Postmodern Conceptualizations of Culture in Social Constructionism and Cultural Studies

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Abstract

The theorization of culture in psychology continues to gain momentum in spite of little agreement concerning the most suitable theoretical frameworks for examining cultural phenomena. We explore two contemporary approaches to culture—social constructionism and cultural studies—and examine their relevance for psychology. In juxtapositioning them we map their continuities and discontinuities in terms of ontological and epistemological stances on language, representation, knowledge, identity, history, ideology, social action and emancipation. We propose a bridge between the two, and discuss ways in which the dialogue between social constructionism and cultural studies can deepen psychology's understanding of culture in the postmodern world.

To focus on the psychological dimensions of culture means linking interpretations of psychological phenomena and the psyche to the ways of life and cultural practices of a specific cultural community or background. Culture is not simply a theoretical conceptualization. Rather, it is embedded in the daily life of every person; everyone belongs to or is represented within cultural dynamics. Far from being a stable or fixed entity, culture is an ongoing organization of material and social constructions that, within place, time and history, is locally experienced and represented through processes of identification and relationship. The view of knowledge and reality as contextualized and culturally embedded is a trademark for both social constructionism (SC) and cultural studies (CS). Both approaches present epistemological positions that help contemporary social scientists understand, interpret, and organize the changing relational and cultural contexts of the postmodern era. At the same time, however, the two traditions differ significantly in their conceptualizations of culture and lived experience and their understandings of how such experience is situated within language and within specific ranges of possible interpretations and actions.

In this essay we address some of the main continuities and discontinuities between conceptualizations of culture in social constructionism and cultural studies. First, painting with a broad stroke, we begin by giving an account of each respective position. Second, by examining what each implies about the ambiguous construct of culture, we explore points of convergence and divergence between social constructionist and cultural studies views, including their respective stances on discourse, ideology, knowledge, reality, social justice, and emancipation.

Inevitably, our arguments reflect our own positionings and experiences. They target general trends rather than specific nuances that are internal to the two fields whose comprehensive representation extends beyond the scope of this article. We therefore decided to bring together (our interpretations of) a few major theorists—Kenneth Gergen, Vivien Burr, and John Shotter for social constructionism and Stuart Hall, Richard Hoggart, and Raymond Williams for cultural studies. We invite the reader to regard these two traditions of thought as complex, multifaceted, and multidisciplinary, both tending to discourage the creation of hegemonies that may be promoted by referring to "authorities" in the field.

The Social Constructionist View of Culture

In psychology, social constructionism (SC) refers to the vast and complex field of constructivism that established itself as a reaction to universal, metaphysical, objectivist, reductive, and nomothetic psychologies (Gergen, 1985). Constructivism has become an umbrella term under which different epistemological and ontological positions emphasize the role of interpretive processes and practices in the construction of reality. (For a brief history of constructivist thought, see Mahoney, 2003). Within this perspective, knowledge is no longer the mere representation of reality. Although most forms of constructivism emphasize the cognitive and agentic power of the individual being and his/her interpretations and anticipations of reality (Kelly, 1955; Maturana & Varela, 1980; Neimeyer & Mahoney, 1995), in SC constructs are viewed as coming from social interactions defined within local contexts of knowledge, power dynamics, cultural practices, and language (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1991, 1994; Shotter, 1993).

Social constructionism has brought concerns with language, narrative, and discourse to the foreground. In shifting the focus from language as a fixed repository of meanings to language as constitutive of relational practices of reality construction and negotiation, it lands into the postmodern territory of discourse, defined as practices or uses of language that, in a given time and place, systematically define the objects of which they speak (Sarup, 1993). Influenced by Foucault, SC analyzes the ways in which systems of value and truth create and, at

the same time, are created by discourse, which both enable and constrain specific constructions of reality (Burr, 2003; Foucault, 1969/1972; 1970/1994a; Gergen, 1994). Constructions are social and political (that is, power-based) practices of interpretation and action that order reality and generate, organize, and limit possibility within a specific relational and historical context.

From a psychological perspective, one of the most interesting features of discourse is its ability to make interpretations and phenomena "real" to subjects and societies through the simultaneous adoption, negotiation and imposition of social values, assumptions, and truths that are implicit in language practices and representations. Therefore, contrary to some critiques of SC as nihilist or solipsist, truth is not absent in SC. Rather, it replaces the concern about the existence and knowledge of a final reality or truth with plural views and understandings that are always local, interpretative, and relational. Every reality is the effect of shared understandings, conventions, negotiations, and power-based relations that produce and are produced by a discursive context (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1985, 2001). In Rorty's (1999) words,

> 'Everything is a social construction' and 'all awareness is a linguistic affair'. . . . Both are ways of saying that we shall never be able to step outside of language, never be able to grasp reality unmediated by a linguistic description. So both are ways of saying that we should be suspicious of the Greek distinction between appearance and reality. (p. 48)

Language is the origin and functional basis for constructions. It is an author of reality rather than a mere means that expresses an objective reality through referents, that is, words, images, or concepts that are supposed to simply coincide with the reality they portray (Lyotard, 1979/1984). From this position, it is therefore impossible to find a direct and unquestioned link between representation and reality. Referents are effaced (Lather, 1997) and the associations between signifiers and signifieds can only be understood as based on social and political relationships. Such a focus leads most SC scholars to explore the origins, effects, and standards of knowledge as inevitably linked to power and authority (Foucault, 1969/1972).

