WHERE IS THE SOCIAL? A CRITIQUE OF LINGUISTIC RELATIVISM
(Joshua Soffer,2001)

Where is the Other?
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Abstract:

Common to different versions of social constructionism is the definition of discourse as taking place between persons. Experiences which take place in the absence of immediate others, such as thinking to oneself or reading a text, are treated as secondary phenomena, as introjected versions of social utterance-gestures. This article asserts that representative constructionist articulations of between-person relationality rest on abstractions masking a more primary locus of sociality. I offer an alternative formulation of the social as the embodiment of sensate experience, borrowing from Merleau-Ponty's and Gendlin's accounts. Sensate experience is already radically relational before and beyond any notion of sociality as between-person voices-gestures, generating more intimate and mobile possibilities of interpersonal understanding than is offered via discursive readings of terms like social, language and embodiment. Note; Although this paper pertains to social constructionist positions, my central criticism of these approaches applies as well to Deleuze's bio-political notion of sociality. While constructionists restrict their focus to inter-personal communication, Deleuze broadens the notion of language to include the living and material world, which includes the body. This places the site of otherness and sociality within intentionality itself via its entanglement with affect. Nevertheless, Deleuze's treatment of affective-intentional dynamics, rather than dismantling social constructionism's between-person abstractions, manages to import them into bodily process.

INTRODUCTION:

Those familiar with recent debates within philosophy and the biological and social sciences know that much discussion centers on how to best move beyond the "God's eye view", the idea that an external world of objects exists independently of the subject experiencing it, which can be represented by a thinking subject via formal symbols(brain in a vat). One of the most notorious and controversial challenges to the God's eye, or objectivist, view is the linguistically-centered 'radical relativism' associated with Richard Rorty's pragmatism, French poststructuralist philosophies(Foucault) and social constructionist psychologies(Gergen), which claims that it is nonsensical to assert such things as internal components of the mind or external features of the world existing independently from the processes of cultural interaction through which we

construct these artifacts. Linguistic relativisms are not without their weaknesses, however. (Rorty is one of a number of writers who rejects the relativism label others have pinned on him. He argues that "relativism, just as much as realism, assumes that one can stand within one's language and outside it at the same time." Derrida also refuses the label, associating it with vagueness and indeterminacy, while Gendlin, ironically, equates relativism with cultural determinacy).

If meanings, both personal and scientific, are generated and only have real existence through and within the languages and gestures we use to relate to and transform each other's worlds, if science is nothing but a social construction, where does the social begin? With humans and their languages? But then does this mean that the cultural ontologically precedes the biological and the physical? Is the only alternative the belief that human social interaction and meaning-making are the product of 'objective' cause-effect brain mechanisms impervious to cultural changes? We have already discussed a third avenue of approach besides objectivism and linguistic relativism: empirical psychologies(dynamical systems, second-generation cognitivism) influenced by or sharing features with phenomenological philosophies(Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger) systematically investigate the 'embodied' nature of the social, which has been generally overlooked by social constructionists in their one-sided focus on cultural practices. If the world of human culture cannot be understood to precede the pre or non-human, then neither can we go back to the belief that there is a pre-existing reality sitting outside of our constructions of it. This paper critiques social constructionism's explanation of the basis of the social and of language, not by championing embodied cognitive psychology , but by offering a way of thinking which I believe transcends the limitations of both social constructionism and embodied cognitivism.

Social Constructionism's Claims:

Writers affiliated with the growing social constructionist movement in psychology have made powerful claims concerning its efficacy in the understanding of persons (Kenneth Gergen(1985), Harre(1986), Shotter(1993)(click here for large collection of Shotter's writings), Potter(1987)). It's purported advantages over other psychological traditions depend on it's radical treatment of the nature of the relationship between self and world. Gergen(1985) posits two poles around which much psychological theory in the 20th century has revolved:the autonomous subject or self, an originating psychological agent possessing context-resistant inner structures, and that of environmentalism, positing stimuli as univocal sources of conditioning. Both alternatives tend to reify that which they posit as the source of meaning organization. The question, then, is how we can be in touch with the world without resorting to doctrines of internal Givens (rationalism, conceptual schemes, transcendental subjects) or external Givens (empirical content, objectivity, nature, materialism) and their relations. Social constructionism offers a way out of this dilemma, not by situating itself somewhere between these poles, but rather by reconfiguring the axes `subject-world' themselves. As Gergen explains, "Although the roots of constructionist thought may be traced to long-standing debates between empiricist and rationalist schools of thought, constructionism attempts to move beyond the dualism to which both of these traditions are committed and to place knowledge within the process of social interchange(p.266)."

Shotter(1993) reiterates,

"Common to all versions of social constructionism is the central assumption that-instead of the inner dynamics of the individual psyche (romanticism and subjectivism), or the already determined characteristics of the external world (modernism and objectivism)-it is the contingent, really vague (that is, lacking any completely determinate character) flow of continuous communicative activity between human beings that we must study(p.179)."

