

this book is concerned with a special dialogical or conversational version of *social constructionism* (Coulter, 1979, 1983, 1989; Gergen, 1982, 1985; Harré, 1983, 1986; Shotter, 1984, 1993), which focuses especially upon the role of our expectations and anticipations in our efforts to understand each other, an approach which, to repeat, I now call a *relationally-responsive* one.

I have called it this because I want to claim that our ability as individuals to speak representationally, i.e., to depict or describe a unique state of affairs (whether real or not), as we please, independently of the influences of our surroundings, is a very secondary use of language and is a way of talking that we make use of only occasionally. As I see it, it arises out of our primarily speaking in a way that is both *related* to the others and othernesses around us, and is spontaneously *responsive* to them in ways determined by our relations to them. When this is the case, when we are in a *dialogically-structured* relation (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984) with those with whom we are interacting, our talk is not shaped by our following of pre-existing rules; it is inevitably unique and creative.

So, while it is undeniably possible to see repeated patterns, regularities, static shapes of forms within in our talk, it is also the case that – due to our ineradicable *spontaneous bodily responsiveness* to the unique events occurring in our surroundings – each occasion of our use of language, each of our utterances is unique. There is a “specific variability” (Voloshinov, 1984, p.69) always present in our language use, and it is in the uniqueness of this variability, its specific nature, that we can attempt to express our own unique meanings to each other. Thus, as Voloshinov (1984) puts it: “The basic task of understanding does not at all amount to recognizing the linguistic form used by the speaker as the familiar, ‘that very same’... No, the task of understanding does not basically amount to recognizing the form used, but rather to understanding it in a particular, concrete context, to understanding its meaning in a particular utterance, i.e., it amounts to understanding its novelty and not to recognizing its identity” (p.68).

Thus, to move further away from the Cartesian idea that our activities are determined or governed by pre-existing rules, laws, or principles, and to move toward Wittgenstein’s (1953) claim that: “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (no.43), I shall want to argue that each of our utterances is a unique and creative use of language; and that norms, that ‘proper ways of speaking’ are brought in retrospectively, after the fact, and only then if necessary to clear up confusions and bewilderments, should they occur. As I see it, the meaning of an utterance, of a word in an utterance, is created only in the interplay between a speaker and listener as the utterance unfolds. A speaker’s meaning is not ‘in’ the words used by the speaker, nor in the speaker’s intentions, nor even in the speaker’s words in this, that, or some other particular context; it is a “developing and developed event” (Garfinkel, 1967, p.40) that is realized and known, by all the parties involved in the interaction, only *from within* the unfolding course of the interaction producing it.

Thus we need to recognize that there is something at work *in our words in their speaking*, over and above what is there *in the patterns present in them once they have been spoken*. Due to our ineradicable spontaneous bodily responsiveness to the unique events occurring around us, there is a kind of *gestural meaning* immanent in our speech (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p.179), expressed in the ways we body forth our utterances – in our choice of words, their pacing, intoning, their intertwining in with our other activities. And it is this that allows us to feel our way into the speaker's *relations* with his or her situation, for it is in the unfolding temporal shape of their utterances that they both allude to, 'touch on', or otherwise indirectly express the 'shape', so to speak of *their* situation, as well as 'pointing toward', or gesturing toward, what they anticipate as occurring next in their movement within it. And it is against our understanding of this background – where they are 'coming from' and where they are trying to 'get to' – that we can grasp the relevance of the 'facts' they are communicating to us.

This, however, must not be taken as meaning that there is a "body language" at work unrecognized in the background in the use of our words – that would be once again to put an emphasis on finished and static forms and patterns, and to ignore the workings of living, dynamical events uniquely unfolding in the moment of interaction. Indeed, it would be once again to see the process of understanding as merely a matter of transmitting and receiving information. But to repeat: we are not treating people here as primarily information transmitters, as putting their ideas into words and sending their ideas 'across' to others as the 'content' of their words. No. We are seeing people as primarily *responding* to each other's utterances in an attempt to link their practical activities in with those of the others around them, and in so doing constructing one or another kind of social *relationship* with them. Thus, with these *relational* aspects of interaction in mind, rather than transmitting information, communication is, in Wittgenstein's (1953) terms, primarily a matter of people becoming *oriented* in relation to each other, of them coming to know to 'know their way about' within each other's worlds, and of how 'to go on' with each other within the shared worlds constructed in their meetings.