The emphasis on language and representation, rather than on referents and taken-for-granted knowledge, allows SC to be sympathetic with a postmodern approach to epistemology and science that critically reflects on the assumptions that underlie psychology's quest for the objectivity and scientific ideals that characterize the natural sciences and, to an extent, medicine. So, in addition to deconstructing specific aspects of the psychological science (e.g., a DSM-based diagnostic category), the SC reflection on language and epistemology operates at a

meta-theoretical level. Rather than advocating for one stance as implicitly better than another, epistemic differences are interpreted in terms of specific locations of place and time and specific positions of power, reflexivity, and "constitutive otherness" (Cahoone, 1996, p. 14). Once stripped from its quests for absolute truth and objectivity, the scientific endeavor, then, requires the thorough understanding of the roles played in the creation of reality by plural epistemological positions, dominant discourses or meta-narratives, and the observer's reflexive and agentic role (Kvale, 1992; Maturana, 1987; Steir, 1991). From the meta-theoretical and pluralist perspective of SC, diverse philosophies or beliefs are potentially valid. Epistemologically, they simply are positions among possible others that could have been endorsed. Critically, however, the social scientist is invited to account for the plurality of judgments or constructions as well as politics and practices.

Cultural Constructions

The SC epistemological approach leads to the interpretation of culture as a shared and ever-changing organization of beliefs, interpretations, and practices. Local meanings define, and are defined by, representational and relational practices that are both institutional and subjective (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In the ongoing dialogue between objective and subjective practices, culture is created through the negotiation, internalization, and expression of social behavior. As a consequence, cultural constructions are highly political processes of power, which result in the elevation of specific forms of knowledge to the rank of the true, valid, or scientific for a specific context (Burr, 2003; Foucault, 1969/1972). Following Saussure's "idea that language speaks us, rather than we speak it" (Sarup, 1996, p. 46), SC explores the systems of constructions and the links between the signifier and signified that are allowed within specific discourses. Constructions of cultural meanings and practices are constantly redefined, negotiated, and agreed upon within specific contexts of language (Shotter, 1993). As SC assumes that "culture is not a given which is handed down authoritatively, but is created discursively" (Misra & Gergen, 1993; quoted in Stead, 2004, p. 393), SC promotes a critical reflection on the epistemologies and knowledge that appear to be valid, granted, or true in a specific social, historical, and cultural context. In this way, culture refers to understandings and interpretations that *act as* "constituents of taken-for-granted order . . . [that] participate in a reiterative pattern of relationship, or if sufficiently extended, a tradition" (Gergen, 1994, p. 49).

In order to understand why specific representations or constructions become valid or self-evident, meanings need to be checked against local uses of language in specific relationships and discursive practices of power, knowledge, and possibility (Anderson, 1997). Within the

range of possibilities implied or permitted by the dominant regimes of power and knowledge, the process of interpretation is based on communications and negotiations of the meanings and practices that define a culture and its identity. The agreements that construct the identity and experience of a culture are based on language-games (Wittgenstein, 1953), that is, on local practices and possibilities of language that extend beyond the "agreement in opinions" to create "forms of life" (Wittgenstein, 1953, § 241). As Shotter (1993) points out, this agreement is not a simple exercise of democracy: not all knowledge is equally permitted or allowed. Not all interpretations are equally viable because any reality and knowledge is placed within a political context of standards and cultural hierarchies. In other words, within a specific context of language and discourse, "culture is both the product of human interaction and the producer of certain forms of human interaction. Culture is both constraining and enabling" (Hays, 1994, p. 65). This view is consistent with critical realism: Trapped within linguistic games and dominant discourses, cultural constructions behave as promoters and at the same time controllers of knowledge and identity (Gemignani, 2003).

In summary, culture emerges as a set of relational practices based on shared interpretive strategies. Common meanings create understandings of reality that are local and constantly fluctuating according to political dynamics of language and positioning. Within specific ideological contexts, discourses exist as political practices of meanings that become true, evident, or viable. In this regard, the notion of ideology and its analysis are crucial to understanding discourse as the origin of social constructions. In fact, the focus on ideologies and discourses entails an interrogation of the relationships between power and knowledge, including internal and external forms of knowledge about one's culture. Consequently, from this perspective, the foundations for experience and possible action can mostly be understood as cultural and political processes within specific discursive domains. For instance, the ideology implicit in positivism that dominates current scientific psychology tends to disregard the reflections on discourse and power/knowledge. It frequently theorizes culture *as if* it were composed of variables and facts, rather than understanding the social, historical, and political processes that led to the legitimization of specific social constructions of culture and the simultaneous exclusion of others (Gemignani, 2003; Peña, 2003). This critical focus on the ideology of positivism and its related discourses has led some postmodern authors, like Henry Giroux, Patti Lather and Peter McLaren, to develop approaches to multicultural education that counter essentialist presentations of culture. We will further elaborate on the concept of ideology later on, in the section on "Continuities and Discontinuities between CS and SC."

The Cultural Studies View of Culture

Arriving at an understanding of culture from a cultural studies perspective requires contextualizing the ways in which the term has been used and defined. That is, the view of culture within CS is tied to its intellectual history. In particular, the indebtedness of CS to "modernist high theory," Marxism, the Frankfurt School of critical theory, and structuralism has given rise to contemporary CS views of culture. Because of the challenges posed to these intellectual antecedents by poststructuralism, feminism, gender and sexuality studies, and race and ethnic studies, however, CS has maintained a long-standing ambivalent relationship with these modernist theories. We begin by examining in brief how cultural studies (CS) —in the U.K. and the U.S.— has taken up the definition and analysis of culture.