The poles of this responsive conversation are no longer objective entities encapsulated in terms like drive and stimulus, or schema and input, but in a communally enacted play between conformity and resistance, ideology and emancipation. The site of meaning is a relational horizon of collective processes, interdependencies, discursive practices and conventions, a joint-negotiation of reality. What is the ethical-political achievement of what has been referred to as the `discursive revolution'(Potter,1987)? A constructionist rethinking of the subject-object relation generates two crucial, and paradoxical, ethical implications. On the one hand, it transforms meaning from a positive in-itself into an indeterminate border. But at the same time that it destabilizes signification, it locates larger patterns of stability in cultural practices. In sum, even as it eschews artificial orders based on mental or society mechanisms, it understands in all engagements a certain minimal relational coherence missing from more traditional psychologies. Constructionism liberates persons from the tyranny of reified schemes, but protects them from the arbitariness of the punctual self. Gergen(1994) explains, "If one believes that the central unit of society is the individual self, then relationships are by definition artificial contrivances, unnatural and alien. For the individualist, people are bounded entities leading separate lives on independent trajectories: we can never be certain that anyone else understands us, and thus, that they can care deeply about us. By the same token, the self-contained individual can never be certain that he or she understands the mind (thoughts, needs, feelings) of others, and is thereby restrained from investing too heavily in their lives."(p.213). For example, first generation (Chomsky, Fodor) cognitive information processing accounts are still wedded to some degree to a belief in context-independent entities or processes.

Where is the Other?

The discursive turn is indeed revolutionary for having liberated thinking from these structuralist limitations. By reifying human experience into mechanisms partially independent of ongoing culture, modernist perspectives make the world at the same moment too static and too arbitrary. By contrast, the movement in discursive interrelationality is emancipatory to the extent that it sees in human relationship a certain ongoing, fully contextual relational order missing from objectivizing psychologies. But even if one believes that the central unit of society is the social nexus of relation, the coherence and continuity that one is allowed to perceive in day to day experience may be limited fundamentally by the way one characterizes the nature of the `social'. While Gergen's intent here is to point to the 'pathology' inherent in reifying content of experience, one can just as well apply these comments to the way that many variants of social constructionism reify and polarize the PROCESS of experience. The flavor of alienness, separateness, interpersonal polarization Gergen mentions as the legacy of intellectual Romanticism still asserts itself in a muted way in their thinking. I intend to show how, from a certain vantage, rhetorical-social constructionisms can be seen to suffer from an anthropomorphizing of the notion of the social. How so?

In the above accounts, as well as in the work of authors such as Shotter, Potter(1987) and Harre(1986), we find the essence of human meaning as emerging from a lattice defined by a circle of related terms:language, rhetoric, sociality, embodiment. We need to examine how these terms work to structure the world for these writers in order to reveal what more primary process of meaning may lie hidden within the confines of their notions of language as social embodiment. If language, as `forms of life', is at the root of discourse, what is the fundamental requirement for language? There would seem to be agreement among a number of versions of constructionism that dialogically-structured activity requires the participation of more than one person. This would seem to be the minimal requirement of any notion of sociality. But then how do we account for communication with oneself, or with a written text?

Wittgenstein(1953) asks, `Can one think without speaking? Can one say things only to oneself?' His answer, echoed by various social constructionists: A thought is not something present somewhere in one's mind, like a picture, to be observed, translated, described or expressed without that observation changing the very nature of what it is we had `in mind'. Therefore, the idea of a thought divorced from expression, usage, application, is meaningless. Speech, for Wittgenstein, only has meaning in relation to its ongoing usage within a community of speakers. Beliefs and desires are not unobservables but are always shown by our acting. Thought In-vention only can be understood as joint activity constrained and fed by Con-vention. This does not mean that the other who says to me, `Yes, I understand what you are thinking' is sharing a supposed identical insight with me. How would either of us know on what basis our thinking is identical, without further explication? And the very necessity of responsively elaborating the supposed initial meaning of my thinking continues to change it's role in our interchange. So, as it turns out, my attempt to represent my `private' understanding identically to another reveals the concept of identity to be a fiction, or more specifically, to be a transient non-recuperable moment in the process of discursive activity. Gergen(1985), like Wittgenstein, denies linguistic, and thus meaningful, significance to the idea of conversation-with-self independent of my rhetorical interactions with other people. He says "Languages are essentially shared activities. Indeed, until the sounds or markings come to be shared within a community, it is inappropriate to speak of language at all. In effect, we may cease inquiry into the psychological basis of language (which account would inevitable form but a subtext or miniature language) and focus on the performative use of language in human affairs(p.270)."

If the self thinking to itself only has meaning as a derived form of social speech, then the same must go for the understanding of a written text. As Shotter(1993) argues, "the essence of textual communication is its so-called intertextuality: the fact that it draws upon people's knowledge of a certain body of already formulated meanings in the making of its meanings-this is why texts can be understood without contexts, that is, independently of immediate and local contexts(p.26)." In treating the interaction with a written work as, in some cases, resistant to the immediacy of context, Shotter upholds a distinction between speech and writing that Derrida has spent a career deconstructing. Derrida uses the terms `text' and `writing' to refer to all modes of understanding, inscribed, spoken, gestured or otherwise, precisely in order to demonstrate the radically contextual process underlying all forms of communication. While it is not our intent here to show how Derrida's(1976) grammatological project destabilizes distinctions between writing and speech, we want to question why a written text should be seen, even if in only rare

circumstances, as in any fundamental way less of a fully local, contextualized conversation than any face-to-face encounter. I suggest that the dialogue between oneself as artist and one's created work, whatever the medium of expression, is a fully contextual sociality not because such experiences show themselves in my actions with other people, affirming my relation to public cultural practices, but because my conversation with myself is already fully public prior to any notion of interchange with `other human beings'. Even my repetitive reading of the `same' sentences over and over is a fully contextualized and social process. In what sense can we claim that such situations are `public', and how can repetition of the same text expose us to otherness, if it excludes other voices from our definition of the social?

