# Dynamic Interactionism: Elaborating a Psychology of Human Possibility and Constraint

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We elaborate the kind of metaphysical, ontological arguments and positions put forth by Martin and Sugarman (1996) in several ways, in an attempt to clarify that it is the assumption of psychological and sociocultural entities as fixed ontological categories that makes psychological–sociocultural dualism problematic, not the necessary distinction it draws between sociocultural and psychological processes. In so doing, we develop an emergent, mutable metaphysics and ontology for psychological and sociocultural processes that emphasizes their dynamic interrelation. We then attempt to articulate and defend a neorealist hermeneutics as a viable epistemological accompaniment to this dynamic, interactionist metaphysics, and to indicate its appropriateness to psychological inquiry in particular.

Martin and Sugarman (1996) presented a theory intended to explain how individual psychological phenomena (like mind, self, and intentional agency) originate in, emerge from, and develop within sociocultural forms and practices, yet (once emergent) are not reducible to these sociocultural means. Their primary purpose was to bridge social constructionist and cognitive constructivist accounts of psychological development. In creating a metaphysics permissive of this theoretical bridging, they argue that the ontological status of individual psychological phenomena is not fixed, but rather, is both emergent and dynamic. This argument carries special significance for theories of mind and behavior. It suggests that the real problem with sociocultural–psychological dualism has less to do with the drawing of a divide between societal/cultural phenomena, and individual psychological phenomena, than it has to do with treating that which is on either side of this divide, and the divide itself, as fixed and immutable.

In the latter part of this century, postmodern textualism and social constructionism have challenged the dualistic assumptions upon which most extant psychological theory and inquiry rest. According to such critiques, a host of problems issue from these assumptions, including difficulties in forging a defensible metaphysics, in explaining how knowledge can accrue from experience, in justifying a priori conceptual schema, and in posing mentalistic explanations without infinite regress. At a more ideological level, to believe in individual reason separate from physical and societal forces is said to champion an indefensible individualism. The general solution of both textualism and social constructionism has been to recognize individual psychological phenomena (like self, autobiographical memory, reflective thought, and emotional experience) as embedded within a contingent, Cartesian tradition of sociocultural–psychological dualism, and to replace the classic dualistic construal, and the tradition that supports it, with different, less problematic ways of talking, writing and interacting.

Unfortunately, as Martin and Sugarman (1996) point out, the most common postmodern solution, whether textual deconstructionist or social constructionist, is to reduce psychological phenomena to either textual or sociocultural constructions. Thus, without denying that something is going on in the heads of individuals, postmodernists like Gergen (1991, 1994) argue that social, narrative accounts of individual psychological phenomena are all that is required and/or possible.

> We are willing to accept social accounts of people's manners, styles of dress, and forms of religion. Why is a similar form of explanation not sufficient as well for people's accounts of their personal past? (Gergen, 1994, p. 101)

It is clear from his writings that Gergen is happy to extend this conclusion beyond autobiographical memory to individual psychological phenomena in general.

However, such postmodern antidualisms conflate individual psychological experience with plausible sociocultural explanations for such experience. Reductive strategies achieve success only if they are ontologically informative in the sense of showing that what were believed to be two ontologically different things are actually one thing. In other words, the things themselves do not differ, even though descriptions of them do. Successful reduction is impossible if important aspects of adequate conceptions of things are lost in the reductive exercises. Such impossibility clearly is evident in attempts to reduce psychological phenomena to neurophysiological states. (For example, knowing the neurophysiological correlates of emotional experience tells us nothing about emotional experience itself.) But, it also holds for attempted psychological to sociocultural reductions.

Human psychological experience is not reducible to its possibly sociocultural origins. When Gergen asks why we are unwilling to explain psychological phenomena entirely in sociocultural, narrative terms, he fails to make clear, or wishes to deny, that one's "manners, styles of dress, and forms of religion" (Gergen, 1994, p. 101) are not the same as one's experiences of, or reasons for choosing or engaging them. Whatever the metaphysical and epistemological problems of psychological experience and explanation, they do not deserve to be dismissed in this way — unless there are better reasons to do so than to avoid postmodern philosophers' problems with sociocultural–psychological dualism.

What Martin and Sugarman's (1996) metaphysics makes possible is a coherent holding of an essentially social constructionist thesis concerning the origins of psychological phenomena, without denying the phenomenology of individual psychological experience. On their account, the phenomena of individual psychology are constituted initially through sociocultural means, assuming only a prereflectively active biological human organism embedded in society and culture. However, once emergent from these origins, psychological beings must be understood as nonreductive, intentional, and reflective agents. What is significant about this emergent, dynamic metaphysics is its suggestion that classic, modern, and postmodern problems of dualism are not resident in dualism per se, but in the dualistic assumptions that sociocultural and psychological categories are separate, fixed, and static.