**Ongoing, responsive or transitional understandings  
within the ceaseless flow of conversation**

A: "Who's talking to Whom here?"

B: "Who's Who?"

A: "He's the one talking to Whom?"

B: "Oh I thought Whom was Who?"

A: "No, it's the other way around."

B: "Thanks, I would have got it wrong."

The opacity of this little exchange between A and B (concocted with apologies to Abbott and Costello) becomes transparent, once one *orients* toward the words ‘Who’ and ‘Whom’ as being used as the names of actual individuals, rather than as relative pronouns (as we *normally expect*). It is our embodied, spontaneously expressed, taken-for-granted expectations to words in the course of their use that are at issue here.

In the past, we have talked of our words as exerting their influence on us in terms of them as having a *shape* or a *form* that can convey a particular *content* to us, by our being able to place them into an already existing framework or structure of some kind. We thus talked of *interpreting* their meaning or meanings. But if, as I claimed above, shared understandings are achieved in practice, step-by-step, by people testing and checking each other’s talk, by them questioning and challenging it, reformulating and elaborating it, and so on, so as to *develop* or *negotiate* a shared understanding between them, over time, in the course of their ongoing talk-intertwined interactions – without them having to rely on making sense of each other’s talk by placing it within an already determined framework of some kind, or by interpreting it according to some already existing conventions – then something very different from such a process of interpretation must be occurring. Transitory, or what we can call, following Bakhtin (1986), *responsive* understandings must be occurring to guide the next relevant step aimed at achieving a clearer understanding.

Thus we can now say a little more about the detailed structure of such ‘developed and developing’ interactions: To finally arrive at an understanding, as the result of a *negotiated development*, it is not necessary for each participant to fully and finally understand each speaker’s utterance as it is uttered; the kind of understanding required *in practice*, is much more of a partial, transitional kind. As Bakhtin (1986) puts it, “all real and integral understanding is actively responsive, and constitutes nothing more than the initial preparatory stage of a response (in what ever form it may be actualized)” (p.69).

Indeed, to reinforce the comments already made above, about the importance of our anticipations in our active understanding of another’s speech, Bakhtin (1981) remarks that: “The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word; it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer’s direction. Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by *that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word*. Such is the situation of any living dialogue” (p.280, my emphasis).

In other words, initially at least, what matters above all in speech communication is that, as each speaker finishes their utterance, listeners who will become the next speaker must know how to ‘go on’ to contribute an intelligible response to that utterance, i.e., how, in Wittgenstein’s (1953) sense outlined above, to *orient* toward it, to know how to place it in the speaker’s

unique scheme of things. If they can, and if the speaker finds what the new listener/speaker has to say is something they can also *orient* to – i.e., grasp it as both *relating* to the speaker’s own situation and as also *relating* to, where the new listener/speaker is coming from and where they are also going to (their ‘point’) – then their exchange can continue to develop smoothly, i.e., routinely, in all its creative uniqueness, without any need for explanatory breaks.

In short, we can see a kind of three-step developmental process implicitly at work here: If it is A who has to understand B’s utterances, we can see the process operating as follows:

- (1) B expresses an utterance, X, to which A must respond;
- (2) A responds to X by uttering Y;
- (3) B, in continuing to respond in an unquestioning manner to Y with Z, shows or displays to A in Z that B finds Y satisfactory.

For example:

“B: Lethal Attraction III is on the movies tonight.”

“A: Oh good, I wanted to see that.”

“B: Yeh, so do I.”

“A: Shall we go together?”

“B: Sure.”

In stating the fact that the film was on, B is not seeming to want a ‘date’ with A, but that’s how it all develops, and the ‘meaning’s of their interchange is developed between them. But to reiterate what was said above about the importance of our anticipations in all of this: it is in terms of the each speaker’s anticipations of each listener’s responses, that they will find each other’s responses satisfactory, or not; and I presume that A and B here were entertaining such anticipations of each other’s reactions, without either being prepared to take the risk of blurting them out loud.

Garfinkel (2004) puts the matter thus (again with A as listener to B as a speaker) : “A acts towards B as if the signs that B provides are not haphazardly given. When we say that A understands B we mean *only this*: that A detects an orderliness in these signs both with regard to sequence and meanings. The orderliness is assigned to B’s activities by A. The ‘validity’ of A’s conception of the signs generated by B are given in accordance with some regulative principle established for A when his return action evokes a counter action that somehow “fits” A’s anticipations. Understanding means a mode of treatment of B by A that operates, as far as A sees it, under constant confirmation of A’s anticipations of treatment from B” (p.184).