Who we perceive ourselves to be is indeed formed and reformed through our encounters with an other, but the question I want to raise is, does this shaping depend on the fact that the othernesses which impinge upon us are formulated as other voices, other persons? What does `person' or `other' mean? If language, as `forms of life', is at the root of discourse, what is the fundamental requirement for language? Is thinking to oneself not to be understood as a fully linguistic activity? Is solitary experience an activity which simply recycle meanings co-created in interaction with other members of a symbolizing community, or does private thought re-invent language? It seems that a social constructionism which bases its notion of the `socius' on a too-authoritative notion of speech needs to begin from the question which sparked Heidegger's project. Before we ask, what is a person, we must ask `what is a thing'.

There is a way of understanding communication, even such experiences as solitary reflection, the reading of a book, or the encounter with a work of art, as fully social and discursive events, without relying on the more obviously formulated notion of actual other speakers being present to us or even introjected by us as internalized voices. Representative constructionist articulations of between-person relationality rest on abstractions masking a more primary locus of sociality. Sensate experience is already radically relational before and beyond any notion of sociality as between-person voices-gestures, generating more intimate and mobile possibilities of interpersonal understanding than is offered via discursive readings of terms like sociality, language and embodiment. Sociality can be understood as originating at a more concrete, intricate site than that of languaged or gestured utterance, allowing each participant in conversation to maintain an ongoing thread of non-agential, anticipative consistency and immediacy missing from constructionist accounts. Derrida has analyzed this under the rubric of `iterability', and Gendlin (1991),(1992) has articulated it as `experiential intricacy'. Let us first examine the general architecture of this dynamic. We will then discuss its implications for the understanding of persons-in-culture.

The Body of Perception as Discourse:

I offer an account of the origin of language and the social which unravels speech in order to reveal working within the apparent dynamics of joint activity a less `conceptual' dynamic, consisting in an intricate process of sensate interaction. It is not as if the body has not already been a focus of discussion recently within the constructionist community (See Stam(1998)) However, I introduce a notion of embodiment which differs from the way in which the body is treated in constructionist accounts (Sampson(1996), Shotter(1993)).

The sensate body is a metaphorical boundary, an intricate site of discursive responsivity of which actual experiencing represents but the moments of its play. The body does not exist first and then interact with an outside. It is nothing but this relational fold. Language IS sensate, already to be found in the `raw' experience of what we hear and see. This is an important point, because it determines the very core of sensate experience to be double, split within itself before it ever has a chance to exist as singular moments. An element of experience is already divided within itself, not only before it enters into relation with other people, but before it is simply `itself' as singular meaning.

Derrida has said:

"The iterability of an element divides its own identity a priori, even without taking into account that this identity can only determine or delimit itself through differential relations to other elements and hence that it bears the mark of this difference. It is because this iterability is differential, within each individual "element" as well as between "elements", because it splits each element while constituting it, because it marks it with an articulatory break, that the remainder, although indispensable, is never that of a full or fulfilling presence; it is a differential structure escaping the logic of presence..(LI53)."

What Derrida is saying here is that no meaning returns to itself identically, even for an instant. One cannot repeat, copy or reproduce a particular menaing or context, even by the simple act or recollection from memory or from some other form of recorded archive, without changing the sense of that context. To attempt to do so is to retrieve this `same' meaning slightly differently, to `split' it, to alter it, to re-invent it. The process of experiencing as radically interactive captures a more subtle sort of modulation, a finer silt of the world, than that represented by the way in which sense is supposedly created in responsive dialogue. Whereas rhetoric begins in reaction, the sensate fold is a modulation which already takes place before we react to what we experience in behavioral-bodily or verbal conversation with others, or in silent reactivity. As we said earlier, interactivity is not only prior to the perception of objects by a subject, it is prior to any notion of a pre-existingly-patterned object-in-itself, whether on the scale of the physical, neural, psychological or cultural.

There is no pure, monological tone, sense, feel, form, entity. We could not even say that sense is unformed, incomplete, or vague before its participation in discourse. There simply is no such thing as a meaning, sense, tone, which is not already mobile, ahead of itself, simultaneously a relation of similarity to my previous experience and an absolute departure from my history. Each moment is both an imminence and a transcendence, a reference to something familiar and previous, and the admittance of an exceeding. As such it is double, a split unity. I can only speak of such a thing as another person because my world is already ordered as a referential transit, but now `person' loses its prior meaning as monovocal participant.

Responsivity seen in this way need not rely on the more obviously formulated notion of actual other speakers being present to us or even imagined by us, because the social world has already begun in the instant that I experience myself. One might argue that one has introjected the multiple voices of the social realm even in seeming solitary reflection, but this misses the crucial

point that if we want to conceive of `solitary' experience as a social, responsive, discursive dynamic, then we need not determine it thus by reference to the artificial level of introjected formed utterances, voices, gestures of others. Instead, sociality can be understood at the more concrete, intricate site of individual intention. This is a more fundamental level than that of languaged utterance, not because it resists the otherness of community, but because it is already structured as such, but in a way which requires a more immediate, intimate and integral conceptualization of the social.

