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# THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF OUR 'INNER' LIVES

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*'What sort of reality pertains to the subjective psyche? The reality of the inner psyche is the same reality as that of the sign. Outside the material of signs there is no psyche... By its very existential nature, the subjective psyche is to be localized somewhere between the organism and the outside world, on the borderline separating these two spheres of reality... Psychic experience is the semiotic expression of the contact between the organism and the outside environment'* (Volosinov, 1973, p.26).

*'Truth is not to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction'* (Bakhtin, 1984, p.110).

*'It is surely no more preposterous to argue that people should try to know physical objects in the nuanced way that they know their friends than it is to argue that they should try to know people in the unsubtle way they know physical objects'* (Code, 1991, p.165).

A growing movement in the human sciences and humanities is known as social constructionism (Berger and Luckman, 1966; Coulter, 1979, 1983, 1989; Gergen, 1985, 1991, 1994; Harré, 1983, 1986; Harré and Gillet, 1994; Shotter, 1975, 1984, 1993a and b). Its radically new and really rather strange nature is, however, easily misunderstood. For, rather than simply proposing yet another new theory within the methodological framework of contemporary academic psychology, its aim is quite different: as Rorty (1989) puts it, by the introduction of whole new 'vocabularies,' whole new ways of talking, its aim is *'to change the subject'* (p.44); or, as Billig et al (1988) put it, *'to change the agenda of argumentation'* (p.149). Indeed, its aim is not only to expose the fact that all psychological research within the current representationalist or cognitive paradigm, is sustained by a certain living tradition of argumentation [See footnote 1](#), but to change the whole character of that tradition (Billig, 1987; Shotter, 1993a). Where, as we shall see, such changes in ways of talking can bring to prominence previously unnoticed features of our relations to each other and to our surrounding circumstances, and in this way, lead to

the institution of new 'forms of life' (to use Wittgenstein's term), new ways in which people routinely relate themselves to one another and thus treat each other as being.

In line with these aims, as one 'voice' in this conversation, I want to explore some aspects of a rhetorical-responsive version of social constructionism, and how it might throw some light on our conduct of what we call our 'inner' lives. Why I have called it a rhetorical-responsive version will become apparent as I proceed. Making use of work particularly derived from Wittgenstein, Volosinov, Bakhtin, and Billig, I want to outline a completely new site or location in which to center our investigations in psychology - as well as to gesture toward both a new basis or new foundations (in 'forms of life') and toward new ('rhetorical- poetic') methods for their conduct.

### **Re-locating our 'inner' lives in momentary 'relational encounters' between people**

To turn first to the new site for our studies: Instead of i) the study of the inner dynamics of the individual psyche (as in romanticism, or individualistic subjectivism); or, ii) the discovery of the supposed already determined characteristics of the external world (as in modernism, or abstract objectivism), the two polarities [See footnote 2](#) in terms of which we have thought about ourselves in recent times (Gergen, 1991; Taylor, 1989; Volosinov, 1973); iii) it is in the contingent, unbroken responsive flow of language intertwined interaction between people, as they spontaneously cope with each other in different circumstances that, I suggest, we should situate our studies. In other words, it is in the 'momentary relational encounters' occurring between people in their dialogic exchanges that everything of importance to us our studies should be seen as happening. And, what occurs there should be seen, not in terms of pictures or representations of what that 'something' truly is, but in terms of the different possible relations it might have, the different roles it might play, in people living out the rest of their lives - a relational rather than a representational understanding. It is in these brief interactive moments between people, in which speakers and listeners must continually react to each other spontaneously and practically, with an active, responsive understanding, that we must focus our studies. Until recently, this back and forth flow of diffuse, responsive, (sensuous or feelingful [See footnote 3](#)) activity has remained ignored in the background. As the unordered hurly-burly or bustle [See footnote 4](#) of everyday social life, it has awaited elucidation in terms of either supposed principles of Mind or of Nature, principles which, it was assumed, could be discovered independently of this background. Below, I suggest the opposite: I claim that this sphere of spontaneous, responsive, dialogical activity is a distinct third sphere of activity, sui generis, quite unlike the other two; and as such, it involves a special kind of nonrepresentational, sensuous or embodied form of practical-moral understanding (Bernstein [See footnote 5](#), 1983), which, in being constitutive of people's social and personal identities, is prior to and determines all the other forms of knowledge available to them (Shotter, 1993a).

