The Case for the Person in Social Psychology
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Introduction

In this paper I will critique a number of approaches to social psychology because in my view they have an inadequate understanding of the person, the being who ought to be at the centre of the discipline. I will argue that both mainstream social psychology and several varieties of social constructionism are at fault in this respect, and will make a case for symbolic interactionism as a way of theorising the person that can enrich and extend a social constructionist social psychology. Finally, I will offer some ideas for the questions that such a social psychology might ask and the research directions it might take.

Today, university courses in Psychology are attracting increasing numbers of students. As a young person in the 1970s, I too was drawn to the discipline because of its apparent promise to give some insight into the mysteries and paradoxes of human behaviour and experience, including my own. But students are often discouraged by psychology's subject matter because it so often studies *processes*, such as memory or perception, rather than *people* as we would recognised them. Social psychology is often popular with students because it seems at least to be about recognisable aspects of human life; the 'level' of social psychological phenomena is the interpersonal, and these phenomena are familiar to people: friendship and attraction, making impressions and forming opinions about others, being part of a group and so on.

But as Harré (1996) points out, mainstream social psychology has increasingly moved in the same direction as its parent discipline; that is, towards cognition as its focus and information-processing as its mechanistic root metaphor (Sarbin, 1986). This may be an improvement upon behaviourism as the previous central theoretical framework, at least permitting the legitimate study of mental states and processes, but it has once again located the level of analysis in mechanisms rather than whole people and their interactions. Mainstream social psychology is hardly 'social' at all; it mainly concerns intra-psychic processes (foe example, attributions and attitude formations) which may or may not even have a social target.

In parallel to this development, and more recently, we have seen the emergence of what has come to be known as social constructionism (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1999a). Although this is a theoretical perspective as relevant

to the whole of psychology as much as to social psychology, it has been of most interest to social psychologists because of its desire to relocate psychological phenomena in the social realm. Nevertheless, social constructionism is more likely to be found having a high profile at social psychology conferences than elsewhere. Within social constructionism, all psychology in effect becomes social psychology, and I like this idea. I often ask my students to think about a person they know fairly well, and to make a brief list of words they would use to describe that person- friendly, kind, humorous and so on. Then I tell them to imagine that person alone on a desert island, and to ask themselves how much sense those descriptions would now make, in the absence of other people. How can one be, say, 'generous', 'thoughtless' or 'helpful' in a social vacuum? So, for me, social psychology is an immensely important discipline.

But I believe that contemporary social psychology is currently heading in two opposite directions, both of them failing to achieve a truly social understanding of humanity; that is, one that transcends the dichotomies of individual vs. society and agency vs. determinism that have for a long time dogged the social sciences, and both of them threatening to lose sight of the *person*, who, to my mind, should be at the centre of our theorising.

The two directions that I have identified are what I will refer to as mainstream social psychology, and social constructionism. I will deal briefly with mainstream social psychology, (but not go into detail here since the arguments have been well rehearsed elsewhere) and then go on to look at social constructionism, saying what I think is wrong with it, and then propose what I believe is one possible answer to these problems.

Mainstream social psychology
Mainstream social psychology has taken cognitive science as it base and has become preoccupied with computations supposed to be carried out within the person, the result of which are things like attitudes and attributions. As Augoustinos and Walker (1995) point out, the information-processing metaphor of the person that is primarily adopted in modern social cognition renders the approach social only in so far as the information processed is about social objects- that is, people (and where the attitude object is not a person or class of persons even this basis is absent). While not dismissing out of hand the contribution made by social cognition, they argue that:

> Currently, research and theory in social cognition is driven by an overwhelming individualistic orientation, which forgets that the contents of cognition originate in social life, in human interaction and communication. The information processing models central to social cognition study cognitive processes at

the expense of content and context. As such, societal, collective and symbolic features of human thought are often ignored and forgotten. Contemporary social cognition research is individualistic because it searches within the person for the causes of behaviour. Social cognition will never explain adequately the totality of socio-cognitive experience so long as it remains at the individual level of analysis (pp 3-4).