Once the dynamically interactive mutability of psychological individuals and societies/cultures is recognized and understood as an ineluctable fact, the substance and advantages of the kind of metaphysics that Martin and Sugarman (1996) envision and propose come clearly into focus. In this essay, we attempt to clarify precisely how this kind of dynamic interactionism differs from the classic dualistic ontology that treats sociocultural and psychological phenomena as belonging to separate and fixed categories. In doing so, we position the social constructionist and cognitive constructivist theses bridged by Martin and Sugarman's theory into the broader context of the atomism–holism debate in contemporary philosophy of social science. Such positioning makes it possible to see more clearly the kind of ontological implications for societies and cultures carried by their proposal, and helps to bring greater balance to their treatment of sociocultural–psychological interrelation and construction — our third purpose. Finally, we propose an epistemology (a kind of neorealist hermeneutics) that we believe fits well with the metaphysical and ontological positions we present. We also attempt to demonstrate the applicability of our neorealist hermeneutics to psychological inquiry in particular.

## Societies and Selves: Sociocultural–Psychological Interactionism

*Atomism versus Holism*

In the more general theory and philosophy of social science, the positions of social constructionism and cognitive constructionism may be understood as instances of holism and atomism respectively. Holism is the doctrine that individuals, their identities, and their properties are entirely the function of broader systems of meaning produced by social and cultural forces. For holists, the individual is simply the vehicle through which culture and society express themselves (Durkheim, 1938). In direct opposition to holism is the thesis of atomism, which holds that the basic units of social life are separate, individual entities, essentially self-contained and independent. For atomists, all social phenomena and institutions result from the decisions and actions of human individuals (Popper, 1948). In their most extreme and oppositional forms, holists equate individual phenomena to societal and cultural phenomena, while atomists reduce societal and cultural phenomena to individual phenomena.

According to a standard holistic view, culture equates with a complex of shared beliefs, values, and concepts that enable collectives to comprehend and direct their activities. On this standard view, society is the system that coordinates these communal activities. More recent versions of holism picture culture as a text whose grammar and vocabulary come to be read by its members through a process of enculturation that enables human individuals to become the persons they are. In all of this, society functions as a set of interlocking structures that enables the appropriation and internalization of culture without reference to meanings, intentions, beliefs, and desires. For example, systems theory draws no fundamental distinction between a thermostatic system and a social system in its nonagentic, strictly functional use of terms like "communication." By conceiving of culture and society as *things* that determine their members, holists leave little room for the kind of agency that atomists attach to the activities of human individuals.

However, a small number of scholars have sought to compromise the extremes of atomism and holism in a manner that leaves room for both sociocultural determinism and individual human agency. Such an approach has been developed recently by philosophers of social science like Giddens (1984) and Fay (1996). The key to this bridging of atomism and holism is to treat societies and cultures not as things with formal causal powers, but as dynamic interrelational processes through which social and psychological practices are ordered over time. On this view, societies and cultures just *are* the dynamic working through of patterns of interaction among agents whose identity and relative position change constantly because of the very kinds of

sociocultural and psychological interconnectedness indicated by Martin and Sugarman (1996).

On the processual view of Giddens and Fay, the influence of societies and cultures consists of enabling and constraining rules and roles that require interpretation by those who act in terms of them. Without such interpretive activity, societies and cultures never would be realized. Societies and cultures provide "the conditions for the possibility of action and guides as to how actions are to be performed, but it is agents who produce and reproduce this structure by means of their activity" (Fay, 1996, p. 65). Giddens (1984) calls this interplay in which structures enable actions, and actions produce and reproduce structures, "structuration." Again, on this view, society and culture are not things, but processes of structuration and its consequences.

The holist view of culture as a text to be learned exaggerates the power of any sociocultural tradition to inscribe itself on its members — witness the great variability in individuals within a given sociocultural tradition. It thus confuses learning with absorption. Human learning requires a phenomenology that includes the interpretation and re-interpretation of sociocultural meanings. But, it also is important to remember that our sociocultural traditions are imposed on us in ways that we do not choose, especially during our initial contacts with them. Even as we develop more sophisticated, complex interpretive capabilities, our sociocultural traditions continue to enable and to constrain us. It is through this process of enabling and constraining, which itself requires the activity of interpreting agents, that our identities emerge, not through a deterministic holism that stamps us uniformly into sociocultural molds. However, such partial independence and indeterminacy also should not be exaggerated. In Fay's words (1996, p. 69), "Agents become agents only by being enculturated and socialized into a particular culture and society — processes which pre-date them, and which continue to provide the means in and through which agents can act." Societies and agents always exist, and constantly emerge, in dynamic interaction.