Thus, the kind of social constructionism I want to outline is concerned precisely with the special set of problems raised by the attempt to investigate and articulate the nature of these spontaneously occurring, joint or dialogical activities and practices. Indeed, to the extent that all our activities emerge from within this conversationally sustained 'background' activity, are directed (however mistakenly) back into it, and are judged as to their fittingness against it, our conversational activities are not just one of our activities in the world. On the contrary, for us they are foundational; we have our lives in them; they provide the living basis or foundation, so to speak, for everything we do. As Wittgenstein (1980, II) puts it: *'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'* (no.629).

But these activities and practices need not remain ignored in the background. For, just as our parents, through their use of speech, can draw our attention as children to aspects of their and our activities in the course of their performance, thus to teach their activities and practices to us, so we as adults can still do the same: For, from within our conversationally sustained activities themselves, we can (through our talk in practice) draw each other's attention to certain of their crucially important features that might otherwise escape our notice, even when a vision of them as a whole, in theory, is denied us. This will be our basic method. Thus, as we shall see, it is in the previously ignored, common sense 'background' to our lives, that we can find, not only the 'seeds', so to speak, of all the new methods and resources we shall need in our studies of its nature, but also the momentary 'grounds' in which we can 'root' them. Where, the rhetorical-responsive version of social constructionism I want to outline will be directed toward, not only an understanding of how we constitute (make) and reconstitute (remake) that common sense 'background' in our relational encounters, but also how we can and do make and remake ourselves in the process. Indeed, it is this dialectical emphasis upon both the contingency and the creativity of human interaction - on our making of, and being made by, our own social realities - that is, I think, common to social constructionism in all its versions.

What is special about the rhetorical-responsive version of social constructionism that I want to offer, however, is its focus on our embodied practices, and our immediate, spontaneous ways of responding to each other's speech intertwined activities. For, I claim, in practice, we do not primarily understand another person's speech by a nonmaterial process of first 'grasping the inner ideas' they have supposedly put into their words, and then 'putting those ideas into practice'. That picture of how we understand each other, in terms of 'pictures' - and let me emphasize here our apparent need for 'pictures', because I shall suggest below that we must sometimes do without them - must be seen as a special case rather than the rule. Most of time, I suggest, we do not fully understand each other in that way at all. Indeed, in practice, shared understandings occur only occasionally (i.e., in practice, we often get by perfectly well without any shared 'pictures' at all). And if they occur at all, it is by people testing and checking each other's talk, by them questioning and challenging it, reformulating and elaborating it, and so on. For in practice, shared understandings are developed, negotiated, or, 'socially

constructed', between participants over a period of time, in the course of an ongoing conversation (Garfinkel, 1967).

But if people are not simply putting their ideas into words, what can they be said to be doing in their talk? Primarily, I suggest, they are materially responding to each other's utterances in an attempt to link their practical activities in with those of the others around them; and in these attempts at coordinating their activities, people are constructing one or another kind of living social relationship. And it is the character of these conversationally developed and developing relations, and the events occurring within them, that are of prime importance. For, as I have already claimed, it is from within the dynamically sustained context of these actively constructed relations that 'what is talked about' gets its meaning.

