

*Affirming the “S” in HBSE through the Socio-Cultural Discourses of Lev Vygotsky,
Barbara Myerhoff, Jerome Bruner, and Ken Gergen*

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Abstract (100 words)

Owing largely to the pioneering spirit of Sigmund Freud, social work’s understanding of human behavior and development has supported individualist discourses that essentialize the self. Socio-cultural discourses present alternatives that strengthen the intentions of many social workers when they invoke the concept of human behavior in the social environment. In particular, Lev Vygotsky, Barbara Myerhoff, Jerome Bruner, and Ken Gergen offer compelling and salient accounts for genuinely regarding human behavior as embedded, even constituted by, social environments.

Key words: Behavior, Bruner, Culture, Development, HBSE, Identity, Myerhoff, Social Construction, Vygotsky, Gergen

Introduction

As the Draft Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards released this year from the Council on Social Work Education highlight the role of “context” (Council on Social Work Education, 2007), and with the current wave of “evidence-based practice” sweeping social work service settings, perhaps it might be helpful to affirm why the “S” is in “HBSE.” That is, what are some of the central ideas that inform concepts of human behavior in *social* environments as distinct from human behavior in individual, autonomous, biological, or genetic environments?

Pioneers explore new territory and lay the foundation for everything else that takes place in that territory afterward. Colonial pioneers of the American West rendered silent the voices and wisdom of marginalized people. In the name of progress—and possibly with good intention—they brought about significant suffering for certain groups of people. Sigmund Freud is a pioneer in the territory of human development and consciousness. His psychoanalysis is akin to the first “wave” of Westward migration. It overturned ancestral lands and has become the new “native” psychology.¹ Each subsequent design for human behavior theory that has held prominence in Western intellectual, professional, academic, and scholarly communities has operated within discursive limits delineated through Freud’s ideas. The dominant legacy in these territories, as in the ethos that carried forward manifest destiny is *individualism*.

Human behavior and development theory is not without visionaries who negotiate the margins of taken-for-granted disciplinary contexts. Some have brought forth alternative discourses from non-traditional fields such as anthropology (e.g., Barbara Myerhoff), some through re-discovery of longstanding ideas (e.g., Lev Vygotsky), and

some through accounts that subsume discourse itself (e.g, Jerome Bruner and Kenneth Gergen). This most recent “waveⁱⁱ,” deserves particular consideration as it offers the promise of rendering visible those ways of thinking and being, those ways of developing, and those experiences of identity that have been subjected to illegitimization by what has come before.

The Pioneering Discourse of Human Behavior: Individualism

By the end of the 19th century the medicalization of problems of living had largely succeeded at pushing aside moral models of understanding and treating human behavior. Liberal social reform movements in the 19th century that focused on public education, abolishing slavery, granting women more rights, and reforming the criminal justice system allowed for a shift in dominant discourses about proper human behavior and development, reasons why human behavior and development might go awry, and what to do about it when it does. Sigmund Freud moved western medical practice away from treating personal problems with invasive procedures (e.g., removing women’s ovaries to treat hysteria) and in the process changed popular discourse in relation to human behavior and development.

Psychoanalysis—and arguably its later derivatives and incarnations, such as psychodynamics, ego psychology, developmental psychology, self psychology, and object-relations—is constructed on two principle “audacious theses.” First, that “...mental processesⁱⁱⁱ are in themselves unconscious and...of all mental life it is only certain individual acts and portions that are conscious” (Freud, 1917/1966, p. 25). Second, “instinctual impulses which can only be described as sexual, both in the

narrower and wider sense of the word, play an extremely large and never hither appreciated part in the causation of nervous and mental diseases” (Freud, 1917/1966, p. 26). Freud (1917/1966) takes pains to make it absolutely clear that he considers the unconscious (and unconscious mental processes) to be quite real, not “a makeshift, *une façon de parler*” (p. 344). These are not mere metaphors or constructs to him, they are real elements of human consciousness. In his own way—a way I describe as pioneering, with full associations with colonization—he is trying to free “neurotic” people from the label of “degenerate” that he says psychiatry “which is acquainted only with a psychology of consciousness” applies to these people. For example, when Freud (1917/1966) says, “homosexual impulses are invariably discovered in every single neurotic,” and that paranoia, “regularly arises from an attempt to fend off excessively strong homosexual impulses” (p. 381), he is not trying to pathologize homosexuality. Rather, he is trying to liberate “neurotics” and “paranoids” from the potential trauma they may experience at the hands of psychiatrists who are only interested in treating the symptoms of their disorder.