Overcoming difficulties with sociocultural–psychological dualisms (whether construed as holism versus atomism or social constructionism versus cognitive constructivism) does not require abandoning any such distinctions. What is required is that these distinctions not be taken to refer to fixed ontological categories, but rather, to reference emergent, mutable processes in dynamic interrelation. The emergence of psychological phenomena in the life-span of a human individual may be seen to originate in a process of dynamic sociocultural embeddedness, which enables and constrains the emergence of a genuinely reflexive psychological self — a self that continues to be enabled and constrained by sociocultural and interpretive practices and means. Further, sociocultural traditions themselves emerge and evolve over a much longer time-line in dynamic interaction with the activities of a myriad

of individual and collective psychological agents. In what follows, we sum-
marize briefly the picture of dynamic sociocultural–psychological interac-
tionism that is thus revealed.

## Sociocultural–Psychological Dynamic Interactionism

An ineluctable condition of human existence is that at birth, humans are
thrown into already existing societies and cultures that have evolved in a
real physical world (Heidegger, 1949, 1962). As biological organisms
equipped with rudimentary physical and perceptual activity, human infants
are capable of prereflective, embodied experience that consists of moving
about in the world, and perceiving and remembering some of what is
encountered directly, without the mediation of reflective understanding
(Merleau-Ponty, 1962). It is this prereflective agency that enables individual
humans gradually to become constituted by the sociocultural forms and prac-
tices in which they are embedded and participate actively. Beyond infancy,
human psychological development consists in the internalization of socio-
cultural means, especially conversational and other interrelational practices.
Once appropriated, these means become transformed into psychological tools
(Harré, 1984, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) that individuals use to engage in
increasingly sophisticated, complex forms of activity, some of which, like
recollection and imagination, become more and more free from the immedi-
ate physical and sociocultural context. In turn, the emergence of these more
complex, abstracted psychological capabilities enables individual humans
gradually to construct progressively more elaborate theories of their contexts
and themselves. The understanding that such theories make possible, when
directed at ongoing participation and activity in the sociocultural context,
shifts the nature of such engagement from one of unmediated, direct percep-
tion and prereflection to one of mediated, reflective consciousness.

With the onset of genuine reflexivity, supported by a theory of self as both
object and subject, the nature of human experience shifts ontologically from
preconscious, preintentional to conscious, intentional (Taylor, 1989).
Whereas previously the human individual existed only as a biological organ-
ism immersed in, and increasingly constituted by, sociocultural practices and
means, the human individual now emerges as a psychological being capable
of acting with self-reflective purpose. While psychological beings have their
origins in their sociocultural embeddedness, once emergent they no longer
can be reduced to these origins. The experiences of such beings are not iso-
morphic with their past and present sociocultural constituents.

Psychological being thus involves coming to possess personal theories of
self and contexts (Harré, 1984). As Martin and Sugarman (1996), following
Greenwood (1989), point out, these theories of psychological beings are

underdetermined by sociocultural and experiential data, in a manner some-what analogous to the way in which scientific theories are underdetermined by relevant experimental and observational data. This is not at all to say that the emergent psychological individual ceases to be constructed in sociocul-tural terms, but that such an individual is now a reflective, intentional agent whose interpretations are active in any subsequent construction. Still subject to sociocultural constraints, the genuinely psychological individual, through the exercise of sophisticated capabilities of memory and imagination, inter-active with a theory of self, now is capable of creating possibilities for present and future action that are not entirely constrained by past and present socio-cultural circumstances. The activity of such an individual includes a psycho-logical self, complete with a mind of its own, that has emerged from the sociocultural, developmental context, a self which continues to be shaped by, but also with some limited potential to shape, that context.

Thus constituted, the psychological self may be conceived as a relational unity. In a manner similar to that in which Giddens (1984) and Fay (1996) have rejected the idea of societies and cultures as fixed things, self, under this construal is not a thing that undergoes various changes to its essential state. It simply *is* various theoretically-enabled states of consciousness related in a certain matter. Such self states come into being in the very act of reflexively self-referring (Nozick, 1981). In this way, it is unnecessary to conceive of the self as a prior existing entity. Rather, on this account, the self is continually created and recreated in interaction with others. Each individual psychologi-cal being reflexively makes use of self-referring psychological utterances and means appropriated from sociocultural interactions and relations with others. The self is an ongoing, dynamic process of construction, a constantly emerg-ing achievement made possible by appropriating the means to reflexively self-refer, including a socioculturally enabled, yet underdetermined theory of self. As such, the self is not a fixed entity, but a process whose nature is fluid and changeable depending on the sorts of self-referring practices available for appropriation in the sociocultural contexts in which psychological individu-als are embedded, emerge, and continue to develop through the ongoing activity of interpretive self-creation. The self is an ever-changing unity cre-ated and constrained by human existence and experience in societies and cultures — societies and cultures which are themselves dynamic processes in mutable interaction with the activities of the psychological individuals they spawn and constrain.