### **A new dialogical or relational paradigm**

Now it is not perhaps obvious, given our new focus on relational activities occurring between people, that social constructionism has anything to say about the inner, psychic lives of individuals - about their feelings or experiences, about their thoughts and thinking, or about those inner moments when, all alone, we try to make sense of our own lives. Such an assumption would, however, I think, be a mistake. Indeed, I shall argue not only that it has a great deal to say, but that it opens up the inner psychic lives of western individuals to forms of conversational investigation never before (because of their supposed bounded, self-contained nature) thought possible. Even more, it reveals some quite extraordinary, very surprising, otherwise unnoticed features of our 'inner' lives: for instance, that what some inner thing 'is' for us, is revealed, not in how we talk about it when reflecting upon it, but in how 'it' necessarily 'shapes' those of our everyday communicative activities in which it is involved, in practice; and that as such, 'it' has an emergent nature of a situated, socially constructed, and thus incomplete, precarious, and contested kind - 'it' has its being in the 'movement' of our voices as we speak our words. In short: the 'things' supposedly in our 'inner' lives are not to be found within us as individuals, but 'in' the momentary relational spaces occurring between ourselves and an other or otherness in our surroundings. Where they are, or it is, just as much an influence in shaping what occurs there as we ourselves, as we live out our lives in interaction with our surroundings. In other words, the contents of our 'inner' lives are not so much 'inside' us as individuals, as 'in' our living of our lives, and as such, they are all related to each other internally (as philosophers say). Yet, this gives rise to the strange consequence that, *'the processes that basically define the content of the psyche occur not inside but outside the individual organism, although they involve its participation'* (Volosinov, 1973, p.25).

How can this be so? How should we make sense of such claims? Perhaps a first step, is for us to explicitly recognize that a new paradigm is at work here, influencing the ways in which we think and talk of our ways of knowing and of knowledge: Instead of immediately turning, as we have in the past, to a study of how we, as individuals, come to know the objects and events in the world around us, as social constructionists, we are

now turning to a quite different paradigm. Now, we are focusing on how, by interweaving our talk in with the other activities between us, we first develop and sustain different, particular ways of relating ourselves to each other - that is, we are attending first to how we construct what Wittgenstein (1953) calls different possible forms of life, actual or imagined, with their associated language games. And only after that, once we understand the nature of these forms of relation, do we then turn to the study of how we can 'reach out' from within them, so to speak, to make various kinds of contact - some direct, some indirect - with our surroundings through the various socially constructed ways of making sense of such contacts our forms of life provide. For me, as I have already made clear, this relational paradigm puts the primary emphasis on our spontaneous, responsive knowing of other people.

Adopting this new dialogical or relational paradigm, straightaway suggests a new account of thinking and deliberation. Instead of likening it to calculation or computation supposedly functioning wholly within oneself, as if according to a set of pre-established, abstract rules or axioms, as the traditional representational-referential paradigm, as might call it, suggests. It can be likened to responsive argumentation between oneself and others (Billig, 1987, pp.110-117) - hence my designation of it as a rhetorical-responsive version of social constructionism. Where, as such, it must involve dialogical processes of criticism and justification, testing and checking, and so on, in which what is at stake, ultimately [See footnote 6](#), is whether one's actions can be accepted as 'fitting in with' the forms of social life of the others around one, or not. And it is in adopting different 'voices' - addressed or directed toward others, and spontaneously calling out from them responsive understandings of one kind or another - that we essentially argue within ourselves as to how best we might formulate and respond to our sense (our own embodied 'feelings') of how, currently, we are situated or positioned in relation to the others around us and our circumstances. Indeed, to this extent, all of one's speech, whether inner or outer, must be directed toward certain others, and must, in being responsive to them in its production, take them into account. Thus, the *'orientation of the word toward the addressee has an extremely high significance. In point of fact, word is a two-sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant... A word is territory shared by both addresser and addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor'* (p.86) - even if many of the relevant interlocutors are only imagined or implied.

This is crucial. And this is why all such processes must take place in words, in responsive voicings and speakings, and not in abstract forms or formulae. For mere forms are, so to speak, 'dead'. Unlike embodied utterances, they lack the capacity to call out any responsive reactions to themselves from people.

Thus, adopting this dialogical or relational view of people's psychic life, suggests that people's 'inner lives' are neither so private, nor so inner, nor so logical, orderly, or systematic as has been assumed. Instead, our 'thinking', as we call it, not only reflects essentially the same ethical, rhetorical, political, and poetic features as those reflected in the dialogical transactions between people, out in the world, but does not go on wholly 'inside' us as individuals either. This is because, as Volosinov claims, what we call our

thoughts, are not first organized at the inner center of our being (in a nonmaterial 'psyche' or 'mind'), later to be given adequate outer expression, or not, in words. But: they only become organized, in a moment by moment, back and forth, formative or developmental process at the boundaries of our being, involving similar linguistically mediated negotiations as those we conduct in our everyday dialogues with others. Indeed, if they did go on wholly within us, then it would be difficult to see how they could be, nonetheless, still related to our circumstances. However, in being 'in' the living of our lives, in being 'internally' (or 'intentionally') related to what goes on around us, their relation to our surroundings is somewhat less mysterious. Indeed, as Volosinov (1973) points out, 'the organizing center of any utterance, of any experience, is not within [an individual] but outside - in the social milieu surrounding the individual' (Volosinov, 1973, p.93). For, *'it is not experience that organizes expression, but the other way around - expression organizes experience'* (p.85). For, *'experience exists even for the person undergoing it only in the material of signs'* (p.28).

