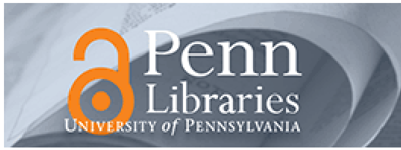

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Reviews of Rom Harré and Grant Gillett, *The Discursive Mind*, and James P. Gee, *The Social Mind*

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NOTE: At the time of publication, the author Stanton Wortham was affiliated with Bates College. Currently June 2007, he is a faculty member of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania.
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Reviews of Rom Harré and Grant Gillett, *The Discursive Mind*, and James P. Gee, *The Social Mind*

Abstract
Although the authors come from very different traditions (respectively, philosophy of science and social psychology; medical ethics and philosophy of psychology; and linguistics), these two books make remarkably similar points. The vision they express - that psychological phenomena like emotions, memory and thought are essentially social types - is in the air, and both books provide useful articulations.

Comments
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personal kind, creative of new social realities). For these are the things we must understand if we are to outgrow our current reality (the present individualistic and scientistic 'way' the world is for us), and to develop new (more relational) ways of relating ourselves both to each other and to our surrounding circumstances. Searle's constructions seem to me to be aimed at sustaining the status quo.

Reference

Goodman, N. (1972). The way the world is. In N. Goodman (Ed.), *Problems and projects* (pp. 24–32). New York: Bobbs-Merrill.

John Shotter
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Sociocentric Accounts of the Mind

Rom Harré and Grant Gillett, *The Discursive Mind*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994. vi + 192 pp. ISBN 0–8039–5501–4 (hbk) 0–8039–5502–2 (pbk).
James P. Gee, *The Social Mind*, New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1992, xxi + 175 pp. ISBN 0–89789–248–8 (hbk).

Although the authors come from very different traditions (respectively, philosophy of science and social psychology; medical ethics and philosophy of psychology; and linguistics), these two books make remarkably similar points. The vision they express—that psychological phenomena like emotions, memory and thought are *essentially social types*—is in the air, and both books provide useful articulations. Harré and Gillett give a description of, and a manifesto for, the 'second cognitive revolution'. The first cognitive revolution rejects only one of the two central problematic assumptions of behaviorism. The second revolution, which Harré and Gillett call 'discursive psychology', agrees with the first that all experience is mediated, but goes beyond this to overcome mind–body dualism. Gee pursues a similar strategy, arguing that human mental processes cannot be separated from social and discursive context. Both *The Discursive Mind* and *The Social Mind* are accessible and unusually broad. The authors describe and illustrate a provocative vision for psychology's future, each in less than 200 pages. Because both books describe a wide and still-emerging set of ideas, however, each remains incomplete. The authors make many brief forays into diverse topics, some of which remain unconvincing.

So how does psychology acknowledge mediation—positing that people interpret their experience, and that this interpretation shapes their behavior—without falling into mind–body dualism? Harré and Gillett argue that the mediators are not semi-permanent mental entities, but discursive practices and cultural context. The authors move 'away from mythical mental entities' (p. 40), because such entities do not really explain anything. As the later Wittgenstein argued, having a copy of the world in one's head does nothing to explain how we actually think and act, and leads to a regress of representations. Gee agrees. He argues that meaning, memory, beliefs and other supposedly psychological entities 'are actually out *in the social world* of action

and interaction' (p. xvii). To explain such entities in terms of individual psychology is like explaining a 'strike' in baseball only in terms of physics. The various physical processes are necessary to the event of a strike, but we cannot understand the phenomenon without the social institutions and cultural categories that constitute it. Similarly, various physical and mental processes are necessary to an event of remembering or believing, but an adequate understanding requires socio-cultural analysis as well.

But how could a belief, an emotion or a memory be a 'socio-mental practice' (Gee, p. 1) instead of a psychological state? Instead of being entities, beliefs, emotions and memories are *actual events*. Such psychological types exist only in practice, and cannot be isolated and identified out of their contexts of use. Attitudes and emotions come into existence 'in the performance of actions' (Harré and Gillett, p. 22). Memories '*are in the telling*' (Gee, p. 60). The report of a memory is not reproduction of a representation, but instead a socio-culturally located event. This does not mean that memories, judgments and emotional displays emerge *de novo*– every time, without constraints. Cultural context and discursive practices, as well as individuals' physical and mental states, provide *resources* that people use to accomplish their judgments, displays and other actions. But individual states and processes do not in themselves constitute memories, attitudes or emotions. It is the cultural and individual resources, and how people employ them in actual events, that psychologists should study.