That psychological individuals shape societies and cultures also is an unde-niable, existential condition (Heidegger, 1949, 1962). For example, attempt to imagine contemporary Western culture on the assumption that individuals like da Vinci, Bach, Descartes, and Einstein had never existed. Would some others have undertaken exactly the same kinds of work with the same kinds

of sociocultural results? Such extreme social determinism seems highly unlikely. By imaginatively subtracting the contributions of these and all other individuals from what soon becomes a rapidly diminishing sociocultural fabric, it perhaps is possible to glimpse a state of societal nothingness (Heidegger, 1949, 1962). Societies as aggregates of physical individuals do not exist without psychological individuals. Societies as sociocultural constructions never would have evolved without the activities of psychological individuals whose feats of imagination and ingenuity, even while undeniably grounded in (i.e., largely constituted by) existing sociocultural forms and practices, are not entirely determined by such means. If this were not so, societies, even if somehow initially emergent, would be static, and such certainly is not the case. That some societies might place little or no importance on innovation or Western-style progress does not negate the potential influence individuals have to shape the practices in which they participate in ways constrained, but not determined entirely, by their immersion in relevant sociocultural values and means.

One does not need to concern oneself with necessarily highly speculative accounts of the evolution of the human/world connection up to the point of the emergence of societies and societally-governed human nature to appreciate the force of the foregoing thought experiment. Nor, does one need to concern oneself with speculations about the precise physical, biological make-up of human individuals capable of undergoing the kind of psychological, developmental emergence within sociocultural contexts that was articulated above. As interesting and important for other purposes as such speculative theorizing may be, neither is necessary to establish the two conclusions that (1) societies require psychological individuals (selves), and (2) psychological individuals (selves) are mostly constituted, but not entirely constrained, by sociocultural means. Consideration of these two conclusions is all that is required to envision a kind of emergent, dynamic ontological condition for both selves and societies that provides a quite adequate account of the nature of human societies and psychological individuals.

Selves need societies, just as societies need selves. A psychological being develops a self only because it is part of a community of other selves, past and present, that have constructed a public, social world of common symbols, systems, and practices capable of underwriting a pattern of interaction in which selves influence and respond to other selves. But, even while selves are essentially social, they are not closed, fixed entities. Selves are dynamic complexes that emerge from the interaction of psychological beings with each other in sociocultural contexts. In a very real sense, they are the sum total of the trails of activity and relations with other selves within societies and cultures.

The perhaps surprising "flip-side" of all of this, is that cultures and societies also are not separate, fixed entities that stamp their mold on their mem-

bers. As the ongoing interactions of their members, they have no power separate from the active participation of the individual agents they provide with both possibilities and constraints. Cultures and societies are forever changing by virtue of the activities of their members. Creativity and innovation unfold at the confluence of dynamic individual psychological and collective sociocultural processes. In considering these claims, it is perhaps helpful to follow Fay (1996, p. 69), and attempt to "Conceive of culture as a process of appropriation and society as a process of structuration in which meanings and rules are applied through the interpretive and willful activity of conscious agents" who "become agents only by being enculturated and socialized into a particular culture and society — processes which pre-date them, and which continue to provide the means in and through which agents can act."

At this stage in our essay, we should remind readers that the point of the foregoing positioning and elaboration of the core ontological thesis presented by Martin and Sugarman (1996) is to support our claim that it is not dualism per se that has occasioned the legitimate metaphysical and epistemological concerns of textual deconstructionists, social constructionists, postmodernists, and others. Rather, such concerns are specific to the assumption of classic sociocultural–psychological dualism that societies and selves are fixed, separate entities. Once this is recognized clearly, it is unnecessary to deny the phenomenology of human psychological experience and its possibly influential role in the kind of creativity and innovation that is required to explain the ongoing evolution and change clearly discernible in sociocultural systems. Once the emergent, mutable sociocultural and psychological ontology we have attempted to describe is in place, a defensible metaphysics is available that permits a plausible understanding of how we humans seem capable of deriving understanding from our experience that goes far beyond this experience itself. Furthermore, the kind of understanding now available makes no call on unlikely, solely mentalistic descriptions that dissipate into an unacceptable regression when put forth, as they invariably are, as explanations of exactly that which they are supposed to explain.

