodology, the discipline may now be regarded for its capacity to challenge our understanding of human behavior. As Gergen (1985) comments elsewhere, this should place social psychology at the forefront of scholarly research alongside emerging postmodernist perspectives.

Toward a Socio-rationalism

Many social psychologists have grown wary of the soul-searching appraisals of recent years. They are hostile to "attack without alternatives," and demand from their seeming assailants a fully developed model for an "improved science" along with compelling exemplars. Yet, although furnishing emotional sustenance, there is little to recommend this form of defense. Its parallel would be to fault criticism of astrology because the critics' capacities for prophecy were not superior, or they failed to furnish alternative pastimes. Yet, on both pragmatic and intellectual grounds, there is manifest demand for an alternative metatheory. A fully developed rationale is required for the development and flourishing of alternative forms of social inquiry. With the elaboration of an alternative metatheory, one may begin to establish viable endpoints or functions for social investigation and to inquire more directly into forms of academic training, journal policies, and professional gatekeeping holding more substantial promise. (Gergen & Morawski, 1980, p. 327)

Positivist-empiricist metatheories, and associated scientific practices, maintain their prominence in Western academia by virtue of a strong network of social support. Considering the science itself, theory and method are supported by metatheoretical arguments, and the converse, metatheory is justified by successful implementation of method and creation of complimentary theories. Metatheory, method, and theory stand as a mutually supportive forms of scientific discourse (Gergen, 1982). The success of positivist-empiricist metatheories is further understood as we turn to the society in which contemporary science is embedded. The modernist emphasis on mechanism, transparent understanding, and control over the world is mirrored in our scientific institutions. And practicing scientists are further encouraged by the vast network of granting agencies and award systems which stand to confirm the utility and importance of continued practice under traditional models. Compared against this tightly knit web of modern scientific discourse, Gergen's claims that social psychology must sensitize itself to historical issues, or adopt a generative model of theory, seem without compelling rhetorical force. Except for the few who are deeply frustrated with conventional practices there is little motivation for embracing Gergen's critique and forging ahead toward a new mode of scientific inquiry. It seems that if Gergen's critique is to take hold there must also be present a social and scholarly network of equally committed resolve, which would serve to nourish and sustain the critique.

Encouraging the development of such a social network is part of the motivation

behind Gergen & Morawksi's (1980) paper "An Alternative Metatheory for Social

Psychology." Gergen and Morawksi reach beyond critiques within psychology and social

psychology to find similar forms of critique in the social and human sciences. The move

outward is anticipated as early as 1973 where Gergen writes:

> However, the study of history, both past and present, should be undertaken in the
> broadest possible framework. Political, economic, and institutional factors are all
> necessary inputs to understanding in an integrated way. A concentration on
> psychology alone provides a distorted understanding of our present condition (p.
> 319).

Where in "Social Psychology as History" Gergen encourages interdisciplinarity for the

sake of broadening our understanding of social behavior, in the present paper

interdisciplinarity is encouraged so as to lay a foundation upon which an alternative

approach to social science research can be built. The articulation of this social rationalist

metatheory not only serves to outline the basic assumptions of an anti-empiricist

approach to social science, but it also serves the pragmatic goal of developing a set of

theories, methods, and practices which might stand in support of one another thereby

challenging the hegemony of positivist-empiricist metatheories.

Gergen and Morawski describe four movements in the social sciences which

challenge positivist-empiricist metatheories. The "hermeneutic-interpretive movement" is

of particular importance because while Gergen (1988) later distances himself from

hermeneutics, it has been argued that, at least in its initial articulation, Gergen's social

constructionism grows out of the hermeneutic perspective (Bruner, 1990; Terwee, 1988).

Like Gergen (1973) hermeneuticians distinguish between the social sciences

(Geisteswissenschaften) and the natural sciences (Naturwissenschaften). The goal of the

natural sciences is to explain behavior in terms of abstract lawful relations. In contrast,

the goal of the social sciences is to provide for understanding of human behavior.

Understanding cannot be achieved by a reduction of the behavior in question to an abstract level of causal relations, but must proceed by situating behavior within the socio-historical context which gives the behavior its meaning. Human behavior then is like a literary text which acquires its depth and significance in the act of interpretation. The hermeneutic movement challenges positivist-empiricists metatheories because it holds that all texts, whether they are religious, scientific, or human behavior emerge from within a culture framework. On this view, like any other text, the scientific research project is not a value free activity, but rather is embedded in a framework of meanings shared by all members of a particular culture.

The second movement described by Gergen and Morawski--"Dialectics"--starts with the assumption that ideas always contain their own negation. For example, in positing a positivist-empiricist metatheory the possibility is already opened up for a challenge to that metatheory--an emphasis on ahistorical inquiry implies the possibility of historical inquiry; or the emphasis on experimentation implies a method which is non-experimental. Change in human thought and action occur as these opposites come into conflict. In the resolution of the conflict a new understanding emerges. In contrast to positivist-empiricist science the emphasis of dialectics is not on stability, but on tension between opposites and the resulting transformation in understanding.

The "critical perspective" shares the emphasis on transformation, but takes an active role in facilitating change by drawing out the tensions which exist in our ideas and practices. This is achieved by illuminating the valuational, or ideological stance assumed by a discipline such as social psychology, and the political systems which these ideals sustain. For example, social psychology as an instance of positivist-metatheories, advocates a mechanistic and atomistic conception of human beings. This view of the human being supports Western political agendas in their emphasis on individualism and

democracy. Psychology, then, is challenged for its hypocritical claims to scientific

neutrality. Questions emerge: "Should psychology continue to support Western political

agendas?" and "Is there an alternative form of psychology which might promote a

collectivist agenda, as opposed to an individualist agenda?"

The "ethnogenic alternative" springs from anthropology, challenging individualistic

and deterministic conceptions of human behavior. The starting point for the ethnogenecist

is the social network in which rules of social behavior are given form. Individual action is

always oriented within this framework of rules. This perspective challenges the

traditional psychological emphasis on deterministic mental mechanisms, and like the

movements described above, allows for the possibility of historically changing patterns of

human behavior.

These four movements find their first point of unity in rationalist philosophy as

opposed to empiricist philosophy. Knowledge does not emerge out of careful observation

of an objective world, but rather is actively created in thought. Gergen and Morawski

draw out of a further distinction between the traditional formulations of rationalism and

the socio-rationalism which they are proposing. They write:

> Yet, one may discern a fundamental separation between the rationalist flavor of the
> schools discussed above and traditional rational idealism. Although rationalist
> philosophy has usually been critical of the assumption that human knowledge can be
> determined by incoming sense stimuli, there has been a simultaneously widespread
> resistance to both solipsism and relativism. Such concepts as a priori ideas, divine
> provision, and the perfectibility of "human knowledge." Yet, the concept of
> knowledge itself becomes suspect within contemporary forms of rationalist social
> psychology. Knowledge is no longer sacrosanct, but "of the people," it is no longer
> the gift of God, built into the gene structure, or an exclusive possession of a scholarly
> elite. Within the emergent paradigm it has become democratized. Knowledge of the
> world is primarily a construction of individuals not acting independently, but engaged
> in processes of intersubjective communication. (1980, pp. 344-345)

As opposed to the positivist-empiricist metatheory which emphasizes the primacy of the

objective world, or the rationalist idealism emphasizes the primacy of individual thought,

a socio-rationalism emerges in which members of a community actively create the meaningful reality in which they live. The focus for socio-rationalism thus becomes the process by which knowledge is constructed within community, the constraints that these constructions impose upon the generation of new forms of knowledge and activity, and the values which these constructions promote. In the case of social psychology we may being to ask: "How did the discipline come to rely on a positivist-empiricist metatheory?" "What are the images of human beings constructed under our present model of research?" and "What models of research, or metaphors of human behavior, might provide for a more challenging and interesting social psychology?"

Concluding Notes

Gergen's critique of social psychology begins with the observation that traditional social psychological theory is largely irrelevant to our understanding of everyday life--in short social psychology has failed to live up to its promise of providing theories which could be of use in resolving social problems and improving everyday life. In a return to the 19th century distinction between the social and natural sciences, Gergen attributes this failure to the fact that social psychology, and more broadly the social sciences, have inappropriately adopted a natural science conception of theory. Our understanding of social behavior is never neutral or value free, but always stands in relation to the values and goals of a particular society. In particular, social psychology has modelled its theories after positivist empiricist metatheories, which in one instance prescribe models for good science, but in addition prescribe a model of ideal psychological functioning-- the human being stands in relation to an objective world, and possess both cognitive and affective properties, the former of which is the most valued human property. Under generative theory, Gergen challenges social psychologists to abandon the traditional ideal of theoretical accuracy, and to embrace a type of practice which focuses on the creation

of innovative accounts of human behavior. Socio-rationalism emerges as a metatheory intended to provide a justifactory base for generative theorizing. In chapter two we see how the basic aspirations of generative theory, and socio-rationalism, are extended under the development of a social constructionist metatheory.

Chapter Two: The Social Constructionist Metatheory

Social constructionist inquiry is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which
people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in
which they live. It attempts to articulate common forms of understanding as they now exist, as
they have existed in prior historical periods, and as they might exist should creative attention be
so directed. (Gergen, 1985, p. 266)

In the present chapter I outline the goals of social constructionism as they manifest at

a metatheoretical level. In the previous chapter I suggested that a metatheory is a set of

assumptions which ground a scholarly pursuit. The basic assumptions of positivist-

empiricist metatheories were contrasted with those of socio-rationalism. One of these

differences was the tie that socio-rationalism has to rationalist philosophies and the

emphasis placed on generative theory. While retaining the view that a metatheoretical

position provides a discipline with guiding assumptions, following Gergen (1982) I want

to distance myself from traditional accounts which take metatheory as the foundation

upon which a discipline is built; as if a discipline first chooses a metatheory and then

builds its practices from this base. Rather metatheory is viewed as one form of discourse,

argumentation, or rhetoric, itself achieving particular social ends. Other forms of

discourse involve discussions of theory or method, or moving beyond the boundaries of

science--religion, racism, or gender (but not limited to these). Metatheory does not stand

underneath, or above other forms of discourse, guiding conversation or providing the

assumptions which ground all other conversations, but rather stands alongside as one type

of conversation among many others. This takes us away from a traditionally leveled

understanding of metatheory, method, and theory and places all forms of discourse on

equal level. The question is no longer: "What are the foundations upon which our

scientific practices rest?" but rather, "What end does each form of discourse achieve?"

In the first chapter, something has already been said of the end that a metatheoretical

argument achieves for Gergen (1980). Socio-rationalism was offered in an effort to meet

the positivist-empiricist metatheories at their own level of discourse thereby providing an alternative model for social psychological inquiry. The foundations upon which social psychology was putatively built were revealed to have been inadequate to social psychology's subject matter. But in offering a socio-rationalist metatheory another end was achieved--it was shown that contemporary science justifies its practices through an appeal to metatheoretical foundations. Any critique which seeks to undermine contemporary research practices must also take aim at the foundations upon which the discipline claims to be built. If Gergen takes his audience to be the social psychological community then his argument must be addressed to that community and its assumptions about the nature of science. The mistake would be to assume that after challenging social psychology's foundations Gergen aims to erect new foundations--to replace positivist-empiricist metatheories with a set of assumptions that better capture the contours of social life. Socio-rationalism, and this becomes even clearer as we get into social constructionism, does not achieve traditional metatheoretical ends--it does not stand as the foundation upon which a discipline is built--but rather stands as a form of argument intended to entice, or attract those working within a traditional mode of scientific practice into a new mode of scientific practice.

A metatheory can achieve broad appeal if it finds support in other forms of discourse. Gergen and Morawksi's description of socio-rationalism achieves its credibility as the meeting point for a number of critiques common among the social sciences. The metatheory is not the sole creation of an individual but rather emerges in a socio-historical context. The assumptions of hermeneutics, dialectics, critical theory, and ethnogenics overlap thereby providing a sort of social support network which stands in defense of socio-rationalism. In particular, the anti-empiricist or anti-foundational emphasis found in socio-rationalism is elaborated with the development of social

constructionism. Very broadly conceived, anti-foundationalist metatheories take the view that there are no groundings, either metaphysical or empirical, for our knowledge of the world. In the remainder of this introduction I will sketch the general direction that this anti-foundational stance takes social constructionism in, and then in the main body of the chapter pursue the specifics of the social constructionist position.

First something must be said of the move from socio-rationalism to social constructionism. As argued in chapter one, socio-rationalism grows out of rationalist philosophies. Gergen and Morawski (1980) try to distance themselves from the lingering traces of foundationalism found in rationalism when they move to a socio-rationalism which emphasizes the social nature of the construction of reality (see Chapter 1). In an interview with Misra (1993) Gergen suggests that the term social constructionism is adopted in order to further purge the metatheory of any links to traditional conceptions of rationalism. Gergen says:

> On thing that has been important for me is not to insulate myself from questioning and critical voices (unless they are rude and vengeful). As long as they honor the issues at stake I want the dialogue to proceed--even if it means abandoning earlier positions. (In fact, the "socio-rationalist" formulation was largely abandoned, in large measure because of the dualist traces I found it carried) [italics added]. (Misra, 1993, p. 408)

By dualist traces Gergen means the rationalist-empiricist distinction between human subjectivity and objective reality. Rationalism has its foundations in an appeal to the primacy of the human mind, and empiricism has its foundations in an appeal to the primacy of a reality external to the human mind.

In its short history, psychology has experienced the influence of both empiricist and rationalist philosophies. Behaviorist psychology favored an "exogenic" approach emphasizing the importance of an objective world's influence on human behavior (Gergen, 1985, p. 269). More recently, the revival of a cognitively oriented mentalism

has favored, at least in theory if not in method, an "endogenic" approach emphasizing the

importance of the human mind in structuring experience (Gergen, 1985, p.269). Gergen

characterizes the history of psychology as a number of shifts between these two

foundationalist epistemologies. Perhaps best exemplified in the perennial nature-nurture

debate psychologists continue to ask whether behavior is internally or externally caused.

It is the swing of the pendulum between rationalist and empiricist epistemologies that

social constructionism attempts to undermine. Gergen (1985) writes:

> It is against this backdrop that one can appreciate the emergence of social
> constructionism. Rather than recapitulating yet again the movement of the pendulum,
> the challenge (for many) has been to transcend the traditional subject-object dualism
> and all its attendant problems (cf. Rorty, 1979) and to develop a framework of
> analysis based on an alternative (nonempiricist) theory of the functioning and
> potentials of science. This movement begins in earnest when one challenges the
> concept of knowledge as mental representation. (p. 270)

Continuing this discussion Gergen introduces the next move which is important for

understanding social constructionism:

> Given the myriad of insolubles to which such a concept gives rise, one is moved to
> consider what passes as knowledge in human affairs. At least one major candidate is
> that of _linguistic rendering_ [italics added. We generally count as knowledge that
> which is represented in linguistic propositions—stored in books, journals, floppy
> disks, and the like. These renderings, to continue an earlier theme, are constituents of
> social practices. From this perspective knowledge is not something people posses
> somewhere in their heads, but rather, something people do together. _Languages are_
> _essentially shared activities_ [italics added]. (p. 270)

There are a number of ideas contained in this passage which will be untangled in this

chapter. For one the move to a communal conception of language immediately

acknowledges that knowledge is not something discovered by individual researchers or

isolated individuals, but is always embedded in a socio-historical context. Psychological

theories, and less formal accounts of our lives, are situated within a context of shared

meanings, and changes in our understanding of the world do not turn on empirical

evidence but rather on our capacity to engage a community of language users in a

convincing and meaningful way.

Social constructionism also moves into the domain of social theory--an area of study traditionally avoided by psychologists and left to sociologists, political philosophers, or historians. If psychological theories and our identities are always given form in a shared language, then it follows that in achieving identity we also situate ourselves within a meaningful social space. As Charles Taylor (1985) argues, to speak is to locate ourselves within a space of other persons who both acknowledge and challenge the stance that we take. The important point here is that outside of a social space we could not hope to achieve an identity or an understanding of the world. Knowledge depends upon our relations to other people. On Gergen's perspective this means that psychological theory, as necessarily formed in a shared language, is always a social activity which, borrowing from the ordinary language philosophies of Wittgenstein and Austin, achieves social ends rather than describing an objective reality.

Social constructionism also encourages a move from the traditional psychological focus on the individual as locus of knowledge, to the forms of relationship which make knowledge and understanding possible. Knowledge is not conceived as something stored in the brain, or represented in the mind of an individual. It is not as if people simply open their eyes and perceive a world which is already meaningful, but rather the world is given meaning in the language of a community, or on a local level the world is given meaning in the conversations which develop in relationship with others. If we can speak about individuals this is not because human beings are inherently individualistic, but rather because the individual is a linguistic achievement owing much of its rhetorical power to a history of political and philosophical discussions which have placed the individual at the center of the knowledge generating process (Stam, 1993). One move in social constructionism, then, is to demonstrate the historical and psychological origins of

individualism and to develop a language in which relationship and social process becomes the starting point for psychological inquiry.

From this quick review, it becomes clear that social constructionism moves beyond the critique of social psychology offered in the first chapter, and extends its reach to include our understanding of psychology, the social sciences, and as Gergen (1994) further extends his thesis, the "human sciences." He (1985) writes:

> However, in its current metamorphosis this emerging body of thought contains implications of substantial significance. Not only are broad vistas of inquiry opened for study, but the foundations of psychological knowledge also are thrown into critical relief. When the implications are fully elaborated, it becomes apparent that the study of social process could become generic for understanding the nature of knowledge itself. Social psychology would not stand, in this case as a derivative of general psychology. Rather, the latter would be viewed as a form of social process, both the grounds and outcomes of which stand to be elucidated by social inquiry. In similar fashion, epistemological inquiry along with the philosophy of science could both give way, or become subsumed by, social inquiry. These are indeed bold conjectures, and as we shall see, to make good on them may require relinquishing much that is sacred. (p. 266)

There is no distinction drawn between knowledge as a representation of the world, and the world that is represented. Rather all forms of knowledge, whether they are social scientific, natural scientific, or our everyday understanding of ourselves, participate in social process. To claim to know something is also to take a stance within a society. On this view, social constructionism takes aim at all forms of knowledge and attempts to elucidate the role that each plays within a society. No form of knowledge seems to escape the social constructionist critique.