However, if the relation between thought or feeling and words is, so to speak, a 'living process' and not a mechanical, systematic one, in what terms do we order our thoughts or feelings, or express them in an organized sequence of words? How are our words appropriately related to the circumstances of their utterance? If the organizing center of an utterance is in the social milieu surrounding the individual, on the boundary at the point of contact between one voice and another, then, as Volosinov (1973) says, *'what is important for the speaker about a linguistic form is not that it is a stable and always self-equivalent signal, but that it is an always changeable and adaptable sign'* (p.68). For, it is the unique use to which a sign is put at that point of contact that gives it its practical meaning, its meaning in practice, not any rules or conventions to do with language as a system. What such rules and conventions do guarantee among a social group, is the recognition of the means being used for the making (constructing) of a meaning; but the meaning being made, is there in the unique use to which the speaker attempts to put those means in the practical context of their use. Thus the task of responsively understanding another's utterance *'amounts to understanding its novelty and not to recognizing its identity'* (p.68). But how is this possible? How is it possible for people to do something entirely new, unplanned, spontaneously, and yet, for it still to be appropriate to their circumstances?

Joint action and the joint, dialogical nature of utterances At this point, it will be useful to discuss three things: 1) the nature of that special sphere of activity that elsewhere I have called 'joint action' (Shotter, 1984, 1995); 2) the importance of Bakhtin's and Volosinov's focus upon the utterance as our investigative unit; and 3) the fact that utterances have their 'life', to so speak, in speech genres.

**1) Joint action:** This kind of social activity is important, in that, due to their embodied, responsive nature, people in face to face interaction with each other cannot not be continuously creative of new responses, both to their circumstances and to each other. As a result, in such a form of activity, both the surrounding circumstances and other people's actions are just as much a formative influence in what we do as anything within ourselves; people are not so much acting 'out of' any of their own inner plans, or scripts,

or suchlike, as 'into' a situation or circumstance already partially shaped by previous talk intertwined activities of others. Hence, its intrinsic appropriateness to its circumstances. But, what is so special about joint action, is that its overall outcome is not up to any of the individuals concerned in it; it is entirely novel; its outcomes are as if they have 'come out of the blue'. Yet, because the people involved in it must respond intelligibly to each other, it is nonetheless 'structured'; it has what might be called a 'grammar'; it 'invites' only a limited realm of next possible actions. In other words, those involved in such joint action, create unique, novel, circumstantially appropriate 'situations' between themselves, which, although they may contain no independent, material objects as such at all, it is just as if they did - hence the moral force of such 'things' as commitments and promises. For those within a 'situation' feel required to conform to the 'things' within it, not because of their material shape, but because we all call upon each other, morally, to recognize and respect what exists 'between' us. Thus, as neither 'mine' nor 'your's', the 'situation' itself constitutes something to which we can both contribute: it is 'ours'.

It is a situation in which 'I' feel I have made 'my' contribution, and in which 'you' can feel that you have made yours. Unless this is the case, I might feel that I am having to live in your reality, or you feel that you are having to live in mine, or, that both of us are having to live in a reality not our own. These opportunities to contribute to the construction, or not, of one's social realities, is what there is in such situations to struggle over: if social realities are socially constructed, then it is important that we can all have a voice in the process of their construction, and have our voice taken seriously, i.e., responded to practically.