These are not merely “theoretical” issues. Dominant discourses establish what Stephen Madigan (1998) refers to as what can be said, who can say it, and with what authority. Freud (1917/1966) ended his series of lectures at the University of Vienna (upon which his *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* were based) with a prescription for society’s role in relation to the developmental and pathogenic processes he has thus constructed.

[S]ociety must undertake as one of its most important educative tasks to tame and restrict the sexual instinct when it breaks out as an urge to

reproduction, and to subject it to an individual will which is identical with the bidding of society. It is also concerned to postpone the full development of the instinct till the child shall have reached a certain degree of intellectual maturity, for, with the complete irruption of the sexual instinct, educability is for practical purposes at an end. Otherwise, the instinct would break down every dam and wash away the laboriously erected work of civilization. Nor is the task of taming it ever an easy one; its success is sometimes too small, sometimes too great. The motive of human society is in the last resort an economic one; since it does not possess enough provisions to keep its members alive unless they work, it must restrict to the number of its members and divert their energies from sexual activity to work. It is faced, in short, by the external, primeval exigencies of life, which are with us to this day (p. 386).

It ought not come as a surprise, then, that in his 2008 budget President Bush proposed to continue recent increases in federal funding for abstinence-only education programs. Even less surprising, since both mainstream Democrats and mainstream Republicans perpetuate dominant discourses, the U.S. House of Representatives voted to increase abstinence-only education by \$27.8 million, bringing total funding to \$141.1 million. This is the amount of funding requested by President Bush (California Adolescent Health Collaborative, 2007). Though “the effects of these policies on marital and pregnancy transitions among those entering adulthood [is] ‘weak or nonexistent’” (Levin-Epstein, 2003, p. 2), the dominant discourse on the subject, consistent with Freud’s warnings, suggests otherwise.

The discourse on human behavior and development pioneered by Sigmund Freud is deterministic, structural, global, essentialist, and—in starkest contrast to the features of human behavior in *social* environments—it is individualistic. Determinism refers to the principle that an event X necessarily leads to an effect Y. More broadly, theories that are deterministic presuppose that it is possible to either determine what will happen in the future based on what has happened in the past (or what is happening in the present) or it is possible to determine how what has happened in the past led to what is currently happening. For example, the success or failure of unconscious mental processes’ movement into consciousness determines the symptoms that will manifest. Here, early childhood experience is frequently indicted. Freud’s ideas are structural in that they assume a basic or deep structure of consciousness that is knowable and identifiable. His later ideas about an *id*, *ego*, and *superego* are perhaps most revealing of his structural orientation. The global nature of psychoanalytic theory is evident in its universal declarations. Freud presumes that everyone, everywhere, and at every time has/had an unconscious (he even psychoanalyzed people living in earlier time periods) that relates/related with the conscious mind in the same, universal way. Healthy development and pathological development are related only to unconscious processes, not to cultural contexts, local contingencies, environmental influences, or epistemological frameworks. Lastly, and the feature targeted most sharply by socio-cultural accounts, Freud’s constructs for human behavior and development are essentialist in nature. That is, Freud posits a core, atomistic, principle structure which is the “essence” of humanity. This is, of course, the unconscious.

Socio-cultural Visions for Human Development

Individualist discourses that support essentialism, structuralism, determinism, and globalism, while currently dominant, are not the only options available to those wishing to make sense of human behavior, and assist in the process of changing it. The alternatives are, perhaps, more helpful, more hopeful, more inclusive, and, ultimately, more meaningful. Consistently, the below propositions privilege local experience and non-autonomous selves. That is, human development, consciousness, behavior, identity, and selfhood are understood as emerging from social and cultural contexts.