The key insight is to appreciate how the sociocultural and psychological are cut from the same cloth of historical human activity (both across and within individual human lives), without either being reducible to the other. This requires a recasting that moves away from the Cartesian notion of fixed sociocultural and psychological entities with set properties, to the kind of dynamic relation between sociocultural and psychological processes, conceived as relational unities, through which particular expressions of individual psychology and sociocultural systems are mutually made possible and constrained.

## Demonstrations, Theories, Traditions, and Fusions:
## A Neorealist Hermeneutics

If the ontological status of sociocultural and individual psychological phenomena is as interrelational, emergent, evolving, and mutable as the kind of sociocultural–psychological interactionism we have described thus far asserts, what kind of epistemology will suffice for claiming and justifying knowledge of sociocultural and psychological phenomena in terms of the relations, constraints, and possibilities that define them? Our answer to this complex question occupies the rest of this essay, and consists of two interacting strategic components. The first follows from an appreciation of the impermanent, yet nonetheless real nature of both sociocultural and psychological phenomena, and consists of the empirical demonstration of possibilities and constraints that sociocultural and psychological theories somehow must acknowledge. The second component in our epistemic proposal concerns the critical evaluation of different theoretical formulations intended to account for these empirically demonstrated possibilities and constraints.

Because there is no definitive way of ascertaining the true fit between theoretical formulations and focal sociocultural and psychological phenomena, it always is possible to formulate different viable theories reflecting different interpretations of the demonstrations in question. Consequently, the evaluation of competing theories, and the means and criteria of any such evaluation, must be considered not only in relation to relevant demonstrations themselves (the interpretation of which necessarily requires a set of sociocultural and psychological conventions and practices that form a tradition of understanding), but also in relation to the tradition of understanding and knowing in which both demonstrations and interpretations are embedded. This inevitably involves the translation and critique of the competing theories in terms of each other and their supporting traditions. In what follows, we will discuss each component of our epistemological strategy in turn, and then attempt to show why it is particularly well suited to the provision and warranting of knowledge claims concerning the dynamic, interactionist sociocultural–psychological metaphysics and ontology we have discussed in the first part of our essay.

*Demonstrations and Theories of Possibilities and Constraints*

Because sociocultural and psychological phenomena are the dynamically evolving artifacts of collective and individual human activity, their status differs from that of physical phenomena. Since human inquiry into these constructions is itself a set of human practices, the study of sociocultural and psychological phenomena is doubly interpretive in a manner foreign to the

study of physical phenomena. However, the actively constructed, constantly evolving nature of human phenomena only means that such phenomena are impermanent. It does not mean that they are not real. Most importantly, the ontological status of these phenomena does not suggest that they can be interpreted in any manner whatsoever. Our conceptions of sociocultural and psychological phenomena, as well as these phenomena themselves, are grounded in social, cultural, linguistic, and historical conventions. As products of these dynamic processes, they are not so ephemeral as to escape attempts to scrutinize them. Sociocultural and psychological phenomena are real in the sense that they both make possible and constrain themselves and our interpretations of them. Such influence, while never static, cannot be dismissed.

For example, it certainly is not the case that we could, without extensive sociocultural engineering of the most unlikely sort, construct and use different conceptual models for psychological phenomena, such as aggressiveness and hostility, in our theories of such phenomena in contemporary Western societies. Within a particular sociocultural tradition, our descriptions and interpretations of human actions and social practices are linguistically objective because their accuracy, appropriateness, or correctness can be adjudicated according to whether the phenomena concerned have the properties attributed to them by our descriptions and interpretations. Thus, the labeling of an action as aggressive is warranted only if it is represented by the agent in question as harmfully directed toward another. This is because of the intentional nature of such labels. On the other hand, actions may be described accurately as hostile if and only if the form of behavior involved is conventionally represented by members of a sociocultural collective as inimical to an other. This latter determination is linguistically independent of the specific intentions of the agent. Such linguistic conventions and the sociocultural traditions that support them form a kind of reality against which we can examine the adequacy and utility of our descriptions and interpretations (Greenwood, 1991). The precise nature of this impermanent, humanly constructed reality is that it both allows and constrains human interpretive practices, including the inquiry practices of social scientists and psychologists.

And because sociocultural and psychological phenomena are dynamic and relational in time and space, the properties, processes, and functions they comprise never can be determined in any definitive, timeless, or context-free manner. Our theories of them cannot be based on definitive tests that establish or refute specific claims resident in the theories. However, we can base our interpretations and theories of sociocultural and psychological phenomena on our interpretations of empirical demonstrations of the kinds of constraints and possibilities they exert and make possible. As real, although impermanent processes, such phenomena are capable of exerting considerable influence.