The Language of Theory

As we have seen, it is unpromising to view theoretical work as a form of behavioral description, a reflection of ongoing behavioral events. Rather, it seems preferable to consider theory principally in it linguistic aspects. The theorist is fundamentally a source of linguistic activity. This is to say that the chief product of the vast attempts at manipulation, control, assessment, and quantification are essentially word systems. In this sense the behavioral sciences are similar to the humanities; both possess certain forms of linguistic expertise. (Gergen, 1982, p. 95)

In chapter one of this thesis I reviewed Gergen's (1978a) critique of experimental social psychology. If we follow Gergen's argument it becomes clear that the experimental method distorts our understanding of human behavior, and develops theories which are limited in their capacity to reflect the complexity and ambiguity of behavior as it occurs across different historical and cultural periods. Traditional psychological theories are better viewed as accounts of human behavior within a particular social setting--the experimental laboratory. The experimental method which has met with success in the natural sciences seems to do more damage than good when taken up in the social sciences. In chapter two of Gergen's (1982) book Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge (TTSK): "The Communal Basis of Social Knowledge" he revives this critique under a linguistic argument.

For Gergen, at least in part, the relative success of the natural sciences in comparison to the social sciences can be traced to the role that language plays in each. Traditionally positivist-empiricist science, and by extension the social sciences, have assumed that language reflects a reality independent of that language. In a review of 20th century philosophies of language Charles Taylor (1985) calls this a "designative" conception of language--words are thought to stand in for, or to represent, an independently meaningful reality (p. 218). A distinction is made between an objective world already invested with meaning, and the language which is developed to mirror the meaning already found in the world. Language is meaningful precisely because it points to or reflects the a priori order of reality.

When in his early papers Gergen (1973, 1978a) argues that scientific theory distorts our understanding of everyday behavior, he seems to share in this designative conception of language. An ideal social science would be one which in the language of theory best captures the contours of everyday experience. On Gergen's view, this ideal language cannot be developed in laboratory settings but must account for historical variables whose inclusion in theory brings us closer to an understanding of social life. But Gergen already problematizes the idea of an ideal theory when he introduces generative theory, whose aims are not to capture the contours of social life, but to challenge prevailing assumptions and to introduce innovative theories. Generative theory would not find its justification in its accuracy of representation, but in its capacity to challenge and innovate. If the designative view of language is challenged by the concept of generative theory, then Gergen (1982) more clearly distances himself from the designative view in TTSK when he writes:

> Thus far our analysis has failed to distinguish between experience and language, between the world as sensed and talk about the world. We have spoken about stimulus factors, psychological processes, and behavioral activities as if the words could furnish an adequate representation of events in nature. In effect, we have misleadingly treated words as it they could bear a point-to-point relationship to a prefashioned reality. Yet, if we extend our initial argument for continuous alteration of the experiential world, it becomes readily apparent that in adopting a language of entities the experiential world has been transformed. The language has created independent and enduring entities in an experienced world of prevailing fluctuation. (p. 59)

Here Gergen comes closer to what Taylor (1985) calls an "expressive" conception of language where meaning is not found in an independent reality, but rather the world becomes meaningful in the act of speaking (p. 218). Put another way, language use, as a communal activity, invests the world with meaning. The world is meaningful insofar as one participates in a community of language users who share certain assumptions about the world. And further, if meaning is created in language, in the act of speaking, it

becomes possible to transform our understanding of the world. In learning to speak then we come to share an understanding of the world with the community who shares in our language, but further in language we are also able to challenge prevailing meanings so as to move beyond conventional understanding. Speaking, then, is an activity in which we give expression to, or realize new feelings and understandings. Taylor (1985) writes:

> What then does language come to be on this view? A pattern of activity, by which we express/realize a certain way of being in the world, that of reflective awareness, but a pattern which can only be deployed against a background which we can never fully dominate; and yet a background that we are never fully dominated by, because we are constantly reshaping it. Reshaping it without dominating it, or being able to oversee it, means that we never fully know what we are doing to it; we develop language without knowing fully what we are making it into. (p. 232)

At this point I compare Gergen's developing conception of language to Taylor's description of the expressive account of language not because they perfectly overlap but rather to orient the following discussion. Very broadly, it is clear that Gergen follows in the expressivist tradition rather than the designative tradition. Language does not gain its meaning by pointing to objects in the world, but rather in a community of language users. I also introduce Taylor's position so that I can later (in chapter 4) contrast it to Gergen's developing position. Taylor advocates a hermeneutic model for the social sciences wherein language allows us to clarify our self-understandings--to develop more accurate descriptions of our lives. A tension develops between speaking as transformative activity, and speaking as an activity which must be grounded in previous understanding. On Taylor's view, in speaking we are always caught between staying "true" to what we already know about ourselves and of saying new things about our selves. Gergen (1988a) later drops the idea that language can be used to provide more accurate descriptions of our lives, and consistent with his emphasis on generative theory, focuses on the transformative capacity of language. Unlike Taylor, for Gergen our use of language seems to be unbounded. Transformation of understanding is as easy of speaking in new

ways. I will further address Gergen's repudiation of the "hermeneutic" position in chapter four. For the present, I want to hold to the view that Gergen moves away from a designative conception of language and toward something like an expressive conception of language. This also moves Gergen away from an "empirical-analytical" conception of science (another term for the positivist-empiricist metatheories already discussed) and toward a "hermeneutic-interpretive" model of science (Terwee, 1988, p. 15).

The distinction between designative and expressive conceptions of language also reflects a long-standing debate in the social sciences as to whether the social sciences are, like the natural sciences, an empirical-analytical enterprise where theory reflects an independent and stable reality, or whether the social sciences are an hermeneutic-interpretive enterprise whose theoretical activity transforms the understanding of the phenomenon under study. If in the social sciences language proves to be expressive rather than designative then the model for the social sciences seems to come closer to that of a hermeneutic-interpretive enterprise. For Gergen (1982) the answer to the question of whether the social sciences are hermeneutic-interpretive or empirical-analytic turns on differences between the subject matter of social and natural sciences.

Gergen argues that the empirical basis for a science depends on the capacity of a community of scientists to develop "ostensive definitions" for their subject matter—that is the capacity to provide widely observable examples of the subject matter of interest to which the entire scientific community can agree (1982, p.79). The natural sciences have met with some success here because their subject matter possess properties which are stable and recurring. To return to one of Gergen's (1973) earlier arguments, the subject matter of the natural sciences are not influenced by the passage of history or the relationship between investigator and subject matter. Gergen (1982) provides an example:

...we may establish the meaning of the term "automobile" by referring to relatively enduring patterns of experience. (These patterns might commonly be referred to as "wheels", "engines", "seats," and so on). Broad agreement may be reached primarily because the relative stability of the experiences allows them to be recorded in memory and shared with others. To be sure, there may be generalized unclarity with respect to what constitute the components of the properties of automobile. People may disagree with respect to which components or characteristics are required before an object may be called an auto.... In this sense all object words may include a "fuzzy set" of constituents. Yet, for more practical purposes, a social group may develop agreement as to what constitutes an automobile, an embryo, velocity, temperature, and the like by a pointing [italics added] procedure. (p. 80)

The natural sciences can be considered empirical because the words used to describe the subject matter emerges from the observation of stable and recurring phenomenon.

In contrast, take the case of the social sciences which generally understands its subject matter to be internal psychological states such as cognitions, motives, intentions, and emotions. There are at least three moves which traditionally have been made to establish objective referents for the development of ostensive definitions in psychology: a) reference to the human body--what Gergen (1982) calls "spatiotemporal observables"; b) inference of a mind like substance through controlled observation; and c) reference to a mind like substance through self-observation/self-perception. Gergen's first discusses these three points in TTSK and further elaborates them in the 1986 paper "Social Pragmatics and the Origins of Psychological Discourse." The present discussion shifts between arguments presented in both papers.

Gergen (1986) describes one line of research which holds that psychological states "are essentially given in the expressive movements of the body" (p. 112). For example emotional states might be determined by facial expression, and a proper understanding of emotional states would begin with careful observation of these facial expressions. Gergen argues that this line of argument quickly becomes problematic. Unlike objects in the natural sciences, the human body is not fixed in its movements but rather "furnishes a

virtual infinity of continuously changing sensory experiences" (p. 113). Gergen (1982) writes:

> Human activity furnishes the observer with a continuous and ever-changing array of experience. Eyes, facial muscles, limbs, voice, fingers, torso, and so on may all move simultaneously, and the stability of pattern may be retained only for the briefest instant (p. 81).

Given the ever shifting movements of the human body the ability to agree that a psychological state is exemplified in overt bodily movements seems to be less a result of direct observation of the body (e.g. anger could equally be exemplified with a scowl, a fist swinging to meet another person's face, or in the writing of an inflammatory letter) and more a result of the psychological community's ability to agree on the situations in which "anger" might be said to have been expressed.

Gergen (1986) argues there is another tradition of psychological research which does not attempt to apprehend psychological states through direct observation, but rather by drawing inferences about internal states from observation. Here psychological states are not identical to their physical expressions, but rather can be inferred from the observation of physical expressions. Gergen (1986) writes:

> On this account, psychological states are not revealed directly in human conduct; rather through careful observation of persons over time one learns to infer the existence of various motives, thoughts, intentions, and the like. (p. 114)

Psychological tests, questionnaires, or even, as in the previous section observation of bodily movements might be used as tools to infer internal psychological states. For example, peoples' consistent performances on a memory test might lead psychologists to infer something about the structure of memory (e.g. short term memory only holds seven pieces of information at any given time). However, as Gergen reasons, the move to inference meets with the problem of induction. There are no legitimate grounds by which we can move from observation to inference. As described in the previous paragraph there

are no spatiotemporal movements which would allow investigators to posit relations between observed behaviors and underlying psychological processes. It seems rather that "the initial hypothesis regarding psychological source would...rely on the application of preconceptions" originating in a community of scientists (Gergen, 1986, p. 114). The inferred psychological mechanisms, then, do not depend upon observation of internal phenomenon, but rather it seems that it is decided in advance which bodily movements, verbal accounts, or performances on psychological tests would count as evidence for underlying psychological processes.

There is one other course of action that the social scientist might take in order to access to internal psychological states. If we presume that people are in possession of underlying psychological events or states which cause behavior then those who experience these psychological states can report on their presence. The experiencing individual should be able to "observe" his or own internal states and report on these in qualitative research settings, on questionnaires, or on psychological tests. Gergen points up the problem of internal observation when he examines some of the assumptions underlying this research. The idea of internal observation first assumes an awkward mental dualism in which one part of the mind must act as a sensor, which turns its eye upon another part of the mind, which, in turn, furnishes the object to be observed. "Such a dualism is sufficiently awkward that one is invited to consider how such a peculiar construction might have acquired such broad credibility" (Gergen, 1982, p. 66). On Gergen's view it seems likely that the assumption that a mind can observe itself does not emerge out of an observation that the mind has such capacities, but seems more likely to be based on the traditional metaphor of external perception. Even if we were to allow for this unlikely mental dualism we are faced with further problems. Gergen (1982) writes:

If both the sensing process and the sensed data are constituents of the same

psychological structure, what safeguards (if any) could be placed over misperception? Could the processes one hope to identify not hinder or distort the very task of identification itself? Freudian theory indeed posits just the kind of psychological processes that would obscure those entities (states, drives, intentions) one hoped to ascertain. (p. 66)

Further, if internal perception is anything like external perception then it would require objects to be observed. But "when one inquires into the properties of mental states what would enable them to be identified. What is the size, shape, color, sound, or smell, for example, of a thought, a motive, a desire, a need, or a hope?" (Gergen, 1982, p.66). When a person reports that he or she is happy, sad, frustrated, or motivated what is the internal state that they are observing? On reflection it seems that there are no such objective reference for our reports of internal states.

There are two important points which emerge out of Gergen's discussion of ostensive definition in the social sciences. First, unlike in the natural sciences there seem to be no enduring or recurring objects which would stand as the reference point for the development of unambiguous definitions of psychological phenomenon. Rather, it seems that a psychological language of intentions, motives, cognitions, or emotions does not refer to any observable objects but rather finds its meaning in the language which has been developed in a scientific community. Gergen (1982) writes:

...that which is commonly viewed as theoretical description in the sociobehavioral sciences is fundamentally a product of linguistic convention and is neither guided nor corrected by behavioral observation. Observation thus serves as an excuse for theoretical work, but is neither its source nor its sanction. (p. 60)

This is a radical move because it claims that the psychological world is never known through observation but through language. And if social science theory is in no way grounded in observation then its theories cannot be undermined or challenged by new observations. Rather, changes in social scientific theory are guided by linguistic conventions. For example, a challenge to the view that human behavior is determined by

cognitive mechanisms cannot be decided by behavioral observation but depends upon the social scientist's capacity to challenge the conventions which embed these assumptions. Indeed, Gergen (1978b, 1980) does not challenge traditional social psychological research with empirical evidence, but rather develops an argument which shows that social scientific practice rests on historically bound metatheoretical assumptions about psychological functionning, or in the present case, assumptions about the nature of language.

The second challenge which emerges here is to the assumption that human beings possess a mind-like substance located somewhere in the individual. If social science theory is not designative but rather expressive then theoretical descriptions of mind do not find their warrant in an objective entity to which language unproblematically refers, but rather finds its warrant in a tradition of philosophical and psychological thought which takes the individual mind as the defining property of human being. The move toward an expressive conception of language moves us toward a new metaphor which could be used to understand human psychology--collectivism rather than individualism. Language is not a tool used by individual human beings to communicate observations or internal thought processes, but rather language is a property of a community and subsequently minds are properties of community.

This brings us around to the distinction made in the opening of this section between empirical-analytical science and interpretive-hermeneutic science. For Gergen the social sciences are interpretive. Social scientific theory is not an incontestable description of psychological events, but rather it is an interpretive enterprise in which different theoretical accounts vie for credibility in a social space. The validity of a particular theory is not determined by its capacity to reflect an objective world, but rather it is validated by its capacity to make sense within a tradition of social-scientific practices.

We can better understand what Gergen means by interpretive by drawing on the example

with which he introduces chapter two of <u>Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge</u>:

> If I see my good friends Ross and Laura approach each other at a social gathering, and Ross reaches out and momentarily touches Laura's hair, precisely what have I observed? What action has occurred before me? How am I to identify it? What does the action suggest about their relationship and the manner in which I should regard it if I wish to retain their friendship? (1982, p. 60)

Gergen points out that direct observation of the action itself can tell us very little. That

is, a measurement of the spatio-temporal particulars of Ross' movements (the angle and

speed at which Ross moved his arm, the force that the arm exerted as it touched the hair,

the time that the event occurred) do not reveal anything about the social significance of

the action. Rather, it is the body of knowledge brought to bear on the situation which will

lead us to an understanding of Ross' actions. For example, if we were to learn that only

days earlier Ross had declared his love for Laura, we might interpret Ross' action as a

sign of affection. Alternately, we might learn that days earlier Laura had told Ross that

she thought he was a cold and uncaring person. With this knowledge we might reconsider

our earlier interpretation, and conclude that Ross' action was a premeditated attempt to

prove to Laura that he was an affectionate person. The interpretation of Ross' action is

not given by an observation of the spatiotemporal particulars, but rather depends upon

making a judgment which is grounded in our knowledge of the meaning of these sorts of

behaviors. The pieces of evidence must be weighed against one another with

consideration given to the possibility that our understanding of the situation can be

changed when new evidence is introduced.

Certainly there are limits on the interpretations that we can offer of Ross' actions.

However, these limits are not determined by empirical observations but rather by the set

of "intelligibility rules" which serve as culturally shared "rules of agreement concerning

the meaning of one event in relationship to a second" (Gergen, 1982, p. 62). Put another

way these are rules which guide our use of language such that it makes sense to other people. Gergen (1982) writes:

> Ross' act of touching Laura's hair has no intrinsic relationship to his preceding proclamation of live. The proclamation bears on our interpretation primarily because of the widely shared rules in Western culture that encourage us to accept both proclamation and touch as signals of the underlying emotional state. (p. 62)

The important point for Gergen is that these intelligibility rules are established in language and as such can be modified in ongoing conversation. Previous interpretations of a given action can be undermined by the creation of new rules of interpretation. Gergen (1982) concludes then that "the limits to the range of possible intelligibility rules would appear to be those bounding the human imagination. In principle any contextual indicator has the potential to be used in multiple ways in the service of interpreting or identifying any human action" (p. 63).

This last point, that the limits to interpretation are grounded only in the imaginative capacity of human beings, seems to be closely tied to Gergen's idea of generative theory. Social science operates under a set of intelligibility rules which are firmly entrenched in positivist-empiricist metatheories. The assumptions of positivist-empiricist science are not grounded in observation and as such can be challenged by developing a new set of intelligibility rules. Further, the invention of intelligibilities need not stop with the critique of positivist-empiricist metatheories. It is possible to continue to reinvent intelligibility rules in continuing conversations about the assumptions which underlie our accounts of human behavior, and the interpretations which could be offered if we set to developing unique theoretical accounts.

Gergen has been much criticized for his endorsement of what seems here to be a radical relativism--a sort of anything goes attitude. Some critiques suggest that in embracing this epistemological relativism he also embraces a moral relativism wherein

any type of theory, no matter how devastating its consequences, is endorsed

(Smith,1994). Other critiques suggest that Gergen's position is still entrenched in the

positivist-empiricist tradition which he aims to overcome. Terwee (1988) writes:

> The conclusion may sound paradoxical: in his radical rejection of the aims of
> empiricist psychology, Gergen remains entangled in one central presupposition of the
> empirical-analytical world-view. He assumes that apart from the realm of natural
> science, no real knowledge may be found, and that any pursuit of truth in the
> humanities is futile. (p. 25)

Taylor (1988) shares in Terwee's critique of Gergen. It is not necessarily the case that

when empirical foundations are abandoned any interpretation can follow. Both Taylor

and Terwee argue that there are constraints imposed upon our capacity for re-

interpretation, and these can be found in the socio-historical period in which people live.

When born into a culture we learn a language in which our lives become meaningful, and

the interpretations of our actions cannot help but be judged against the meanings into

which we are born. On this view, it is not possible to re-write the intelligibly rules which

guide our use of language. The social sciences, and our understandings of who we are in

everyday life, are grounded in these rules just as the natural sciences are grounded in

empirical evidence. At this point, I want to leave this complicated point of contention

aside. I will return to it again when in chapter four I discuss Gergen's repudiation of the

hermeneutic-interpretive movement . For the moment, I want to turn to Gergen's further

elaboration of his conception of language within the context of the "ordinary language

philosophers."