Social Development and Definitional Ceremonies

Barbara Myerhoff belongs to a cadre of scholars, academics, researchers, and practitioners committed to a social understanding of personhood and identity. She is concerned about “the anatomization of thought.” That is, she offers an alternative to disciplines of identity that aim to identify and describe a defined structure for internal thought/mental processes. Myerhoff sees identity as a relational achievement, as the product of a dynamic performance between communities of people. Her research focuses on “How people make sense out of themselves, for themselves” (Myerhoff, 1986, p. 261), in contrast to what might be considered “how scientists make sense out of people, for people.”

I understand Myerhoff’s major claim to be that people make sense of themselves by “showing themselves to themselves.” This is not only self-recognition, and it is most certainly not “finding out who one really is” or “getting in touch with one’s self,” which can be attributed to a humanistic construction of selfhood. Rather, it is self-definition.

The stories we tell about ourselves, the roles we play, the artifacts we construct, and the relationships we negotiate continually generate and revise who we are. Myerhoff suggests that identity is social and relational because personal “demonstrations and performances” have audiences that necessarily reflect back the images and statements carried in those personal expressions. Moreover, audiences do not exist in a static or observational position in relation to performances of identity. The “reflecting back” is interpretive, or at the very least a “mirroring” of what has been witnessed, thereby influencing the experience of the demonstration and performance for all—for the performer and for the audience. This new post-relational demonstration varies from the initial articulation. Through this process, people can bring about the very existence they prefer by engaging in a performance of a preferred identity that is then “taken up” by the audience. In her work with elder Jews in Venice, California, Myerhoff noticed, “They displayed and performed their interpretations of themselves and in some critical respects became what they claimed to be” (Myerhoff, 1986, p. 263).

In contrast to deterministic and universal accounts of human behavior, Myerhoff explicitly allows for the contradictions, paradoxes, and fantasies that imbue stories of identity (as they do, I believe, in all stories). Personal identity cannot be clean, consistent, or concise, nor can it ever be fixed and permanent, nor yet can it be individually bounded. Myerhoff noticed that “people inscribed their self-interpretation on the spaces and surfaces they touched—walls, neighborhoods, media...” (Myerhoff, 1986, p. 266). The Jewish elders who lived in the Venice neighborhood and who visited the local senior center engaged in performances of meaning that transcended audiences of immediacy. That is, they marked their world—they left bits and pieces of themselves—in places that

allowed audiences to pick up and engage with the original author’s expressions at a later time. Thus, in addition to a de-centered and relational identity, Myerhoff allows for identity conclusions that are temporally extended, and always available for re-creation.

In such a frame (as in all frames) we are both limited and liberated. We are limited in the possibilities for development of preferred human behavior because we are not able to construct our identities alone, we are dependent on communities of people to bring about our identities. Yet, we are able to become that which we prefer by joining others in identity relationships. Myerhoff refers to such events as “definitional ceremonies,” performances which bring about people’s visibility when there is no audience to bear witness to lived stories. “Reflecting surfaces” such as the walls, neighborhoods, and media referred to above render visible those identities which are marginalized by being excluded from dominant and taken-for-granted depictions.

For this reason, Myerhoff engaged in an act of social change by publicly showing the lives of the older Jewish men and women in Venice. Other communities of people could not help but be recruited as audiences for the performances of identity Myerhoff facilitated. Such thinking can lead social workers to the necessity of audiences for marginalized voices, in contrast to notions of social advocacy that speak of “giving people a voice.”^{iv} Those who are marginalized by dominant cultural institutions and practices already have a voice, what they are missing is an audience.

A final significant implication of Myerhoff’s work for those engaging with ideas around HBSE is how all of this brings to the forefront the power of so-called “experts” to change people’s lived experience and sense of themselves. The rough, unfinished, playful, dissonant telling of a person’s experience and knowledge gets collapsed and

essentialized by global, objective, professional, and bounded accounts of their identity. We are at risk of stepping into non-preferred identities when an audience of identity experts is thrust upon us.

Storied Consciousness and Cultural Narratives

Jerome Bruner invites readers to consider a “cultural psychology,” with a focus on how meaning is constructed, as opposed to a “positivist psychology,” with its ideals of reductionism, causal explanation and prediction. He does so, he says, because

when we deal with meaning and culture, we inevitably move toward another ideal. To reduce meaning or culture to a material base, to say that they “depend,” say, on the left hemisphere, is to trivialize both in the service of misplaced concreteness. To insist upon explanation in terms of “causes” simply bars us from trying to understand how human beings interpret their worlds and how *we* interpret *their* acts of interpretation. And if we take the object of psychology (as of any intellectual enterprise) to be the achievement of understanding, why is it necessary under all conditions for us to understand *in advance* of the phenomena to be observed—which is all that prediction is (Bruner, 1990, p. xiii, original emphasis)?