I am in agreement with this statement, and make no apology for my criticism of mainstream psychology and social psychology, which for the most part seem hopelessly essentialist, individualistic and hamstrung by a narrow vision of science. Although I would like to point out in passing that exceptions to this trend do exist. The theory of social representations, put forward by Moscovici (1984) was a genuine attempt to provide a social account of psychological processes. Also, the British social psychologist Miles Hewstone (Hewstone, 1989) notes that some work in the field of attribution has moved away from simple questions about intra-psychic mechanisms of attribution towards those concerning the role of interpersonal relationships, groups and societal beliefs and values in the attribution process.

Social Constructionism
Social constructionism held the promise of a radical new social psychology that was both critical and empowering. It promised a fundamentally different way of understanding what it means to be a person and different answers to how social and personal change might be brought about.

But the way that developments in social constructionism have been heading in recent times makes me think that, rather than developing a better understanding, the social constructionist fraternity has instead divided into rival factions that are 'digging in' on opposite sides, each losing what the other has gained.

For present purposes, I include under the heading of social constructionism both deconstruction and discursive psychology. I believe that deconstruction ultimately becomes socially deterministic, rendering the person as a puppet of discursive structures, and discursive psychology, while showing the constructive force of language, brackets off the person as meaning-maker behind the constructions that it analyses. I'll say a little about my reservations about each of these in turn, and then go on to critique a further turn in the social constructionist debate, one which attempts to privilege interpersonal relationships as the site of the construction of the person:

Deconstructionism

Deconstructionist developments in social psychology, which, drawing on Foucault and Derrida, explicitly aim to re-cast the individual as a thoroughly social being, may themselves be unable to escape the agency vs. determinism dichotomy. If the person is understood as a product of discourse, the individual and self are seen as illusions or at best constructions over which we have little control. Although some writers (e.g. Davies and Harré, 1990) have tried to argue that the person is as much constructing as constructed, the processes by which this two-way exchange is supposed to occur are not spelled out. Given the power that is accorded to language in deconstructionist approaches to the person, there is therefore a tendency for these formulations, by default, to emphasise the formative power of the discourses we inhabit. Deconstruction, therefore, is in danger of reproducing the same individual vs. society dualism upon which mainstream social psychology is founded, but this time privileging the social rather than the individual side of the dichotomy.

Discursive psychology

Discursive psychology (e.g. Edwards and Potter, 1992; Harré and Stearns 1995; Harré, 1995) has an advantage over the mainstream in that its methodology of choice (discourse analysis) explicitly studies real examples of situated language use, aiming to identify the forms of argument and rhetorical devices being used by the participants. It privileges the *social context* of speech, allowing for meaning to be situated rather than fixed. And it is a *social* psychology because of its insistence upon our use of shared tools (interpretative repertoires).

While discursive psychology does not deny the existence of processes we might wish to call 'thought' or 'memory', it does not see these as instrumental in the production or use of interpretative repertoires, and takes a radically anti-cognitive stance. For example, it is critical of the theory of social representations for appearing to locate these inside people's heads, which then come to be thought of as lying behind and expressed in social interaction. Discursive psychology has been most useful in drawing social psychologists' attention to the constructive use of language, to the variability in accounts and their dependence upon local and transient interaction contexts.

However, I think an important and difficult issue, that discursive psychology largely ignores, is the relationship between the social and the psychological. If we are to move beyond the traditional conception of social psychology as the study of how the social environment affects the pre-existing individual (which was the view of Floyd Allport, one of the founders of what I am calling mainstream social psychology) then we need

theories that reconceptualise the individual in social terms. Discursive psychology goes some way down this road in its conceptualisation of language use as socially derived and socially occasioned (rather than as issuing from psychological states) but has not addressed the nature of the person as repertoire-user. Discursive psychology attempts to bracket off the person's psychological life with respect to our understanding of language use. Although discursive psychology implicitly characterises the person as motivated to build socially credible and defensible accounts it does not explicitly address the psychological status of this. While discursive psychology does not deny the possible existence of structures such as motivations, beliefs and attitudes, it claims, as does behaviourism, that these are not available for our inspection. Following Wittgenstein, it argues that we can only treat our accounts of our experience as part of the 'performance' and accomplishment of such things as anger or desire, within particular language-games. Just what kind of 'person' we need to create in our psychology in order to understand what it means to be a repertoire-user remains a mystery to us.