Language as Relational Activity

If we view language (and here we shall confine ourselves to the verbal domain) chiefly as a set of practices employed by people for purposes of successful interchange, then new horizons open for the understanding of psychological discourse. Forms of discourse emerge, for one, as a response to certain practical problems encountered in human relationships. In the same way that a carpenter may require a certain instrument to drive a nail, and the artist certain implements to render a likeness, differing vocabularies and grammars may be required to solve various problems of human community. In light of our initial concerns, this is to say that much common sense as well as scientific "knowledge of the mind" may gain its character not from the actualities of mental functioning but from problems of human interchange that the language was designed to solve. In effect, the existing ontology of mind manifests the structure of social action. What is taken to exist on the level of mental functioning can be viewed in large degree as the objectification of linguistic practices born of pragmatic exigency. (Gergen, 1986, pp. 116-117)

Gergen (1982) first refers to the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein in Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge to support his argument that the language of social science theory does not bear a point to point relationship with observable objects. But in TTSK Wittgenstein's writings are not central to Gergen's argument, and are overshadowed by an emphasis on the interpretive nature of social science. Wittgenstein's importance to Gergen's project first becomes obvious in "The Social Constructionist Movement in Modern Psychology" when Gergen (1985) writes:

Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations must be viewed as seminal in this regard. By asking such questions as where does an individual feel grief or happiness, could a person have a profound feeling in one second, and can the features of hope be described, Wittgenstein brought into poignant clarity the extent to which the use of mental predicates is convention bound.... In effect, many classical problems both in psychology and philosophy appear to be products of linguistic entanglement; with clarity concerning the nature and functions of the language the problems may often be decomposed. (p. 267)

Gergen (1986) further explores Wittgenstein's work in "Social Pragmatics and the Origin of Psychological Discourse" where he argues that commonsense and scientific accounts of mental life do not emerge out of observation of psychological functioning, but rather emerge to solve "pragmatic" problems in human relationships (p. 116). A language of mental functioning emerges to co-ordinate complex social interactions, and the language of psychology is better viewed as a tool which enables certain forms of human

relationship. Considering Taylor's (1988) and Terwee's (1988) critiques of Gergen, this emphasis on the pragmatic nature of language becomes an important point of departure from the hermeneutic perspective. We are certainly bound by convention in our use of language, but viewed as a tool, language can also serve to transform the way that people understand and relate to each other. Rather than focusing on language's capacity to express what we already know about ourselves, social constructionism turns to language as the tool which can be used to continually undermine convention and transform human activity.

In particular, there are four points that Gergen emphasizes in his discussion of the ordinary language philosophers. These points are entangled, but for the purpose of clarity I will try to discuss each independently. First there is the view that words acquire their meaning not by pointing to objects in an independent reality, but rather from their use in particular contexts. Another way of putting this is that words which we usually take to have single definitions are actually underdetermined in their meaning--the meaning can never be grasped in a single proposition. Gergen (1986) writes:

> ...a term like "aggression" derives its meaning from the many contexts in which it is employed...whether one is speaking about soldiers at war, tennis players, investment policies, woodchopping, or weed growth in the spring. (p. 139)

And quoting Wittgenstein, Gergen continues:

> There are countless...different kinds of use of what we call "symbol,"" words,"" sentences." And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once and for all. (p. 139)

This is a challenge to the positivist-empiricist conception of language which seeks strict definitions for scientific words, and in particular it is a challenge to conventional psychology which seeks to provide strict definitions for words like intention, motive, emotion, or cognition. For example, if we want to understand what the word

"aggression" means then we are not to look for this in a single context, such as the laboratory setting, but rather by observing the way that the word aggression is used in the laboratory, the workplace, at home, or in international conflict. Psychology is moved from the laboratory to the multiple settings in which words first acquire their meaning.

The second point is that words acquire their meaning by the way that they are used in particular settings. Indeed words cannot be understood outside of the context in which they are used because they develop to achieve particular ends unique to these settings. Put another way words do things for us. They are like tools each specifically designed to evoke a particular response from other people. Here, the ordinary language philosopher J.L. Austin distinguishes between "constative," and "performative" propositions (Gergen, 1988b, p. 4). Constative propositions are descriptive--these propositions operate much like the positivist-empiricist expects--they directly refer, or point, to objects in the world. Performative propositions are different because they do not refer, or point, to anything; rather, they do things. "The utterances 'On your mark, get set, go...','hello', 'good-bye', or 'here's to you', are performative" (Gergen, 1988b, p. 4). Evidently, performative utterances cannot be evaluated for their correspondence to fact--indeed there is no fact to which these refer. Rather, as Austin argues, they can be judged for their "felicity" within a "procedure" (Gergen, 1988b, p. 4). If a performative is uttered in the proper context, and on this is rendered intelligible, then the utterance acheives something.

Continuing his review of Austin's philosophy, Gergen (1988) argues that constative propositions are derivative of performative propositions. That is, even our "pointing" words acquire their meaning first as they are used in particular contexts. He writes:

> In particular, let me first propose that when we engage in actions that we call 'describe' 'explain' or 'theorize' we are essentially engaging in a performative ritual or life form. When we say that such and such an utterance is 'accurate' or 'inaccurate', true' or 'false' we are not judging it according to some abstract or idealized standard of verisimilitude; it is not its pictoral accuracy that is at stake.

Rather, we are indicating its degree of felicity or infelicity in particularized circumstances. The proposition that the world is round and not flat is neither true nor false in terms of pictoral value, i.e., correspondence with the objective world. However, by current standards, it is more felicitous to play the game of round world truth when flying from Cologne to Kansas; and more felicitous to 'play it flat' when touring the state of Kansas itself. Let me next propose that the felicity of utterances we call descriptive is derived from other performative rituals. That is, the capacity to function as a performative in the game of description depends on the way in which the utterance is embedded within more primitive practices. (1988b, p. 6)

The languages developed both in the social and the natural sciences are to be understood

by the things that they do in particular contexts, and when we say that a particular theory

is accurate, or true, this is because within the existing language the theory is felicitous.

The focus of study for social constructionism, then, becomes a description of the rules

which guide felicitous language use in particular contexts. For example, it is asked:

"What elements must a scientific explanation contain in order that it make sense to other

members of the community?" or "What are the linguistic constraints imposed upon our

descriptions of psychological states?" Quoting Wittgenstein Gergen (1986) asks, why

Does it sound so queer to say, "He felt grief for one second?" Because it so seldom happened? Then what if we were to imagine people who often have this experience? Or such as often for hours together alternate between second-long feelings of deep grief and inner joy? (p. 89e) (p. 113)

Gergen continues:

In attempting to answer such questions the reader becomes acutely aware of the system of conventions in which mental discourse is embedded and unsettled over the extent to which it is the conventions themselves that determine the character of what we take to be knowledge of mental conditions. (p. 113)

Put another way Wittgenstein encourages us to describe the "language games" which

guide our everyday conversations. Gergen (1994) describes these language games with an

example:

For Wittgenstein words acquire their meaning within what he metaphorically terms "language games." That is, through the ways that they are used in patterns of ongoing exchange. The terms "batter," "pitcher," "bases," and "home run" are all essential in describing the game of baseball. In commonsense terms, the game of baseball exists

prior to the act of description, and a given description can be more or less accurate (think about the abuse heaped upon the umpire who calls "strike" at what obviously is a "ball"). From Wittgenstein's view, however, the terms for baseball are not dissociated descriptors but constitutive features of the game. A pitcher is only a pitcher by virtue of one's acceding to the rules of the game. In effect, the terms acquire their meaning by their function within a set of circumscribed rules. The act of "describing" the game is a derivative of the preceding placement of the relevant terms within the game itself. (p. 53)

Language games, then, are like a set of rules which co-ordinate human activities--they describe patterns of human activity intended to accomplish mutual ends. A social constructionist inquiry would aspire to describe the language games in which our activities (both scientific and everyday) are embedded.

This moves us to the third point that Gergen takes from the ordinary language philosophers. Traditionally psychologists have held that intentions, motives, dispositions, and cognitions are individual properties contained in the mind, or in some scientific communities, derivative of brain activity. But on the pragmatic view, psychological languages are a derivative of the language games, or the forms of relationship out of which they originally emerge. When we describe our emotions to another person this is not a report on an internal state but rather it is an utterance within a broader pattern of activity intended to elicit a particular response from another. Gergen (1994) provides an example:

> In order to count as legitimate by contemporary standards expressions of jealousy must be preceded by certain conditions. One cannot properly express jealousy at the sight of a sunset or a traffic light, but jealousy is appropriate if one's lover shows signs of affection toward another. Further, if the jealousy is expressed to the lover, he or she is not free (by current cultural standards) to begin a conversation about the weather or to express deep joy. The lover may apologize or attempt to explain why jealousy is unwarranted, but the range of options is limited. And if the apology is offered, the jealous agent is, again, constrained in the kinds of reactions that may intelligibly follow. In effect, the two participants are engaged in a form of cultural ritual or game. The expression of jealousy is but a single integer in this sequence--the ritual would be unrecognizable without it--but without the remainder of the ritual, jealousy would be nonsensical. (p. 224)

Here the expression of jealousy is not understood as the communication of an internal

state (what would the jealousy that one is reporting on look like?) but rather a response

embedded in a long sequence of events that is intended to achieve a particular end--

invoke sympathy or reassurance (which are themselves not reports on internal states but

responses to the expression of jealousy). Language games, then, provide a framework in

which human activity is structured and made meaningful. To invoke another metaphor, it

is as if in communication with others we are tossed a ball and in order to continue the ball

throwing game we are expected to throw the ball back, and then the ball is returned--this

back and forth activity is continued until one of the participants chooses to leave the

game. Gergen (1988a) writes:

> Each of my actions is not only a reply to yours, but is simultaneously an action to
> which you reply. In this sense my conduct is neither a response nor a stimulus, but an
> integer in an extended pattern of which both of us are a part. Or to put it another way,
> the two of us (and the numbers could be expanded) together achieve a pattern of
> relationship. (p. 45)

This move to relationship becomes central to Gergen's later writings where he proposes a

relational theory of self. I will discuss the relational self in chapter three, but for the

moment want to draw out one last implication of the adoption of a pragmatic view of

language.

On Gergen's view, social scientific theories stand in relation to existing bodies of

language either sanctioning certain patterns of exchange or challenging them. There are

two issues here. Social scientific theory is of use to a society because it resonates with

existing forms of discourse, thereby participating in widespread language games. For

example, in the last chapter it was argued that social psychology was able to flourish in

the 20th century because it adopted metatheoretical, theoretical, and methodological

language of positivist-empiricist metatheories. A discipline's success, then, depends upon

its capacity to participate in conventional languages. But social scientific theories also

develop languages which can be used to co-ordinate our activities in everyday life. Put

another way, theory creates a language in which we can "do" relationships with others.

The number of options that people have open for them in performing relationships are

limited by the number of languages available for describing particular forms of relations.

In Gergen's "jealousy" example, described above, it becomes clear that when confronted

with a promiscuous lover the there are few available responses . This is not because

people are naturally inclined only to respond in one way to promiscuity, but because the

number of languages that we have available for responding in such a situation in very

limited. The social sciences have been of little help in generating new patterns of activity

because they have traditionally valued theoretical accuracy over generativity. The focus

on accuracy in theoretical description translates into a impoverished language for doing

relationships.

Not only have the social sciences been unable to provide a diversity of theoretical

accounts, but Gergen (1994) also criticizes them because they are unreflective as to the

types of relationships which their theories encourage. In as much as theoretical accounts

provide us with languages for achieving forms of relationship, these accounts also

contain ideological commitments. And insofar as one form of language is privileged over

others, communities who do not share in the assumptions embedded in these theoretical

languages are oppressed. Though the pragmatic conception of language leads us to

understand that language co-ordinates social activities to achieve social ends, we now

begin to cross over into what Gergen calls "ideological" critiques (1994, p. 34). He

writes:

> For any group concerned with injustice or oppression, ideological critique is a
> powerful weapon for undermining confidence in the taken-for-granted realities of the
> dominant institutions: science, government, the military, education, and so on. As a
> general form, ideological critique attempts to reveal the valuational biases underlying
> claims to truth and reason. To the extent that such claims are shown to represent

personal or class interest, they are disqualified as either objective or rationally transcendent. (1994, p. 35)

This point resonates with Gergen's (1973, 1979) earlier claim that social psychological theories always prescribe certain forms of behavior. If one is oppressed, forced to speak in the language of the majority, then one is also denied valued patterns of relationship.

In the context of the emerging social constructionism the ideological critique is not taken up in order to champion neglected political causes or lifestyles, but to point up the fact that all languages, whether scientific, political, or religious enable different forms of valued relationship. Since there is no empirical touchstone against which to judge the worth of these different patterns of relationship, the social constructionist is not compelled to choose from among them, but rather advocates a radical relativism in which all languages are held to be of equal worth . The challenge for the constructionist is to provide a space in which all of these languages can co-exist, or at least meet in conversation to create new, shared realities. Gergen (1994) writes:

> What does the culture gain or lose if we constitute the world in terms of the economist, the psychologist, the feminist, and so on? How is cultural life improved or impoverished as the vocabularies and practices of these communities expand or proliferate? This is not to privilege the evaluation over the intelligibilities and practices in question; the moral or political lament, for example, does not constitute the "final word" on such matters. However, because such evaluations are essentially outgrowths of other communities of meaning--other ways of life--it is to open the door to a fuller interweaving of the disparate communities of meaning. If evaluations can be communicated in ways that can be absorbed by those under scrutiny, relational boundaries are softened. (p. 54)

The social constructionist chooses not to choose among preferred constructions of reality, but rather seeks a means by which the culture can be enriched by an intermingling of languages, and conflict averted by engagement in ongoing conversations. Or put another way, the constructionist asks all conversational participants to put aside commitments to ideology, morality, truth, or objectivity, and engage in a dialogue in which new forms of

relationship can be created. In short, as long as conversation continues conflict will be avoided.

Scientific Progress from a Social Constructionist Perspective

The question we must now address concerns the positive potential of these views. What do such assumptions suggest for a reconstructed human science? What is now favored? What must be rejected? For the traditional empiricist or security-seeking scientist, constructionist arguments may seem pessimistic, even nihilistic. However, they are so only if one remains glued to worn-out conceptions of the scientific enterprise, or obfuscating conceptions of truth, knowledge, objectivity, and progress. What we find is that in significant degree, traditional empiricist conceptions of the craft have narrowed its scope, truncated its methods, muzzled its possible expressions, and circumscribed its potential for social utility. In contrast, I propose that when properly extended, constructionist arguments contain enormous potential for the human sciences. New horizons emerge at every turn, and many are currently under exploration. (Gergen, 1994, p. 54)

Traditionally, scientific theories have been assessed by their capacity to reflect empirical fact. Indeed, the faith that scientists and non-scientists place in scientific theory depends upon the putative relation between theory and fact. If life is sometimes confusing, and decisions difficult to make, then science stands in to point us in the right direction. But on Gergen's (1994) argument the scientific appeal to foundations for truthful knowledge of the world is without epistemological merit. This certainly has implications for continued scientific practice, but, more broadly, it has implications for the role that science plays in society. If scientific theory acquires its rhetorical power--its capacity to influence social relationships--from its appeal to empirical foundations, then the constructionist critique along with the growing body of post-modern, post-structuralist, and post-empiricist critiques, threaten to dethrone science and possibly dissolve the entire enterprise of theory creation.

The response to such critiques could be a very pessimistic one. Without any foundations for knowledge, or assuredness in the rationality or truth-telling capacity of science, theory construction comes to be seen as an elaborate game, designed to occupy those in a privileged position, but surely of no use to the society more broadly. As Shotter (1996) has argued, we might better abandon the goal of theory creation and turn to more

practical pursuits. In addition, theory creation also poses the threat of its own reification.

That which is held up as scientific theory may be taken as objective knowledge and, as a

result, stand unchallenged. Gergen writes:

> To the extent that any reality becomes objectified or taken for granted, relationships
> are frozen, options sealed off, and voices are unheard. (1994, p. 58)

The danger is that certain patterns of relationship may come to be held as objectively

superior to others, and those groups holding minority views, practicing unconventional

forms of relationship, are neglected or oppressed. Despite the pitfalls of continued theory

creation Gergen (1988b, 1994, 1996) argues that a under a pragmatic conception of

language, scientific theorizing can lead to potential social benefits. We must ask: "What

is the role that scientific theory plays within a society?" On Gergen's (1994) view there

are three potential contributions that scientific theory can make to a society. He writes:

> To appreciate the array of potentials, it is helpful to recall the attempt in the preceding
> chapter to account for transformations in human science perspectives. There I spoke
> of tendencies to maintain, to question, and to transform traditions. In keeping with
> these emphases, we may also consider various forms of scientific practice in terms of
> (1) their contribution to existing institutions or ways of life; (2) their capacity for
> critical challenge; and (3) their potential for transforming culture. (1994, p. 55)

In the first case, scientific theory helps to sustain existing traditions, and to increase the

efficiency of the workings of a society. In the latter two cases, scientific theory serves the

generative role of undermining convention, and then of providing new and innovative

languages of relationship.

Science in a Stable Society

Before proceeding, it is helpful to introduce a concept that I have not yet reviewed--

the "intelligibility nucleus" (Gergen, 1994, p. 6). Gergen (1994) writes that an

intelligibility nucleus

> ...ideally forms a set of interrelated propositions that furnish a community of
> interlocutors with a sense of description and/or explanation within a given domain.

To participate in the intelligibility nucleus is to "make sense" by the standards of a particular community. Such nuclei may be unbounded and totalizing (as in the case of universal cosmologies or ontologies) or localized and specific (as in a theory of the educational process at Swarthmore College); they may command broad appeal (as in common understandings of the democratic process) or appeal to a small minority (as in a religious sect). Further such forms of intelligibility are typically embedded within a broader array of patterned activities (writing papers, doing experiments, voting, praying, and so on). In effect, propositional networks are essential constituents of more inclusive forms of action. (pp. 6-7)

The intelligibility nucleus describes all of the ways of talking, and associated patterns of activity, shared by a particular community. A community's strength, its continued existence, depends upon the amount of agreement amongst these propositional networks. For example, in the mid-20th century behavioral psychology was able to sustain itself by developing theoretical accounts which were closely tied to positivist-empiricist metatheories, experimental methodologies, and society's understanding of science and psychology. When there is widespread agreement as to the utility of particular forms of scientific investigation theory can help "to sustain and/or strengthen the existing form of life; and second, it can enable persons to live more adequately within these traditions" (Gergen, 1994, p. 55).

The scientist can sustain traditions by providing rationales and justifications for particular patterns of activity. For example:

To explain human action in terms of individual psychological processes...is to have far different implications for practices and policies than to explain the same actions in terms of social structures. Theories of the former strip lead us to blame, punish, or treat deviants in a society, while those of the latter favor reorganization of the systems responsible for such outcomes. (Gergen, 1994, pp. 55-56)

Scientists play the role of "articulate, respected, and visible elaborators and purveyors of language" whose activities have a significant effect on the development of public policy, law making, and the way that people engage others on a daily basis (Gergen, 1994, p. 56).