Of course, all sociocultural and psychological theories are empirical in that human experience in the pre-existing and evolving physical and sociocultural world provides the basis for all of our beliefs. However, this kind of necessary, inevitable grounding of our beliefs is insufficient for warranting our theories of sociocultural and psychological phenomena. Knowledge of these phenomena goes beyond our experience of them. While not static nor universally or eternally true, such knowledge must take explicit account of relevant public standards of meaning and evidence, as these have been (and are) constructed, and subscribed to, by communities of individuals active in the study of these phenomena. In short, sociocultural and psychological theories require experience, but experience alone is not a sufficient basis for theoretical development in social science and psychology.

Theories in psychology and social science develop through a complex, public articulation of psychologists' and social scientists' understanding of human experience made possible by an ongoing immersion and participation in social life in general, and in the forms and content of understanding and knowing that constitute social science and psychology. Empirical investigations intended to support and/or refute important aspects of these theories might best be thought of as demonstrations of the possibilities and constraints afforded by the focal phenomena. Such demonstrations become increasingly useful for the purposes of theory construction and revision as the theories themselves are elaborated and refined in an ongoing, repetitive cycle of dynamic interpretation and reassessment. Understood in this way, much extant inquiry in social science and psychology (at least, that which does not conceptualize and reduce subject matter inappropriately) can be stripped of its unsupportable vestiges of objectivism and positivism, and can be seen as a valuable source of necessarily socioculturally and temporally constrained demonstrations of what is possible and influential in human practices, actions, and experiences. This more fallibilist construal of social and psychological inquiry assumes that its focal phenomena are impermanent, yet real, and thus cannot be construed in manners unsupported by relevant sociocultural traditions, including those that define the inquiry practices of psychologists and social scientists.

*Translations and Critical Fusions*

But, what happens when different inquirers, with memberships in different traditions, offer competing accounts of psychological and sociocultural phenomena? Because demonstrations of theoretical possibilities and constraints are themselves necessarily embedded in particular sociocultural traditions and practices of inquiry, is one then required to conclude, even while acknowledging that within such traditions and practices it is not the case

that "anything goes," that there is no way of moving beyond the impasse cre-
ated by the possibility of different theories from different traditions and per-
spectives? In other words, while strong relativism is clearly overcome within
traditions of inquiry, does it nonetheless hold sway across different traditions
of inquiry and their products?

Sociocultural–psychological dynamic interactionism takes an ontological
position of emergent, dynamic psychological realism. It assumes real socio-
cultural practices that also are subject to ongoing change. This position
seems most compatible with the kind of hermeneutics articulated by
Gadamer (1975, 1977). Gadamer's position avoids the radical relativism
sometimes connected with postmodern textualism (e.g., Derrida, 1978), and
provides a solid, identifiable basis for the kind of pragmatism associated with
much social constructionist thought (e.g., Gergen, 1991, 1994).
Furthermore, we believe it can be adapted to do this without conflating psy-
chological phenomena with their mostly sociocultural origins. Simply creat-
ing a different narrative is not epistemically satisfactory unless this narrative
adheres to, and achieves coherence within, the relevant sociocultural reality.
All human understanding and knowledge are perspectival in that they
depend on real sociocultural traditions (here, both we and Gadamer follow
Heidegger, 1949, 1962). Interpretations of social collectives or of psychologi-
cal individuals that fall outside of, or defy, constraints imposed by relevant
traditions, fail to impress.

There is no way of escaping from the sociocultural traditions in which
societies and psychological individuals are positioned. There is no outside
vantage point, complete with its own set of unimpeachable standards, from
which to make judgements concerning the merits of different interpretations.
This is especially true when the subject matter of the interpretations being
considered consists of human sociocultural and/or psychological phenomena.
Gadamer's metaphor for moving beyond impasses in interpretive understand-
ing, that might reflect different traditions of understanding, is "a fusion of
horizons." Gadamer rejects radical incommensurability among competing
traditions, and posits the possibility of fusions across them. These fusions
result from honest attempts to understand different interpretations and the
traditions supporting them. When such attempts ("conversations") are legiti-
mate, joined seriously, and sustained, the resultant fusions are inevitable and
differ from any of the competing traditions in their substantive claims and
warrants of justification.

Because the possibility of illegitimate interpretation exists (i.e., interpreta-
tion not appropriately constrained by any identifiable tradition), participants
in these conversations always retain the right to disagree, once such illegiti-
mate impasses are recognized (see Warnke, 1987). Gadamerian hermeneutics
thus assumes that sociocultural traditions are real and must be treated seri-

ously in attempts to form and defend interpretations of sociocultural and psy-
chological phenomena. Because such phenomena are constituted historically
and are contingent, relevant traditions are the only feasible epistemic source
available to scholars in the humanities and social sciences.