Now, we do not have to agree with discursive psychologists on this point. There is considerable debate between philosophers regarding the tenability of Wittgenstein's position. But even if we agree with discursive psychology that concepts such as 'motivation', 'drive', 'attitude' and 'belief' are misleading as explanations of the content and purpose of our talk, I would argue that it does indeed need to specify the psychological nature of the discourse-using person, and the nature of the relationship between that psychology and the social realm in which it is located. Without this, it is hard to see how the discursive approach outlined here can be called a *psychology* as such.

In addition, I would want to argue that the private, psychological realm deserves our attention, and others before have made such a case. For example, I have argued elsewhere (Burr, 1999) that some forms of experience exist outside of language and are expressed in and are accessible through non-linguistic forms such as art, dance and other bodily movements. I am reminded also of the inventive investigation, within the phenomenological tradition, of the lived experience of such things as anger and daydreams. Others (Butt and Langdridge, forthcoming) have drawn on the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of the 'lived body' and George Mead's 'conversation of gestures' to ground a socially contingent concept of personal experience that helps us to understand our conduct.

The person-in-relationship

Other writers who would probably want to align themselves either fully or partly with a social constructionist theoretical framework (e.g. Shotter, 1995; Gergen, 1999a and b) have proposed re-locating the crucible of behaviour and experience in the interpersonal space between people, within relationships and interactions.

Discursive psychology acknowledges mental processes but, like behaviourism, accords them no place in the understanding of conduct. John Shotter (1995) talks of 'joint action', a term borrowed from the symbolic interactionist Herbert Blumer, which is like a dance where the conduct of each person constitutes the whole (that is the dance, the interaction) but where the behaviours of each participant are not isolable and cannot be said to cause each other.

Gergen (1997) too locates psychological events (like emotion) inside relationship exchanges, and I wouldn't in principle disagree with this. But he argues for what he calls a 'de-psychologised account of human action'. This seems to arise from the fear that 'psychology' equals 'mental states' that cause behaviour. I think this assumption is quite unnecessary. It is important to emphasise here that the psychological need not be equated with essentialist mental states, nor be causative in any way. The dimensions of private vs. public, psychological vs. social and determined vs. constructed do not map onto each other or reduce to each other. Social and even relational realms can be used in just as deterministic a fashion as the psychological and the psychological and private can be just as contingent as social phenomena. So that claiming back a personal, private and psychological space as the proper realm of our enquiries as psychologists and social psychologists in no way automatically returns us to essentialism, determinism or possessive individualism (Sampson, 1993). I prefer to think of psychology as the study of the processes by which the mental and behavioural *emerge* from the social. As Dodds et al (1997) put it 'It becomes important to describe how the social becomes personal without denying the activity and contribution of either social or personal domains'.

What I *do* like about relocating conduct within relationships is that it attempts to get rid of causality (the idea that mental states cause behaviour) and emphasises the social dependency of conduct, apparently without inverting the problem and creating a reductionistic social determinism. But what is missing here is any understanding of how or why interactions take the particular course that they do. They seem to emerge magically. The psychological appears to have no role to play in producing them. I see the silence of psychologists and social psychologists on this issue as a problem,

and so I want to go on now to draw on some older voices social psychology that I feel can help us out here.

The case for an interactionist self-concept
There already exist theoretical frameworks that have attempted to both build a model of the individual in social terms and to transcend the individual vs. society and social vs. psychological dichotomies, and two that I feel deserve particular mention here are symbolic interactionism and social representations theory, because they have both been put forward by social psychologists (interestingly, from the disciplines of psychology and sociology respectively). I have chosen to focus here upon the potential that I feel lies with symbolic interactionism, because I want to flesh out an argument for taking the self-concept seriously; the interactionist self concept can, I will argue, provide us with a route back to a psychology that can enrich and extend a social constructionist social psychology.

The call to listen to such 'older voices' in social psychology is not new, and in 1995 Denzin attempted to forge a symbolic interactionism that is informed by more recent poststucturalist theorising concerning the role of language, discourse and power in the production of personal meanings. My concern here is the reciprocal of this- that is, to examine how a social constructionist social psychology may be extended by symbolic interactionist thinking. If symbolic interactionism, according to Denzin, has neglected the role of culture and power relations in providing the meanings with which individuals endow their experience, then social constructionism has largely avoided theorising personal experience and its role in personal conduct. My aim in introducing symbolic interactionism here is therefore to extend and strengthen social constructionism so that it becomes capable of understanding the nature of the socially constructed *person*.