This more immediate origin of meaning is not an already constituted self, but something prior, of which the self is merely one of its effects.The irreducible basis of meaning is what Derrida calls a mere mark or trace, not yet an `I' or an `Other', but the basis of both. The mark implies both subject and object because, as Derrida's analyses show, for a mark to be a mark it must be repeatable, and the very repetition of a mark of meaning, an intention, a `meaning to say', transforms it. Repetition is altering, and this is what Derrida calls `iterability':

"Through the possibility of repeating every mark as the same, [iterability] makes way for an idealization that seems to deliver the full presence of ideal objects..., but this repeatability itself ensures that the full presence of a singularity thus repeated comports in itself the reference to something else, thus rending the full presence that it nevertheless announces"(LI29)). ...the possibility of its being repeated another time-breaches, divides, expropriates the "ideal" plenitude or self-presence of intention,...of all adequation between meaning and saying. Iterability alters...leaves us no room but to mean (to say) something that is (already, always, also) other than what we mean (to say) (Limited, Inc,p.61)." "The break intervenes from the moment that there is a mark, at once. It is iterability itself, ..passing between the re- of the repeated and the re- of the repeating, traversing and transforming repetition(p.53)."

This situation is valid not only for linguistic signs, but, Derrida says, for all of what philosophy calls experience, "even the experience of being"(Limited,Inc.,p.9). Derrida is telling us that nothing can be thought before or outside of transformation, not even movement itself taken as its own theme. No concept is ever actually stored, archived, dormant, old, existing independently of the `NOW' which marks both our recognition and our modification of its meaning for us. It is not Derrida's point to say that in the ongoing flow of experience and language, the past instants of this endless chain of changing senses of meaning are presumed to still exist somewhere, untouched by what follows them in time. For Derrida this past FOLLOWS the future which is framed by it. That is to say, there is never a question of returning to recover a `what was' untouched by what follows it temporally.

Gendlin(1997) affirms that the self-transcendence of the sensate body is already operative before and after interaction with other `persons':

"Individuals are inherently social, but that doesn't mean everything must come from society, and be imposed on us. Rather, it means that what is individual is also social. In living, our bodies generate, imply, and enact language and culture; but with and after those, our bodies imply (project, experience, sense, practice, demand...) more. What they imply is inherently interactional and social, but it is more precise and implies what has never as yet formed and happened.(p.393)"

Meaning as Beyond Itself:

In distinguishing the relationality of meaning as social constructionisms consider it from our perspective, I do not mean to suggest that a rhetorical social constructionism treats language as anything as reified as formal symbol system. Constructionists agree that language is not a closed system of signs; it is to be understood as a tool, not as a finished form. What I bring to a conversation with each word, gesture or bodily action is not a symbol whose referent is available as context-independent meaning, but is instead radically indeterminate. But notice that the utterance-gesture, even as unfinished tool in a responsive play, is still seen as an `it', a form, a unitary element in joint activity. Its definition may always be in question, but its status as singularity, however indeterminate its referent, apparently is not. Let's take Shotter's position, for instance. On the one hand, Shotter(1999) affirms that experience is a temporally unfolding, implicate order, a relationality not simply of interpersonal dialogues but of perceptual othernesses in which the event of meaning is a part of "the indivisible wholeness of the ceaseless flow of activity within which we-along with the others around us-are embedded"(p.6). In many respects this emphasis on responsivity as expectant, anticipative, implicative, captures the general flavor of my argument. I agree with Shotter's observation that we need not conceive of experience as being `shot out of a pistol at us'. But when he refers to dialogic entities as "incomplete, ongoing, on the way to being other than at the moment they already are"(1993,p.94), he makes a conversational entity, even as a moment in a responsive order, seem to exist first as itself (`what it already is', even if just for a moment) before it becomes its other through the dialectic of joint activity. Thus, responsivity is treated as an implicate order based on a meeting between utterances-gestures.

While I applaud Shotter's rhetorical-responsive version of social constructionism for stretching its reach to the limits of a thinking of culture as joint activity, I want to take a step beyond the notion of discourse as a meeting or joining of othernesses. I argue instead that an utterance is already a meeting with itself. Events don't speak with their surroundings; they ARE their surroundings. As Gendlin(1992) says,"In sensing itself the body functions as our sense of each situation(p.345). It is not a perceived object before you or even behind you. The body-sense IS the situation, inherently an interaction, not a mix of two things (p.347)." An element or `form' of language, as embodied perception, is already split in two as a sensing and being-sensed, a touching and being touched, not only before it enters into relation with other people, but before it is simply `itself'. A moment of experience is not only not monological, but it is equivocal. This internal dichotomization, this infinitesimal way in which a new experience shows itself for me, or more accurately shows myself to me, in terms both of ownness and moreness, transforms a language of rhetorical negotiation into a more sublime dance which sees the latter's forms as overstuffed. That which we `are' at any moment does not need to wait for a response (felt, gestured, spoken) from an other in order to be contested, an entity of meaning is already its own response, its own co-ordination. In this double awareness I leave myself and return to myself, I join the novel and the familiar. More accurately, the familiar and novel are joined as the permeable boundary called `I', always leaving and returning to itself differently in each moment of its instantiation, thus always meaning more than it meant. To sense, to be, is to already be beyond, more than, that which we identify with as the object of our attention.