Matthew Arnold's View of Culture

The examination of culture as an object of study is generally attributed to British poet, cultural critic, and education reformer Matthew Arnold. His text, *Culture and Anarchy* (Arnold, 1869/2004), is cited as having an enduring effect on Anglophone societies' views of culture as comprised of "civilizing" institutions and the site for the dissemination of cultural values (Munns & Rajan, 1995; Williams, 1983a,1983b). Arnold couched his reading of culture in spiritual, intellectual, and aesthetic terms, stating that "culture is then properly described . . . as having its origin in the love of perfection; it is *a study of perfection*" (Arnold, 1869/2004, p. 23). Arnold believed that becoming a cultured being entailed the liberatory potential of overcoming class distinction by making "the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere" (Arnold, 1869/2004, p. 40). The encounter with high culture could therefore serve to liberate "the masses" and demonstrate the superior humanistic values they ought to pursue. Arnold's egalitarian interests were quite revolutionary in their own right. However, his exclusive view of culture would quickly become a strong point of CS critique in the post-world war era.

British Cultural Studies

In 1950s Great Britain, elitist conceptualizations of culture running through Arnold's educational tradition were critiqued by Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart, who are credited as two of the founders of the British cultural studies movement (During, 1999; Munns & Rajan, 1995; Nelson, Treichler, & Grossberg, 1992). Hoggart and Williams both examined culture beyond its aesthetic and spiritual elements, thereby decentering its concept as an exclusively civilizing mechanism. In *Culture and Society*, for instance, Williams (1983a) exposes the interests of the cultured elites to counter the social pro-

gress of the working classes and argues that the totality of culture is larger than the product of a single class.

In *The Uses of Literacy*, Richard Hoggart (1957) examines shifts in working class groups in post-World War II Great Britain as told from his own experience. Like Williams, Hoggart came from a working class background. He argues for the relative merits of both high culture and working class culture, especially in light of the eroding influences of capitalist consumerism on both classes. In 1964, he founded the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in which he worked to bring an understanding of culture back to the *ordinary*, that is, back to the lived experiences of individuals (Bromley, 1995).

No other figure in the history of cultural studies on either side of the Atlantic, however, has had as far-reaching an impact as Stuart Hall. He became affiliated with the British New Left in the late 1950's and his early work was influential in overturning the notion that culture and politics operate in separate spheres (Hall, 1977). Under Hall's leadership as director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1968, CS moved beyond the exclusive focus on class to include questions on the politics of identity (Hall, 1980/1995). Hall distinguished CS from a strictly Marxist orientation, asserting that the relationship between CS and Marxism was never "a perfect theoretical fit" (Hall, 1999, p. 279). Even if Marxism has been among the most influential theoretical frameworks within CS, especially for its reflections on class oppression and social inequality, Marx "did not talk about or seem to understand . . . our privileged object of study: culture, ideology, language, the symbolic" (Hall, 1999, p. 279). Specifically, CS criticized the Marxist view of culture as a material force rather than a symbolic process. In addition, Marxism was challenged for its inability to address more complex questions of subjectivity and culture without becoming deterministic and reductionistic.

In addition to wrestling with Marxism, the philosophical and social justice movements of critical theory, structuralism, feminism, and race and ethnic studies sharply marked the development of CS in the '60s and '70s. Through their pioneering explorations of gender, politics of race, emancipation, and disciplinary separation as constitutive poles of philosophy and the social sciences, they guided the intellectual enterprise of CS (Hall, 1999). It was during Hall's tenure at the CCCS that exploration concerning the intersections of culture, gender, class and race were brought into closer dialogue.

Hall (1999) cites several major challenges brought about by the feminist cultural studies movement that reshaped the foundations of CS. Specifically, the questions of identity related to the "personal is political" changed the object of study in both theoretical and practical ways. Rather than focusing on cultural and political differences among classes, feminists made clear that those differences also existed within clas-

ses. Consequently, the particularity of the gendered subject problematized the more abstract and gender-neutral notion of the classed subject. Hall states that the feminist movement helped to expand radically our understanding of the notion of power from a class-specific hegemony of power structures, like the media or the parliament, to a hegemony of gender oppression that cut across classes that was present in society regardless of class. In addition, questions of gender and sexuality started to be seen as having a central role for the understanding of power itself in that female bodies, which bear the mark of gender socialization, have been regarded differently in the face of patriarchy. Moving further away from Marx's reductive view of the classed subject, the CS encounter with feminism led towards a greater emphasis on subjectivity and the subject's location in social space. Finally, Hall (1999) argues that feminism's focus on the subject was responsible for the "'re-opening' of the closed frontier between social theory and the theory of the unconscious—psychoanalysis" (Hall, 1999, p. 104).

The study of race and ethnicity arrived late on the scene of the CCCS and lacked the political force that feminism achieved within the Centre. Hall (1999) describes the ways in which those interested in race at the CCCS struggled to interrogate how race figured into its vision. He states:

> Actually getting cultural studies to put on its own agenda the critical questions of race, the politics of race, the resistance to racism, the critical questions of cultural politics, was itself a profound theoretical struggle. . . Again it was accomplished only as a result of a long, and sometimes bitter—certainly bitterly contested—internal struggle against a resounding but unconscious silence. (Hall, 1999, pp. 104-105)

Hall cites the work of Paul Gilroy and the CCCS's pivotal text, *The Empire Strikes Back*, as having an enduring effect on the cultural studies overall project. However, Hall admits that "Paul Gilroy and the group of people who produced the book found it extremely difficult to create the necessary theoretical and political space in the Centre in which to work on the project" (p. 105). To those readers accustomed to examining the cultural processes of gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity within the field of psychology, it may seem a bit unusual that CS showed such resistance. It is important to notice here that the CCCS was initially focused on macro-level questions of class stratifications in society, and not on the political ramifications of identity. Therefore, the CCCS view of culture reflected the ways in which it tended to reduce issues of race and racism into discourses on class. Although CS in Britain had a problematic history of interrogating concerns about race, ethnicity, and racism, CS in the U.S., in sharp contrast, grew out

of the concerns by marginalized groups such as women and racial and ethnic minorities.