Does this not lead to behaviorism—by insisting that psychological states exist only in performances and refusing to posit mediating psychological entities? No, because neither Harré and Gillett nor Gee denies mediation or unobservable entities. They argue that much of the structure which constitutes beliefs, memories and emotions exists in the world, not in the head. So the best explanation is a sociocentric one, which takes as its unit of analysis 'people engaged in social forms of life out in the world' (Gee, p. 1). Traditional psychological explanations mistake socio-cultural structure for individual competence, and make fallacious inferences about mental states.

This seems to eliminate psychology altogether and replace it with sociology. Does the new discursive or social psychology describe people as automatons, merely responding to social inputs? On the contrary, Harré and Gillett present individuals as agents who skillfully use cultural and discursive resources to accomplish their intentions. Cultural context and discursive positions constrain individuals, but individuals also choose how to respond to their situations. But this seems to undermine the argument. What exactly are 'skills' and 'intentions', if not semi-permanent mental entities of the sort discursive psychology means to avoid? To explain an event with reference to individual agency seems to invoke the same sort of mysterious mental realm that Harré and Gillett criticize cognitive psychology for.

Gee might be able to help, at least with regard to skills. He gives a more thorough account of the individual-level resources that might contribute to the performance of memories, emotions, and the like. Drawing on connectionist theory, he argues that individual minds or brains (he does not clearly articulate which) contain 'networks of associations'. We don't directly store a concept of 'kitchen', for example, but instead build up associations among features (stoves, chairs, etc.) that make up kitchens, as contrasted with other types of rooms. Such networks of associations get

built up through experience, and provide resources used to perform memories, emotions and attitudes.

Connectionism appeals to Gee—and also to Harré and Gillett, in fact, although they do not explore it as extensively. Connectionist accounts do not build emotions and attitudes into the head, but instead argue that such things emerge from networks of associations. But such accounts normally pay the price of reductionism for this parsimony. That is, the typical connectionist account presents a memory or a concept as simply a pattern of associations, and nothing more. But this would reduce Gee's socio-cultural phenomena to neurological or unconscious mental ones. To avoid this Gee claims only to borrow connectionism as a *model* for the individual *resources* people bring to performances of memories and beliefs, not as a model of memories and beliefs *themselves*. Although perhaps plausible, this non-reductionist use of connectionist accounts begs for elaboration.

So both Harré and Gillett and Gee resist sociological determinism, and argue that individual-level structures and processes partly constitute memories, beliefs and emotions. But both fail to give a convincing account of what these individual-level phenomena are. Harré and Gillet's 'intentions' threaten to reintroduce mysterious psychological entities, and Gee's 'networks' either invite reductionism or need substantial elaboration. To deliver on the promise of these sociocentric accounts of mind, then, two things must happen. First, we must continue to explore the discursive and socio-cultural contexts of psychological processes and performances, in search of structure that partly constitutes memories, emotions, and the like. The more structure we find out in the world, the less we will need to build into the head. Second, we must more clearly describe the individual-level resources that help establish psychological processes and events. In pursuing these two projects, Harré and Gillett would probably want to reconsider their claim that discursive psychology represents 'the final shift of paradigm' (p. 26) for psychology. Both they and Gee have articulated a promising approach, but more than details remain to be worked out and there are undoubtedly further transformations to come.

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Psychology as a Liberating Device?

CHARLES W. TOLMAN, *Psychology, Society and Subjectivity: An Introduction to German Critical Psychology*. London: Routledge, 1994. 163 pp. ISBN 0–415–08976–X (pbk).

In November 1995 Klaus Holzkamp, the 'godfather' of German critical psychology, died. It is unclear if this also symbolizes the end of the endeavours of critical psychology, which seem to have existed in increasingly isolated and less important conditions in Berlin. At least this has been its development from the perspective of the Netherlands. During the 1970s and 1980s the Berlin school and its theoretical products were actively studied and discussed in circles of leftist students and teachers, but gradually this interest faded away. The reason for this must be located in the highly abstract and also somewhat arrogant, dogmatic character of the proposals for a critical psychology. As empirical studies which could provide some