Assuming that convention is respected--that patterns of action remain stable--

scientists can also help to "facilitate adaptive action" by furnishing the culture with the

kinds of "predictions that enable policies to be formed, programs put in place, and useful

information disseminated to the culture" (Gergen, 1994, p. 56). Gergen (1994) writes:

> Within the common realities of the culture, the human sciences can generate, for
> example, reasonably reliable predictions of academic success, schizophrenic
> breakdown, rates of mental illness, voting patterns, crime rates, divorce rates, school
> dropout rates, abortion requests, product success, the GNP and so on. (p. 56)

The scientist's knowledge of statistical tools, "sampling procedures, recording devices,

survey questionnaires, experimental methods" become indispensable in documenting

patterns of conventional behavior such that predictions of future actions can be insured

(Gergen, 1994, p. 56). Here prediction does not depend upon an understanding of

underlying psychological processes, but rather on the scientist's ability to describe the

way in which language is conventionally used. The research does not operate to "validate

nor invalidate general hypothesis"--there is no empirical touchstone against which

hypothesis could be tested--but rather to enhance social prediction (Gergen, 1994, p. 56).

Destabilizing Convention

There is also a need for a type of scientific theorizing which recognizes important

challenges to existing traditions, and continually seeks to undermine theories that might

come to be taken as objective and truthful. Gergen (1994) writes:

> Cultural values seems altogether too precarious, cherished patterns too quick to erode,
> and undesirable elements always in ascendance. At the same time, cultural practices
> are seldom univocal. We swim in a sea of competing intelligibility's, where
> discursive currents from dislocated periods of history--Greco, Roman, Christian,
> Judaic, and more--are forever surging one against the other, and the mingling of
> disparate parts is forever generating new and appealing (or appalling) possibilities.
> Thus, regardless of the dominate cultural realities, and their related practices, there
> are always groups whose realities are scorned, suffering that goes unheeded, and
> visions of positive change that are muffled by the secure and sanctimonious. (p. 57)

Put another way, in contemporary Western society intelligibility nuclei which sustain

very different patterns relationship continually come into contact, and in this meeting, the stronger, more entrenched intelligibility, often destroys the weaker of the two. Here a critical scientific theory would serve to point up the contingency of deeply entrenched intelligibilities "[offering] a rationale for challenging the dominant realities and their associated forms of life," such that opposing intelligibilities could exist alongside one another or at least engage in conversations that could lead to the creation of new, mutually beneficial forms of life (Gergen, 1994, p. 57).

Gergen describes three forms of critique which could serve in this critical capacity: culture critique, internal critique, and the scholarship of dislodgment. Where traditionally scientists have avoided "ethical or political partisanship" the culture critique encourages researchers to "actively employ [their] skills to make intelligible the moral and political issues related to our professional domain" (Gergen, 1994, p. 58). Scientists would take up society and culture as their unit of analysis, aiming to describe the moral and political assumptions which guide our everyday practices and the institutions that we live within. For example, the critical psychologist could illuminate the potentials and pitfalls of the psychological individualism which underlies most of our democratic institutions. Where the culture critique uses scientific theory to examine the surrounding culture, the internal critique turns inward to examine science itself. "In effect, scientists are invited to monitor criticize, and cast necessary doubt on the use of their own constructions of reality and associated practices" (Gergen, 1994, p. 58). For example, we might investigate the assumptions about psychological functioning implicit to positivist-empiricist metatheories. What are the benefits and disadvantages of promoting an atomistic, dualistic, and mechanistic view of human conduct?

We have encountered both of these forms of critique in Gergen's (1979, 1982, 1986) earlier writings. They have proven valuable in allowing us to move beyond the positivist-

empiricist metatheories and to consider the values implicit to the social institutions which

have traditionally sustained the social sciences. But on Gergen's view, these two forms of

critique do not do enough to destabilize convention. He writes:

> Both cultural and internal critique are typically grounded in particular value
> commitments: equality, justice, conflict reduction, and so on. However,
> constructionism also invites a third form of inquiry, one less invested in a particular
> value position and more focused on the general disruption of the conventional. To the
> extent that any reality becomes objectified or taken for granted, relationships are
> frozen, options sealed off, and voices unheard. When we presume that there is
> equality, we are blind to inequities; when a conflict is resolved, we are insensitive to
> the suffering in the wings. In this respect, there is value to be placed on a scholarship
> of dislodgment, one that simply loosens the grip of the conventional. (1994, p. 58)

The development of a scholarship of dislodgment is important in our understanding of

social constructionism, because it points out the radical relativism advocated by Gergen.

On the constructionist view, there is no intelligibility which stands superior to others. Put

another way in the case of the culture critique the illumination of an injustice and

subsequent revision of social policy is not decided by the inherent superiority of one form

of life over another--again, there are no empirical grounds upon which such superiority

could be decided. Rather the success of one intelligibility over another emerges with its

ability to muster social support, to use language in a convincing way, to tap into the

unarticulated sentiments and values of a particular culture--but the victory of one

intelligibility nucleus is always at the expense of those who do not share in these same

views. The scholarship of dislodgment, then, seeks to keep the conversation open, to

curtail the decisive victory of one intelligibility over another, such that all perspectives

are offered the opportunity to flourish.

The scholarship of dislodgment is modeled after literary deconstruction, rhetorical

analysis, and cultural and historical contextualizations, which serve to point up the taken

for granted assumptions, the rhetorical devices, and the unfounded appeals to authority,

which provide intelligibility nuclei with their appearance of rationality and truthfulness.

Gergen (1994) writes:

> In locating the metaphors, the narratives, the suppressions of meaning, the appeals to authority, and so on, rationality and objectivity lose their regnancy. With consciousness of artifice, the discourse loses suasive power. (p. 59)

In this scholarship of dislodgement, the contingency of any perspective is revealed and the grip of an intelligibility is loosened. For example, if social scientists view the products of their investigations not as the possession of individuals, as grounded in "truthful methods," or untouchable metatheories, but rather view these all as linguistic constructions aimed at achieving particular social ends, then we find ourselves in the position to move beyond the conventional and to embrace new intelligibilities, and their attendant patterns of relationship.

Theory as Transformative Tool

In the third phase of scientific inquiry we are challenged to move beyond convention and critique, to the transformation of culture and patterns of relationship. The three forms of critique reviewed in the last section certainly loosen the grip of convention but in themselves are insufficient. This is because critique is always "symbiotically" bound to the intelligibilities which they propose to critique (Gergen, 1993, p. 137). Gergen (1993) writes:

> In effect, the critique renders support to the ontology implicit in the initial network of assertions, an ontology that might wither or dissolve without the critical impulse. Feminist arguments against male dominance simultaneously reify a distinction between men and women; they operate to essentialize gender as a factual difference. (p. 137)

Preoccupied with overcoming dominant patterns of relationship, the critical human scientist is forced to provide a critique which draws on existing languages, thereby reinforcing tradition.   Gergen (1994) returns to the generative model of theory

originally proposed in 1978. Scientific theory is not only to be critical of convention, a

watchdog for the oppressed, but also a tool which can be used to enrich everyday life--to

titillate people with patterns of relationship previously unconceived. In effect, scientific

theorists, and the people to whom they disseminate their theories, are invited to

experiment with the absurd. Gergen (1982) writes:

> Yet it is just this mantle of apparent madness that must be donned if conceptual progress is to be achieved. In effect, some of the greatest conceptual strides are to be made when the theorist can bracket the accepted realities and fumble toward the articulation of the absurd. It is precisely this capacity that elevates the world of such theorists as Freud, Jung, Skinner and Goffman. Each has succeeded, in varying degrees, to make uncommon sense. (p. 157)

In part, this experimentation with the absurd can be achieved with the blurring of

academic boundaries. Psychology, for example, need not stand apart, as if protecting a

privileged space of knowledge, from literary studies, the fine arts, anthropology, history,

or quantum physics. Rather, in borrowing from these previously "foreign" disciplines

psychology might be supplied with metaphors, methods, and expressive mediums which

could significantly enrich theory. Here Gergen points to the French feminist writers who

are introducing "new and iconoclastic form of writing into the human sciences" (1994, p.

61). He continues:

> ...as French Feminists Irigaray (1974) and Cixous (1986) demonstrate, most conventions of scholarly writing are phallocentric (linear, binary, dispassionate). Their writings experiment with alternative forms of expression, forms they believe are more congenial to a primordial feminine consciousness. (p. 61)

If, as has been argued throughout this chapter, our use of language shapes the forms of

reality, and the patterns of relationship in which we live, then experimentation with new

forms of writing is sure to offer new conceptions of reality and new patterns of

relationship.

Radical transformation might also be found by embracing research methods other

than the experimental model. Gergen (1994) writes:

> As new research procedures are made intelligible, new models for relationship are encouraged. Such attempts now emerge with increasing frequency across the human sciences. Avoiding many of the ideological and intellectual problems of traditional research practices are flourishing explorations in qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln 1994), hermeneutic or interpretive inquiry (Packer and Addison 1989), Dialogic methodology (M. Gergen 1989), cooperative inquiry (Reason 1988), biographical or life history (Bertaux 1984; Polkinghorne, 1988), narrative analysis (Brown and Kreps 1993), appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider 1990), research as social intervention (McNamee 1988), and feminist scholarship as lived research (Fonow and Cook 1991). In each case, new research practices model new forms of cultural life. (p. 62)

It is unclear where this merging of disciplinary boundaries, this experimentation with the absurd, will lead social science theory. It is neither guided by commitments to convention or ideology. But there are at least two implications which follow from this loosening of commitments. First, if commitments are loosened then the threat of conflict between people is reduced. If taken seriously constructionism removes the possibility of an appeal to ideological or moral foundations. My point of view is not superior to yours because it is scientifically proven, endorsed by heavenly powers, or more rational. Rather, it is a move within a language game intended to facilitate patterns of relationship within particular times and places. As long as the pattern of relationship is beneficial to all concerned parties it can be sustained. But when the game becomes threatening or boring to the participants it can be abandoned and new realities constructed. Second, the loosening of commitments opens up the space in which unimagined realities can be articulated and new patterns of relationship can be realized. At first this seems to be an aspiration only for the particularly imaginative, curious, or daring person; the one who grows tired of the everyday, and seeks rejuvenation in play. But as will be argued in the next chapter, this playful creation of new forms of relationship becomes a fact of life in the postmodern world.

Chapter Three: Extending the conversation: <u>The Saturated Self</u> and Relational Theory

> One ponders, " How should I live my life?" and considers the "desire for fulfilling work," "needs for loving relationships," hopes for children," or "wants for financial security." One pauses to consider how the day or the evening should be spent, and again account is taken of one's wishes, needs, hopes, and fears. Such contemplations are commonplace. Yet consider some contrasting possibilities. How often do we ask, for example, "I wonder what my family will do with its life?" "What will my community do this month?" or "How will may marriage fare today?" We find it "only natural" to contemplate our own personal desires, needs, wants, and fears and to direct our lives accordingly. It is awkward and confusing to lay the self aside and to focus on broader units of being. Relationships come and go, we believe, but self remains until death. The individual self is the center of society; relationships are but artificial by-products of interacting individuals. (Gergen, 1991a, p. 239)

Traditionally, psychologists have drawn a distinction between metatheory and theory. Metatheory struggles with the guiding principles of a discipline. For example, the positivist- empiricist assumes that there is a distinction between language and reality, that psychological phenomena can be explained in terms of parts rather than wholes, and that scientific inquiry should be neutral and value free. In contrast, and as the previous chapter documents, the social constructionist assumes that language is constitutive of its subject matter, and that psychological research is best conceived of as a move in a language game which sustains particular forms of life. On the traditional view, once a metatheoretical position is assumed, methods and theories are formulated more or less in accord with these assumptions. In order to preserve neutrality the logical empiricist embraces the experimental method, and in order to get a sense of the role that a particular concept plays in a language game, the social constructionist gives thought to the historical development of that concept. If we assume such a distinction between metatheory and theory, Gergen's 1991 book <u>The Saturated Self</u>, the topic of the present chapter, can be read as a theoretical derivative of the social constructionist metatheory:

Once we assume that there are no objective, value free foundations for knowledge, we also assume that self knowledge has no objective foundations. The language of self understanding does not refer to an objective entity called the self, but rather plays a role in a set of language games. The concept of self becomes a tool for achieving particular

forms of relationship. Though pivotal to many of our undertakings, the concept of self is ever-changing, reflecting the uses to which the concept is put in different cultural and historical periods. The self might better be conceived of as a product of relationship—a "relational self" as Gergen proposes—finding its origins in communally negotiated meanings, or on a more local level, in the conversations that we have with others on a daily basis.

But we run into problems if we retain too sharp a distinction between metatheory and theory. Metatheory does not stand above theory, carefully informing the choices that we make at the theoretical level (Gergen, 1994). That is, the move from metatheory to theory is not a move down a hierarchy of abstraction, each move taking us closer to an empirically real phenomenon. Theory also informs metatheory, and the both of these are informed by, and inform the language which we employ in everyday undertakings. Metatheory, theory, and everyday language then do not stand in hierarchical relation, each immune to the effects of one another. Rather, we might better view each of these "levels of the hierarchy" as mutually sustaining forms of discourse (i.e. an intelligibility nucleus, see Chapter 2), but each of them designed to engage a different audience. The social constructionist metatheory finds its place in academia. It addresses questions of epistemology, truth, explanation, and the lawfulness of behavior. And while the theory of self presented in The Saturated Self can be read to share many of the assumptions underlying social constructionism, it is not firmly situated in questions raised in the academy. Rather, this book is an attempt to bridge the domains of the academy and those outside of the academy, to encourage a dialogue rather than an academic monologue. In this book, the author is not the scientist informing the naive public, but the interlocutor attempting to clear a space for mutual exchange. He asks the reader not to treat the theory of relational self as an empirically proven scientific truth, or as confirmation of the social

constructionist metatheory, but rather as an invitation to conversation: "Those in the hurly-burly of daily life required voice, for an articulation of their experiences could enrich and edify academic debate. I hope then to provide some common ground for mutual exploration and enlightenment" (Gergen, 1991a, p. x).

A book on the self is an appropriate starting point for such a dialogue for two reasons. First, the self has occupied a central place in psychological research. While many psychologists view the self as an epiphenomenon--a more or less useful illusion created by brain chemicals--social, personality, and humanistic psychologists have viewed the self as a unifying force in psychological life. It brings coherence and consistency to experience and orients one in the world. But despite the important explanatory role that the concept of self has played in psychological research, it is now threatened by constructionist arguments. Gergen wants to ask: "When foundations for knowledge collapse what are we to do with the concept of self?" or "What becomes of "self knowledge"?

The second reason that the self is a good starting point for a dialogue between the academy and those outside, is that the concept of self has had important influence in everyday life. While the uninitiated might not be prepared to discuss cognitive development, neurobiology, or connectionist models, there are ample tools available for self-discourse in all spheres of Western life. If I know anything, then I must know about myself. The centrality of self knowledge in Western culture is evidenced in the way that it is tied into all of our important institutions. Gergen (1991a) writes:

> Beliefs about the self seem pivotal to all our undertakings. We believe that as normal human beings we possess reasoning powers, emotions, conscience, intentions; these beliefs are critical to the way we relate to others. What could marriage mean if we did not feel ourselves capable of love? What would be the purpose of education if we had no concept of reason or memory? How could we trust others if we didn't believe in the power of conscience? (p. x)

This commonly shared space of self-knowledge is Gergen's entry point to a book which introduces and invites the reader into a much larger story describing the shift from a modernist era into a postmodern era. While the self is his starting point, Gergen sets out to show that we are also talking about a change in the way that we live our lives and relate to those around us. Along the way we encounter the conceptual baggage of romantic and modernist views of life, the "multiphrenic condition" which accompanies a shift from modernist to postmodernist ways of life, and finally the proposed, and seemingly inevitable, shift to a relational conception of self and the postmodern consciousness in which it shares (Gergen, 1991a, p. 74).

The History of Self

> We play out our lives largely within the language of romanticism and modernism. These modes of understanding ourselves and others are built into the fabric of our daily relationships: without them daily life would be unlivable. (Gergen, 1991a, p. 19)

The thesis of The Saturated Self is that previous vocabularies of self (e.g. romanticist, modernist) and the social institutions which they sustained, are falling into disuse. Contemporary "technologies of social saturation" place us in relation to people who hold radically different values, and opinions than our own. This explosion of relationship contributes to the emergence of a postmodern condition under which the consistency and reliability of romanticist and modernist discourses are undermined by fragmentation and spontaneity. The argument is that modernity allows a concept of self because its values, ideas, and practices, are consistent in all spheres of life, whereas postmodernity does not allow for a concept of self--there is a dispersal of self in relations with other people. There are two threats to the self which must be addressed. In the first instance, the self is saturated with possibilities of different forms of relationship. I can act in one manner when at home with the family, play a different role when at work, and then slip into another persona at church. Second, as we confront those with different views than our

own we are challenged to bridge this difference in order sustain a working relationship, ease political tensions, or simply to manage a conversation on the bus. If we are unwilling to transcend these differences we are threatened either with conflict, or with immobilization--the inability to adapt to a rapidly changing social space. Here Gergen (1991a) wants to replace the "grand" and "totalizing" narratives (the stories that we communally tell about the world and ourselves) of romanticism and modernism (narratives which were said to apply to all people in all places) with narratives that are constructed in the immediacy of relationship (p. 245). On this view, the very concept of the self (as a stable and enduring phenomenon) is dissolved into relationship for the purpose of "getting along" with others.

The Saturated Self presents as a story of historical change. The postmodern period, which gives rise to the relational self, is contrasted with romanticist and modernist periods. The romantic self originating in the late 18th century was tied to a style of life which valorized profundity and depth. In philosophy, romanticism challenged the Enlightenment's focus on dispassionate reason and observation, and championed the unknown, unconscious depths of the soul. Life was lived passionately--the individual willing to risk all, even life itself--for the sake of the passions. And romantic art sought to express the ineffable and mystical, hoping that these expressions could bring one communion with the mysteries of the universe. But, as Gergen argues, the Enlightenment focus on reason and observation returns in the 19th century in the form of modernism.

