The Social Construction of Reality (and Conclusion)

Spring 2014

Final Examination
- Monday, May 12, 2014
  - 7:00 - 10:00 PM
  - 2050 Valley Life Sciences Building
- 3-Hour Exam
  - 1st Hour (+), Noncumulative
    - c. 15 very short-answer questions
  - 2nd Hour (-), Cumulative
    - 5 less short-answer questions
  - 3rd Hour Free
- DSP Proctoring Is Being Arranged

Topics in Noncumulative Portion
1. The Self
2. Social-Cognitive Neuropsychology
3. Development of Social Cognition
4. Personality and Social Cognition
5. Social Construction of Reality

Knowledge and Reality
- Purpose of Cognition is to Acquire Knowledge of Reality
  - Basis for Adaptive Behavior
- Social Cognition: Reality is Social in Nature
  - Other People, Their Behavior
  - Ourselves, Our Own Behavior
  - Situations in which We Interact with Others
- Reality has Existence Independent of the Knower

Philosophical Roots: Realism vs. Idealism
- Descartes, Mind vs. Body
- Realism (Kant)
  - The Objects of Perception Exist Independent of Our Perception of Them
- Idealism (Berkeley)
  - The Objects of Perception Do Not Exist Independent of the Activities of Our Own Minds
  - Intrinsic vs. Context-Dependent Properties
The Enlightenment Stance
Cassirer (1932)

- “Enlightenment” of 17th-18th Centuries
  - Locke, Voltaire, Diderot
- Contrast with Medieval Superstition
  - Knowledge Through Authority
- Knowledge Acquired Through Reason

The Enlightenment Stance

Reason is the Central Human Capacity
Permits Correct Thought and Action

- Humans are Rational by Nature
- Progress to Perfection
- All Humans Equally Rational
- Tolerance
- Acceptance of Beliefs Based on Reason

Theobald von Oer:
The Weimar Courtyard of the Muses
(1860)

The Enlightenment Stance

Reason is the Central Human Capacity
Permits Correct Thought and Action

- Individuality vs. Local Prejudice
- De-Emphasis on Historical Difference
- De-Emphasis on Cultural Difference
- De-emphasizes Intuitive, Artistic
  - Set Stage for 19th Century Romanticism

Anicet-Charles Lemonnier
"Reading of the Tragedy 'L'Orphelin de la Chine' in the Salon of Madame Geoffrin" (1812)

Science and the
Enlightenment Stance

The Laws of Nature are Inexorable

“Any intelligent alien anywhere would have to come upon the same logical system as we have to explain the structure of protons and the nature of supernovae” — Steven Weinberg

Social Construction and Social Cognition

- Beliefs Create Reality
  - Subjective, Objective
    - About Ourselves, Others
    - Situations, Behavior
  - How Are These Beliefs...
    - Acquired (through Perception)
    - Stored (in Memory)
    - Altered (through Thought)
    - Communicated (through Language)
- How Do Beliefs Create Reality?

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy
Merton, 1947, 1958

"Definitions of a situation... become an integral part of the situation and thus affect subsequent developments....

The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true.

The specious validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates a reign of error. For the prophet will cite the actual course of events as proof that he was right from the very beginning”.

Such are the perversities of social logic.
Expectancy Confirmation Effects
Snyder (1978); Darley & Fazio (1980); Jonas (1986)

- Behavioral Confirmation
  - Elicitation of Confirmatory Behaviors
  - Creates Public Reality
- Perceptual Confirmation
  - Interpretation of Ambiguous Behaviors
  - Creates Private Reality

Modes of Perceptual Confirmation

- Constructive Processes in Perception
  - Interpret Current Events
- Reconstructive Processes in Memory
  - Re-Interpret Past Events
- Constructive Alternativism in Thinking
  - Construe Events in Different Ways

Constructive Alternativism
Kelly (1955)

- Events Can Be Construed in Multiple Ways
  - Choose Among Available Constructs
  - Abandon Old Constructs
  - Acquire New Constructs
- Construal Determines Subjective Reality
  - Mental Representation Determines Behavior

Two Aspects of Social Cognition

- Cognition of Social Reality
  - Understanding the Social World
    - Exists Independent of Individual Mind
- Creation of Social Reality
  - Constructing the Social World
    - Through Thought and Action

Levels of Constructivism

- Shared Premise
  - We Do Not Perceive the World Directly
    - Only Through Our Representations of It.
- Individual Variant
  - These Representations are the Product of Cognitive Constructions.
- Social Variant
  - These Representations are the Product of Social Constructions.