The term symbolic interactionism was introduced by Blumer (1962), who built on and extended the earlier work of George Mead (1934), and it is Mead's thinking about the self that I want to draw upon here. Mead's contribution lies in transcending the dualism of self vs. other, and in providing an account of the individual that is thoroughly social. His conception of mind and of consciousness, and of the relationship between these and society was based upon the interdependency of self and other. Furthermore, language and social interaction were for Mead crucial to the development of the mind, consciousness and the self. For Mead, the self does not pre-exist society, it emerges from it. His social psychology is therefore radically different from psychological social psychology, where the individual or self (in those psychologies which accept the existence of a self) is not dependent upon social forces for its existence.

Mead turns on its head psychology's question of how individual persons, who are conscious and have minds, come to interact with other individuals, affect and be affected by them, so producing something that is called society. Instead, he sees consciousness and mind (our ability to reflect upon our actions and those of others) as the outcomes of social interaction. Mead's individual does not exist independently of society but is instead made possible *by* social interaction between people. And the key to the development of mind is something distinctly human; our ability to use symbols to represent things and events, especially our use of language. It is language, says Mead, that allows us to internalise social interaction, to represent it to ourselves and to think about and reflect upon it, and this is what mind is.

Symbolic interactionism argues that 'society and individuals are the product of interaction (communication) between people and that this interaction takes place through the use of symbols which have meaning for the individuals involved' (Flory, 2000). Both mind, our capacity for consciousness, for reflection upon our experience, and self are seen as made possible by and emerging from the processes of social interaction and language use. Central components of the person in this form of social psychology are therefore seen as socially contingent; they depend upon meaningful social interaction for their development in the person. We cannot think about or reflect upon our experience (this is what is meant by mind) until we are able to symbolically represent events to ourselves through language. And we cannot acquire language without engaging in social interaction. As babies, we are born already capable of rudimentary interaction. Babies engage in turn-taking and imitation games with their caregivers and the baby's part in this 'conversation', its actions, becomes meaningful through the way the caregiver responds. Adults and older children respond to a baby *as if* its actions were already meaningful, and in this way both baby caregivers come to mutually define certain actions as having particular meanings. At this point in its development, the child is engaged in what Mead (1934) termed a 'conversation of gestures'. As the child's cognitive capacities increase, it becomes able to replace these gestures with symbols, that is, words. Through the continued process of social interaction, the child is able to move away from this conversation of gestures and participate in its society's system of shared symbols and their meanings, that is, language. Language is therefore a kind of covert social interaction, a conversation of gestures carried out privately through the use of symbols. At this point, the child has become capable of truly reflecting upon and representing both the world and its own actions to itself and others. It has acquired both mind and a sense of self.

For symbolic interactionism it is therefore social relationships and human interaction and communication that provide the basis for the development of the person. But it is not simply that we assign meaning to our actions and to those of other people. Human interaction as we would recognise it also demands that we have some conception of the meaning that our actions hold for others, and that we know that they will know that we have such a conception. Meaningful human social interaction is distinguished by this characteristic; we are able to imaginatively anticipate the effects of our actions on others and act accordingly. This is a result of our ability to represent actions through our system of shared meanings. When we interact through gestures, and later through language, we know that a gesture or word has the same meaning for others as it has for us. We therefore have a kind of access to the mind of others; we can anticipate the meaning that our actions have for them because of the meaning they have for us. We can therefore represent to ourselves what would happen *if* we were to undertake a certain course of action. We are able to consider alternative courses of possible action, which is one way of describing agency. Mead saw this capacity as what separates the meaningful interaction of humans from the meaningful interaction of other animals.

So the person is a truly thoroughly social and socially contingent phenomenon. Harré once referred to the person as a 'fenced-off ' section of the prairie-land that is the social realm. He was reflecting on the way in which what counts as 'me' extends well beyond the physical boundary of my being. I think I agree with Harré on this point. But the person is not ONLY this. There IS a difference between private and public (though not one that is so sharply drawn as in mainstream psychology) and what happens in my private realm has consequences for joint action. But we do not need to resort to causality to acknowledge a role for mental processes. Reflectiveness and memory are processes that inform my future conduct and make CHOICES possible. And it is here that I think the idea of self-concept can be of value.