**2) Utterances:** As Bakhtin (1986) and Volosinov (1973) see it, utterances are formative units of situations (and, as I see it, of joint action also). In studying the utterance rather than the grammatically well-formed sentence, Bakhtin and Volosinov claim that the utterance is a real responsive-interactive unit for at least the following three major reasons:

i) It marks out the boundaries (or the gaps) in the speech flow between different speakers, in that 'the first and foremost criterion for the finalization of an utterance is the possibility of responding to it...' (Bakhtin, 1986, p.76).

ii) And because every utterance (even utterances apparently 'opening' conversations) in its performance must take into account the (already linguistically shaped) context into which it must be directed. For:

*'Any concrete utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication of a particular sphere... Every utterance must be regarded as primarily a response to preceding utterances of the given sphere (we understand the word 'response' here in the broadest sense). Each utterance refutes affirms, supplements, and relies upon the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account... Therefore, each kind of utterance is filled with various kinds of responsive reactions to other utterances of the given sphere of speech communication' (Bakhtin, 1986, p.91).*

iii) And because the very 'bridging' of the 'gap' between the ending of an utterance and the response to it, forms a living (and not a merely mechanical) relationship of some

kind. For example, if we take two sentences 'Life is good' and 'Life is not good', one is simply the logical negation of the other; there are no dialogical relations between them. However, when issuing from different voices in a dialogue, the second utterance voices disagreement with the first - a relation with quite a different evaluative sense (responsive understanding) to it is jointly created. The practical meaning of words in their use is not something simply felt or experienced in isolation, their meaning is responsively understood, in terms of the dialogical relations they create in the responses their speaking calls out in others.

**3) Speech genres:** Speakers, in taking into account all the *'various kinds of responsive reactions to other utterances of the given sphere of speech communication'* in the voicing of their utterances, clearly cannot just speak as they please. Indeed, as we have already seen, our utterances are *'constructed between two social organized persons, and in the absence of a real addressee, an addressee is presupposed in the person, so to speak, of a normal representative of the social group to which the speaker belongs... Each person's inner world and thought has its stabilized social audience that comprises the environment in which reasons, motives, values, and so on are fashioned'* (pp.86-86). Thus whatever we say can never be wholly up to us - all our utterances are to an extent jointly produced outcomes between ourselves and others. Yet, our utterances are not responsive to just anyone. In being directed toward a stabilized social audience, have their being within a particular 'form of life,' and to that extent, they have a generic form, or, they belong to a speech genre (Bakhtin, 1986). Where, what it is that makes a set of utterances all hang together as members of a genre, is that *'each speech genre in each area of speech communication has its own typical conception of the addressee, and this defines its as a genre'* (p.95). In other words, it is our actual or imagined ways of relating ourselves to each other - what, as we have seen, Wittgenstein calls our 'forms of life' - that are the basis for our ways of talking, which ultimately provide us with our ways of thinking. These are the constraints we must take into account and struggle with in attempting to answer for ourselves; we cannot just respond as we please.

Taking these emphases together - upon joint action, the nature of the utterance, and their embedding in speech genres or forms of life - we can perhaps begin to see why the gaps in the speech situation, our relational encounters, are so important to us. For it is in those gaps, in these momentary relational encounters, that everything of importance to us exerts its influence. These influences work in the gap or on the boundary between the ending of one utterance and the next that is a response to it. It is in these moments of indeterminacy, that the influences of others (or the Otherness of one's circumstances) can partially at least determine the 'shape' the 'doings' of individual agents. This is why, in this approach, we are far less interested in patterns of 'already spoken words', and much more interested in the moment by moment emergence of 'words in their speaking': for it is in our responsive speaking of our words, that we can begin to create with others, in joint action, a sense of the unique nature of our own inner lives - to the extent, that is, that they are prepared to play a proper responsive part in the process also. And it is in our utterly unique and novel uses of language also, we can offer or afford others a responsive understanding of our own unique inner lives.



## Embodiment and the 'creative use of language'

This, I think, is a startling conclusion. For traditionally, we have always been concerned with patterns and order, with thinking that we can only understand things by finding the hidden laws or principles determining their nature. We are quite unused to the idea that the nature of the events of genuine importance to us in our investigations are unique, novel events, not repetitions. Yet, isn't this what is involved in making history, in doing something that has never been done before? How in the world are we to understand such novelties? Well, we can't, theoretically, as isolated, scientific thinkers; but we can practically, as dialogically involved, ordinary, everyday, embodied persons. For, after all, what it is to be bodily embedded in a dialogue with others, is to be embedded in the selfsame historical process (movement) as them, and to have a diffuse and unordered bodily sense or feeling of how we are 'positioned', semiotically, in relation to them within that movement. If we are to understand how we can create a sense of our inner lives in our speakings, it is both our embodied, responsive nature that we must understand, and, its existence within 'forms of life.'

