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Are Constructs Personal?

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Abstract
Mancuso (1996) accurately identifies some similarities between personal construct psychology and social constructionism. These two traditions agree that experience is mediated, and that humans have no access to the absolute truth about themselves or the world. Against Mancuso, however, I argue that the two traditions have different accounts of *what* is constructed and *how* it is constructed. Mancuso's proposed synthesis stays too close to traditional cognitive psychology, by focusing on individuals' cognitions and by ignoring the social and relational context in which meaning is constructed.

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ABSTRACT. Mancuso (1996) accurately identifies some similarities between personal construct psychology and social constructionism. These two traditions agree that experience is mediated, and that humans have no access to the absolute truth about themselves or the world. Against Mancuso, however, I argue that the two traditions have different accounts of *what* is constructed and *how* it is constructed. Mancuso's proposed synthesis stays too close to traditional cognitive psychology, by focusing on individuals' cognitions and by ignoring the social and relational context in which meaning is constructed.

In his article 'Constructionism, Personal Construct Psychology and Narrative Psychology', James C. Mancuso (1996) suggests that we might unite these three traditions. He describes commonalities among the traditions, and sketches his own position on how they might be usefully combined. I find his approach productive. He avoids the name-calling that often occurs in discussions of this sort, and in doing so he provides an opportunity to reconsider some of the assumptions made by these important schools of thought in psychology. In my view, however, Mancuso's proposed synthesis does not do justice to essential insights from social constructionism.

In discussing Mancuso's argument I refer to two traditions, not three. I find it more useful to cast *social constructionism* and *personal construct psychology* as the primary theoretical traditions here, and *narrative psychology* as an area of inquiry that can be pursued within either tradition. I do not mean to devalue the theoretical or methodological insights that 'narrative psychologists' have brought us, but in my judgment these insights do not yet constitute their own theoretical tradition. Work on narrative introduces an important new concept and focuses on a central empirical phenomenon, but it still proceeds from more established theoretical traditions. Gergen and Gergen (1986), for instance, present a social constructionist view of narrative. Stein and Policastro's (1984) cognitivist account is more congenial to personal construct psychology.

One way to address the adequacy of social constructionism and personal construct psychology is to ask which best explains the phenomenon of

narrative discourse. Mancuso argues that his version of personal construct psychology—which foregrounds narrative as a theoretical tool—can incorporate insights from social constructionism, and explain both empirically occurring narratives and other aspects of human behavior. I argue that Mancuso's synthesis fails to incorporate central insights of social constructionism, and thus explains narratives and other human phenomena less well than it might.

Although Kelly's (1955/1991) personal construct psychology is not often credited in accounts of the 'cognitive revolution', he provided an early non-behaviorist theory in psychology. Along with Bruner, Chomsky, Piaget and others opposed to behaviorism, Kelly proposed that experience and behavior are *mediated* by cognitive constructs. The nature of the world and our true selves do not impinge directly upon us, such that our accounts can correspond to them. Instead, our experience has meaning only as it is mediated by our construals of it. Mancuso is right to argue that social constructionists agree with personal construct psychology on this point.

Social constructionists and Mancuso go further than mainstream cognitive psychology in their account of mediation, by arguing that the real world and our real selves are largely beside the point. Instead of proposing a context-independent entity that forms the core of a person, Mancuso argues that the self emerges in particular contexts. People create themselves as they actively make sense of the world. Social constructionists (Gergen, 1991) and social constructionist accounts of self-narrative (Spence, 1982) agree. Instead of wrestling with puzzles about whether constructs correspond to reality, we should study how these constructs help create our realities.

More than many cognitive psychologists, Mancuso also extends his emphasis on mediation to his view of science. Psychologists and other scientists do not build theories that reflect reality. Instead, they always work from within their own construals. Social constructionists agree that we must reflexively apply our accounts of mediation to our own work—this was, in fact, one of the earliest themes in social constructionism (Gergen, 1973). To some extent Mancuso enacts this reflexivity in his presentation, which gives it a less dogmatic tone.

Despite these three points of agreement, however, Mancuso diverges from social constructionism on two crucial issues—*what* is constructed, and *how* it is constructed. The two traditions agree that something is constructed, something that mediates our experience and understandings of the world. In Mancuso's revised personal construct psychology, the mediators are 'personal realities' and 'private meanings'. He does not deny the influence of social and cultural factors on experience and understanding, but he suggests that *individuals'* construals must be central to any explanation. Given the importance of socio-cultural patterns and interactional dynamics, personal construct psychology studies 'how those local

realities become the personal realities by which individuals seek to be defined in their social interplay' (p. 51). Note the commitment to an individual level of explanation here: to explain the constructs that mediate experience, Mancuso looks to the individual's psychological processes.

How do these psychological constructs work? They 'incorporate proactively the inputs' received from the world (p. 52). That is, they filter input and organize experience into something meaningful. The person 'monitors the discrepancy levels generated by locating the input at any point along one of the bipolar constructs that are available in the person's hierarchically organized system of constructs' (p. 56). Constructs facilitate understanding by being organized into systems in the individual's mind, and the person uses different constructs with various kinds of input to make sense of the world. As Mancuso's discussion proceeds, his description of these mediating constructs sounds more and more like the schemas or concepts of information-processing cognitive psychology. His occasional talk of 'discrepancy levels' and 'validation' contains echoes of hypothesis-testing models of cognition.