Constructivism in Psychology

- Stimulus Environment is Inherently Ambiguous
- Respond to Mental Representations of Objects, Events in World
- No Denial of External Reality
  - The World Exists Outside Our Minds
  - But Does Not Determine Our Behavior
- Action Determined by Internal, Mental Representation of Reality
The Standard View of Reality

- **Objective Reality**
  - Exists Independent of the Mind
  - Discovered through Science, Reason
  - Can Be Changed Through Overt Behavior
    - Mental States Determine Behavior

- **Subjective Reality**
  - Product of Constructive Mental Activity
    - Perception, Memory, Thought
  - May Not Correspond to Objective Reality

The Post-Enlightenment Stance

- **Denial of Universal, Objective Truths**
  - Historical Contingency of Scientific Knowledge
    - of Scientific Discoveries, Scientific Facts
  - Nominalism
    - Classification Reveals Inherent Structure
    - Classification as Convenient Label
  - Stability
    - Coalition Supports Findings
  - Discovery vs. Construction of Reality

Gender as a Biological Fact

- **Sex is Observer-Independent**
  - Chromosomal Heritage
    - XX, Female; XY, Male; etc.
  - Hormonal Endowment
    - Fetal sex hormones
  - Primary, Secondary Sex Characteristics
    - Internal, external genitalia
    - Physique
  - Gender Identity, Gender Role, Sexual Orientation
    - Follow from Biological Facts

Social Construction of Gender

- De Beauvoir (1947)
  - "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"
  - Biological Differences Between the Sexes Do Not Determine Gender, Gender Attributes, or Gender Relations
  - Gendered Attributes and Relations are Highly Contingent on History and Social Structure

Gender as a Social Construction

- **Biological Sex is Objective Fact**
- **Gender Identity, Role are Subjective Facts**
  - Identify Self as Male, Female
    - Transsexualism
  - Social Consensus About Behavior
    - Masculinity: Agency, Independence
    - Femininity: Communion, Dependence

The Social Construction of Race

- Painter (2010)
  - Race Not a Biological Concept
    - Biological Differences Miniscule
  - Racial Distinctions Highly Contingent on History and Social Structure
    - "One Drop Rule"
    - History of US Census
    - "Whiteness"
      - "Caucasian" "Anglo-Saxon"
A Short History of “Whiteness”
After Painter (2010)

- Greeks and Romans vs. “Barbarians”
  - Circassians
- Blumenbach’s “Racial Science” (1776)
  - Caucasians
  - Mongolians, Malays, Negroids, Americans
- Jeffersonian/Emersonian Conceptions
  - Anglo-Saxons, Teutons
  - Nordics, Aryans
  - Alpines
  - Mediterraneans

The Social Construction of...
Hacking (1999)

- Authorship
- Emotions
- Knowledge
  - Nature
  - Quarks
  - Reality

Analysis of Social Constructivism
Hacking (1999)

Meanings are...
- Not Inherent and Immutable
- Historically Contingent
- Product of Social Forces

Stages of Social Constructivism
Hacking (1999)

1. $X$ Appears to be Inevitable…
2. $X$ Need Not Have Existed
   a. or Need Not Be As It Is
   b. or Not Determined by the Nature of Things
   c. or Not Inevitable
3. $X$ is Quite Bad As It Is
4. We Would Be Better Off If…
   a. $X$ Were Done Away With
   b. or $X$ Were Radically Transformed

Traditional Social Constructionists
Hacking (1999)

- Historical
  - $X$ is Historically Contingent
- Ironic
  - $X$ Could Have Been Different
  - But We’re Stuck With It Now
- Unmasking
  - $X$ is Stripped of Ideological Authority
  - $X$ is a Bad Thing, We’re Better Off Without It

“Unmasking” Social Constructivists
Hacking (1999)

$X$ is bad…
- Reformist
  - We Can Make It Better
- Rebellious
  - We Can Get Along Without It
- Revolutionary
  - We Should Change the World
Objective Facts Can Be Socially Constructed

Money
Marriage
Property Rights

- These Things Are What They Are
  - Because We Think They Are What They Are.
- But They Are What They Are, Objectively.
  - Not Simply a Matter of Belief.

Institutional Reality

- Brute Facts
  - Matters of Physics and Biology
  - Exist Independently of Human Institutions
  - Require Language Only to State the Facts
- Institutional Facts
  - Exist Only in the Context of Human Institutions
  - Brought Into Being by Speech Acts
  - But Not Merely Matters of Opinion

The Big Question

“How can there be an objective reality that is what it is only because we think it is what it is?”