American Studies and Literary Studies

Munns and Rajan (1995) cite that the cultural studies movements in the U.S. arose from the interdisciplinary field of American studies, which emerged as an interdisciplinary field in the 1930's and offered a platform from which to engage in a critical analysis of an "imagined" homogenous national culture. American studies began first as the study of elitist cultures and aesthetics, akin to the Arnoldian perspective cited previously. The 1960's ushered in, however, a challenge to the imagined unity through the emergence of the fields of ethnic and women's studies, which questioned the myth of a monocultural America. Their challenges to American and Eurocentric literary canons and to positivist social science served to decenter theories of culture tied to metanarratives such as that of America as a melting pot, or the problematic notion of manifest destiny.

Stefan Collini (1994) characterizes cultural studies in the U.S. as a "marriage between literary theory and what has been called 'the politics of identity'" (cited in Munns & Rajan, 1995, p. 213). In addition, CS in the U.S. has brought together literary studies and urban anthropology, whose study of culture emerged from the civil rights movement and the analysis of sociocultural processes in industrialized societies. Whereas literary studies had a limited role in the development of the CS movement due to its focus on canonical works and lack of attention to the literature of marginalized groups, the increasing importance of urban ethnography created a space for the study of popular cultural practices of ethnic minorities, women, and other marginalized groups. Although U.S. and British cultural studies have historically had different foci—with the British's original emphasis on class struggle and the U.S. focus on identity—one might say that those lines have become quite blurred in the U.S. academy in the interest of more general emancipatory agendas, especially as they relate to the "politics of identity." It is in relation to the development of specific identities that CS explores the role the mass-media play in the creation of shared social knowledge. Specifically, CS scholars focus on the ideologies and cultural hegemonies promoted (or, at least, offered) by the mass media, including popular representations of diversity and otherness.

Although there is no agreed upon definition of culture in cultural studies, theorists of the field generally agree that there is "double articulation" of culture, where culture is understood as having a *material* as well as a *symbolic* domain. In addition, the double articulation of culture implies that culture is coequally a source of reflection and the ground from which such reflections emerge (Nelson, Treichler, & Grossberg, 1992). The material domain of culture, then, refers to the

cultural artifacts, practices, or products shared by a particular cultural group or groups. The symbolic domain of culture on the other hand is a more abstract concept that refers to the meanings and communicative systems shared by a particular cultural group or groups. When engaged in the analysis of a particular cultural group or cultural phenomenon, cultural studies concerns itself with specific cultural practices and their corresponding meaning systems. It is ethnographic in that it seeks to enter into and examine the particularity of cultural practices (i.e., the material domain). At the same time cultural studies is philosophically and politically oriented in that it seeks to reflect upon the discourses, meanings, and political interests tied to these practices (i.e., the symbolic domain).

Indebted to Althusser's structuralist readings of Marx about the ideological and political underpinnings of society, CS does not seek to hide its political emancipatory commitments, but rather makes them explicit. The analyses of Hoggart, Williams, and Hall discussed previously established the groundwork for exposing the hegemonic elements of dominant cultural institutions. These theorists made apparent the fact that large-scale political, religious, and educational institutions do indeed contain oppressive components and highlighted the deleterious effects upon the working classes and other marginalized groups. The CS initial focus on class struggle was later expanded to marginalized groups in the U.K. In the U.S., instead, CS grew out of the civil rights era and the concerns of women, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized groups.

In summary, CS makes clear that political processes and interests are implicit in any form of cultural production. Not only is the person political, but also the cultural is political. The emphasis is on understanding the political effects of culture and ideology, and their influence on the everyday practices of living.

Continuities and Discontinuities between SC and CS

Language, Representation, and Discourse

Stuart Hall (1982) summarizes one of the key reflections for the field of cultural studies in the question: "If the world has to be *made to mean* then how do certain meanings get privileged over others?" (p. 67, italics original). This question is a programmatic statement that defines the CS focus on dynamics of power and inequality as they are represented and constructed through language practices and, therefore, social, cultural, and political relationships. Local practices of language become a privileged medium for understanding the symbolic aspects and signifying practices from which culture derives (Hall, 1996). This is because those practices of language constitute systems of representation that allow for certain social structures, material objects,

and political processes to be recognized as meaningful or valid within a specific cultural context. From within a framework in which language is a functional and integral aspect of reality construction, CS aims to understand the ways in which specific practices of representation and recognition become signifying and significant.

Both SC and CS underscore the roles of language, discourse, and institutionalized power structures in the creation of meanings. For SC, language is itself a construction that provides the ground onto which constructs, and therefore reality, can be created and performed. In other words, something is considered real because particular discourses only allow for those truths and experiences that are deemed worth noticing and narrating. Far from being a given entity, language is shaped by its uses while, at the same time, serving as an active tool in the process of shaping and enacting meanings (Wittgenstein, 1953). Nevertheless, the SC research agenda concerning the practices of language is not without complications. It meets with at least two main methodological challenges. The first is the hermeneutic (Gadamer, 1960) concern that "the constitutive power of language is taken for granted by social constructionism. . . . [which overlooks that] reflective or descriptive activity can only take place against a *background* of already taken-for-granted normative practice" (Baerveldt & Voestermans, 2005, p. 452). By analyzing language and its uses as being simply evident in the narratives and discourses of the speaker, SC risks approaching language practices as a self-revealing object of study, without accounting for its historical, social, and political roots. The second challenge is that of reflexivity, which becomes crucial to understanding the ways in which specific systems of knowledge develop auto-poietically (Maturana & Varela, 1980) upon pre-existing constructions, normative practices of knowledge (Lather, 2001), and relational positions of the social actors (Steir, 1991). For instance, a person who identifies with a particular culture will structure her reality in ways that are meaningful and viable within the relational context of that culture. By doing this, she will contribute to the creation of the culture itself by adopting, embodying, and performing a particular system of cultural and social constructions.