Perhaps caused by the growing interest in global trade, or the successes of natural science inquiry, romanticism, in all of its idealistic impracticality, was deemed inappropriate to meeting the challenges of this new order. What was understood as romantic superstition and unproductive mystical fervor is contrasted with the "hard-headed" commitment to science and progress characteristic of modernism. Where the

romantics had subjected themselves to the unknown forces of nature, modernism, in a return to the aspirations of the Enlightenment, sought to dominate and control the natural and social world. The 19th century was deemed to be the culmination of a "grand narrative of progress" in which the striving of human civilization had finally come to fruition in scientific and technological gains (Gergen, 1991a, p. 30). Further, science set out in search of the "thing-in-itself"--that "essential unit of matter out of which the universe and all its conditions are constructed," thereby rendering the intangible, indefinite, and unknowable world of the romantics fully transparent (Gergen, 1991a, p. 33). And accompanying this retrenchment of reason the "metaphor of the machine" dominated the modernist period (p. 36). Gergen (1991a) writes:

> There were plenty of reasons to honor the machine in the modernist period. Not only could machines generate enormous incomes for their owners and operators, they provided jobs--a solid foundation for the national economy. They were also populist in their ends, able to work for the benefit of everyone. The large machines of industry could place telephones, radios, washing machines, electrical heaters, and the like into virtually everyone's hands. And each of these products was itself a machine, reducing labor and opening new and exciting opportunities. (p. 36)

And like in the romantic period, the modernist period lead to the construction of a particular version of self. Where the romantic is mysterious, unpredictable, passionate, and dependent upon others, the modernist, like a machine, is transparent, reasonable, stable, and self-sufficient--its operating parts (e.g. perception, memory, language) amenable to scientific explanation. Of the modernist person Gergen (1991a) writes:

> To know him is to know what to expect of him. His words will be an authentic expression of what he truly is--now and in the future. The modernist man is genuine rather than phony, principled rather than craven, and stable rather than wavering. (p. 39)

Gergen's historical review of these romantic and modernist vocabularies of self already owes much to the postmodern influence in his previous writings. While Gergen acknowledges that an unambiguous description of historical periods is problematic,

threatened by alternative interpretations and descriptions, the historical review proves

useful in that it loosens up our commitment to any single conception of self. Contrary to

both modernist and romanticist conceptions of self, the postmodernist begins to recognize

that the self, like all other psychological concepts is a product of a particular historical

period. The romanticist and modernist vocabularies of self serve to achieve particular

social ends in mirroring particular social settings.

The Technologies of Social Saturation and Population of the Self

> The change is essentially one that immerses us ever more deeply in the social world, and exposes us more and more to the opinions, values, and lifestyles of others. (Gergen, 1991a, p. 49)

Initially, Gergen prepared The Saturated Self as a text which would introduce those

outside of the "ivory tower" to contemporary academic debate over the foundations of

knowledge, the dissolution of identity and, in general, the postmodern turn in thought

(see Chapters 1 and 2). But Gergen soon found that this academic ferment was paralleled

by a similar ferment in everyday life. He writes:

> Yet as I began the process of 'speaking outward,' my work began to shift direction. To bridge the gap between the academic world and the broader public requires some sensitivity to the experiences and conditions relevant to this audience. As I began to focus on the more general state of affairs, I was struck by the realization that the contemporary upheaval in the academic world is paralleled by major shifts in contemporary ways of acting and relating. Increasingly, people are living through the 'dissolution of self' discussed within the academy--and experiencing the shocks of dislocation, the dilemmas of identity, and the thrills of newly opened vistas. (1991a, p. x)

The disruption of foundations, discovered in both the academy and everyday life, is

traced to what Gergen calls the "technologies of social saturation." These "advances in

radio, telephone, transportation, television, satellite transmission, computers and more"

expose us to "an enormous barrage of social stimulation" (1991a, p. xi). "The small and

enduring communities" characteristic of romantic and modernist periods are replaced by

a social space of "vast and ever-expanding array of relationships" (p.xi). In short, Gergen

argues, it is the influence of the technologies of social saturation which distinguish, and give rise to, the postmodern condition.

Gergen contrasts social life in the postmodern age with social life in the romantic and modern ages. He writes:

> A century ago, social relationships were largely confined to the distance of an easy walk. Most were conducted in person, within small communities: family, neighbors, townspeople. Yes, the horse and carriage made longer trips possible, but even a trip of thirty miles could take all day. The railroad could speed one way, but cost and availability limited such travel. If one moved from the community, relationships were likely to end. From birth to death one could depend on relatively even-textured social surroundings. Words, faces, gestures, and possibilities were relatively consistent, coherent and slow to change. (1991a, p. 61)

A century ago life was lived within the confines of a single intelligibility nucleus. The "cast of others remained relatively stable," and the values and goals which defined one's existence were affirmed on a daily basis (p. 62). This insularity of community gave rise to and sustained both romanticist and modernist conceptions of self. One's identity, stable and unchanging, is confirmed in the stable and unchanging forms of relationship that one engages in everyday practice. Put another way, socio-political life was reflected in the self.

The stability of traditional communities (and as such, stability in identity) is challenged when the technologies of social saturation embed us in social life unlike ever before. "Low tech" developments (railroad, public postal services, the automobile, the telephone, radio broadcasting, motion pictures, and printed books) offer the potential of extending relationship beyond the immediate community (Gergen, 1991, p. 53). "Each brought people into increasingly close proximity, exposed them to an increasing range of others, and fostered a range of relationships that could never have occurred before" (p. 53). Further, the last twenty years have brought us "high tech" developments (e.g. air travel, television, video, electronic-mail, and fax services) which on the one hand greatly

facilitate the forms of relationship enabled by low tech developments, but which also

brings relationship even closer, through for example the television, or the internet (p. 53).

Relationship is no longer limited by physical presence, but can be achieved at great

distances and speeds. Gergen (1991a) summarizes:

> For much of the world's population, especially the industrialized west, the small, face-to-face community is vanishing into the pages of history. We go to country inns for weekend outings, we decorate condominium interiors with clapboards and brass beds, and we dream of old age in a rural cottage. But as a result of the technological developments just described, contemporary life is a swirling sea of social relations. Words thunder in by radio, television, newspaper, mail, radio, telephone, fax, wire service, electronic mail, billboards, Federal Express, and more. Waves of new faces are everywhere--in town for a day, visiting for the weekend, at the Rotary lunch, at the church social--and incessantly and incandescently on television. Long weeks in a single community are unusual; a full day within a single neighborhood is becoming rare. We travel casually across town, into the countryside, to neighboring cities, states; one might go thirty miles for coffee and conversation. (p. 61)

In this high-speed, high-tech world, where new relationships are encountered on an

hourly basis, the stable and enduring self is populated with possibilities for relationship.

Not only are we caught up in relationships with friends and family, but at every turn new

relationships present themselves. For example, "...the next telephone call can thrust us

suddenly into a new relationship--with a Wall Street broker, a charity solicitor, an alumni

campaigner from the old school, a childhood friend at a nearby convention, a relative

from across the country, a child of a friend, or even a sex pervert" (Gergen, 1991a, p. 63).

While many of these relationships are short lived and superficial, they nonetheless

require a momentary commitment of self, and oftentimes push us up against values and

opinions much different from our own. As the technologies of social saturation enter our

lives the stable community of friends and family is potentially disrupted.

As one is increasingly exposed to these various forms a relationship a repository of

possible relations grows--a set of knowledge which prepares one to engage others as they

present themselves in constantly shifting forms. Gergen (1991a) describes this increasing

repository of relational knowledge as a "population of the self" (p. 68). In other words, the self is filled up with the knowledge of how to act in a variety of situations--by simply participating in a postmodern society, we become familiar with all of the possible patterns of relationship which we may at one time be called upon to adopt. In fact, if one is to adapt to the every shifting array of people encountered in social life, one must be able to change the way in which he or she relates to others as the particular encounter demands. The scientist who plays the role of detached and neutral observer at work, must learn to play the role of close and compassionate companion to husband or wife, of teacher and parent to one's child, of shrewd investor to the banker, or of eager and willing student to an admired colleague. The number of roles to be played expands as one becomes increasingly immersed in the social world of interdependencies. In short, if one is to participate in all of the relationships which postmodern life affords, one is required to shift one's language, one's persona, in each new encounter, and further be prepared to "invent" a new self as previously unencountered relationships unfold.

This population of the self stands in contrast to romantic and modernist vocabularies of the self which conceived of the individual as stable and coherent in his or her relationship to others. Identity turned on the capacity to remain, for example, compassionate in all situations--whether at work, at home, or when dealing with the local merchant. Thus, we sit on the cusp of a shift from the modernist conception of a stable self whose properties characterize the individual, to a postmodern image of the self as shifting, and ever-changing, constituted by the immediacy of relationship. The population of the self is an early indicator of this shift. Fueled by the technologies of social saturation, the modernist individual self is "filled up" with possibilities for relationship, but unable to bear the weight of rapidly expanding relationship falls into a "multiphrenic condition" (Gergen, 1991a, p. 73).

The Multiphrenic Condition

> A multiphrenic condition emerges in which one swims in ever-shifting, concatenating, and contentious currents of being. One bears the burden of an increasing array of oughts, self doubts and irrationalities. The possibility for committed romanticism or strong and single-minded modernism recedes and the way is opened for the postmodern being. (Gergen, 1991a, p. 80)

The population of the self leads to increasing anxiety and expenditure of energy. A tension arises between the individual, consistent and stable self, and the impositions of relationship which constantly demand one to be more than one conceives of oneself. As relationships multiply, the image of a stable and enduring self is torn apart, and what follows is a condition of multiphrenia:

> ...generally referring to the splitting of the individual into a multiplicity of self-investments. This condition is partly an outcome of self-population, but partly a result of the populated self's efforts to exploit the potentials of the technologies of relationships. In this sense, there is a cyclical spiraling toward a state of multiphrenia. As one's potentials are expanded by technologies, so one increasingly employs the technologies for self-expression; yet, as the technologies are further utilized, so do they add to the repertoire of potentials. It would be a mistake to view this multiphrenic condition as a form of illness, for it is often suffused with a sense of expansiveness and adventure. Someday there may indeed be nothing to distinguish multiphrenia from simply 'normal living.' (Gergen, 1991a, pp. 73-74)

While concerns and doubts about identity and selfhood may already be familiar to the modernist--for example, the threat of losing one's identity in the face of the other--Gergen's contribution is to point out how these concerns are expanded and intensified under the multiphrenic condition. These are no longer the isolated concerns of existentialist philosophers and psychiatrists, but an increasingly common distress synonymous with living contemporary life. The question is: "As one is dispersed in relationships how is one to retain a coherent unified self?" Gergen describes three of the most prominent symptoms of multiphrenia.

First, as the self is increasingly populated one finds oneself constrained, unable to fulfill all the relationship requirements demanded by the world. The technologies of social saturation free people to participate in multiple forms of relationships--to exercise

one's selfhood unlike as ever before—but people are also enslaved by these relationships. "For each person, passion, or potential incorporated into oneself exacts a penalty—a penalty both of being and of being with" (Gergen, 1991a, p. 74). The penalty to being is found in the desire to do as the other person does—to enjoy the lifestyle enjoyed by all those that one encounters in social life. Ironically, while each new relationship presents the opportunity to explore new vistas of selfhood, the likelihood of fulfilling all of these desires limits one's perceived achievements. "To want reduces one's choice to want not" (p. 74). One is pulled to expand selfhood, but is also frustrated by the inability to take advantage of every opportunity.

We are also penalized for being with. Here, the pragmatics of getting along in relationship take their toll. "To sustain relationship requires an honoring of the definitions—both of self and other. If two person become close friends, for example, each acquires certain rights, duties and privileges" (Gergen, 1991a, p. 75). And as relationships multiply, we find each relationship characterized by unique demands which require attention and time. "Thus, as relations accumulate and expand over time there is a steadily increasing range of phone calls to make and answer, greeting cards to address, visits or activities to arrange, meals to prepare, preparations to be made, clothes to buy, makeup to apply" (p. 75). As one embraces the technologies of social saturation one also embraces the demands which these place on individual time and energy. In short "there are 'opportunity costs'" and the liberation offered by these technologies "becomes a swirling vertigo of demands" (p. 75).

The second threat that the population of the self presents is an "expansion of inadequacy" (Gergen, 1991a, p. 76). In everyday life we are confronted with people of different values all presenting various ideals or attitudes concerning the good, proper, or exemplary person. Gergen writes:

Many of us carry with us a 'ghost of the father' reminding us of the values of honesty and hard work, or a mother challenging us to be nurturing and understanding. We may also absorb from a friend the values of maintaining a healthy body, from a lover the goal of self-sacrifice.... Normal development leaves most people with a rich range of 'goals for a good life' and with sufficient resources to achieve a sense of personal well-being by fulfilling these goals. (p. 76)

Under the population of self these visions of the good may eventually come into conflict. How is it that one can be a caring and compassionate father in the morning, and only half an hour later become a cold and uncompromising business person? "Each voice of value stands to discredit all that does not meet its standard. All the voices at odds with one's current conduct thus stand as internal critics, scolding ridiculing, and robbing action of its potential fulfillment" (p. 77). And again, in the relationships that one chooses to engage, one also adopts certain value stances and neglects other stances. The cold and uncompromising business person, cannot live the idealized life of the caring and compassionate social worker, though this form of relationship may perceived to be of equal or even greater social worth. The inadequacy, or regret, of one's life choices, given the possibility of having been something other, creeps up on the saturated self.

Third, Gergen points to the "recession of rationality" (1991a, p. 77). Rationality, the means by which we justify our chosen activities to self and other is itself a "by-product of social participation" depending upon the opinions and views of others (p. 78). One justifies his or her life choices always in the context of the reasons that others have offered for their life choices. For example, a college education is a justifiable enterprise because, it is reasoned, higher level education prepares one for the job market, expands one's consciousness, and contributes to the good standing of one's nation in relation to other nations. But given the technologies of social saturation, we quickly stumble across equally compelling reasons for avoiding college. It is a bourgeois institution, it dulls the mind rather than expanding the mind, and it excludes those who cannot afford its high

prices. As the number of reasons justifying, or criticizing one's views, activities, and

lifestyle are multiplied, life decisions become paralytic. Gergen (1991a) provides the

example of casting a presidential vote:

> Where one might have once employed a handful of rational standards, or seen the issues in only limited ways, one can now employ a variety of criteria and see many sides of many issues.... Increasing the criteria of rationality does not, then, move one to a clear and univocal judgment of the candidates. Rather, the degree of complexity is increased until a rationally coherent stand is impossible. In effect as social saturation steadily expands the population of the self, a choice of candidates approaches the arbitrary. A toss of a coin becomes equivalent to the diligently sought solution. We approach a condition in which the very idea of 'rational choice' becomes meaningless. (p. 79)

The effect of the population of self appears in all spheres of life. Unable to assess the

validity of one set of reasons over another, one finds oneself unable to exercise the

agency prized under modernist and romantic visions of the self. One is tossed about in a

sea of reasons unable to enter the debate; unable to offer a reason for one's choices or

opinions.

> Gergen (1991a) concludes the section on multiphrenia:

> So we find a profound sea change taking place in the character of social life during the twentieth century. Through an array of newly emerging technologies the world of relationships becomes increasingly saturated. We engage in greater numbers of relationships, in a greater variety of forms, and with greater intensities then ever before. With the multiplication of relationships also comes a transformation in the social capacities of the individual--both in knowing how and knowing that. The relatively coherent and unified sense of self inherent in a traditional culture gives way to manifold and competing potentials. A multiphrenic condition emerges in which one swims in ever-shifting, concatenating, and contentious currents of being. One bears the burden of an increasing array of oughts, of self doubts, and irrationalities. The possibility for committed romanticism or strong and single-minded modernism recedes and the way is opened for the postmodern being. (p. 80)

From Self to Relationship

In this era the self is redefined as no longer an essence in itself, but relational. In the postmodern world, selves may become manifestations of relationship, thus placing relationships in the central position occupied by the individual self for the last several hundred years of Western history. (Gergen, 1991a, pp. 146-47)

In chapter six "From Self to Relationship" Gergen describes the transition from modernist self to relational self in three phases: a) "strategic manipulation", b) "pastiche personality", and c) "relational self" (1991a, p. 147). The strategic manipulator, overwhelmed by the feelings of anxiety and confusion characteristic of the multiphrenic condition, signals the first intimations of the break with traditional conceptions of self. Gergen (1991a) writes:

> One is increasingly thrust into new and different relationships--as the network of associates expands in the workplace, the neighborhood is suffused with new and different voices, one visits and receives visitors from abroad, organizations spread across geographical locales, and so on. The result is that one cannot depend on a solid confirmation of identity, nor on comfortable patterns of authentic action. One confronts scores of new and different demands. How is one to act polite, rational firm, humorous, or affectionate, for example, with people from other countries, ethnic and age groups, economic backgrounds, religions and so on? As one shuffles and searches for appropriate forms of action, identity is more likely to be questioned than confirmed. One confronts subtle hints of doubt: 'Who are you?' 'What do you hide?' 'Give me proof?' The result of this wrenching from the familiar is an enhanced sense of 'playing a role,' managing impressions, or acting a part to achieve goals. (p. 148)

The strategic manipulator still remembers the authenticity of romantic and modern conceptions of self, and as such is all the more distressed that social life does not allow for such authenticity. One must always pretend to be something other than one is. In order to get along at work, on a trip oversees, or on an internet journey, one must constantly deviate from the essential image of who one is. And as one struggles to recover this essential core of self one is constantly reminded that he or she never has time for this self anymore. Is one more true to this self at home spending time with the family, at school dedicated to scholarship, or at work dedicated to ascending the career ladder? If equal time is dedicated to all of these tasks, and the forms of relationship which each

entail, and further if the forms of relationship in which one participates threatens to

expand on a daily basis, thus infringing on previous forms of relationship, the question

must arise: "Am I ever my true self?" or "Has my true self been lost along the way?"