Confusion of Ontology and Epistemology

- Two Modes of Existence
  - Objective
    - Does not Depend on Subject’s Experience
  - Subjective
    - Exist Only as Experienced by Subject
- Two Forms of Knowledge
  - Subjective, “First-Person Mode”
    - Truth Value Depends on Attitudes/Feelings of Observers
  - Objective, “Third-Person Mode”
    - Truth Value Independent of Attitudes/Feelings of Observers

Features of the World

- Intrinsic (Observer-Independent)
  - True Regardless of What People Think
    • Ontologically Objective
    • Epistemically Objective
- Observer-Relative (Observer-Dependent)
  - True Only Because People Think They’re True
    • Ontologically Subjective
    • Epistemically Objective

Facts About People

- Intrinsic
  - 6’2” Tall
  - Male or Female
  - Active or Inactive
- Observer-Relative
  - Aggressive or Passive
  - Extraverted or Introverted
  - Masculine or Feminine
  - Intelligent or Dull
Evolution of the Five Factor Model of Personality

• The Big Four
  – Neuroticism
  – Extraversion
  – Agreeableness
  – Conscientiousness

• The Fifth Factor
  – Intelligence
  – Intellectance
  – Openness to Experience
    • Absorption/Fantasy
    • Intellectance
    • Political Liberalism

Different Cultures May Choose Different Traits as “Basic”

Two Kinds of Science and Two Kinds of Features of the World

• Natural Sciences
  – Observer-Independent Features

• Social Sciences
  – Observer-Dependent Features

Implications for Social Cognition

• Social Cognition a Field of Psychology

• Goal of Science
  – Objective Knowledge of Social Reality

• Some Features are Intrinsic
  – Exist Independent of Observer

• Others are Observer-Dependent
  – Depend on Observer’s Attitudes, Feelings

• Some are Products of Collective Intentionality
  – Exist Only in Certain Social Contexts

Social Cognition Defined
Bruner & Tagiuri (1954); Tagiuri (1969)

Placing the “knowing of people” in the wider theoretical context of how we know the environment generally

• Cognition in Social Psychology
  – Persons as Dependent Variables

• Social Psychology of Cognition
  – Persons as Independent Variables

Canonical Topics in Cognition

• Perception

• Memory

• Thinking (Reasoning, Problem-Solving)

• Language

• Intelligence

• Cognitive Development

• Mathematical/Computational Modeling

• Neuropsychology/Neuroscience

Quantitative Differences between Social and Nonsocial Cognition

• Ambiguity

• Conflicting Cues

• Context Effects

• Role of Emotion, Motivation

• Social Cues

• Social Learning

• Social Interaction
  – “The Purpose of Perception is Action”
Qualitative Differences between Social and Nonsocial Cognition

- Modularity
- Self as Object vs. Self as Subject
- Object as Sentient Being
  - Impression-Management
- Observer-Dependence
  - Social Reality as Cognitive Construction
    - Self-Fulfilling Prophecy
    - Interpersonal Expectancy Effects
  - Social Reality as Social Construction

Social Cognition Is Special

- Cognition
  - Mind Forms, Transforms Mental Representations of the World
- Non-social Cognition
  - The Objects of Cognition Have an Existence That Is Independent of the Mind
- Social Cognition
  - To Some Extent, at least, the Objects of Cognition Are Not Independent of the Mind

In Social Cognition, Belief Creates Reality

- Constructivism
  - Constructs mental representations of world
- Self-Fulfilling Prophecy
  - Subjective interpretations of ambiguous behavior
  - Create objective conditions in world
- Social Constructivism
  - Create objective reality through shared beliefs

“Sovereignty” of Social in Cognitive Psychology

- Humans as Social Creatures
  - Live in Groups
    - Cooperation, Competition
  - Mate for Life, Tend young
  - Culture as Social History
- Animistic Thinking in Children
  - Attributions of Intentionality
  - Generalize from Social to Nonsocial
  - Later, Learn Differences

“Sovereignty” of Cognitive in Social Psychology

- Cognitive Mediation of Social Behavior
- Linguistic Basis of Social Behavior
  - Language as Tool for Thought
  - Medium for Social Interaction

“Two Cultures” in Cognition

- Social vs. Cognitive Psychology
- Anthropological Analogy
  - One Culture Temporarily Dominates
  - Each Culture Reconstructs the Other
  - Each Culture Learns from the Other
- Neuroscience as a “Third Culture”?
  - Eliminative Reductionism
Social Cognition as a Link to Cognitive Social Science
Turner (2001)

- Meaning
- Reason
- Choice
- Concept Formation and Conceptual Change
- Human Evolution
- Cultural Differences

In order to understand social cognition, we must understand social forces outside individual

Is it time for an interdisciplinary cognitive social science paralleling cognitive neuroscience?

Maybe

- Social Cognition the first step toward cognitive social science
- Cognition not just a matter of the activities of individual minds trying to understand external reality
- Cognition also a matter of minds working together
- Trying to understand a reality that is partly the making of their own minds