For both SC and CS, representations are far from being neutral; they are always placed within a historical and intersubjective context of power/knowledge that they represent and, at the same time, generate. However, SC does not necessarily focus on the politics of social constructions. That is, the question on how and why some linguistic and discursive productions are privileged is not systematically addressed in SC. Albeit it does not deny the importance of such a question, SC focuses mostly on the present possibilities implied in the current constructions. Instead, CS emphasizes the analysis of the politics of representation and the promotion of liberation politics (Hall, 1996). From a

CS perspective, language is always spoken from within a political and historical locality. In contrast to the SC perspective in which language is the agent, CS focuses on the historical and political context in which narratives and discourses are enacted. This position leads CS toward a historicist focus on the analysis of ideology, in which the current state of events is understood as a function of past events and political designs. As the history of a specific culture functions as referent, CS adopts a realist epistemological stance that comprises critical and naïve positions. Such a realist position appears to be distant from the constructivist assumption that individuals are always dealing with constructions of constructions of constructions (Gergen, 1994). Next, we further elaborate on our view of realism and historical determinism as they apply to CS and SC.

Reality, History, and Knowledge

The question of realism (the link between our thoughts and perceptions of objects and events and their actual existence) is critical for distinguishing and yet encouraging dialogue between CS and SC. Both approaches underscore that interpretations of discourse and reality extend beyond the individual to embrace shifting socio-cultural and historical contexts and relationships. In addition, both approaches criticize hierarchical views of culture that regard one culture or internal subculture as implicitly better than another. For instance, both CS and SC would agree that there is no assumed distinction between high and low culture or art. We might make a distinction between a good and a bad painting, but such a distinction is made locally and contextually, in the sense that it is relational and contingent.

By virtue of its indebtedness to Marxist historical materialism, the CS approach to reality links the understanding of societies and cultures to material productions, economic conditions, "cultural practices and social and historical structures" (Nelson, Treichler, & Grossberg, 1992, p. 4), which are seen as a "mind-independent reality" (Sarup, 1993, p. 77). Even when CS professes a commitment to anti-essentialism, history and politics stand as cornerstones for the understandings of groups that have lived through those phenomena. Similarly to history, experience as well is frequently reified and essentialized in CS. In *What is cultural studies anyway?*, one of the groundbreaking papers at the CCCS, Richard Johnson (1986/1995) points out the pressure within the field of CS to attribute an ontological status to experience, based on a "sympathetic identification with empiricist or 'expressive' models of culture" (Johnson, 1986/1995, p. 604). For instance, the experience of blue-collar workers is at times essentialized romantically; or, some branches of feminism assume the existence of a distinct female world that reflects women's experience.

On the one hand, both CS and SC are postmodern in that they refrain from endorsing the idea of unconditional and universal referents. They acknowledge the slippery relationship between signifier and signified, and they underscore the roles of power and language in the construction of identities, cultural practices, and knowledge of reality. Whereas SC assumes that we are always dealing with constructions, CS gives a privileged ontological position to factors such as history, ideology, and local experience. Such a focus within CS, however, comes with some major challenges. At the methodological level, it borders on naïve realism by assuming the possibility of accessing first-hand, authentic experience that is unmediated by reflexivity and is gathered or found rather then intersubjectively constructed. Second, this framework comes with "a systematic pressure towards presenting lived cultures primarily in terms of their homogeneity and distinctiveness" (Johnson, 1986/1995, p. 605), which risks romanticizing and essentializing within-group experiences and cultures.

From a SC perspective, history is important indeed, but the interpretations of events and experiences are generally seen as discursive conventions, as opposed to grand narratives that work as all-embracing principles, like the prescriptive view of class struggle in Marxism (Burr, 2003). In other words, for SC, historiography (literally, the writings of historians) is much more important than history (i.e., past events). Rather than taking historical discourses as given explanations in themselves, SC would "try to account for the conditions and circumstances in which such linguistic conventions came to play a functional role in social (and intellectual) life" (Gergen, 1994, p. 105). SC is careful not to abstract the truth of experience and historical interpretations from their linguistic and relational context, a practice of reification and reduction that would end up missing the complexity of cultural phenomena.

Whereas the deconstructionist impulse would "dispute the existence of any independent reality beyond the stories we tell" (Spears, 1997, p. 5; cited in Gottschalk, 2001), a more realist argument would argue that if "reality is always constructed by its users, this does not necessarily mean that reality. . . is *only* socially constructed" (Gottschalk, 2001, p. 250, italics in original). It is precisely at this ontological and epistemological juncture that SC and CS diverge. For SC the "only" in the above quotation is superfluous because, once the referent is effaced (Lather, 1997), we are only left with social constructions. The realist critique of radical constructivism as representative of all forms of constructionism– "But there is a world out there!" (Gergen, 1994, p. 72) – is based on the misunderstanding that SC neglects experience or the external world, thereby prohibiting political and moral action. Instead, what SC rejects are absolute, a-historical, and a-relational interpretations of reality.