The strategic manipulator increasingly becomes aware that he or she no longer has

the time to give expression to true selfhood and is faced with the prospect of playing a

role--in every activity being something other than he or she truly believes him or herself

to be. And this dissolution of self is further accompanied by the awareness that the sense

of self once prized may not be the best sense of self that one might have. Gergen's

discussion of the "expansion of inadequacy" returns. He writes:

> It is not simply the local community that dictates the nature of the good, but virtually
> any visible community. In the traditional community a man might live in tranquility
> simply by being sincere, amiable, reliable, and reasonably effective at work--a 'good
> guy' a mensch. In contrast the middle class male in a socially saturated context can
> scarcely claim self respect unless he can demonstrate proficiency or participation in [a
> variety of activities]...With each expansion in the criteria of the good, the individual
> is again forced out of the comfortable patterns and univocal affirmation. Increasingly
> one sense the superficiality of one's actions, the strategic marketing of personality.
> (1991a, pp. 148-149)

The strategic manipulator is caught between modernist conceptions of self, which

demanded of the individual authenticity in the face of others, and the technologies of

social saturation which, if one is to retain the sense of authenticity--of doing all of the

things expected of a good person--tax one to the point where one is overwhelmed by the

sense that he or she is no longer authentic, but simply playing the roles expected by an

increasing array of others. Gergen (1991a) writes:

> The nausea of dissimulation is the burden of the modernist in an increasingly
> saturated society. As one casts out to sea in the contemporary world, modernist
> moorings are slowly left behind. It becomes increasingly difficult to recall precisely
> to what core essence one must remain true. The ideal of authenticity frays about the
> edges; the meaning of sincerity slowly lapses into indeterminacy. (p. 150)

Eventually the strain imposed by the lifestyle of the strategic manipulator reaches its

breaking point and the strategic manipulator abandons the reliance on an essential conception of self accepting the reality of the fragmentation of being. If I cannot find my true self in any of my activities, then I will take advantage of the technologies of saturation to expand myself in as many directions of possible. The strategic manipulator becomes a "pastiche personality" which Gergen (1991a) describes as:

> ...a social chameleon constantly borrowing bits and pieces of identity from whatever sources are available and constructing them as useful or desirable in a given situation. If one's identity is properly managed, the rewards can be substantial--the devotion of one's intimates, happy children, professional success, the achievement of community goals, personal popularity, and so on. (p. 150)

The anguish of the strategic manipulator gives way to a self which does not seek itself in its own activities, but rather seeks itself in the possibilities of relationship afforded by others. Here, seeking self expansion, one seeks out new forms of relationship, and without guilt can potentially fulfill all desires. "Life becomes a candy store for one's developing appetites" (p. 150).

But the relational self has not yet emerged. The pastiche personality still reflects the modernist conception of self. The expansion of self is still just that--an expansion of self. It is the individual who casts out amongst a sea of others in search of new forms of self expression, and it is the individual self which reaps the rewards of this expansion. The transition from strategic manipulator to pastiche personality is a shift from discomfort to bliss, but the not the shift from self to relationship that Gergen foresees. Where the strategic manipulator is disturbed by the loss of essence, and the perceived superficiality of role playing, the pastiche personality frolics in the superficiality of self, and seeks to refine his or her role playing capacity.

The emergence of the relational self parallels arguments in the academic sphere. As reviewed in chapter two, social constructionism emerges out of the constitutive conception of language. Here language does not originate in the individual but rather

emerges first in community, as a negotiated set of meanings. This leads Gergen to a

relational conception of human interchange, wherein the language of relationship gives

form to psychological knowledge, and most relevant to the present chapter, conceptions

of self. In <u>Realties and Relationship</u>, addressing an academic audience, Gergen (1994)

extends the implications of this relational conception of self, and language, to argue that

the individualistic conception of self must give way to a relational conception of self.

Gergen (1991a) draws on these arguments in the <u>Saturated Self</u> where he writes:

> The case is clarified by focusing on the language of self-construction—the words and
> phrases one uses to characterize the self. As outlined in the preceding chapters, it is
> impossible to sustain the traditional view of language as an outer expression of an
> inner reality. If language truly served as the public expression of one's private world,
> there would be no means by which we could understand each other. Rather, language
> is inherently a form of relatedness. Sense is derived only from co-ordinated effort
> among persons. One's words remain nonsense (mere sounds or markings) until
> supplemented by another's assent (or appropriate action). And this assent too,
> remains dumb until another (or others) lend it a sense of meaning. Any action, from
> the utterance of a single syllable to the movement of an index finger, becomes
> language when others grant it significance in a pattern of interchange; and even the
> most elegant prose can be reduced to nonsense if others do not grant it the right
> meaning. In this way meaning is born of interdependence. And because there is no
> self outside a system of meaning, it may be said that relations precede and are more
> fundamental than self. Without relationship there is no language with which to
> conceptualize the emotions, thoughts, or intentions of the self. (1991a, p. 157)

The relational self emerges when these academic insights are realized in everyday

practical activity. A shift from the pastiche personality to the relational self is also a shift

from an individualistic conception of self (packed with possibilities and potentials of self

expression) to a communal conception of self (no longer packed full, but always engaged

in relation to others). In our "self-knowledge" we depend upon the participation of others.

We return then to the thesis of Gergen's book—as forms of social life change so do

conceptions of self. Technologies of social saturation draw us toward a selfhood which is

no self at all. Once stability and endurance of romanticism and modernism give way to

fragmentation and contingency of postmodernism, the self no longer becomes the unit of

analysis, but rather the relationship becomes central. We move from situation to situation in which different forms of relationship are realized, and there is nothing which transcends or links these relationships. We are, in a sense, different persons each time that we engage a new relationship. The romantic and modernist need to reflexively draw these relationships into a coherent whole is resisted. We present ourselves as fragments, each relationship only a fraction of all the relationships in which we participate.

This move away from the coherence of self to fractured living opens up the possibility for playful renegotiation and reconstruction of relationship. Aspirations to truthful tellings of self are replaced by an invitation to a "carnival" wherein "we might play with the truths of the day, shake them about, try them on like funny hats" (Gergen, 1991a, p. 189). This carnival of self construction is anticipated in the attitude which many postmodern scholars bring to their work, playing with traditional forms and expressions, and reflexively poking fun at their own efforts. Here, scholarly writing is no longer taken as a serious effort in which truth is given form, but rather as an opportunity to play with words and to invent new forms of expression. Both the writing and the reading becomes a game in which the challenge is to quickly learn the rules and to share in its jocosity. Gergen (1991a) is cautious here recognizing the perils of unhindered playfulness:

> How are we to respond, for example, to the death of a child, life in a cancer ward, crack houses in D.C., the condition of South African blacks, or the Holocaust? Does one wish in these instances to simply let the signifiers frolic and go piss in the wind. Even the most jaded postmodern would stop short of such a conclusion. (p. 194)

To soften these insensitivities Gergen proposes a "serious play" in which we honor the internal validity of existing language games and practices, but nevertheless recognize that these are contextually bounded and contingent (p. 193). Thus, we are equipped with the capacity to take seriously the inherited dilemmas of romanticism and modernism, all the while retaining the right to step back and consider the perspective offered by those from

different communities and traditions.

At the outset of this chapter, I presented two dilemmas which the relational self emerges to resolve. The first is the loss of an identifiable coherence of self experienced in the distress of multiphrenia, and the second is the potential for conflict which follows from the meeting of those who hold radically different opinions. The concept of relational self moves toward the articulation of a language in which these dilemmas can be overcome. Multiphrenia emerged out of the modernist self's inability to cope with the social saturation. The modernist self is burdened by the multiplication of relationship and the demands placed upon the individual self. But the language of relational self, in its emphasis on fragmentation and playfulness, forgets the dilemmas of authentic selfhood. In the relational vocabulary there is no self remaining that can be filled up or overwhelmed by the imposition of others. In other words the self has been dissolved into multiple relationships. Second, the postmodern prioritizing of relationship averts the conflicts inherent to the modernist language of authenticity and difference. Here, difference is sacrificed for the mutually beneficial goal of "getting along" in relationship. If ideology and tradition get in the way of relationship, participants are invited to lay aside these differences, recognizing that they are in fact playful constructions of a particular time and place. The aim, then, is to construct new forms of relationship--new language games, new forms of play--more appropriate to getting on with the tasks at hand. In other words, if more time is dedicated to constructing new forms of relationship, less time will be spent planning the demise of the other.

Toward a Vocabulary of Relationship

Relationships cannot become the reality by which life is lived until there is a vocabulary
through which they are realized. (Gergen, 1991a, p. 160)

Romantic and modernist conceptions of self retain their hold on contemporary

Western life because there is a well established vocabulary which speaks to the reality of

deeply felt emotions, and coherent experiences of self. Gergen (1991a) writes:

> Still, the development of relatedness as a fundamental reality will proceed but slowly,
> for as we have seen, the Western vocabulary of understanding persons is robustly
> individualistic. The culture has long been committed to the idea of a single, conscious
> self as the critical unit of society.... Thus we stand at the present historical juncture
> with a massive array of terms to depict the individual. It is the individual who has
> hopes, fears, wishes, thoughts, desires, inspirations, and the like. These are the terms
> by which we understand daily life, and which are embedded within our patterns of
> interchange.... It is as if we have a thousand terms to describe the individual pieces in
> a game of chess, and virtually none by which we can articulate the game itself. (p.
> 160)

This vocabulary is strained under the technologies of social saturation rendering the it

problematic both at the conceptual level (where the modernist quest for a consistent self

no longer becomes plausible), and at the experiential level (where the self is torn apart

under the threats of multiphrenia). Here, The Saturated Self plays a dual role. On the one

hand, it documents the rise of technologies of social saturation and their effects on human

relationship and psychology. On the other hand, it pushes toward the construction of a

vocabulary of relationship, therein seeking to provide a language which could better help

us adapt in the postmodern world. It is the construction of this vocabulary of relationship

that I consider in this section. This moves us from the relational self to Gergen's broader

effort to develop a relational theory, in which all of our traditional psychological,

sociological, and political concepts could be rethought in terms of relationship.

In his reading of The Saturated Self Michael (1991) argues that Gergen has not

sufficiently explored the assumptions which underlie his narrative account of the rise of

postmodernism. On the one hand, Gergen presents the relational self as if it were "an

emergent property of contemporary Western life," an almost natural consequence of the technologies of social saturation (Michael, 1991, p. 147). On the other hand, consistent with the constructionist thesis that all narratives or all stories of historical and psychological change are social constructions, Michael encourages us to inquire into the "vision of the promised self of postmodernity" presented in The Saturated Self (1991, p. 147). In other words, in proposing the relational self Gergen also offers an ideal account of what the self could, or should be like in the postmodern era. Michael (1991) writes:

> The point is that we can now ask, where does such a vision of the promised self of postmodernity come from? How is it constructed from the evidence and anecdotes Gergen furnishes us with? I would suggest that there is...an Utopian vision in operation here, one in which multiplicity, difference, shifting perspectives is valorized. There is an echo of Nietzsche's Dionysianism (Nietzsche, 1956/1971). (p. 147).

Tolman, Coughlan, and Robinson (1996) reach a similar conclusion when they argue that Gergen advocates the ideal of a "civil society" which is to realized through a "rhetoric of common citizenship." (p. 125). On their reading, the language of playfulness, language games, and fragmentation is developed to soften barriers between class, race, and gender with the purpose of allowing all persons to participate in the construction of, what Gergen also later calls, the "good society" (Gergen, 1996, p. 15). While Gergen is careful not to limit his definition of what the good society is, at a minimum is to provide a space in which no person is locked out of ongoing debate simply because they hold a different opinion from the majority--the prevailing intelligibility.

Given Michael's (1991) and Tolman et al.'s (1996) comments, we might argue that Gergen aims to develop a relational vocabulary for two reasons. First, in the postmodern world it is no longer possible to develop grand narratives--patterns of relationship which hold true in all places and all times. Because the stable and coherent communities of romanticism and modernism have fallen away, there is no longer widespread agreement

as to what the true narrative would be. In a sense it is necessary to set aside the narratives

which have fueled romanticist and modernist societies and to start again. Each

relationship that one comes to is, in a sense, a new community guided by its own

language games, and its own version of play. In the postmodern world each new

encounter becomes the opportunity to construct a new form of relationship. Here Gergen

argues that relationship is constructed in "micro-social scenarios" where the immediate

meeting between one, two, three or more people becomes the space in which new

patterns of relationship can be constructed (Gergen, 1996, p. 20). Second, Gergen argues

that if emphasis is placed on relationship, of continuing the conversation, then conflict

between people can be avoided, or at least softened. The languages of romanticism and

modernism are insufficient to meeting this goal because in advocating an individualistic

self they promote difference--me versus you, us versus them. A relational vocabulary

would blur such boundaries replacing them with a greater sense of interrelatedness. "To

condemn, excoriate, or wage war against a constructed other in our society is inherently

self destructive; for we are the other. They are born of us, emulate us, derive their sense

of identity from us and vice versa" (Gergen, 1996, p. 20). My actions are inextricably

entangled with yours, and any harm that I do to you is also harm that I do to myself. The

development of a relational vocabulary points to the promise and potential of "flowering

forms of relatedness, a growing consciousness of interdependence, an organic

relationship to our planet, and the withering of lethal conflict" (Gergen, 1991, p. 259).

On Gergen's view, the development of a relational vocabulary does not necessarily

require that we abandon all of our conventional languages. Indeed, as he points out, this

would be an impossible task, robbing language of much of its sense making capacity. He

writes:

To simply abandon such terms as "anger" and "fear" in favor of a new vocabulary,

> unsullied by cultural traditions, would not only ask the reader to suspend the lived realities of daily life. It would also result in an unusable language, abstracted from any context and without illocutionary appeal. (1994, p. 218)

Rather, Gergen proposes that we reconstitute our understanding of these conventional terms so

that they reflect the growing awareness of interdependency and relatedness. He writes:

> This may be accomplished in part by removing the referential locus for such terms from the head of the individual actor and placing it within the sphere of relationship. Rather than hammer our a new argot of understanding--descriptive and explanatory terms without currency in the marketplace of daily life--we can leave the psychological vocabulary intact but alter the way in which we understand such terms. (1994, p. 218)

The Saturated Self serves in this capacity. Gergen does not abandon the concept of self

but rather transforms it into a self which is constituted in its relations to others.

Conceived of as relational, the self is not a stable of enduring entity but a move in a

language game which achieves different ends in different micro-social scenarios. The self

is not integrated or coherent, but rather is constituted and reconstituted as each new

relationship demands.

In The Saturated Self Gergen draws attention to three areas in which a language of

the individual is giving way to the language of relationship: personal history, the

emotions, and morality. He takes up the task again in Realities and Relationships where

he outlines relational languages of psychotherapy, deceit, and meaning, and in the paper

"Theory Under Threat: Social Constructionism and Identity Politics," Gergen (1996)

provides an example of relational theory as it might help in easing political conflicts. For

the sake of illustration, I focus on Gergen's discussion of personal history, or

autobiography, and then "relational politics" (1996, p. 18). I set the two examples

alongside one another because I think that it draws out the important point that relational

theory attempts to provide a language which can be applied both to traditional

psychological concepts--autobiography--and traditional cultural or political concepts. In

the immediacy of relationship--micro-social exchange--Gergen dissolves the distinction

between categories such as psychological or social. All knowledge production can be

understood as occurring in the immediacy of relationship.

Constituting the Relational "Autobiography"

In his reconceptualization of autobiography, Gergen argues that in romantic and

modernist vocabularies personal history is thought of as "a private possession from which

one draws sustenance and direction...one could speak of possessing a life story, an

accurate account of one's unique trajectory through life" (1991a, p. 161). In both

romantic and modernist views, these personal stories are tied to one's own experiences,

and one's own perceptions of the significance of one's experiences. As such, the personal

history is lived and written by individuals. But the postmodernist argues that these stories

are first communal constructions, and only later, as one learns how to tell personal

stories, does it become possible to construct an autobiography. The autobiography, both a

story which one uses to make sense of one's own life, and the story that one uses to make

sense of one's life for others, is inextricably tied to the narratives of a culture. Gergen

describes the narrative forms most commonly used to make sense in the western world:

> In Western culture most of our stories are built around events that go either in a
> positively or negatively valued direction. In the typical "success story," life events
> become continuously better, and in the "failure story," they go downhill.... Most other
> stories represent variations on these two rudimentary forms. In the "happily ever
> after" account, a success story (how I "won my man," "earned my rank," etc.) begins
> to level off; in a "tragedy," someone highly valued plummets very rapidly into
> failure.... Some individuals adopt the "epic hero" narrative, in which one strives
> toward success, only to be turned back and then to battle again to the top, and so on in
> a series of heroic recoveries. (1991a, p. 162)

Thus, our personal histories are born of relationship in two senses. First, it is through

social relationships (with our parents, peers, educators) that we learn how to tell

intelligible life stories, and second our life stories are always situated within communal

narratives—stories negotiated by members of a community. A relational conception of

autobiography takes advantage of these insights concluding that "autobiography is

anything but autonomous; it is more properly sociobiography" (Gergen, 1991a, p. 164).

This insight loosens our commitments to the view that I am the authority of my own

autobiography, something which is fixed in the past, and opens it up to further

elaboration in the context of the proliferation of relationships enabled by technologies of

social saturation. My personal story shifts, and is rewritten as we explore new forms of

relationship. Under a relational conception of self we might better speak of writing our

ongoing story, as opposed to my fixed story.

Constituting a Relational Politics

Gergen first introduces the conception of relational politics in a symposium at the

International Society for Theoretical Psychology intended to address the role of theory in

psychological research (see Problems of Theoretical Psychology, 1996). Consistent with

arguments presented in chapter two Gergen (1996) argues that theory

> may be usefully [viewed]...as a discursive resource for: 1) engaging in critical
> evaluation of cultural practices (including the practices of the human sciences); (2)
> generating intelligibilities for action—rationales for personal or collective action or
> policy; (3) altering conversational patterns—as differing forms of language metaphors,
> moves in argument, and the like are placed into interchange so do relationships
> change; and (4) creating images of alternative futures. (p. 14)

Gergen takes this conception of theory to the "streets" to demonstrate how is can be used

to combat "a mode of political activism" called "identity politics," which grew out of the

need to provide a voice for cultural groups traditionally marginalized in main-stream

politics (e.g. "blacks, feminists, homosexuals, lesbians, Chicanos, Asians, the aged, the

homeless, the disabled") (p. 14). On Gergen's view, social constructionist arguments

provided a "powerful justificatory basis for the political and moral activism" of identity

politics, by demonstrating the unfounded rationale underlying traditional claims to

objectivity and superiority (p. 14). It eradicated the appeal to foundations replacing these

with an appeal to plurality wherein all members of a society could equally participate in

the creation of "the good society" (p. 15). But while constructionism provided the space

in which marginalized political and moral intelligibilities could speak and flourish--

thereby establishing identities--in doing so it also created a society in which boundaries

between different intelligibilities were increasingly fortified. In the articulation of

identity, the tension between intelligibilities became more evident. Gergen (1996) writes:

> By and large identity politics has depended on a rhetoric of blame, the illocutionary
> effects of which are designed to chastise the target (for being unjust, prejudiced,
> inhumane, selfish, oppressive, and/or violent) in western culture we inherit two
> conversational responses to such forms of chastisement--incorporation of antagonism.
> The incorporative mode ("Yes, now I see the error of my ways") requires an extended
> forestructure of understandings (i.e. a history which legitimates the critic's authority
> and judgment, and which renders the target of the critique unanswerable). However,
> because in the case of identity politics, there is no pre-established context to situate
> the target in these ways, the invited response to critique is more typically one of
> hostility, defense and counter-charge. (p. 15)

In its first instance, then, social constructionism provided a space in which identity could

be articulated--previously marginalized patterns of relationship extended--but in doing so

it also set up a space in which conflict threatened. To avoid conflict Gergen proposes that

identity politics be replaced with a relational politics. Gergen's social constructionism, in

its focus on relationship, becomes central to developing a relational politics.