Of course, Gadamer's insistence on the inescapability and utility of socio-
cultural traditions as a basis for the avoidance of strong relativism through
his construct of fusions, has been hotly contested by contemporary critical
hermeneuticists (e.g., Habermas, 1971, 1984) and postmodernists (e.g.,
Lyotard, 1987). Significant difficulties might be encountered in adjudicating
when attempts at cross-tradition, interpretive translation ("conversation")
possess legitimate good faith and when they do not. For this reason,
Habermas has insisted that it is necessary to articulate some kind of universal
pragmatics that defines communicative competence, thus forming a kind of
metahermeneutics that serves as a discursive bridge across different interpre-
tations and the traditions in which they are embedded. In a different direc-
tion, Lyotard objects strenuously to Gadamer's conservative appeal to
established traditions of interpretation, arguing that such attachment fur-
thers the essentially unwarranted prejudices of powerful, vested interests of
traditional groups of knowledge makers. In response, Gadamer insists on the
possibility of laying claim to both rational and moral argument without
standing outside of historical traditions of understanding and inquiry. He
holds that these traditions are the only possible bases for deciding between
competing interpretive and theoretical accounts, and that the ever-present
possibility of fusion undermines the conservativism that otherwise might
attend such a reliance on traditions. On this view, attempts like that of
Habermas to step outside competing and available traditions to forge an
independent basis for warranting are impossible. Furthermore, attempts like
that of Lyotard to radically reconstruct the status quo, are inevitably regres-
sive, nihilistic, and egocentric, because they court both unintelligibility and
unbridled self-interest in their suggestions that knowledge projects are con-
ceivable outside of historical, sociocultural traditions and their fusions.

The kind of dynamic sociocultural–psychological metaphysics we discussed
earlier in this essay shares with Gadamer's hermeneutics an emphasis on the
real yet shifting nature of sociocultural traditions. Because of the way in
which it conceives of the psychological as derivative from, but not reducible
to, the sociocultural, this kind of dynamic interactionism also is amenable to
the view that epistemological claims concerning psychological phenomena
only can be adjudicated in relation to relevant sociocultural traditions and
their fusions. All potentially creative, innovative contributions of psycholog-
ical individuals, including communities of inquirers in psychology and social
science, must meet, and surpass warrants of justification available in relevant
sociocultural traditions and their fusions. In this way, necessary distinctions

between beliefs (of psychological individuals) and knowledge (socioculturally sanctioned claims and warrants through which beliefs and understandings of psychological individuals can be assessed) are maintained, and intelligibility is preserved within a dynamic, ever-emergent process that accompanies the dynamic interactive metaphysical context charted earlier. The possibility that the beliefs and actions of psychological individuals, including psychologists, may advance relevant sociocultural, shared knowledge, and be judged to do so on the basis of traditional warrants, and/or extensions to same (as a result of legitimate fusions) serves as a viable basis for epistemic justification. In this way, a middle course is charted between the extremes of an overly constraining static, ahistorical, "outside" standard on the one bank, and a strongly relativistic, nihilistic "anything goes" absence of standard on the other.

A key ingredient to all of this, is, of course, a sufficiently powerful notion of what constitutes legitimate "good faith" in the translation and critical consideration of competing interpretations and theories. Once objectivism and positivism are abandoned in favor of a fallibilist, perspectivist epistemology, some powerful, coherent notion of "critical intersubjectivity" is required for the necessarily imperfect (but all that is available) possibility of Gadamer's "fusion of horizons."

*Critical Intersubjectivity*

The kind of perspectivism advanced by Gadamer, and subscribed to above, entails a critical recognition that no psychological inquiry possibly can yield singular, objective truths that correspond directly to a fixed sociocultural/ psychological reality. Instead, the only kind of objectivity that is possible is one of critical intersubjectivity that might be achieved through fair-minded criticism and accountability both within and across traditions of understanding and inquiry. When various investigators working within the same and different traditions of inquiry conduct demonstrations they interpret as supportive of their theoretical formulations, they also must engage in an ongoing dialogue with rival inquirers. In this dialogue, inquirers must attempt sincerely and openly to understand the theories and interpretations of others through the construction of translations and fusions that open onto the possibility that rival views may have merits that surpass their own. This involves the systematic examination of one's own and rival views in a careful, critically probing, and fair-minded manner. This kind of critical intersubjectivity features cooperative, collective conversations bent on discerning the worth of rival theories, modes of inquiry, and systems of justification.

It is important to note that none of this demands that investigators abandon their preconceptions in their attempt to attain an entirely detached,

outside view of the matters under consideration. As Gadamer has argued, no such outside vantage point is possible or necessary. What is necessary is that critical intersubjectivity be exercised so that the outcomes of programs of inquiry are not determined by the inevitable preconceptions and biases of particular investigators or groups of investigators.