Nonetheless, decisions regarding what should be the focus of analysis require an ontological and moral position. Gergen's (1994) statement that "constructionism is ontologically mute. Whatever is, simply is" (p. 72) seems to neglect that constructions of reality occur and are performed within regimes of power and knowledge, dominant ideologies, and hegemonic institutions and practices. Rather than reducing ontology to epistemology —a common practice in constructivism— CS might help SC to utilize its meta-theoretical position to better articulate "the political history of the relationship between epistemology and ontology" (Grossberg, 1996, p. 95). Specifically, by incorporating the CS reflections on the ontological and epistemological functions of power, SC may avoid becoming a "purely theoretical and idealistic" (Shotter, 1993, p. 39) position, which "seems to be disengaged from a concern with individuals or groups of people" (Mills, 1997, p. 35) and may lose contact with the "phenomenological and experiential realities of everyday, practical life" (Crossley, 2003, p. 287; Fiske, 1992). The issue here is not about the kind of realism under consideration. Rather, we suggest a move from ontological interrogations to interpretations of cultural practices and social actions informed by constructions of empirical usefulness and validity.

Cultural Identity and Experience

For CS and SC, identity, whether collective or individual, develops within dynamic processes that are always socio-cultural, ongoing, and incomplete (Grossberg, 1996). Those processes are "historically located sets of shared experiences" (Davis, 2004, p. 185) that, at the same time, valorize the unique ways in which individuals narrate their stories about themselves (Hall, 1996). It follows that, while personal and unique, identities are also strongly contextualized, plural, and connected through negotiation of partial differences, common relationships, and cultural practices. The SC and CS analysis of identity shifts from its ontological reality to its practices of representation, with the result of partly moving away from the essentialist humanism of the modern episteme, which constructs subjects as rational, self-constituted individuals whose human nature does not change (Foucault, 1970/1994a). SC and CS understand identity as embedded in politically-determined ranges of possibility for knowledge, ethics, and actions. Identities are neither just found in nor chosen by individuals; rather, identities are always culturally situated within pre-existing systems of values and norms of which every person is part and which every person elaborates.

At the same time as it acknowledges the dialogical and social construction of reality, the concept of cultural identity also highlights the discontinuities between SC and CS regarding the reality of personal experience and the role of history. Awareness of race, for instance,

may become painfully real to the person who experiences racism. CS scholars would like be interested in understanding the situatedness of this experience in order to pursue social justice. SC scholars would however be concerned about the potentials for essentializing experience and context and for making unilateral interpretations that would reduce reality to single interpretations, which would miss the complexity of social phenomena as in this case of monolithic views of racism or classism. Even as SC condemns racism and acknowledges the pain of an individual's experience, social constructionists are aware that "the concept of conscious experience does not have a singular meaning" (Gergen, 1994, p. 70). From a SC perspective, people never deal with experience in itself, but with discursive and relational interpretations of lived experience. Any reality exists, becomes present to the subject, and finds its meanings only within a language context that creates a "*discourse about experience*" (Gergen, 1994, p. 71). When specific narratives are elevated to a meta or master level (Lyotard, 1979/1984), like in the case of power, race, or gender difference, some SC authors recognize a certain "hesitation" in "presuming that power should be a grounding concept within the meta-theory, a concept without which a constructionist sensitivity cannot be set in motion" (Gergen, 1994, p. 73). The result is that, frequently,

> Too many discourse theorists in psychology (often referred to collectively as social constructionists) pay too scant attention to the dynamics of power, hegemony and history . . . [they] fail to propose a discourse theory that is also a political theory and/or a praxis ethics of alterity. (Laubscher, 2005, p. 326)

If experience is the result of its representation, which is in turn the result of dynamics of power and knowledge, then what epistemological and ontological conditions need to be in place in order for some identities to become viable possibilities and for some "technologies of the self" (Foucault, 1982/1994b) to prevail? To answer this question, SC needs to fully "admit that power produces knowledge" (Foucault, 1975/1977, p. 27). It is along this line that SC analyses need to address practices of resistance, to embrace the constitutive power of practices of differentiation (Butler, 1993; Cahoone, 1996), and to be "accompanied by some kind of claims about the actual or real possibilities (and resources required) for constructions to be available" (Shotter, 1993, p. 39). Throughout history, the hegemonic relationships of power/knowledge have crystallized the dynamics between epistemology and ontology. It is by engaging in a critical dialogue among sources of knowledge and action that SC may avoid the risk of missing the relational and political complexity of cultures and identities (Gemignani, 2003).

Ideology, Liberation and Emancipation

Critical approaches to constructionism are interested in pointing out social inequalities and the limited access to power and capital for underrepresented individuals. As a means to understand how different constructions are utilized to maintain the status quo within a specific cultural context, SC explores dynamics of exclusion, representation of otherness, and the production of an outside. These processes are seen as political aspects of the development of identity as well as, reflexively, of its exploration by the social scientist (Gergen, 1991, 1994; Shotter, 1993). For instance, representations of homosexuality can be understood in light of seeing the heterosexual nuclear family as "the keystone of our present capitalistic economy" (Burr, 2003, p. 109). In conjunction with its epistemological and ontological pluralism and the consequence that "different constructions of the world sustain different kinds of social-action" (Burr, 2003, p. 61), the SC critical project aims at fostering resistance by increasing awareness of the effects of social and cultural discourses.

Nevertheless, it would be unusual for SC to endorse directly and pragmatically this resistance to discrimination by stating the forms that social struggle may take (Gergen, 1994). For SC, to be socially proactive would mean to take a political –and therefore moral and ontological– position, which might jeopardize the ability to identify the plurality of social constructions generating inequality. Its choice to "be suspicious of all attempts to establish *fundamental* ontologies – incorrigible inventories of *the real*" (Gergen, 1994, p. 75) allows SC to develop complex meta-conceptualizations (i.e., conceptualizations of the ways in which people, including the speaker, conceptualize) about the political and moral domain (Lather, 2001; Talburt, 2004). The validity of SC meta-analyses comes from its ability to explore and address dynamics of otherness and difference (Derrida, 1982; Gemignani, 2005) without necessarily creating a "'ground for action' or possibly a 'cognitive structure' dictating behavior. . . what is removed from the table is the justificatory base for these [moral] commitments, the range of 'sound reasons' that furnish ultimate sanctions for silencing (or destroying) the opposition" (Gergen, 1994, p. 113). For SC, the contentious matter is not about being proactive toward social justice (to which a number of SC scholars are committed indeed), but about limiting one's view to just one side in order to endorse an ethical imperative. A reductive view will end up reinstating the kind of prescribed, hierarchical order that postmodern constructionists are vehemently trying to remove.