Relational politics grows out of the constructionist view that conflict, violence,

hatred, and jealousy are historical artifacts, products of language which gain their felicity

in our everyday conversation through their continued use--their continued reification or

objectification in our everyday languages, practices, and social institutions. An identity

politics which threatens conflict, which grows out of one group's need to assert its power

over another, can be combated then by changing the way that we talk with one another. In

changing our talk, eliminating the language of difference, conflict, and hatred we also

change our patterns of relationship and avoid the threats of mutual intimidation and

destruction. For example, Gergen (1996) writes:

> There is no natural (biological, genetic) basis for inter-group antagonism (as
> sociobiologists, ethologists, and Freudians argue). Violence is a meaningful integer in
> a relational dance; this dance is rooted in history, and it is subject to change on both
> the grass-roots and policy levels. (p. 20)

or

> There are no prejudiced individuals. Prejudicial action is a meaningful move within a
> variety of cultural scenarios. As the scenarios unfold, so is prejudicial action invited.
> Given a modicum of participation in the culture (including its mass media) all of us
> are capable of such actions. By the same token, we are all capable of loving, caring
> and societally responsible action. All actions, in effect are by products of relationship.
> (p. 20)

All forms of activity grow out of relationship. Just as love and mutual regard are patterns

of relationship, embedded within a larger scenario of cultural activities, so too are hatred

and conflict moves within relational games intended to achieve particular ends sanctioned

by a particular society. Gergen's move here seems to be to replace (or at least

supplement) the long-standing patterns of relationship which threaten conflict, with

patterns of relationship that place co-operation and mutual respect in the forefront. This is

not to say that under a relational view conflict will always be avoided. Gergen (1991a)

writes:

> ...postmodern thought does not in itself opt for the abolition of conflict. When
> conflicts are untenable, postmodernism opens the way to means of medling; from the
> postmodern perspective, however, a certain degree of conflict in society is both
> unavoidable and desirable. It is unavoidable, for to speak within a discourse at all is
> to take a certain moral and political stand against others. (p. 259)

Rather the development of a relational politics stands in to provide an alternative to

conflict, or to lessen the devastating effects of conflict.

I conclude this chapter with a list of four assumptions which I think follow from the

preceding discussion of Gergen's relational self, and, more broadly, relational theory.

1. While all of our languages and activities are born of relationship Gergen prizes particular forms of relationship over others. Those languages which encourage conflict and immobilization are to be replaced, or at least supplemented with, languages that draw our attention to interdependency. Put another way, Gergen privileges language which enable us to "get along" with each other, over languages which reify difference and threaten conflict.

2. Realities are constructed, and knowledge is produced, at the level of microsocial exchanges. While these are embedded in the grand narratives of larger cultural frameworks (i.e. macro-social scenarios), in the postmodern world it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain common images of the good, or the other. The micro-social setting becomes the place in which prejudice, bias, and difference can be overcome for the sake of constructing new, localized forms of reality.

3. While Gergen is careful not to take a moral stance, or to claim that social constructionism and relational theory are the only stories to be told of the postmodern condition, there is an ideal model of the civil society implicit in his social constructionism. This is the society in which plurality and multivocality are privileged over singularity and monologism, and all people are invited to participate in the construction of the good society.

4. The means to reconciling difference and of generating new forms of reality is the same both in the private and the public sphere. Whether engaged in a conversation about oneself with a close friend, or engaged in a conversation with a political leader about the rights of the oppressed, we are encouraged to generate new forms of relationship congenial to getting along with one another.

I carry these points over into the critique that is offered in chapter four.

Chapter Four: Some Critical Comments

Treat others as you would have them treat you...(Matthew, 7:12)

In the previous three chapters I have presented social constructionism, and its

corollary relational theory, as forms of discourse developed to address certain problems

in traditional social science research, and, more broadly, problems in everyday living.

Social constructionism emphasizes the transformative capacity of social scientific theory.

If positivist-empiricist metatheories advocated a detached and value free stance toward its

subject matter, then social constructionism steps in to advocate a type of theory which is

fully involved in the critique and transformation of prevailing intelligibilities, and better

prepared to provide relevant solutions to ongoing threats of social and interpersonal

conflict. In particular, relational theory emerges to confront the potential and perils which

arise under the "postmodernization" of contemporary society. Social constructionists are

optimistic that under a relational conception of human exchange the conflict which

threatens when radically different intelligibilities come into contact can be averted, and a

civil society which values plurality and respect for difference can be created.

In this chapter I want to consider some critiques of Gergen's social constructionism

and relational theory. In <u>Realities and Relationships</u> Gergen (1994) summarizes some of

the more common critiques addressed to the position: "Does constructionism deny the

reality of personal experience?" " Does constructionism abandon all concern with the real

world?" " In its relativism, isn't constructionism morally vacuous?" (p. 65). While

Gergen's responses to these questions are helpful in further delineating the social

constructionist perspective, for the most part, these are questions asked by researchers

and theorists entrenched within the positivist-empiricist intelligibility, and as such do not

pose a serious threat to the constructionist intelligibility. Rather, I want to focus on

critiques offered from within post-empiricist intelligibilities-- hermeneutic scholars

(Taylor, 1988), social constructionist scholars themselves (Danziger, 1997), and Marxist scholars (Tolman, Coughlan, & Robinson, 1996). I want to make the argument that in order for social constructionism and relational theory to work as a form of discourse something must be given up. Gergen might defend against this by arguing that "the constructionist's point is not to eradicate existing vocabularies of action. Rather, my hope is that in the further elaboration of theory, we participate in generating a new vocabulary, a new consciousness, and a new range of practices..." (1996, p. 22). But this new consciousness does not leave our old forms of understanding (romanticist and modernist) unchanged. For example, on Taylor's (1988) view, when priority is placed on facilitating relationship we give up the vocabulary of authenticity which has become central to the way that we understand our lives. There are two general questions which follow from this: "Can we give up the vocabularies which have played an important role in shaping our identities?" and, "If we can give up these vocabularies what do we stand to lose," or as Tolman et al. (1996) ask: "What is obscured?"

I address these questions in three sections. In the first I consider an exchange between Taylor and Gergen in the volume Hermeneutics and Psychological Theory (Messer, Sass, & Woolfolk, 1988). Taylor agrees with Gergen that all of our activities are embedded in relational scenarios, but argues that this should not lead us to the conclusion that we can abandon traditional languages of self understanding for the sake of facilitating relationship. Rather, it is because our lives are embedded within broader patterns of relationship, where we are required to provide accounts of our lives, that we cannot help but to ask questions about personal authenticity, and accuracy in understanding. In the second section I consider a distinction that Danziger (1997) makes between "light constructionism" and "dark constructionism" (p. 410). Gergen is a light constructionist because he is optimistic that prejudice, bias, and class differences can be overcome in

microsocial scenarios by developing new patterns of relationship. Dark constructionists

are critical of this optimism, arguing that power differentials are embedded in the very

structure and organization of a society, and cannot be overcome at the level of

conversation. Taking a Marxist perspective, Tolman et al. (1996) are especially critical of

Gergen arguing that in his focus on microsocial scenarios, and the construction of a civil

society, (see Chapter 3) he obscures the reality of class difference. In the final section of

this chapter, I ask the question: "With what sort of knowledge we should expect a

psychological theory to provide us?" Gergen's view is that psychological theory should

provide languages which help us to facilitate relationship and open up the possibility of

generating new forms of reality. But given both Taylor and Tolman's critiques, we find

that not just any account will do. In contrast to Gergen, both Taylor and Tolman argue

that there is a reality (but not the objective, value free, reality of positivist-empiricist

metatheories) which psychological theories must struggle to give expression to. In short,

psychological theories must be able to account for the way that we live our lives.

Gergen's Repudiation of the Hermeneutic-interpretive Model

Of course, you can only be in one or other of the states I'm concerned with because you already stand in some relationship to me because we are linked in the same story. As Gergen so well puts it: "The announcement 'I am angry' is the utterance of an idiot until it is understood within the unfolding context of relationship." But this doesn't empty the issue of whether you are angry of its meaning. It's precisely because of the relationship within which we both stand that it has such tremendous importance to me. And we must allow that you may be ambivalent, both angry and forgiving, struggling between the two, or alternatively one or the other. Yes, but then this is description I'm looking for, the one I'm going to have to live with and around. A declaration of ambivalence is also an answer to my question. (Taylor, 1988, p. 54)

I begin by turning to a point which I discussed in chapter two. Gergen abandons the

hermeneutic-interpretive model of social science for a pragmatic conception of science.

In this he also gives up the view that there are foundations for knowledge. Once we reach

the conclusion that there are no foundations for knowledge, we are encouraged to

generate new forms of reality—a process which is without conceivable limit. The

significance of Gergen's (1988a) split with the hermeneutic tradition is best understood in

the context of an exchange that he has with Charles Taylor (1988) in the volume

Hermeneutics and Psychological Theory. Taylor argues that the realization that scientific

theory has no objective foundations need not lead us to assume that any account of our

lives will do. Rather, Taylor argues that in every psychological theory, or more generally,

any account that we provide of our lives, we must struggle with the traditions in which

we live, and the way that we have given expression to our lives in the past. As such, and

in contrast to Gergen, Taylor argues that there are limits placed on what we can say about

our lives. Or put another way, the construction of new interpersonal realities must

contend with the backdrop of meanings and understandings that we bring to conversation.

These cannot be put aside for the sake of generating felicitous patterns of relationship,

but play a central role in the ongoing conversation.

Gergen and Taylor share in a critique of positivist-empiricism and foundationalist

social science, but they disagree in their central thesis. Gergen argues that hermeneutics,

and the associated metaphor of the "person as text," depends upon a distinction between

internal intentions and external expressions. The task of the hermeneutician, as Gergen

understands it, is to interpret the meaning of external expressions so as to reveal the true

intentions underlying peoples' behavior.

Gergen offers two critiques of the hermeneutic position. Interestingly these critiques

are the same that he uses to undermine positivist-empiricist metatheories (see Chapter 2).

At a conceptual level, Gergen argues that like positivist-empiricists, hermeneuticians

think that there is a deep interior of thought, feeling, action, and cognition which can be

communicated in language. The task of the hermeneutician is to develop methods which

allow us to interpret peoples' external expressions such that their true meanings are

understood. But following on arguments reviewed in chapter two, there is no reason to

assume that such an internal space exists to be interpreted. Second, this dualism threatens

conflict. Gergen (1988a) writes:

> ...the metaphor of the text places us in a position from which neither readings, intimacy, nor self-knowledge is possible. If persons are texts they must be viewed as isolated social atoms who can neither know nor understand each other. Further, they cannot comprehend their own actions; such actions lie beyond the boundary of objective interpretation. Such conclusions are not only dolorous, but unfortunate in their implications for social life. They hold little promise for intimacy, for genuine contact, for authenticity—or indeed any profound form of human relatedness. (p. 43)

Not only are we placed in a position of relative isolation, but contentions over the true interpretation of an individual's behavior lead to potential conflict. As long as we argue that there is a true meaning underlying a person's behavior, Freudians will argue with behaviorists, scientists will argue with spiritualists, and we, in our everyday lives, will argue among ourselves as to the true intentions underlying each others expressions.

As an alternative to the textual metaphor Gergen suggests that we adopt the metaphor of relationship. The important point here is that in rejecting the hermeneutic metaphor Gergen also rejects the view that we can give accurate, true, or insightful accounts of our lives. Indeed, attempts to provide such accounts can result in relational stalemates. He writes:

> If one is embarked upon a love affair, there is little need to inquire into the internal source of expressions of adoration—whether they are somehow true. The nature of the relationship in which such expressions are embedded may be of utmost importance to the participants. However, to seek carefully into the inner meaning of loving 'expressions' is to launch yet another form of relationship—one of potential doubt and alienation. To ask of the lover what he/she is truly about is to lose the invitation. (1988a, p. 61)

On this view, the hermeneutic metaphor of person as text encourages a form of relationship in which we are eternally beset with questions about the truth or validity of another's expressions. Rather than facilitating relationship, the hermeneutic metaphor and its questions about authenticity, erect hurdles to mutual co-ordination of activity.

In moving away from a depth metaphor Gergen also shifts the priority of the social

sciences. The hermeneutician equates interpretation with depth. As I articulate the way in which my life is situated in a social and historical context--as I interpret my life--my self understanding is deepened, and my relationships to other people are potentially enriched. But on the relational view, the social sciences are not charged with the task of providing interpretations of people's behavior, rather they are charged with the task of providing languages which can facilitate relationship.

It is important to get Gergen's conception of relationship right here. At first the hermeneutician agrees with Gergen that our lives are embedded in patterns of relationship. Taylor (1988) writes:

> In fact, much of our thought about the verification of psychological attributions, both in science and in everyday life, has suffered from a neglect of this basic truth, that many of our actions can only be the actions they are because they occur within "relational scenarios." And these relational patterns in turn are only possible because we share a certain language of action, feeling, sensibility. (p. 52)

This means that all of our expressions--anger, conflict, love, envy, friendship--only become meaningful in relation to other people. We come to have an identity and we act out of this identity precisely because we share a meaningful language with other people. But Gergen wants to go a step further than recognizing this "basic truth." As illustrated in chapter three's discussion of the relational self and relational theory, Gergen wants to develop a language in which all of our actions are understood by the things that they do in micro-social scenarios. We are not to inquire into the true meaning of our actions but rather the impact that the words we use have in our immediate relationship with others. Gergen wants to translate our everyday vocabulary of anger, love, jealousy into a relational vocabulary. Conceived in terms of relationship, we can begin to ask questions such as: "What happens when I describe myself as angry?" "How does my friend respond to my anger?" But another question of even greater importance is now asked: "Are there certain expressions--certain moves within the relational scenario--which threaten to

terminate relationship, or to end conversation?" When I tell my friend that I am angry

with him does he stop talking and walk out of the room, raise his fist and strike me, or

inquire into the reasons for my anger.

I think that this is the point that Gergen gets at in The Saturated Self. There are

certain languages, or patterns of relationship, which when invoked, lead to conflict. Put

another way, the language of modernism thrives under difference, conflict, antagonism

and incorporation of the other. Opposing intelligibilities cannot exist alongside one

another because the only language that we have available to us for negotiating these

forms of relationship is one in which difference must be undermined. As we enter into the

postmodern era, fueled by technologies of social saturation, we are increasingly

confronted by other people who do not share our same viewpoints. We need a language

which can soften the conflict which often threatens when opposing viewpoints come into

contact. It is in this spirit that Gergen offers "relational politics" (Gergen, 1996, p. 18).

He writes:

> If we press the implications of social constructionist thought in just these ways we
> may envision the development of a relational politics--a politics in which neither self
> nor other, we nor them, take precedence, but in which the relational process serves as
> the generative source of change. (p. 18)

The priority for relational theory, then, is in developing language which encourages

"collaborative" as opposed to conflictual forms of activity (1996, p. 21). On this view,

while all human activity is relational, for Gergen there are certain forms of relationship

which are prized over others. There are some forms of relationship which meet the need

of "getting along" with other people, and there are some forms of relationship which do

not even allow a conversation to occur in the first place. For the sake of avoiding conflict,

of creating a civil society, Gergen proposes that we develop languages which bring

people together to negotiate mutually beneficial forms of reality.

Taylor's response to Gergen turns on the view that we cannot so easily translate our traditional understanding of anger, love, hate, friendship into a relational vocabulary, because our self understandings depend upon the way that we have conventionally used these languages. If we abandon the depth metaphor, and the goal of providing accurate accounts of our lives, then we also lose the capacity to make sense of our lives. This is not to say, like the positivist-empiricist, that there are objective internal psychological states which our self expressions must accurately reflect. Taylor (1988) writes:

> Reading Wittgenstein will cure us forever of the temptation to think that there is an answer to this question that is buried deep in some inner space...that if we just had the right kind of probe--either psychoanalytic, or perhaps even neuropsychological--we could go in there and find out, disregarding completely the surrounding context. (p. 53)

Rather, it is to recognize the basic intuition that in living among other people we are often called

to make sense of our lives by providing accounts which more or less ring true. He continues:

> But when all this is said, we still haven't disposed of the problem of the valid interpretation. Questions still arise which we seek answers about what someone really thinks or feels or wants. Does our relationship mean as much to you as to me? Are you deep down angry at me? Can you ever forgive me for what I did 10 years ago? These are questions we can't help asking of each other, not as psychologists or sociologists, but in the course of living our lives. One could say that we live our lives on the basis of one or other answer to questions of this kind. That is why being uncertain about them can be so upsetting and unsettling. An epistemological theory that tries to tell us there isn't a genuine question here, or that the answer is up to the observer or the interlocutor to supply, is just not credible. (p. 54)

In his move from an interpretive science to a pragmatic science Gergen loses, or perhaps willingly abandons, the capacity to answer these sorts of questions. For Gergen these questions potentially get in the way of co-ordinating relationship. Where for Taylor we can't help but ask these sorts of questions and struggle to provide accurate answers to these questions, for Gergen these kinds of questions erect barriers to continued relationship and we are advised to leave them aside.

Perhaps the important difference is in the respective lessons that Taylor and Gergen draw from Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein criticized the social sciences because they tried to impose an "alien interpretive grid on language, thought and feeling" (Taylor, 1988, p. 57). Social scientists hijacked the depth metaphor claiming that it referred to a real space within individuals. The mistake that this leads to is the assumption that we can understand a person simply by accessing this inner state. Taylor continues "The only justification for this empiricist theory would have been that it actually captured the lived experience of thinking, feeling, and talking--which was, of course the claim of the original founders of the tradition" (p. 57). On Taylor's view, it was Wittgenstein's great achievement to show that the empiricists had not lived up to their own ideals. And once Wittgenstein shows us this, the logical empiricist attempt to secure an accurate depiction of the deep interior "loses its credentials" (p. 57).

But Taylor does not take this to mean that we should abandon the language of depth, nor the attempt to provide a clear, and accurate account of our lives. This is to lose sight of Wittgenstein's goal which was to lead us back to life as it is lived. Taylor suggests that his critique of Gergen's "radical relativism" is offered in this same spirit, that "nothing can trump the best account of what we have to presuppose in order to get on with the business of living" (p. 57). Taylor argues, then, that Gergen's relational theory takes us away from life as it is lived, and erects an ideal in which certain questions that we must ask about our lives cannot be answered in a convincing way. It is not just a preference for a particular type of language which leads Taylor to reject Gergen's thesis, but according to Taylor it is in our "psychological makeup" to ask these questions of ourselves--we have no choice here.