Currently, however, we are still in the thrall of the traditional, individualistic, non-relational paradigm, and both the representationalism and epistemology project it sustains. And, in ignoring our embodied nature and our spontaneous, responsive relations to others, it leads us to treat our ordinary everyday, creative use of language - what I am proposing that we do unproblematically and continuously in our ordinary, everyday practical affairs - as an utter mystery, quite unamenable to any kind of rational study known to us. Indeed, Chomsky (1975) claims, for instance, that: *'What I have called elsewhere 'the creative aspect of language use' remains as much a mystery to us as it was to the Cartesians who discussed it, in part, in the context of the problem of 'other minds'. Some would reject this evaluation of the state of our understanding. I do not propose to argue the point here, but rather to turn to the problems that do seem to me to be amenable to rational inquiry'* (pp.138-139) - and we, all too easily, follow suit. Yet in our everyday practical lives, we (almost) all have no difficulty in learning to use language in the ways required to continuously create the links and relations making up our practical lives together... How do we do it? Do we really have to wait for something - like, but better than Chomsky's explanatory analyses - that will finally explain us how to do what we already have little trouble in doing? Aren't we missing something here?

Indeed, as Wittgenstein (McGuinness, 1979) said about his arguments with G.E. Moore: *'Can only logical analysis explain what we mean by the propositions of ordinary language? Moore is inclined to think so. Are people therefore ignorant of what they mean when they say 'Today the sky is clearer than yesterday?'* *Do we have to wait for logical analysis here? What a hellish idea!*" (p.120). Of course we must be able to understand such propositions in practice without knowing their supposedly proper logical analysis; of course we must be able to understand 'what' we are talking about, in the course of talking about 'it'. Indeed, when we talk to each other about our 'thoughts' and 'feelings', our 'motives' and 'desires', etc., we do not continually confuse and bewilder each other. How do we do this, how can we make sense of it as a possibility? It is the recognition of our embodied, socially responsive nature, that is the key.

In taking the rhetorical-responsive function of language to be primary, and the representational function to be a secondary, derived function, I have wanted to emphasize the materiality of language: the fact that in our speakings we can 'move' people, we can affect their bodily behavior... and our own; as well as the fact that we cannot move them just as we please. Due to the already structured nature of speech genres and forms of life, there are 'resistances' (better, 'moral intransigences') at work too, that must have their 'say' also, in what we do or say. Thus, as I see it, our speakings work within a material background of both the already said and the sayable, and the unsaid and the unsayable, an aggregate of living, embodied practices that make some forms of speaking possible, while at the same time, making others all but impossible. Thus, if the material of our inner lives is the same as the material of the sign, what might be the sign material of the psyche? Volosinov (1973) replies: *'Any organic activity or process: breathing, blood circulation, movements of the body, articulation, inner speech, mimetic motions, reaction to external stimuli (e.g., light stimuli) and so forth. In short, anything and everything within the organism can become the material of experience, since everything can acquire semiotic significance, can become expressive'* (pp.28-29).