If to be is in a single instant to be `more than', if to intend is to intend beyond what one intends, then the flow of experience is best thought of as a repetition of this movement-event, rather than as an encounter. Such an experiencing has the quality of perspectival variation, as when we see an object as modulations, fluctuations, each variation existing as a pointing to the next. Gendlin(1997) offers, "Intricacy is very orderly in response to formulations, but it IS neither this nor that formulation. It does not have a static "IS". Rather, it `is-for-carrying-forward'. Although not as yet formed, it always very demandingly and precisely IMPLIES a next step (p.385)." The process of perception as flesh captures a more subtle sort of modulation, a finer silt of the world, than that represented by the way in which sense is created in responsive dialogue. Whereas rhetoric begins in reaction, the sensate fold is a modulation which already takes place before we react to what we experience in behavioral-bodily or verbal conversation with others, or in silent reactivity. There is no pure, monological tone, sense, feel, form, entity. We could not even say that sense is unformed, incomplete, or vague before its participation in discourse. There simply is no such thing as a meaning, sense, tone, which is not already mobile, ahead of itself, simultaneously a relation of similarity to my previous experience and an absolute departure from my history. Each moment is both an imminence and a transcendence, a reference to something familiar and previous, and the admittance of an exceeding. As such it is double, a split unity. I can only speak of such a thing as another person because my world is already ordered as an embodied dialectic, but now `person' loses its prior meaning as monovocal participant.

Culture and Perceptual Embodiment:

I mentioned that notions of embodiment have been offered from various constructionist perspectives. Language as discursive relation can be said to be embodied to the limited extent that it is contaminated by an outside, an other, formed and reformed in every repetition of its joint use. Yet, as monovocal tool, it wields too arbitrary and disruptive a power. For a constructionism of joint utterance, embodiment refers to the body politic, the between-person community. For instance, Sampson's(1998) characterization of the role of the body is that of reflecting and generating a person's position in a social field. He writes, "Not only have we been socialized to use particular words but also to employ our bodies in particular ways. Even the most mundane of our actions, including how our mouths, lips, lungs, vocal cords, and breath patterns are all socialized to form the words we speak, tell us clearly of the embodiment of discourse.(p.25)".

Similarly, Shotter(1993) speaks of ideas originating in `sensuous bodily activities'(p.30). But he seems to assign internal thinking the role of liaison, helping to shape one's behavior in conformity with the supposed constraints of cultural mores and practices. He says, "...one's task in developing into a morally autonomous adult in one's own society is not just that of learning to direct one's own mental processes with the aid of words and signs, but of doing so in a way that makes sense and is considered legitimate by others... Thus our mental life is never wholly our own. We live in a way which is both responsive, and in response to, what is both `within us' in some way, but which is also `other than' ourselves"(p.45). If Shotter's view of inner speech is in fact close to our own perspective, which it may be, then `sensuous bodily activities' need not be characterized as shaping themselves to an outer realm of social convention when that `outer'

realm is already included in (but deconstructed by) an ontologically prior perceptually embodied self-world horizon. I agree that we do not direct our own mental processes. But what is `within us' is `other than ourselves' not because it is exposed to other people's responses, but simply because it is exposed to itself. As I have said, each awareness of meaning is a double movement, in which what I `am' returns to question me from beyond my own resources. The incessant way in which our self-sameness is put into question via the otherness of perceptual sociality puts us always just beyond culture defined as `between person' conventions. As Gendlin puts it(1997),"Culture elaborates and acts in something [experiential intricacy] that is much more than culture(p.391)." To say that my local coordinations of meaning are embedded within broader social processes, or `permitted forms of talk'(Shotter,1993), is putting the cart before the horse. When these broader social processes are understood via the vantage of embodied perception, they lose their legitimacy. Via thinking from the intricate process which is the only site where culture has any real existence, monovocal abstractions like genre, convention, practice make way for a changed landscape of the social, a subtler vocabulary of ongoing styles of implicit experiencing.

What use to us, then, is the idea of a cultural world? What is left of the significance of shared experience and conventions, of genres and communities, if these terms derive from a dialogic thinking that I claim is mired in overly conceptual simplifications masking a more fundamental relational process? I do not at all reject the crucial constructionist insight that human understanding is best understood as relationality fashioned and re-fashioned (and only really existing) within immediate local contexts. But I have asserted that the moment to moment history of my Being-in-relation is of an order which hides within the level of responsive between-person dialogue. This means that those larger patterns of human belonging abstracted from local joint activity, which constructionists discern in terms of cultural language games and practices, also hide within themselves a more primary patterning.

While I affirm that our experience as individuals is characterized by stable relations of relative belonging or alienation with respect to other individuals and groups, the site of this interactivity, whether we find ourselves in greater or lesser agreement with a world within which we are enmeshed, has a character of peculiar continuity of the order of an implying ahead of itself. It also has a character of relentless creative activity that undermines and overflows attempts to understand human action based on between-person determinisms. We may identity to a greater or lesser extent with various larger paradigmatic communities, delicately united by intertwining values. But the contribution of each member of a community to the whole would not originate at the level of spoken or bodily language interchange among voices; such constructs repress as much as they reveal. Even in a community of five individuals in a room, I, as participant, can perceive a locus of integrity undergirding the participation of each of the others to the responsive conversation. In my dealings with other persons, I would be able to discern a thread of continuity organizing their participation in dialogue with me, dictating the manner and extent to which I can be said to influence their thinking and they mine. My thinking can not properly be seen as `determined' by his response, and his ideas are not simply `shaped' by my contribution to our correspondence.