Where Gergen sees a single issue Taylor sees two: the depth metaphor as employed by social scientists, and the depth metaphor as employed in everyday life. Certainly,

traditional social science was mistaken in assuming that it could probe the deep interior

and provide true understanding, but this does not mean that the language of depth itself is

problematic. Taylor (1988) writes:

> But one mustn't confuse the two senses of inner, the old empiricist one and the perfectly valid image we invoke in our self explanations. The first was defined by the notion of first-person privileged access. The Cartesian or empiricist inner was a domain that is directly accessible in principle only to the agent him/herself. Others have to make shaky inferences about it from external signs. Inwardness as a category of ordinary self -understanding in our civilization isn't like this at all. One of the reasons I may describe some of my feelings as 'deep' is my difficulty in contacting them, in making them palpable and perspicuous. But this is as much a difficulty I have in being clear about my own feelings as it is a puzzle for you. And I will often overcome this, if I do, in the course of an extended conversation with you, in which I try to make sense of my feelings in a way that both of us together can find convincing.... Depth and inwardness here are quite unconnected to privileged access. This whole Cartesian inspired idea is a red herring. (p. 58)

The difference that emerges here is seen in the direction that each Gergen and Taylor's

projects have taken. Gergen emerges out of a social psychological tradition which has

consistently been assigned the task of providing solutions to problems that we encounter

in everyday life. Gergen (1973) criticized social psychology because its explanations of

human behavior had proven irrelevant to social life--social psychological theory was

unable to provide theories which could resolve racial, gender, and cultural tensions (see

Chapter 1). Under social constructionism Gergen continues to search for a type of theory

which could address these problems. The important move is that for Gergen theory can

now help to transform our relationships to other peoples. It does not merely reflect an

objective world, but rather is a practical activity which in its articulation reconstitutes the

reality in which we related to each other.

But as both Taylor (1988) and Terwee (1988) have argued, it is precisely here that

Gergen retains some central assumptions of the positivist-empiricist project. The

positivist-empiricists argued that the language used in everyday life was inaccurate in its

representation of objective reality. The goal was, in scientific theory, to develop a language which was unambiguous in its referents. Gergen has certainly moved away from this conception of language--he does not want to tighten up vocabulary, nor to establish links between language and an objective world--but like the positivist-empiricists he does want to take an active role in transforming the way that language is used in everyday life. But in doing this Gergen must also abandon the sense in which we can be authentic in living our lives, or alternately, the sense in which we can provide accounts of our lives which are better than other accounts.

The Dissolution of Power in Relationship

> If there is a problem with this stimulating call for a transformation of theory, let alone persons, it is not due to any lack of scholarship, persuasive rhetoric, or good old American optimism. It is rather that Gergen's formulation of relational politics retains its plausibility and admirable idealistic appeal only to the extent that the existence of drastic differentials in socioeconomic and political power is ignored. Indeed, power is conspicuous by its absence from his discourse on sociopolitical conflicts. The fact that contending interest groups are rarely equal in power, and hardly ever willing to voluntarily relinquish any of their power advantages, hardly requires elaboration. It remains to be seen whether the idea of a relational politics is viable in a competitive, materialistic society structured in such a way as to encourage disparate interest groups to struggle for power advantages by whatever means that are not grossly illegal. None of this means that Gergen's proposals are without merit, only that in the absence of any consideration of power differentials and social class divisions, it is difficult to take them at their face value. (Rappaport, 1996, p. 36)

Another form of critique is offered by Marxist scholars and constructionists themselves. Here it is argued that Gergen's faith in the micro-social scenario--the idea that existing prejudices, biases, and power differentials can be left aside when one enters into immediate conversation with others--is naive. Where Gergen focuses on the potential of the micro-scenario, and places faith in people's capacity to take "existential leaps into a mutually generated faith," the critiques reviewed in this section focus on the macro-social scenario as the larger sphere in which micro-social scenarios are embedded (Gergen, 1988a, p. 61). In a review of the different forms of constructionism Danziger (1997) distinguishes between Gergen's "light constructionism" and other "dark" forms of constructionism (1997, p. 410). He writes:

...But among those points of view which do not claim a monopoly on the path to truth, which do not prejudge the nature of reality, tolerance must be the order of the day. A thousand flowers may bloom, provided none of them is of a type that threatens to take over the entire field, if left unchecked. This is a relatively gentle, hopeful variety of social constructionism, which I want to call the light version in order to contrast it with another, dark, version.

Quite a few contributors to these volumes recognize the importance of non-discursive aspects of human relationship. Most often, these aspects are subsumed under the category of power. The manifestations of power may range all the way from limitations placed on people's actions and experiences to the infliction of pain and suffering. But in any case power cannot be reduced to mere discourse, at least not according to dark constructionism. In the lighter versions there is little or no reference to the problems of power and if they are alluded to, they are treated as effects of discourse. Problems of power, if recognized at all, are embedded in essentially discursive relationship, whereas in dark social constructionism discourse is embedded in relations of power. Those authors who adopt Foucault's conjection of 'power/knowledge' also find themselves on the 'dark' side because of their recognition that talk and text are inseparable from manifestations of power. (1997, p. 410)

Light constructionists, like Gergen, argue that differences in power can be overcome in conversations at a micro-social level of exchange. The conversation becomes the space in which previous injustices can be undone and new forms of relationship, congenial to all participants in a dialogue, can be generated. But a dark constructionist might first respond that even in conversation power is always evident. All attempts to level the playing field are subverted because conversation itself reproduces distinctions and differences built into surrounding social institutions. In effect the focus on the microsocial scenario covers over, or hides the power differentials, in which these conversations are embedded. For example, a meeting in conversation will not change the reality of socio-economic differences and the inequalities which they promote. Rather, overcoming poverty requires a change in socio-economic arrangements.

Tolman, Coughlan, and Robinson (1996) provide an argument which illustrates the dark constructionist critique. They suggest that Gergen's constructionism, like many other postmodern perspectives, is guided by the ideal of creating a civil society in which

all people are invited to participate in an ongoing dialogue. For the sake of civility, modernist languages are replaced by languages more congenial to getting along with each other. In the postmodern world "instead of purpose, play now replaces work; the tool becomes a toy; life becomes a game; structures are replaced by rules; and function becomes fashion" (Tolman et al., 1996, p. 120). Conceived of as on ongoing game, wherein no position is superior to any other, the postmodernist attempts to avert conflict. But Tolman et al. argue that in emphasizing the ideal of a civil society "inequalities in discursive powers" are ignored. That is "the equality of voices and sense of participation are illusory" (p. 126). In short, inequality is covered over in a rhetoric of equality. The civil society which Gergen promotes then is not a reality, but an idealized version of what the world should look like. And in focusing all of its efforts in creating a language of relationship, social constructionism also avoids addressing ongoing problems of class difference, and power differentials. Tolman et al. (1996) underline the point with an example:

> But consider the teenager who wears work boots as a fashion statement. They play a role in the teenager's discursive community. For the teenager to switch to sandals, only a change in the dominating discourse is required. Compare this with the worker's work boots, which are worn because they fulfill a specific function relative to the demands of labor. For the worker to replace them with sandals would require more than a mere alteration in discourse; it would require a change in the forces of production. A psychology that addresses only the teenager's situation may be correct and relevant, but only for such situations. To insist that it extends to the worker would be to obscure the reality of the relations of production by confusing consumption with production. (pp. 127-128)

Taylor and Tolman et al.'s critiques of Gergen agree on the point that a psychological theory must do more than simply promote continued conversation. There is a reality to our psychological life, and there is a reality to the organization of society which cannot be overcome with a leap into new forms of conversation.

In part, I think that the move Gergen makes to a relational self and to relational

politics results from his collapsing the traditional categories of society, and then the self, into micro-social relationships. On his view, the self--the narratives which we have constituted our lives by--are linguistic artifacts and as such can be undone in ongoing conversation. The transformation requires a leap of faith into new forms of relationship. And similarly society, class relation, and power, are abstractions created in the immediacy of micro-social situations. These can also be undone by talking in new ways. But in order for transformation to occur we must first undermine, or forget, modernist languages which privileged the self and society.

A Psychology of the Person

> Individual life is uniquely personal even as it is thoroughly implicated in the social-historical context of historical life. It is of pressing importance especially in a post-modern era of constructionist discourses that we recover a conception of the individual person not, in Dilthey's words, as "prior to society and history," but as a "point of interaction," as a participant with others embedded in those meaningful relational coherences of society and culture that from the standpoint of life are primordially lived. (Mos, 1996, p. 42)

In Taylor's critique of Gergen I focused on the idea that our psychological theories must do more than facilitate relationship, but must be able to make clear what we already know about ourselves as we have lived our lives. That is, before a psychological theory is developed we already possess a forestructure of understanding, an intuition of the problems that we are dealing with, and what needs to be said. On Taylor's view, and in contrast to Gergen, theory serves to clarify what we already know about ourselves--it gives expression to, rather than actively seeking transformation of understanding. Indeed in giving expression, our understanding is already transformed (Taylor, 1985). Similarly, when reviewing Tolman et al's critique I argued that psychological theory must reckon with the reality of existing social structures and the inequalities that they reproduce. In each case, the category of self understanding, or social order, cannot be dissolved in the immediacy of relationship. In this last section I want to further explore what it might mean to develop a psychological theory which gives expression to life as it is lived. To

do this I draw on Mos' (1996) comments on Gergen's (1996) proposal for a relational

politics.

Like Taylor, and drawing on the writings of Wilhelm Dilthey, Mos argues that in

theory we must give expression to our understanding of life as it is lived. He writes:

> Our relation to the world cannot be theoretical--or, god-like--as we are participants in
> the world, in life, prior to knowing it. In a tradition reaching back to Dilthey and, a
> century earlier, to Johann Gottfried Herder (e.g. Taylor, 1989), the concept of "life" is
> here conceived of not as a biological category but as a historical and biographical
> one, ineluctably having its basis in nature yet articulated in relations to the socio-
> historical world [italics added]. Reality from the "standpoint of life, " as Dilthey
> would have it, is always one of vital involvement in the sense that our individual
> existence compels us to adopt a stance in and towards life thereby bringing
> meaningful coherence to our experience and, in an articulation and reflection on that
> experience, acquiring a personal character that is unique and irreducible. (p. 41)

Further, rather than arguing, as Gergen has done, that the self and the social can made

over in the immediacy of conversation, Mos argues that the category of self and society

are given in the socio-historical world before we approach it in theory, and as such are

irreducible to one another. He writes:

> Our individual lives are continuous, but not identical, with those social and cultural
> coherences wherein are embedded our purposes, values, and ideals. From the
> standpoint of life, the individual person is an irreducible, concrete reality, not
> paraphrasing Wilhelm von Humboldt, merely a leaf on a tree of humanity. (42)

Here Mos argues that the categories of individual and society are given to us as we live

our lives. Borrowing Dilthey's term these are "massive objectivities" which ineluctably

inform our understanding of our lives (Mos, 1996, p. 45). But Gergen dissolves the self,

or here the individual, into its micro-social relations (see Chapter 3). It is precisely

because the technologies of social saturation fragment, and disrupt the continuity of

community that he argues the self is also dissolved amongst its relations, and that the

distinction between society and individual is collapsed in the micro-social scenario.

The difference is an important one because if as Gergen argues, the self, as

constructed in the immediate situation, is dissolved into relation, with no "real" commitment to its past or its ongoing relationships these "massive objectivities," then it becomes possible to continually reconstruct the self with no attention paid to previous and ongoing constructions. Paraphrasing Gergen, we are able to take existential leaps into new forms of relationship without consideration given to the coherence which we have come to know as the self—not as an abstract entity, but as a way that we live our lives. But following both Taylor and Dilthey, Mos argues that in making such existential leaps we are also unable to make sense of our lives as lived. The new relationship—that which we "unthinkingly" throw our selves into—is always a reflection of our way of living, and in order for the significance of the relationship to be understood, we must have a sense of how it coheres with our personal identities. This is a reflective activity in which all of our life experiences are integrated and, in further articulation, transformed. On this view, the transformation of self which Gergen foresees in relational theory is certainly a possibility, but it is not one that spontaneously emerges when we choose to forget how we live and have lived our lives. The shift is not solely governed by technologies of saturation or the contingency of relationship, but rather by our capacity as individuals (who live in relation to others) to give expression to our shifting and transforming identities.

And this becomes an empirical question; not empirical in the sense of providing scientific evidence, but in the sense of asking the question: "Can we live our lives in Gergen's relational mode?" "Can we reconcile Gergen's proposed fragmentation of self, and playful renegotiation of relationship, with our understanding of how we live?" Or alternately, "Is Gergen's relational self an ideal set before us in order to guide us toward a civil society?" or "Is it an account of how we are capable of living our lives in relation to other people?" This opens up an entirely new set of questions which I am not able to address in the remainder of this paper.

I want to conclude, then, by pointing out that Gergen asks similar questions of his theory. As pointed out in the end of chapter three he is aware that the technologies of social saturation, the population of self, and the rise of the multiphrenic condition are only signals of a shift to a postmodern consciousness, but not the postmodern consciousness itself. And further that the relational vocabulary he aims to articulate is yet in its infancy--an attempt to give voice to problems and concerns confronting the contemporary world. It remains to be seen, then, whether Gergen's conception of relational living can inform and shape our everyday relations. Given these considerations I think that it is appropriate to end this chapter with the following quotation taken from the closing section of <u>The Saturated Self</u>:

> This is a good point to end this book. The text now speaks of flowering forms of relatedness, a growing consciousness of global interdependence, an organic relationship to our planet, and the withering of lethal conflict--all so hopeful in implication. But is this not to indulge once again in romanticist dreams of the good society, and to invoke the great modernist narrative of progress? Are we not at last, merely giving way to the traditional pleasures of the text? Reflexive reconsideration is required: can we now blend these richly elaborated discourses into new forms of serious games that can take us beyond text and into life? And can we do so without losing sight of context and contingency, without making fast the language, or formulating final solutions? We move now beyond the speakable to action. (p. 259)

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IMAGE EVALUATION
TEST TARGET (QA–3)

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150mm

6"
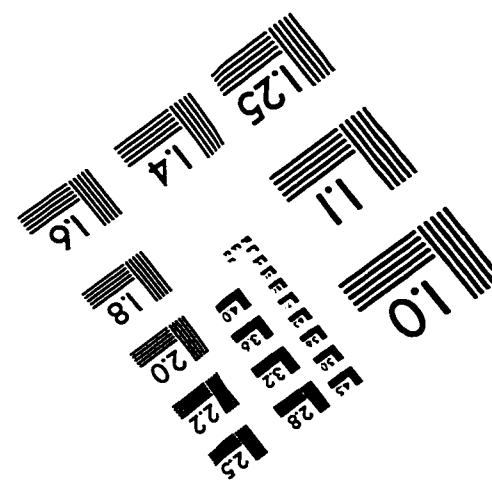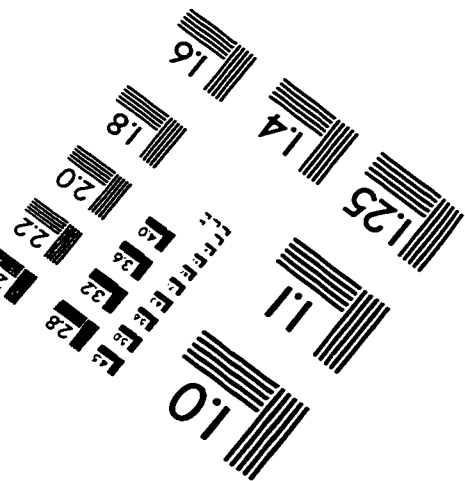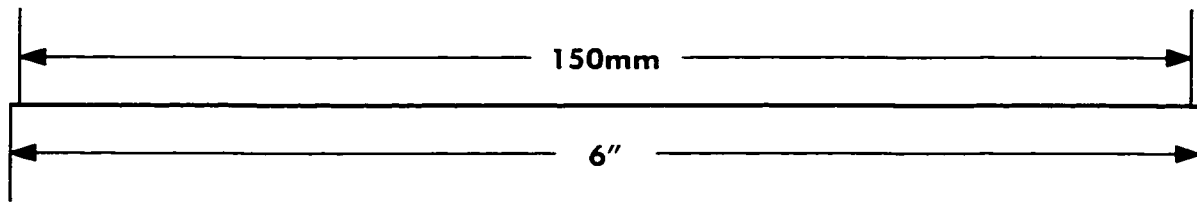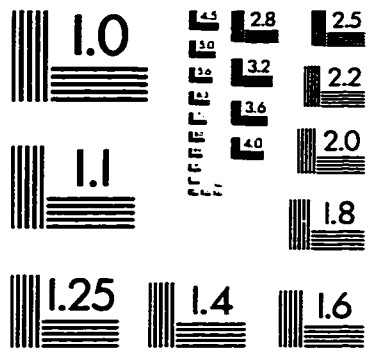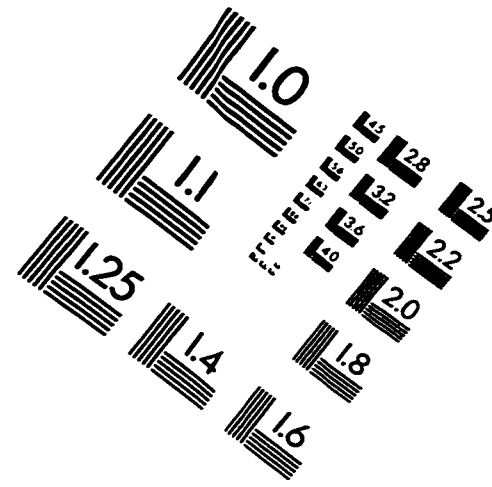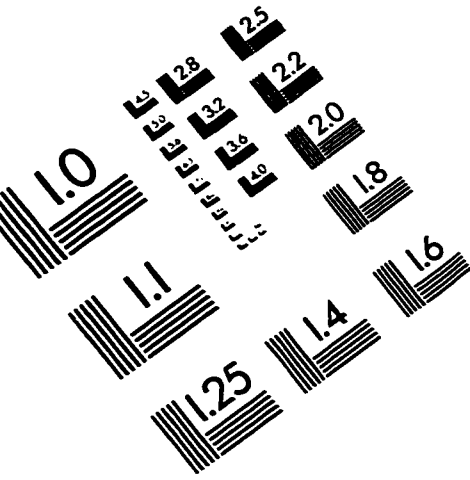
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