While the SC analysis of discourse allows us to understand the relational processes of truth-making and the ways in which language creates social reality within a certain culture (Phillips & Hardy, 2002), "it does not allow us any sense of how it would be possible to intervene

and change that process" (Mills, 1997, p. 44). In contrast, social change is a major goal for CS, which holds a strong commitment to social justice, egalitarian access, and the possibility for action. "The intellectual project of CS is always at some level marked, we would argue, by a discourse of social *involvement*" (Frow & Morris, 2003, p. 508). Such an activism implies the proactive exploration of avenues for agency and resistance. Even as they are circumscribed by dominant discourses, subjects are encouraged to draw from available cultural forms to fight against the constraints of dominant social orders. Consequently, CS perspectives are more generally aligned with such forms of research as critical discourse analysis and action research, and with political and social activism that operate directly on the ground. As Martin (2001, p. 68) writes about CS, "textualization meant being disturbed by details and not simply positioning them to affirm or deny hypotheses" or deconstruct assumptions, which is instead where SC tends to stop.

The invitation to be grounded in the practical aspects of science in order to create social change leads CS to analyze ideology from a perspective that differs from that of SC. Both approaches see the analysis of ideology as a means to understand the privilege that, within specific contexts, dominant interpretations and practices of culture enjoy, as they espouse ideological and discursive practices and create a "sense of what is *real* in those contexts" (Shotter, 1993, p. 43). Both Foucault's Panopticon and Althusser's reading of ideology describe a politics of identity that operates as a sort of "self-enslavement" (Sarup, 1993, p. 76), in which one's subjectivity develops around the practices of power and normalization of an ideology (Foucault, 1975/1977). However, whereas SC underscores the role of ideology to generate realities, CS focuses on the discourses of domination and discrimination that ideology enacts as it positions itself as everyday common sense. For CS, the concept of ideology derives from the values of a society's prevailing symbolic and material domains, which, because of their authorial power, are expressed in any cultural production and practice. For Althusser, "individuals can be sucked into ideology so easily because it helps them make sense of the world, to enter the 'symbolic order' and ascribe power to themselves" (During, 1999, p. 5). The analysis of ideology in CS is likely to underscore the emancipatory potentials of alternative ideologies, which allow the subject to resist the status quo and work to achieve greater agency. However, some argue that the CS goals of resistance and emancipation remain linked to humanistic and romantic discourses of modernity (Cahoone, 1996; Gergen, 1991). That is, the logics of liberation and alienation are modernist metanarratives in that, by implying the romantic possibility of being free, authentic, emancipated, and real to oneself, reproduce political structures and dynamics of domination and subjectivation (Kvale, 2003).

A Proposed Rapprochement

In exploring the key continuities and discontinuities between SC and CS, we outlined the salient features of each movement as they relate to their respective views of culture. We then placed them in juxtaposition with one another in order to examine their points of convergence as well as divergence. In our concluding comments, we would like to articulate a bridge between the two perspectives that, based on John Shotter's culturalist and pragmatic reading of SC (Shotter, 1993, 1995a, 1995b), seems to provide the most useful points of contact for the field of psychology.

Through a move that is parallel to the CS concern with social action and political engagement, Shotter invites a realist and socially proactive approach to the analysis of ideology. Shotter's position seems an inevitable consequence of SC attempts to deconstruct discourses that perpetuate unequal relations of power. As Vivien Burr (2003) writes, "it is difficult to see how it is possible to do this [deconstruction] without falling back upon some notion of reality or truth the discourses are supposed to obscure" (p. 84). Even if the possible interpretations of reality and the directions of social action will depend on local epistemes and politics, the analysis of discourse and ideology "still, in the last instance, retains the notion of the individual subject who is capable of resisting ideological pressures and controlling his or her actions" (Mills, 1997, p. 35). However, in endorsing a more realist view of experience, constructionism faces three main challenges: the concretization and reification of culture and reality; morality claims implied in the choice of a direction for social change; and the belief in individual agency. Rather than viewing those challenges as dichotomies, Shotter suggests an epistemological border crossing, "in which realist and social constructionist claims (although always contestable) are not in fact incompatible" (Shotter, 1995b, p. 98). The common epistemological ground between CS and SC is an hypothetical, "non-systematic, situated realism" (Shotter, 1995b, p. 98) in which plurality and complexity are created through a "set of . . . *real* societal resources", which are never single, one-sided or absolute, but that nonetheless present "*themes* or *topics*" that are at work as sets of "'means', or 'tools', for giving shape to the topics relevant to our momentary circumstances" (Shotter, 1995b, p. 110).