This is of course, a significant challenge for and to dominant ideas of the “social” or “soft” sciences which have strived for so long to achieve the respect of the “hard” sciences.^v In order to explore culture and the search for meaning, one must give import to the role of intentional states in making meaning: what people *say* in addition to what they do. “Saying and doing represent a functionally inseparable unit in a culturally oriented

psychology” (Bruner, 1990, p. 19). But an interpretive position does not necessitate an unverifiable, illegitimate position on human behavior and development. Bruner decries the “post-Freudian” dismissal of intentionality as mentalism—as not being amenable to prediction and not appropriate for verification. A construct of intentionality that is predictable and verifiable is clearly possible—after all, this is what he identifies—and does not need to have a deep structure to be able to be mapped. Such an argument would suggest an essentialist position, which Bruner stands against.

Bruner emphasizes that an interpretive psychology, such as his cultural psychology, “need not be unprincipled or without methods, even hard-nosed ones. It seeks out the rules that human beings bring to bear in creating meanings in cultural contexts” (Bruner, 1990, p. 118). So much for the potential dismissal of a cultural context for understanding human development and consciousness as a “soft” approach.

Bruner insists that he and his colleagues’ original psychological effort in the late 1950s was to establish “meaning^{vi} as the central concept of psychology—not stimuli and responses, not overtly observable behavior, not biological drives and their transformation, but meaning” (Bruner, 1990, p. 2). This, he says, is what people refer to as “the cognitive revolution.” Like many rebellions, though, the purposes and commitments of this revolution were hijacked and taken in other directions. “Emphasis began shifting from ‘meaning’ to ‘information,’ from the *construction* of meaning to the *processing* of information” (Bruner, 1990, p. 4, original emphasis).^{vii}

Bruner now maintains, “It is man’s [sic] participation *in* culture and the realization of his mental powers *through* culture that make it impossible to construct a human psychology on the basis of the individual alone” (Bruner, 1990, p. 12, original

emphasis). He argues that “it is culture and the search for meaning that is the shaping hand, biology is the constraint, and that, as we have seen, culture even has it in its power to loosen that constraint” (Bruner, 1990, p. 22). For example, cultural practices may lead to extraordinary activities such as fasting, that oppose biological pressures in the search for meaning. They may also support ordinary, everyday achievements, such as techniques to remember more than Miller’s (1956) “seven plus or minus two things” at a time. This quality of culture, the ability to grant people powers greater than their biology would allow, was asserted several decades earlier by Lev Vygotsky, as will be explored below. It also serves, in Bruner’s view, as the feature of human evolution that separates us from the rest of “the apes.” In contrast to perspectives that emphasize brain size or bipedalism as the “turning point,” which he says are only morphological steps in human evolution, “the divide in human evolution was crossed when culture became the major factor in giving form to the minds of those living under its sway” (Bruner, 1990, p. 12).

Biology is not irrelevant in exploring human behavior. Clearly there are certain limitations that biology imposes. However, biological structures and processes are not the essential units for understanding human meaning-making. Bruner says, “A cultural psychology does not [rule] out or [deny] the existence of biological limits and physical and even economic necessities...It insists that the ‘methodology of causation’ can neither capture the social and personal richness of lives in a culture nor begin to plumb their historical depth. It is only through the application of interpretation that we, as psychologists, can do justice to the world of culture” (Bruner, 1990, p. 137). It is likely that Bruner includes social workers in his claim.

How then, does culture interact with individual consciousness to bring about experiences of meaning and behavior? “[C]ulture...gives meaning to action by situating its underlying intentional states in an interpretive system. It does this by imposing the patterns inherent in the culture’s symbolic systems—its language and discourse modes, the forms of logical and narrative explication, and the patterns of mutually dependent communal life” (Bruner, 1990, p. 34). Bruner believes that humans have an innate and primitive predisposition to narrative organization that allows us to quickly and easily comprehend and use narratives. We are then “brought in” to a culture by the qualities of narratives we learn through that culture; really, by the qualities of narrative the culture teaches us. Bruner says the culture “equips us with new powers of narration through its tool kit and through the traditions of telling and interpreting in which we soon come to participate” (Bruner, 1990, p. 80).