The extent to which I could be said to be embedded within a particular set of cultural practices would be a function of how closely other persons I encounter resonate with my own ongoing

experiential process. I can only shape my action to fit socially legitimate goals or permitted institutionalized grammatical forms to the extent that those goals or forms are already implicated in my ongoing experiential movement. Even then, what is implicated for me is not `the' social forms, but aspects hidden within these so-called forms which are unique to my perceptually embodied construing; what I perceive as socially `permitted' rhetorical argumentation is already stylistically distinctive in relation to what other participants perceive as permitted. Each individual who feels belonging to an extent in a larger ethico-political collectivity perceives that collectivity's functions in a unique, but peculiarly coherent way relative to their own history, even when they believe that in moving forward in life their strategic language moves are guided by the constraints imposed by essentially the `same' discursive conventions as the others in their speech community. All that exists for me in an interchange is that which carries forward the implicate order of my embodied perceptual experiencing.

Perception as Non-Agential Relationality:

`Carries forward the implicate order of my embodied perceptual experiencing'? Isn't this just code for `interprets reality via internal representations'? Aren't we resurrecting the specter of a power-centered agent choosing her world? My perspective is no more to be thought of in essentialist terms than is the constructionist claim that our actions are guided and constrained by larger patterns of communal intelligibility. In both cases, the patterning which constrains our meaning-making is not the order of a context-independent agency, but a relational process which only really exists within the contingency of local interchange. Constructionist orders like genres, practices, conventions are not static but dynamically stable coherences, re-enforced and re-fashioned in each local social encounter. This is precisely how we need to think of the implicate order of perception, the key difference being that, instead of the dialogic space consisting of a responsive conversation between monovocal participants, it exists first and foremost as a conversation between a meaning, sense, utterance, gesture and itself. This strange idea of the instant of awareness, perception, meaning as simultaneously both itself and beyond itself turns a single moment of verbal exchange between two people into a plurality of conversations. In the instant a constructionist account would locate a single interchange of responsive language forms, I would trace a multiplicity of intertwined aspectival variations continually altering my sense of the situation, of myself and the other person. By the time a series of discursive interactions had taken place, allowing the constructionist to place them as tactics or performances within a cultural genre, that `genre' supposedly constraining the interchange would have already been subtly made and remade a number of times over in different ways for each participant.

It is an easy mistake to read perceptual intricacy via constructionist definitions of interpersonal engagement. This results in the appearance that I am claiming to be able to take away from an interpersonal encounter only those aspects that I preemptively announce as `resonant with our own implicative order', thus retreating from the full contingency of responsive being into a kind of teleological self-actualizing process. It is crucial that this implicate order not be confused with a schematic or narrative agency. I agree with Gergen(1994) when he says people "do not consult an internal script, cognitive structure, or apperceptive mass for information or guidance; they do not interpret or "read the world" through narrative lenses; they do not author their own lives. He

rightly points out that such a system can never get beyond its own biases in order to truly be affected by a world outside of its own schemes. Each moment of my ongoing participation in a world, as a play of memory and otherness, destroys the unity which a monological narrative, schematic or apperceptive entity would claim to impose on my understanding. The peculiar ongoing continuity generated by sensate intricacy is not the result of the total or partial preservation of an `internal' meaning, protected from contestation. I am remade differently, but integrally, in every instant.

I am not claiming that we respond to mentally prefigured aspects of another's voice, gesture, feeling; I don't begin from constructionist premises concerning what or who it is that we respond to in interpersonal contact. It is just as much a misnomer to refer to what I do, as embodied being, as choosing or selecting from a world as it is for the constructionist to speak in these terms. It is not that our perspectival understanding is resistant to the influence of discursive communication, but that the way in which we are influenced by a world takes the peculiar form of an anticipative repetition, rather than a contamination. Experience for me is not agential, not a question of autonomous choice, assimilation or self-actualization, but of a fully contextual responsivity which happens to unfold as resonant, perspectival, anticipative, implicative because that is all there is in the fabric of a world as sensate relationality. The discursive other who surprises me as a polarization, intervention, destabilization of my history is presumed to come at me from a substantial distance. But the sensate other who intervenes in my solipsism doesn't come AT me, doesn't interrogate me. The other as variation, implication, anticipated elaboration is impossibly close to me. Far from choosing a reified notion of the individual over more relational thinking, my account of meaning as embodied perception is more radically open to history and culture. Culture is already to be found, shaped and reshaped, in each moment of this transformative process, allowing relationality and culture to intervene more aggressively, more immediately, more intimately in my ongoing history of experience than is seen in monovocal constructionist accounts.

Idealism and Coherence:

Where does the coherence of embodied perception derive from? Mustn't its philosophical justification rest on an idealism of sorts? I might note that the same accusation has been leveled against a between-person constructionism. What, after all, is to guarantee that the interactive nature of human relations expresses itself in terms of larger patterns that allow us to speak of shared genres and practices, rather than a scene of arbitrary, nihilistic freedom (as constructionism's realist detractors(Richardson(1999)) view it)? I think Gergen(1994) is on the way to an answer when he points out the inseparable roles that both novelty and memory play in the act of understanding. He says we are always confronted with novelty.

"Yet our actions in each passing moment will necessarily represent some simulacrum of the past; we borrow, reformulate, and patch together various pieces of preceding relationships in order to achieve local coordination of the moment. Meaning at the moment is always a rough reconstruction of the past, a ripping of words from familiar contexts and their precarious insertion into the emerging realization of the present(p.270)."