But such material, such movements, surely, cannot in themselves be our thoughts, the content of our inner lives? While our bodily reactions and responses constitute the indeterminate beginnings of our thoughts and intentions, our perceptions and understandings, they only become determinate in our voicing of them in relation to a form of life. As Volosinov (1973, p.36) puts it: *'We do not see or feel an experience - we understand it. This means that in the process of introspection we engage our experience into a context made up of other signs we understand. A sign can be illuminated with the help of another sign'* (p.36). As a result, even though (to repeat a phrase quoted earlier) *'the content of the psyche occur[s] not inside but outside the individual organism'* (Volosinov, 1973, p.25), in occurring 'in' our own activity, moment by moment, as we formulate it in its responsive expression, only we can be answerable for the 'shape' it takes. Although, it is also the case that, in this account, our mental lives are neither wholly under our own control, nor wholly filled with our own materials. For every word constitutes a *'border zone'* (Volosinov, 1973, p.86) between persons and their addressees. Indeed, this is precisely how Wittgenstein (1981) saw it also: *'No supposition seems to me more natural than that there is no process in the brain correlated with... thinking... I mean this: if I talk or write there is, I assume, a system of impulses going out from my brain and correlated with my spoken or written thoughts. But why should the system continue further in the direction of the center? Why should this order not proceed, so to speak, out of chaos?'* (no.608). But if this is the case, if the orderly expression of a thought or an intention, the proper saying of a sentence (or the doing of a deed), does not issue from already well-formed and orderly cognitions at the center of our being, where does the order in our behavior originate? In this view then, what we are pleased to call our selves, is a boundary phenomenon. *'The psyche enjoys extraterritorial status in the organism. It is a social entity that penetrates inside the organism of the individual'* (p.39). In practice, it is less an entity and more a strategy or set of strategies, a set of characteristic ways of responding to the others around us. Where 'its' nature only appears in our practical activities, at that point of contact with those others, in our relational encounters with them. Indeed, it is in our pausing, our breathing, our responsive intoning

of our words, that we 'show' or 'gesture' toward our relations to our 'inner world', to our 'position' within it; it is unreproducible and uniquely individual; it thus voiced with an 'evaluative accent,' and it is in this accent or tone that we first manifest our relational stance to our circumstances - in whether we talk deferentially, officially, apologetically, indignantly, respectfully, imperiously, condescendingly, or so on.

In other words, in Bakhtin's (1986) and Volosinov's (1973) view, our psychic life manifests itself in our practical activities as we body them forth, dialogically, out into the world; even what we call introspection is for them a dialogical process, in which we 'dialogically develop' an initial, vague 'sense' of a circumstance into something determinate, in a back-and-forth process between the sense and its specific formulation in the course of us 'giving' it voice, or 'voicing' it. Thus a person's psyche (if such an entity can be said to exist at all!), is, according to social conditions, an entity with constantly contested and shifting boundaries; something we can re-collect in one way one day, and in another the next. And even when 'thinking' all alone, these considerations of our relations to others are still the ones to which we must address ourselves - that is, if we want what we do or write then to be acceptable to, and to have point for, others.

## Conclusions

From within social constructionism, everything that is taken to be an already existing, real psychology object in the cognitive (realist) account - such as our intentions, memories, motives, perceptions, emotions, etc. - can be talked of in a different way: As not consisting in already finished and finalized objective entities at all, but as still being in the process of construction, that is, as being both partially constructed and open to further construction, or even, re-construction - in different ways in different discursive or conversational circumstances, according to one's sense of how one is placed in relation, both to one's own project, and to the others around one. Indeed, I have in fact claimed that, it is only through the semiotic mediation of signs, within an inner conversational process, that what we talk of as our 'self', our 'psyche', or our 'mind', comes into existence at all, but that *'the reality of the inner psyche is the same reality as that of the sign'* (Volosinov, 1973, p.26) - in other words, 'minds', 'selves', or 'psyches' exist as such, only within our embodied discursive practices.

But what do we mean in saying this? Although we may accept that what we talk of as 'the self' is a constructed and contested entity, we can still all too easily assume that nonetheless, we all know perfectly well what 'it' is that we are all talking about. We find it difficult to accept that such discursive objects are not already in existence in some sense, perhaps a 'theoretical' sense. But, if we do take the view that it is what we do between us in our practices that is important, then our focus changes. For instance, instead of seeing certain of our 1st-person utterances as reports on our inner mental states, we can see them instead as being used in an attempt to 'construct', with the help of others around us, certain forms of life. Thus in a dialogical, rhetorical-responsive, social constructionism, neither external reality, nor people's supposed psychological states, are treated as existing prior to our talk of them; they are seen as being constructed in different

ways in different circumstances, for different purposes. Currently, our 'obsession' with theoretical and explanatory talk obscures the practical nature of the responsive, dialogical talk between us, within which we jointly construct the 'realities' in which we find ourselves 'placed' as individuals, and into which, and out of which, we situate much of our talk and action. We do not yet know how to explore what is involved, practically, in us opening up such spaces between us, in us creating new possibilities for being human.