What Garfinkel is emphasizing here is that, whatever order or pattern is found to be at work in people’s meetings with each other, it is initially an order *made* to exist as such by the actual participants themselves, and that if

*they* cannot ultimately make such an order between them, then and only then do they begin to question the character of each other's participation in the meeting. In other words, it can only be seen as an order *retrospectively*. It is not an order present to the participants *prior to* their interaction. It is *constructed*, if at all, not as a crucial step in the process of communication itself, but as a consequence of communication – the process of communication being thus conducted in quite some other means than by a reliance on it. Indeed, most of our everyday meetings are not conducted according to pre-established orders, and any attempts to impose such a pre-established order, results in one or more of the other participants becoming irate (see Garfinkel's 1967 work reported in Chapter 1 below).

In other words, within or inside our everyday processes of communication, a lot goes on implicitly, unseen and unselfconsciously experienced within the ever-changing dynamics of the background flow of activity occurring in all our communications with each other. As such, it is not easily noticed or remarked on. About this situation, Wittgenstein (1953) notes: "it all goes by so quick, and [we] should like to see it as it were laid open to view" (no.435).

What this means in practice, though, is: (1) that without participants initially achieving an *orientation* toward each other's utterances, they cannot begin the collaborative process of developing shared understandings between them; (2) that only *momentary, unique meanings* understandings, understandings *from within* our meetings matter; (3) that while our words may be open to other interpretations by outsiders, *from within* our meetings with each other, single, unambiguous understandings can be constructed; (4) indeed, it is also only *from within* meetings in which participants are mutually oriented, that "specifically vague" (Garfinkel, 1967, pp.40-41)<sup>2</sup> forms of talk can be used, i.e., forms of talk that are open to being most precisely determined in the course of further talk – our use of images, metaphors, slang, etc., to have precise meanings in specific situations, depends also, of course, on our being appropriately oriented toward one another.

### Summary

To summarize, then: The basic issue that I want to tackle in this book is to do with the question as to what counts as a useful outcome of inquiry *to practitioners*, to people actually at the point of contact with the reality of everyday affairs – (1) a retrospective, justificatory, reason-giving account of an already achieved outcome; or (2) a prospective, action guiding account of the detailed struggles required to achieve, develop, or construct that outcome for the very first time in practice? Where here by 'practitioners' I do not just mean professional researchers in business consultancies, psychotherapists, social workers, probation offices, mental health nurses,

and the like, I also mean all the rest of us, ordinary everyday people in the street who are puzzled about what next to do for the best in their lives.

Conventional research portrays practitioners, and all the rest of us in our daily lives – if we are not acting impulsively and heedlessly – as adopting a course of action by first reflecting on possibilities and then as choosing amongst them. It fails to portray us as already caught up in ongoing processes *from within* which we must express – in the face of both the constraints and limited resources it offers them – recognizable, legitimate, and above all, successful (in relation to already existing criteria) actions and utterances. In other words, to portray us in this way is, as Garfinkel (1967) puts it, to portray us as “judgmental dopes” (pp.67-68), i.e., as people who are unable to take the complexity of our practical lives into account and to make judgements about them as they unfold.

In ‘going on’ within a world that we are creating as we move on within it, as participants in a world still in the making, we are not able to reflectively articulate to others the character of those aspects of it that are not yet completed. In being performed for yet another first time, while we *anticipate* that others *will*, sooner or later understand us, we can never be sure: we know what we are trying to do; we know why we are trying to do it; but what we don’t know until we have succeeded in our attempts to make sense to the others around us, is *what* our saying and doing has said and done.

Standard, mainstream scientific research approaches the already made social world both as a finished and complete world but as a world still not well understood by us, and reflects on it with the aim of mastering its reproduction, i.e., of making it for a second time, of copying it. It fails to capture what it is to which actors have to attend in their first time creative developments of this world, how they can from within their participation within it, further develop it and refine it to accord more with their own needs, rather than with needs imposed on them by unknown influences outside of their control. It fails, in other words, to take account of the enormous grasp of detail available to us in our ways of knowing how to make sense of the myriad events occurring around us, and our embodied ways of spontaneously reacting to them. We need some other way of making sense of our first-time activities than having to describe them within already shared and pre-existing categories, thus to treat them as no different from previous, already performed activities. It is the main task of this ‘revisited’ version of *Conversational Realities*, to try to outline what is required – not to *explain* our first-time, uniquely creative activities accurately – but to do justice to *portrayals* of them.