If it is the complex interweaving of memory and novelty that allows the social world to unfold for constructionists in terms of larger patterns and stabilities, then the articulation of a more immediate and intricately woven process, wherein the future engages the past not as a ripping of words but a transformative carrying forward, can reveal at the same time a more integral and a more dynamic social order.

Reconciling the Other-in-Me and the They:

An even more central question from a constructionist point of view might be how our claim that an ongoing thread of continuity underlies my participation in interpersonal relations could possibly allow a more penetrating understanding of the Other, than a discursive account which makes no such claim. Haven't I made people into `bounded entities, leading separate lives on independent trajectories'? On the contrary, even as I discover that I am not simply my interactions with other people in the abstract and polarized way that they are represented in discursive accounts, I am able to insert myself into the process of another's thinking more effectively. Being able to relate to others via dimensions of commonality is indeed crucial to going on with life rather than being lost in a fog of chaos and confusion; as such my recognition of the other's integrity of perceptual process is not a barrier to intercourse with them, but an invitation to proceed further than the level of analysis which locates our conversation within shared rhetorical genres. This further engagement is not a retreat from the depth of social connectivity that is achieved via discursive methodology, but the move to a more thoroughgoing sociality. The fine silt of variating perspectives which is the implicative order of experience does not separate me from other persons in any fundamentally different manner than that by which one moment of my experience is `separated' from the next (that is, from itself). Whether my ongoing situational conversation intertwines me within the otherness of an `inanimate' object or a living soul, the process is the same.

Let's take a closer look at the underlying process uniting these conversational modalities, beginning with the kind of experience which finds me alone with my thoughts and my `inanimate' surroundings as I attempt to write a paper. As I write these words, it is a given that my activity arises out of a background of assumptions, concerning my competency, relation to an audience, etc. Through my acquaintance with their own writing, I enter into a conversation with a particular community, and it is important to me that, at least for the purposes of this article, what I have to say is intelligible to that group. On the other hand, I could decide to write for `myself', using a vocabulary which I fully expect will be only marginally coherent to other readers. The point is that, whether I write with an audience or `myself' in mind, the process of generating ideas for the work is not simply the elaboration of an already formed role that I am socialized to perform as discursive partner in a society, involving repositioning myself within the constraints of grammatical forms. The process of writing is itself an ongoing conversation moving subtly BEYOND the reach of those cultural constraints, during which both my view of my own position as well the arguments of my imagined audience is subject to potentially significant change. The role that I perceive to take on in relation to my imagined audience shifts as I reconstrue my own position incrementally in every word that I write, every thought, image, feeling, recollection. I begin with a sketchy idea of what I want to say. As I jot this down, I search for the proper words

to convey what it is I think I already know. The sense of a thought that I intend, even before committing it to writing, speaks back to me and surprises me. As I attempt to solidify this new sense of the word by giving it a name, it engages me now as just a bit inadequate, in need of supplement. Not just my writing, but my thinking, perceiving, has this spiral quality wherein I reach for an idea just beyond my grasp; then grasping it, find it instantly inadequate in the moment of it's capture. Even as inadequate, what I nail down as `this sense' of a thought has the feel of at the same time a completion and a qualitative alteration not just of what immediately preceded it, but of my entire history.

The dialogue between myself as artist and my created work, whatever the medium of expression, is a fully contextual sociality not because such experiences show themselves in my actions with other people, affirming my relation to public cultural practices, but because my conversation with myself is already fully public prior to any notion of interchange with `other human beings'. Even my repetitive reading of the `same' sentences over and over is a fully contextualized and social process (As Derrida 's `iterability' trope remind us, to repeat a `meaning to say' is to transform it). The peculiar dual quality of completion and instant obsolescence that attaches itself to each moment of my thinking, wiping out and remaking my past, applies to an infinity of other modes of awareness that intervene when I seemingly lose my train of thought and, succumbing to creative fatigue, find myself observing visual textures of my surroundings, listening distractedly to ambient sounds, noting the touch of warm air blowing on my skin from the heating vent. In my immersion in these objects of attention, I am confronted with othernesses as fully interrogational as any `voice'.

They are in the most immediate sense my culture, background others which ground my situational comportment as well as subverting the self-sameness of my identity. Each of these perceptual encounters are not simply my assimilation of `objects' of perception, as if in encountering my familiar surroundings I revisit what was in some way already there. Neither are they othernesses in the sense of events which engage me (joint-action) from a distance. They don't come at me, they tumble out of me, as a redefinition of me. They (and myself) only exist in the instant of my contact with them as a touching-being touched, feeling-felt. I become myself anew in them, through them, and they are born anew as responses, interlocutors, to their own inquiry. In the same way as in interpersonal conversation, each of my utterances is contextualized as response to a question. My encounter with sensate objects represents further embodied conversations which depend on, and carry forward, the background thematics of my writing-connected thinking and vice-versa.

