

Book review

THOMAS TEO

Fiona J. Hibberd, *Unfolding Social Constructionism*. New York: Springer, 2005. ISBN 0 387 22974 4, xviii + 207 pp. US\$69.95.

This book analyzes the metatheoretical characteristics of social constructionism (SC), the famous and, for many psychologists, infamous research program that has emphasized the historicity, contextuality and socio-linguistic embeddedness of human (mental) life. Hibberd reconstructs – using logical and philosophical tools – the metatheoretical ideas of Jonathan Potter, John Shotter and, in particular, Kenneth J. Gergen, who has become internationally the best-known icon for this movement. She discusses SC's position on the relationship between language and reality: for instance, that psychological theories do not derive from observation; that they do not mirror reality; and that they are discourse-dependent. She evaluates the accusation brought forth by SC's opponents that this perspective remains relativistic and self-refuting; and she challenges the view that SC is in theoretical contradiction to a positivist philosophy of science by demonstrating that both share several philosophical points of view.

While Hibberd develops her arguments on SC in eight chapters, she also provides an excellent introduction to some of the most important issues of the philosophy of science as they relate to psychology. The standpoint, from which the author performs her analyses, is acknowledged as realism, more precisely the philosophy of John Anderson, who in the 1920s introduced his philosophy to Australia. Hibberd in this book demonstrates an excellent understanding of the philosophy of science and of issues addressed by analytic philosophy while at the same time she applies with sophistication

theoretical concepts in order to clarify the ideas of SC. This well-argued book contains the best psychological reflection of what is happening in the metatheory of this recent psychological program.

The most important chapter in this book is the treatise on 'relativism and self-refutation'. The seemingly easy and bullet-proof rejection of SC due to its relativism, which supposedly is self-refuting, is a matter much more complex than can be expressed in a single argumentative attack. Indeed, Hibberd differentiates various types of relativism relevant to SC such as epistemological relativism, ontological relativism and conceptual relativism. She shows that the charge of relativism and self-refutation assumes the legitimacy of concepts that SC rejects (traditional ontology, rationality, objectivity, the representative nature of language and truth, etc.) and thus demonstrates that many of its critics are mistaken. This does not mean that she agrees with SC, because she identifies issues of relativism in SC's metatheory.

Hibberd provides a very clever philosophical analysis of SC. For psychologists the question remains: Do we need a philosophical analysis of SC and should we care about this reconstruction? She shows awareness of this issue by admitting 'Shotter would have no time for the material in this book' (6). In order to answer this question I suggest that we consult metatheories discussed in the book itself. From a positivist position we should care about inconsistencies, contradictions, problems, shortcomings and misunderstandings in any psychological metatheory. The problem is that most psychologists do not care about these issues because social dynamics play a larger role than evidence and arguments in psychology. If this is the case, then it would support the perspective of SC. Ironically, positivist reconstructions are embedded in a normative desire, whereas SC seems to do justice to reality by identifying what actually happens in psychology.

Individuals who are sympathetic to Gergen's project will not change their mind because of these reconstructions and individuals who are in conflict with his project will remain opposed and probably not spend time reading this book, which in fact provides a balanced view of SC. Psychologists without a preset attitude towards SC might even become more sympathetic to Gergen's ideas, against the intentions of the author, because she identifies mistakes made by critics of SC, and because the extensive arguments on connections and commonalities between logical positivism and SC are less threatening to SC. Although Hibberd shows convincingly that elements are shared by both metatheories, a focus on elements does not do justice, to use terminology from the history of psychology, to the gestalt of logical positivism or SC. The world-views of these programs are in the end significantly different.

Despite the fact that there are minor misreadings of the literature, such as the suggestion that for Kant necessary truths are synthetic, rather than that

Kant intended to identify necessarily true synthetic judgments (because most synthetic statements are not necessarily true); despite the fact that there exist some interpretations of logical positivism that seem idiosyncratic; and despite the uneven chapter lengths: Hibberd in her reconstructions does justice to the metatheoretical program of SC, which has changed significantly over time. Despite my concerns of relevance, Hibberd demonstrates how analyses in theoretical psychology should be accomplished in being scholarly, thoughtful, informed and argumentative rather than rhetorical. Hibberd has accomplished the task of unfolding the metatheories of SC to a psychological audience and anyone interested in the strengths and limitations of SC and in theoretical psychology in general should study this book.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

THOMAS TEO is an Associate Professor at York University, Toronto, Canada. His current research focuses on critical studies in the history and theory of psychology. Specifically, he is reconstructing the history of psychology as the history of the critique of psychology; he researches the history of philosophical psychology, and the history and theory of racism in the human sciences.

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