Social constructionists—as suggested by the adjective that Mancuso tellingly fails to use—argue that mediation can be better exp'ained at the socio-cultural and relational levels. Socio-cultural practices and belief systems provide constructs that make experience meaningful. And constructs are created, on the fly, as we interact in particular relational contexts. But—the response wells up—we have to explain how individuals incorporate and use those constructs. Mancuso wants to explain how socio-cultural and relational products become part of each individual's 'personal system of signs'.

It is here that social constructionists, especially those inspired by Wittgenstein (1953) and Bakhtin (1935/1981), disagree. Explanations of mediation in terms of individual cognitions bring intractable conceptual problems, and fail to capture central aspects of mediating processes. Following Wittgenstein, Gergen (1982) argues that we must avoid the conundrum of 'inner' and 'outer'. Faulconer and Williams (1990) make a similar argument based on Heidegger. To suppose that we must posit an inner world to explain meaningful experience leads to intractable questions about the accuracy of internal representations, about free-will and determinism, and so on. Positing individual cognitive processes does not help explain mediation. As Wittgenstein argues, it explains little and brings many puzzles.

Shotter (1993) describes how mediating processes are essentially relational. Following Wittgenstein and Bakhtin, he argues that the concept 'personal system of signs' is an oxymoron. Language is permeated with the echoes of others' voices—so much so that, even when we talk or think about our selves, we are always inevitably in relation with others. The constructs that give meaning to our selves and our experiences are so woven into relational

context that it does not serve us to suppose that they are internalized into individual minds.

So how would social constructionists propose to explore psychological topics like 'the self'? Shotter and Gergen (1989) describe some of the cultural belief systems that provide resources people use in creating and transforming their selves. Following Spence (1982) and others, they also describe how people 'talk themselves into being', and analyze the relational processes through which this occurs. These explorations of the self remain at socio-cultural and relational levels—citing shared beliefs, practices and interactional dynamics. As such, although they are not perfect, I find them more promising than Mancuso's return to the level of individual cognitions.

Using Mancuso's example of Vincent and his father, we can briefly explore how empirical analyses might differ in personal construct psychology and social constructionism; this will clarify the traditions' divergence. Personal construct psychology and social constructionism differ centrally in what aspects of context they consider relevant. As part of their agreement on mediation, the traditions agree that individual signs must be *contextualized* to become meaningful. Signs do not refer unambiguously to a transparent reality. People understand signs only as the signs get contextualized within a system of constructs.

But, as we have seen, the two traditions differ in their account of these constructs. Mancuso's personal construct psychology focuses on cognitive content at the individual level. This leads him to consider certain kinds of context irrelevant, as revealed in his example of Vincent. I will discuss three aspects of the context surrounding Vincent's narrative that Mancuso ignores, but social constructionists would explore—the socio-cultural, the textual and the relational.

Mancuso's presentation of the example preserves only the cognitive content. This makes sense, as his analysis focuses on the concepts that it contains. Social constructionists would be interested in this, but they would pay more attention to the content's place in cultural, not individual, belief systems. What cultural patterns exist in father–son interactions in this society? What is the meaning of physical labor for these people? Is it more 'male'? In what contexts? In this society does one characteristically become a 'self' by separating from others? These sorts of questions would enrich Mancuso's discussion of the example. To include them, he would have to include cultural belief systems as part of the relevant context. Because belief systems can be cast as cognitive content, this first aspect would be easier than the following two for Mancuso to integrate into his account.

I assume Mancuso's example is fictional, and in any case the discourse is not transcribed as it would have actually occurred. This is important, because actual interactions are always more subtle and complex than invented ones. As Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) show in detail, social practices and particular interactions contain intricate textual patterns

that organize the experience and make it meaningful. People can organize their relationships and their senses of themselves through subtle cues in their discourse. The fact that Mancuso left this sort of detail out of his example shows that he does not consider these aspects of the social and interactional context relevant to the meaningfulness of the narrative. Against this, Goodwin (1990), Hicks (1994) and others have shown that the details of narrative discourse essentially contribute to its meaning.

Mancuso also fails to discuss the relational context of his example adequately. Goffman (1983) and others have shown how people inevitably adopt relational positions with respect to others, often implicitly. Based on these relational positionings Goffman describes a level of organization —which he calls the 'interaction order'—that helps structure our experience. We do not have much data on Vincent's relationship with his father, but I cannot avoid the suspicion that something Oedipal is going on. (By calling this relational pattern 'Oedipal' I do not mean to accept Freud's individualistic metapsychology, but use the term as shorthand, to characterize a type of relationship.) Mancuso's interpretation of Vincent's personal constructs casts the relationship quite positively, and this might be plausible on the surface. But if we consider the implicit relational level, an 8-year-old boy's remark about 'something happening' to his father sounds ominous. In making this utterance Vincent is adopting a relational position with respect to his father, and I suspect that we might find a competitive or even hostile side to their relationship. To explore this hypothesis, we would need more data from interactions in this family. We would need to look at details of the verbal and non-verbal signals they use to maintain and transform their relationships with each other, using methods like those developed by Silverstein (1984).

I understand that Mancuso was only giving a brief example to illustrate his position, and that he had limited space to elaborate it. Nonetheless, given his theoretical discussion, I believe his exclusion of three aspects of the context—the socio-cultural, the textual and the relational—reveals biases about what is relevant to explaining mediation. Mancuso's personal construct psychology focuses on the content of individual cognitions, and leaves out promising levels of explanation that social constructionism has stressed.

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