However, it is clear, that the task of developing a conversational, relational, rhetorical-responsive account of our selves is thus, not a merely theoretical task. It is also a task of a practical kind; we must develop new practices, new stances, new ways of talking and being: we must 'instruct' ourselves not only in how to 'see', 'talk', 'think', 'act', and 'evaluate' in relational terms, but work also to develop the kind of multivoiced tradition of argumentation, a new social 'order', appropriate to sustaining such relational forms of relating ourselves to each other. Where, to view our cognitive abilities in this way - as being formed in what we do and say, rather than as being the already existing, well formed sources of our actions and utterances - is, as Harré (1992) has recently put it, to contribute to a 'second cognitive revolution,' one which takes a 'discursive turn' (e.g., Edwards and Potter, 1992). Unlike the first, that emphasized the instrumental, individualistic, systematic, unitary, ahistorical, representationalist ideology of the day, this second revolution tends to foreground the poetic and rhetorical, the social and historical, the pluralistic, as well as the responsive and sensuous aspects of language use, all the concerns that were left in the background in the first cognitive revolution. But, in taking a dialogical, argumentative view of the growth of knowledge rather than an eliminative, Neo-Darwinian, monological stance, the previous concerns of cognitivism should not be wholly eliminated or backgrounded, but be considered as a 'voice' in the dialogue also. But now, not so loud as to silence the voice of these other concerns.

Many see this turn to relational and dialogical concerns as a turn to 'relativism': as if the taking an argumentative view of the growth of knowledge, is automatically tantamount to arguing that all claims to knowledge are just as good as each other. They clearly are not. As I see it, the relativism involved here amounts to no more than claiming, that all clear and unambiguous claims to knowledge only make sense from within a shared form of life, a tradition, or disciplinary matrix; that all claims to knowledge are 'rooted' or 'grounded' in such traditions or matrices; and in nothing else! In other words, this means that - in reaching out from within them to make various kinds of contact with our surroundings, through the various ways of making sense of such contacts they provide - we only ever respond to what we find in such contacts in socially shared (or at least sharable) ways. Being unable to root our claims in any foundational principles, does not absolve us from taking responsibility for our claims; indeed, the opposite is the case: lacking any foundational principles, we must be prepared to give good ethical reasons for why we have conducted ourselves as we have. Such a relativism seems to me to be benign, when compared to the claim that, as individuals, we can support our claims to knowledge by special, uncontestable, extralinguistic appeals to our direct access, as individuals, to the absolute nature of objects, minds, or language. If there are worrying features of social constructionism, it seems to me that they are much more to do with what it leaves uncontested than with what it contests.

Indeed, as professional academics, we must find ways to extend our grasp yet further of what goes within relationships, to extend our grasp of what might go on in the 'inner lives' of individuals 'positioned' or 'placed' within them - even if it means giving up the theories we can each get inside our own heads. Only then, can we help to create a truly dialogic 'space' within which, not only the creation of new meanings will be possible, but within which everyone (not just the 'seeing' elite in the classroom) can participate in the interplay of voices.

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## Notes

[Footnote: 1](#) [1] Where, as MacIntyre (1981) puts it, 'a living tradition... is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition' (p.207).

[Footnote: 2](#) [2] To talk like this is, of course, to over simplify, for these two polarities play into each other and borrow from each other to such an extent, that all theories in psychology contain aspects of both tendencies.

[Footnote: 3](#) [3] Here, I have in mind Marx's first thesis on Feuerbach, that 'the chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively' (Marx and Engels, 1977, p.121).

[Footnote: 4](#) [4] 'Hurly-burly' and 'bustle' are terms used by Wittgenstein (1980, II, nos.625, 626, 629) to characterize the indefiniteness and indeterminacy of the background that determines our responses to what we experience, and against which we judge events in our everyday lives.

[Footnote: 4](#) [5] Bernstein (1983, pp.38-44) relates this kind of knowing to Aristotle's understanding of praxis and phronesis.

[Footnote: 6](#) [6] See Mills (1940).

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