When I find myself returning to my writerly `train of thought' and discover that an impasse has been removed, it must be recognized that the `distracted' modes of experience I was tempted to conceive as a hiatus were a continuation of the writing of the work, even in their apparent departure from it. Lets say I now meet with a friend to discuss what I've written. The conversation will have all of the features which typified my solitary writing. Like my writerly and sensate conversations, interchange with my friend will involve measures of anticipation and surprise. But my contact with another person is not a dialogic ping pong game. As words, gestures, expressions are lobbed back and forth, my identity, as Gergen(1994) supposes, originates in my coming to perform a role, defined by and dependent on the validation of others

with whom I enact that role. But my role is not fundamentally in relation to another person or persons, but in relation to the otherness of sensate experience underlying both my self-conversation and my interchange with another person. Perceptual embodiment is not a grammatical order so much as a grammatological order, as in Derrida's notion of gramme as a split singularity. Rather than being constrained by between-person social role, as implicatory being always intending-beyond-itself I stand partially ahead of the culture it presumably represents. My social role is not simply pushed and pulled via the validation of others; if I determine that my conversational partner reinterprets my argument via a predicable, too-narrow perspective, I not only will not be little affected by their critique, but in anticipating such a response will consider it an affirmation of sorts. On the other hand, my `solitary' self-conversation can lead to devastating invalidation and reformulation of my identity.

Rather than a single game, interpersonal relationality is at least two intertwining games, or, more precisely, texts, from my vantage; it is both my integrally variating senses of the other's interpretation of our encounter, and my awareness of the dynamic stability of the difference between his and my outlook. (In fact, as we have seen, it is a multiplicity of modes. For in the situation, both our perspectives will wander into many subregions and modalities, just as when I am alone.) While I am with my friend, I can move back and forth between styles of my self-conversation and the interpersonal interchange, noting an ongoing difference in the relative thematic coherence of these two threads. In attempting to share my ideas with them, I can be aware of the overlap in our understanding at the same time that I recognize incommensurabilities between our perspectives.

But my perspective and that of another are not to be understood as independent, private regions. The interpersonal relation directly remakes my sense of what my `own' perspective is, as well as what I assume to be the other's integral position. It is always a new sense of `me' and `other' that emerge in conversation, but as an intertwining iterative movement among threads of implication. When I get inside the other's head, it is simultaneously they getting inside my head, even if that other is a text I am reading or a painting I gaze at. But again, this process is no different in kind than that of `solitary' perceptive experience, in which my various activities lead me into distinct zones or situations characterized by a certain aesthetic integrity of unfolding perspectival variations. Listening to music, enjoying lunch, following my own train of thought, or conversing with others, are all modalities of experiencing having their own distinct, temporary integrities even as they blend into and carry forward previous modes. My sense of my own identity is relentlessly, but subtly, formed and reformed in moving through and between myriad modalities of experience, including my moments of self-conversation, my immersion in subjects-objects of touch, sight, as well as within interpersonal interchange.

Conclusion:

As ethical-therapeutic instruments, both between-person constructionisms and my embodied approach emphasize movement and the ceaseless questioning of ideologies. Both constitute thoroughgoing ethical relativisms. Their differences center on the kind of intimacy and intensity of movement we allow ourselves to recognize in the incessant finding and losing of ourselves in the world as simultaneously historically grounded and emancipatory actors (See Gendlin(1981)

for a well-developed therapeutic approach based on sensate embodiment.) I have faulted discursive accounts for failing to see the changing contexts of a person's thinking within a more fundamental perspective of embodied-sensate intricacy. I have argued that a process of embodied perception underlies our encounters in different contexts and gives them a peculiar sort of coherence or implicate self-consistency hidden from a variety of constructionist versions. Inevitably, my argument will be read by some as the advocacy of an idealism, a structuralism, the old wine of individualism in new clothes. Let me make this much clear. There is no vantage point I am allowing, from which anyone might point to the process which I have described on these pages and totalize it, in even a momentary fashion. As I have said, myself, culture and convention are entirely reborn each moment of my sensate experience, which includes everything I might claim to know about myself or another, any particular privileged source of knowledge, theoretical or practical. Each new word I write down on these pages and which you read right now EX-ists as both continuation of contextual history, different for you as reader than for me as writer, and the introduction of a new world. It is both these things at the same time. Each new word is, as perspectival variation, a new sense of the word and thus a new philosophy of the world, in some small way. This is true even in rereading the same word over and over. The otherness of history, culture, intervenes in each supposed repetition of the `same' word, and this comes from within a thing's own resources as simultaneously object and subject, not from the response of a `rhetorical' outside.

There is no vantage point from which I, as theorist, can escape this transformative process such as to pre-emptively determine a particular narrative foundation for experience. If I want to assert that what I've just claimed concerning the origin of discourse as embodied intricacy remains ethically, aesthetically, scientifically true now, I have to allow my terms to be self-reflexive, so that the truth of what I write is continually being rewritten in each new mark on the page, as a new philosophy of truth, embodiment, intricacy, writing, as well as a new philosophy of me. My writing does not renew itself because it introjects or coordinates with a culture beyond it, but because it already is culture, as always a (subtly) new conventionality in every moment of its instantiation, interwoven with what preceded it in an intimate order, intending beyond what it intends. Truth, then, is this horizon which in the same instant loses and comes back to me, as `me', always a new instantiation of subject-object. Is what I offer, then, a modernism, a structuralism, a self-actualization? Such entities claim to step outside of the bounds of the repetition of difference which remakes the whole world, including my `self', anew in every awareness. This is far from what I have in mind. All that I advocate here, is that discursive thinking allow itself more aggressive and thoroughgoing exposure to the `enchanted', or the transformative, impetus renewing experience in innumerably rich and precise ways, but packed so tightly and invisibly within the abstraction that is the rhetorical social relation that what is left to be seen is a dialogic space both too plodding and too constraining.

(Joshua Soffer,2001)

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