Constructions are tentative and unfinished; rather than offering truth, they are means that people freely use to create intelligibility and legitimation within a specific context of language and performative utterances (Kelly, 1955; Shotter, 1993). Shotter moves toward an "epistemological humanism" (Paden, 1987) that places knowledge "on the ground of human interaction" (Shotter, 1995b, p. 111). However, rather than considering the human subject-mind relationship as the exclusive site for the origin and validation of knowledge, Shotter

embraces a critical form of realism (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999) which endorses the existence of a social reality to be changed and that, at the same time, acknowledges the epistemic processes and the political, historical, and cultural dynamics that create specific discourses, concerns, and games of truth. The result is a critical constructionism that keeps a hypothetical approach to knowledge and mirrors the CS understanding of the symbolic domain of culture. This means that the shared meanings and practices that define a culture are linked to individual or collective idiosyncrasies of interpretation as well as to symbolic practices, which place themselves as an epistemic and ideological background that transcends human representations. The underlying system of interpretations and epistemes is therefore both relationally constructed and historically structured along political dynamics that create reality and its rhetoric, as well as the games of truth and their justifying discourses on which culture is based (Wagner, 1981).

Herein is the juncture where the analysis of ideology and discourse may be brought into collaboration between CS and SC toward understanding the specificities of experience and culture. For instance, the Parekh Report on the Commission on the Future of Multi-ethnic Britain (Parekh, 2000), of which Stuart Hall is a contributing author, accounts not simply for "the way things are"; it also proposes "an active challenge to the status quo" (Davis, 2004, p. 189). The Parekh Report provides specific recommendations regarding how broadcasters and cultural agencies should represent racial and cultural diversity in a multicultural society such as the U.K. Although any "should" entails a moral position and, therefore, normative and disciplinary underpinnings, a conceptualization of culture that is informed by both SC and CS argues for a critical, political, and proactive pluralism that separates epistemology from ontology. Epistemic positions are achieved through performative utterances in a relational and political manner that does not entail or assume the existence of a reality that is independent from its social actors and their context. The result is a relativity based on pluralism; not "positive statement opposed to realism. . . . [but a] rhetorical practice" (Edward, Ashmore, & Potter, 1995, p. 18) accompanied by political commitment. Rejecting realism does not mean rejecting the reality of experience and utterance. In specific instances one will inescapably take a moral stand. Rather than avoiding moral commitment, SC scholars like Shotter and Potter maintain that psychology should increase its situatedness in the everyday lives of individuals in order to contribute to its progressive transformation (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999). Doing this will allow us "to reconstruct psychology as a moral science of action (and agency), rather than a natural science of behavior (and mechanism)" (Shotter, 1995a, p. 385).

Shotter and the CS authors addressed in this article endorse a view of the lived world that, similar to the phenomenological tradition of

Husserl and Merlau-Ponty, departs from representationalist philosophies. Rather than seeing acts of speech and gestures as structures that either depict or create shared reality, text and language co-constitute an

> imperfect fit between language and materiality, world and word . . . . The play of linguistic meaning and signification is shaped and constrained by embodiment, materiality, socio-cultural institutions, interpersonal practices and their historical trajectories (all of these structured by, and reproducing structures of, power) such that language does not independently and thoroughly constitute our world. (Nightingale & Cromby, 2002, p. 706)

From this perspective, the SC focus on discourse matches the CS concerns about the materiality of history, experiences, cultural practices, and political structures. Social scientists need to acknowledge that "the sedimented forms of everyday ways of living are both the starting point *and* the complex *product* of the cultural circuit as a whole" (Johnson, Chambers, Raghuram, & Tincknell, 2004, p. 262). In light of the tangibility of cultural production and the ongoing dialectic between the symbolic and material domains of language and culture, we understand Stuart Hall's intent to represent, for instance, "the *real* experiences of Black people in Britain" (Davis, 2004, p. 102)—a representation that is imperfect and yet real in its ongoing dialogue among partial perspectives that include the materiality of experiences, institutions, and histories.

Between action and representation, between what we know and what we do with that knowledge, there are moments of indecision, indeterminacy, and difference. It is in those moments, in the contacts with the invisible, the awkward, and the marginal that it is possible to see alternatives to current hegemonies and ideologies. Once alternatives are seriously considered, once homogeneity and ethnocentrism are not assumed or expected, a multicultural society can develop in the only possible way of being defined by difference (Hall, 2000). The irreducibility of difference has the fundamental role of allowing for the creation of cultural identities that resist normalization and homogenizing reductions (Butler, 1993; Hall, 1996). Both CS and SC may work together for those at the margins (Shotter, 1995b), through a commitment to social justice that fights normalizing tendencies by acknowledging the complexity of different perspectives and seeking "to increase problematization" of unitary solutions (Gergen, 1994, p. 114). Ultimately, oppositions such as essentialism vs. social constructionism or realism vs. relativism would benefit from being reinterpreted in the context of their practical uses in daily life and experience. Such reinterpretation would

> relativize and contest the fixity of this opposition. First of all, both of these terms emerge from and to a large extent reproduce the historical process of the commodification of bodies. Furthermore, it is only through the mutual negation of their untruth that these opposites can demonstrate their partial insight. Thus, the falsity of antiessentialism lies in the "absolutization" of the autonomy of construction. (Ziarek, 2005, p. 94)

By helping to avoid idealistic and narrow epistemological stances within psychology, the dialogue between CS and SC can support the ongoing and liberatory resistance against prescribed truths, taken-for-granted knowledge, and cultural hegemonies. The contemporary push in psychology toward the quantitative imperative, empirically-supported treatments, or the reductive tenets of some multicultural psychologies remain embedded in positivistic ways of knowing and approaches to theorizing culture (Gemignani, 2003; Peña, 2003). By articulating the continuities and discontinuities between CS and SC, psychology can forge a language of the cultural domain that resists homogenizing and positivist readings of culture within the field (Muñoz, 2000; Peña, 2003). The two traditions support a reflexive, nonfoundationalist approach to the study of culture in psychology that founds the practice of social science not on the discovery of truth, but on the process of interrogating the particular ideologies and hegemonic discourses that organize the discipline of psychology.

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