The idea of a 'self concept' does not dictate any particular *content* to that concept. The fact that our western self-concepts are full of personality, individuality and agency can be accounted for, in social constructionist terms, by discourse. But the fact that we have a self-concept at all cannot. I am happy to dispense with personality, attitudes and such like as pre-existing or environmentally produced mental states that cause behaviour, but 'self-concept' is different in kind from these. It is *socially* contingent rather than pre-existent; it is not fixed and does not have to be seen as 'causing' anything.

So while our particular self-concept is not trans cultural, I believe the generic self-concept may be. In other words, human beings always have and always will have a concept of selfhood. The only thing this is contingent upon is social interaction. Human beings become persons when they become engaged in social encounters, and this makes some form of self-concept possible and even inevitable.

My self-concept arises out of reflection and is 'there' during all social interactions, in effect constituting a third 'other' that exerts the same 'pull' on my conduct as real interactants. We can therefore see self-concept as a positive asset, grounding moral choices and agency, something that social constructionists find very difficult to theorise. It gives me something against which to assess current interactions and check possible future conduct, through monitoring of myself during social encounters. Without the self-concept, it is hard to see how we can avoid regarding all actors as interchangeable. Where do moral choices come from? If we do not want to claim that people's experience of wrestling with moral dilemmas and choices is illusionary, that in fact our moral behaviour is simply determined (either by pre-existent psychological processes, or by social rules that we have internalised, or by force of social structures), which would be to slide back into the dichotomies that social constructionism is trying to escape, then we have to explain how it is that we have such choice and how it is that we have some form of collective conception, at some level, of what is good, that is, basic values. It is possible to find a route to these through Mead's concept of the 'generalised other'; the other is so much a part of my make-up that my experience is not differentiated from that of the other. It is much more than simply imagining what others would feel like if I treated them in a certain way; we feel (phenomenologically) the consequences of our actions upon others because we are not differentiated from the other. This is the 'care' that Gergen speaks of and wants, but he can only reach it through the recognition that all outcomes are jointly produced- that we all depend on each other. It is too utilitarian and reduces to moral expediency.

The future for a social constructionist social psychology
I am in agreement with Ryan (1999) who foresees, through the social constructionist turn, a radical shift in the aim and constitution of the behavioural sciences, but not their elimination. Social psychology will need to find new organising themes, new concepts and therefore new questions.

Gergen regards analyses that see psychological events as *existing* in the social realm as superior to those that see them as *derived from* the social realm. I disagree with this, for the reasons I gave above about misunderstanding the relationship between various dichotomies. Nevertheless, just what it might mean for phenomena to 'exist' in the social

realm is not clear. Gergen (1999b) calls his paper 'the place of the psyche in a constructed world' but seems to find NO place for it. He leaves it lying on the floor between people, but neither of them knows how it got there or has access to it.

For me, the key questions for social psychology now are these:

1. How are our joint actions and co-constructions brought about? And
2. What role does our self-concept play in this constructive process?

A research programme aimed at answering these questions would capitalise on our capacity for reflexive self-consciousness. Elsewhere (Butt et al, 1997) I have described how, for example, personal construct methods have been used to investigate how our sense of self is fragmented across relationships and dependent upon them, and how our feelings of authenticity are dependent upon the self-monitoring processes during interaction described by Mead. Such an approach lies broadly within a phenomenological framework, and I would additionally see phenomenological methods of enquiry as potentially able to inform us about the psychological processes taking place during joint actions of all kinds, from conversations to playing a game of tennis.

Conclusion
In this paper I have critiqued a number of approaches to social psychology because in my view they do not properly address either the *social* nature of our psychology or the *psychology* of our social nature. I have found both mainstream social psychology and several varieties of social constructionism wanting. I have argued that symbolic interactionism offers us a way of theorising the person that can enrich and extend a social constructionist social psychology without returning us to either essentialism or social determinism. It also gives us some purchase on how individual persons are able to reflect upon and make choices about their own conduct while at the same time retaining social relationships and interactions as the crucial sites where we can become persons at all. Finally, I have tried to offer some ideas for the questions that such a social psychology might ask and the research directions it might take. I hope that, even if you don't agree with my arguments here, that you will at least agree with me that the *person* needs to be put back into social psychology.

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