Traditions provide researchers with necessary tools and conceptual resources with which to conduct their inquiries. But, traditions are not closed, fixed, and immune from internal and external criticism. Critical intersubjectivity requires that researchers both (a) acknowledge necessary and inevitable contingent limits to their theoretical and methodological practices and the assumptions that support them, and (b) take seriously and respond constructively to fair-minded criticisms of their assumptions. This means that they must examine critically their basic conceptual commitments, their conceptions of evidence, their standards of significance, and take into consideration the manner in which their investigations are positioned socially and morally (see, for example, Fay, 1996; Hoshmand and Martin, 1995, Martin, 1996). It also means that inquirers must be accountable for their intellectual and evaluative commitments, and "acknowledge their positionality *vis-à-vis* other investigators, their audiences, and those under study" (Fay, 1996, p. 219).

In summary, the main ideas advanced above include (a) a conception of inquiry practice in terms of necessarily imperfect, revisable theoretical formulations in constant interaction with interpretations of relevant empirical demonstrations; (b) the explicit recognition that all such practices are conducted within traditions that support the assumptions, biases, theories, interpretations, and investigative strategies and methodologies of researchers; and (c) the possibility of fusions, which can result from the engagement of critical intersubjectivity, and which might advance understanding and knowledge about focal phenomena both within and across traditions of inquiry. This dynamic, perspectivist, and fallibilist approach might be thought of as a kind of neorealist hermeneutics that accepts the ontological status of sociocultural and psychological phenomena as real, yet impermanent and emergent, processes that are constantly evolving and mutating as a consequence of their dynamic interaction. The important point is that all of this dynamic change occurs within existing sociocultural and psychological processes and traditions that, while impermanent, both allow and constrain their own evolution. This is what permits psychologists and other social scientists to inquire into sociocultural and psychological phenomena and achieve knowledge that, while contingent, perspectival, and fallible, is nonetheless useful within and across the boundaries of traditions of inquiry and knowledge practices.

## Concluding Comments

In this essay, we have elaborated Martin and Sugarman's (1996) theory of how individual psychological phenomena originate in, emerge from, and develop within sociocultural forms and practices, but do not reduce to these sociocultural means. In the first part of our essay, we attempted a clarification of what we termed, dynamic sociocultural–psychological interactionism, distinguishing it from classic sociocultural–psychological dualism and from postmodern textualism and social constructionism. In so doing, we also positioned this processural interactionism in relation to recent suggestions for moving beyond debates between atomists and holists in contemporary philosophy of social science. An important consequence of this broader contextualizing was to develop a more elaborated conception of societies and cultures than was evident in the Martin and Sugarman treatment. Finally, in the latter portions of our essay, we articulated and supported an approach to psychological inquiry that we believe is compatible with the dynamic interactionist sociocultural–psychological metaphysics discussed earlier. We termed this position neorealist hermeneutics and describe it as an approach to attaining and warranting knowledge of psychological and sociocultural phenomena through psychological and social scientific inquiry — which we understand as an ongoing interaction of theoretical formulation and empirical demonstration within and across different traditions of inquiry practice and their fusions, with particular emphasis on a kind of neo-Gadamerian critical intersubjectivity as a defining characteristic.

If we have succeeded in our aims, it should now be possible to glimpse clearly, if not completely, two important possibilities with respect to the forging of a more satisfactory philosophical basis for psychological inquiry than that afforded by classic sociocultural–psychological dualism and either traditional objectivism or postmodern relativism. The first possibility is that of defending a viable position concerning the nature of psychological phenomena that does not flounder on the rocks of classic, fixed entity dualism, but which preserves non-mysterious distinctions between emergent psychological phenomena and the sociocultural contexts that spawn them. The second possibility is that of defending a workable epistemology that is compatible with our ontological position, and which avoids both the scientism involved in applying objectivist, positivist, physical scientific methodologies to psychological phenomena without regard to the agentic, contextualized nature of such phenomena, and the strong relativism that seems too often to accompany the necessary endorsement of perspectivism and fallibilism. In short, if our aims have been met, readers now should be in a position to envision psychological inquiry as nested between classic dualism and anti-psychological

reductionism (such as postmodern textualism, social constructionism, and eliminative materialism), as well as between scientism and strong relativism.

Such a psychology is both made possible and constrained by the same sociocultural traditions and fusions that make possible and limit the emergence and development of psychological phenomena themselves. We psychologists emerge from this characterization as psychological individuals immersed in our societies and cultures, including our traditions of inquiry, but with the possibility of transcending the current forms of these practices by virtue of our reflexive intentionality targeted at a deeper understanding of our own nature and the constraints and allowances that make warranted, yet necessarily incomplete knowing of it possible.

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