It is our embodied feelings – and the embodied anticipations and expectations to which they spontaneously give rise – that are neglected in the theories of many social scientific theorist. But it is just these *contingent, action guiding feelings* (which are ill served if they just called ‘emotions’)

that work both to guide our next actions and as the ‘momentary standards’ against which our more explicit formulations are judged for their adequacy and appropriateness. In fact, I want to claim along with Wittgenstein (1980, II) that:

“We judge an action according to its background within human life... The background is the bustle of life. And our *concept points to something within this bustle...* Not what *one* man is doing now, but the whole hurly-burly, is the background against which we see an action, and it determines our judgment, our concepts, and our reactions” (nos. 624-9, my emphasis).

In other words, whereas in the past we sought a theoretical or causal *explanation* to dispel our puzzlement as to next how to act, Wittgenstein’s suggestion is that with respect to human affairs, this is unnecessary: “We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place... [The difficulties we face can be overcome] not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known” (no.109). By arranging what we already know in such a way that we can produce “just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connections’” (no.122), we can overcome those orientational and relational difficulties that have the form of: “I don’t know my way about” (no.123).

It is with these remarks of Wittgenstein’s above in mind – that the new concepts we need to introduce must to point towards events occurring within the general background ‘bustle’ of our everyday human lives together – that we can turn to the next two chapters: Chapter one is aimed at discussing the embodied, conversational nature of this *background* activity – for, to the extent that everything we do and say both draws its possibility from and returns in its realization to this background, all our social constructions must be *situated* in it, i.e., our ‘constructions’ must draw on the ‘provisions’ it affords. Chapter two explores the consequences of situating social constructionist studies, not only in our shared conversation intertwined activities together, but also in the very *moment of meeting* between two or more persons. In other words, as mentioned in the Preface, I want to explore what is involved in conducting our studies from within an unceasing flow of turbulent but nonetheless formative, embodied, social activity.

## Chapter One

### THE CONVERSATIONAL BACKGROUND TO SOCIAL LIFE:

#### BEYOND REPRESENTATIONALISM

“The human sciences, when dealing with what is representation (in either conscious or unconscious form), find themselves treating as their object what is in fact their condition of possibility... They proceed from that which is given to representation to that which renders representation possible, but which is still representation... On the horizon of any human science, there is the project of bringing man’s consciousness back to its real conditions, of restoring it to the contents and forms that brought it into being, and elude us within in it...” (Foucault, 1970, p.364).

One of the aims of formulating a relationally-responsive version of social constructionism corresponds with that mentioned above by Foucault: it can confront us with the ‘real’ socio-historical and socio-cultural conditions of our lives, the background conditions making the current nature of our consciousnesses possible – where, of course, in the view taken in this book, all attempts to characterize them as such, i.e., as the ‘real’ conditions of our lives, can of course be contested. But if this is the case, if the background conditions of our lives can be responded to in different ways, then we must cease thinking of the ‘reality’ within which we live our lives, i.e., what we talk of as that reality, as homogeneous, as everywhere the same for everyone. Different people in different positions at different moments will live in what they formulate as different realities. Thus we must begin to rethink what we talk of as ‘reality’: we must begin to think of it as being differentiated and heterogeneous, as dynamic, as continually developing and changing, as consisting in many different regions and moments, all in constant intertwined motion, all with many different kinds of events occurring within them.

Thus we can begin to think of social reality at large as a dynamic ecology, as a continuously turbulent flow of ongoing, intertwined social activities, containing within it at least two basic kinds of activity: A set of relatively stable centres of *institutionalized*, well ordered, self-reproducing activity, sustained by those within them being accountable to each other for their actions (Mills, 1940; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Shotter, 1984) in terms of codified versions of order, i.e., social conventions, created in previous interactions – but, with the forms of accountability being used to sustain

them being themselves continuously open to contest and change (Billig, 1987; MacIntyre, 1981). But we can also imagine these diverse regions or moments of institutionalized order being separated from each other by zones or regions of much more disorderly, institutionally unaccountable, chaotic activity. Where it is in the meetings occurring in these more unaccountable, marginal regions – on the edge of chaos, away from the orderly centres of social life – that the events of interest to us occur.

In fact, as we move away from a modern toward a more postmodern (or premodern!) world to confront the times in which we live, we begin to realize that our reality is often a much more disorderly, fragmented, and heterogeneous affair than we had previously thought<sup>3</sup>. Thus, if uncertainty, vagueness, and ambiguity are *real* features of much of the world in which we live, *and*, how we ‘construct’ or ‘specify’ these features further influences the nature of our own future lives together, then their contested nature should come as no surprise to us: for what is at stake *is* which of a possible plurality of future next steps should we take for the best? *Whose* version points towards a best future for us? Clearly, there is a political aspect present in all our meetings with the others and othernesses around us.

### **Knowing of the third kind: knowing “from-within”**

As I have already mentioned, it is a part of the relationally-responsive version of social constructionism being introduced here to argue that the importance of these contests inheres, not simply in their outcomes, but in the way in which the vocabularies and forms of talk at issue are *interwoven* into the practices in which our relations to the others and othernesses around us are conducted. For such forms or styles of talk are constitutive of different possible styles of our social lives together, especially our institutionalized forms of social life. Thus an important change occurs, not simply when one or another side in an institution wins an argument, but when such an opportunity is used to change the style of future forms of discussion, i.e., the permitted forms of talk within that institution. For instance, the move begun in the seventeenth century during the Enlightenment – to talk less about our lives in religious and more in secular terms, less in terms of ‘souls’ and the ‘human spirit’ and more in terms of ‘brains’ and ‘minds’, less in terms of God’s will and more in terms of natural mechanisms – was, and still is, just as important for the new ways of talking and the new forms of social relationship (and new forms of contest) it introduced, as for any of the particular conclusions so far reached. Indeed, within the sphere of our socio-psychological interests here, these ‘Enlightenment’ forms of talk are clearly still of prime importance to us. Although now, perhaps, they are more important for what they have attempted to prohibit, to exclude, or to marginalize (Foucault, 1972) than for what they privileged as central.

Thus in pursuing the project of restoring to consciousness, i.e., kind of

consciousness, an understanding of the conditions of its own possibility, I want to argue that present in the conversational background to our lives are many other forms of talk, with their own peculiar properties, currently without a ‘voice’ in the ongoing contests within this sphere. If they were to gain a voice, it could change our lives; the form or style of our consciousnesses could become very different from how it is currently manifested.

Indeed, it is one of the major claims explored in this book, that an important, special *third kind* of knowledge, embodied in the conversational background to our lives, has remained ‘unvoiced’ in our socio-psychological debates so far: a special kind of knowledge – to do with how *to be* a person of this or that particular kind not only both according to the culture into which one develops as a child, but also to the kind of exchange in which one is currently involved. It is a kind of knowing that cannot be finalized or formalized in a set of proven theoretical statements, nor need it be to be applied; for it shows itself only in the dynamics of our interactions with each other. Thus it is not theoretical knowledge (a “knowing-that” in Ryle’s (1949) terminology) for it is a knowing, a knowledge-in-practice. Nor is it merely knowledge of a craft or skill (a “knowing-how”), for it is joint knowledge, knowledge-held-in-common with others; it is an intersubjectively shared form of knowing. Thus it is a third kind of knowledge, *sui generis*, that cannot be reduced to either of the other two, the kind of knowledge one has *from within* a situation, a group, social institution, or society; it is what we might call a “knowing-from.” Bernstein (1983) has called it a “practical-moral knowledge.”

Elsewhere, I have discussed the nature of this special third kind of knowledge extensively (Shotter, 1984, 1993a). This volume explores various of its implications further in certain different spheres of psychology and our conversational lives together, as well as other, more general implications of its nature. Specifically, these studies address the question of how it is that we come to experience ourselves, our world, and our language, in the particular ways that (at the moment) we do, and how we might also come to experience all these entities differently.

Why, for instance, do we currently simply take it for granted that we each have minds within our heads, and that they work in terms of inner mental representations which resemble in some way the structure of the external world? Why do we feel that we live our social lives within certain, independently existing social structures, and act within them as if according to rules? Why do we think that the best way to make sense of our lives and to act for the best, is in terms of theoretical formulations provided us by experts (rather than in terms of more practical, everyday forms of knowledge)? And also, why do we feel that our language works, primarily by us using it accurately to represent and to refer to things and states of affairs in the circumstances surrounding us, rather than our using it influence each other’s and our own bodily behaviour? In other words, why