Cultures fill in the mind’s narrative structure with principle accounts and stories that are the baseline against which other narratives are juxtaposed. This means that the implicit, taken-for-granted, silent, invisible narratives receive no recognition. They operate “in the background” so to speak. Bruner refers to these narratives as *canonical*. Humans engage in active narrative construction only when these implicit narratives are “violated.” He says, “When things ‘are as they should be,’ the narratives of folk psychology are unnecessary” (Bruner, 1990, p. 40). “Folk psychology,” then, is the base of a cultural psychology that aims to explore how people make meaning out of interpersonal and personal-cultural interactions. We only make meaning out of those events which stand outside of the canonical narratives, for the canonical narratives are

taken-for-granted, they are already “understood” and thus need no meaning-making (e.g., “that is what everyone does,” or “this is what you are supposed to do”).

The meaning that is constructed for exceptional events has a narrative structure. It has to. If it didn't, there would be no way of fitting these events into the mind's narrative orientation. As a consequence of this construction of meaning, we have “reasons” for the extraordinary, exotic, or strange that allow them to make sense. “The function of the story is to find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from a canonical cultural pattern” (Bruner, 1990, pp. 49-50). In order to have a narrative structure there must be an intentional state of the main actor (or subject, or protagonist) in front of a background canonical element of the culture. For example, the scenario of someone dealing with homelessness who is talking out loud is explained/reasoned as a person who *believes* there is someone else around, and/or is *coping* with a traumatic event, *and* there is mental illness in general and PTSD in specific in the world. The intentional state ascribed to this person is a belief or a coping mechanism. The canonical element is that there is PTSD, which is one kind of mental illness.

Consistent, then, with Myerhoff above and Vygotsky and Gergen below, Bruner's narratively understood “self,” is in sharp contrast with “the so-called Western conception of Selfhood, the view of ‘the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action, organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against such other wholes and against a social and natural background” (Bruner, 1990, p. 114).

Intra/Interpersonal Development and Cultural Artifacts

Lev Vygotsky may have been one of the first psychologists to suggest social and/or cultural underpinnings for human behavior and development. However, the Russian scientist’s writings were “lost” through the Soviet ascension to power and were only “re-discovered” in the late 1970s. Cole and Wertsch (n.d.) explain Vygotsky’s conception of the relationship between individual development and social/cultural development as such, “The development of mind is the interweaving of biological development of the human body and the appropriation of the cultural/ideal/material heritage which exists in the present to coordinate people with each other and the physical world” (p. 2). This is rather consistent with Bruner’s ideas of cultural-individual narrative processes. Vygotsky, however, focuses on what he calls “intramental” and “intermental” development.

Two ideas are central to grasping Vygotsky’s model, “lower mental functions” and “higher mental functions,” and these two ideas rely on the conceptual constructions of “tools”^{viii} and “the zone of proximal development.” Lower mental functions originate in genetic inheritance, they have an unmediated structure, they are isolated to individual mental units, and they have an involuntary relationship to other mental functions. Higher mental functions are socially acquired, they are mediated by social meanings, they exist as a link in a broad system of functions, and their relationship to other mental functions is voluntarily controlled (Subbotsky, n.d.). The example that Vygotsky gives for a lower mental function is an infant reaching out for something that she/he wants. Higher mental functioning is operating when an infant reaches out for something because she/he knows, “Reaching toward something gets me it.” In the former, the infant reaches out for

something because she/he wants it. This is not mediated by a thought or intention. In the case of the latter, higher mental function, the infant knows that a caregiver will get the item for her/him because that is what happens when she/he reaches out for something. There isn't the expectation that reaching out for something makes it somehow appear in her/his hand. Rather, the expectation is that someone will get the item and place it in her/his hand. For Vygotsky, all the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals (Nicholl, n.d.). That is, higher mental functions are only possible because of social exchange. The role of culture is obvious, then, when considering that social exchange only takes place within the larger context of culture.

The gap between lower and higher mental functions is bridged through psychological tools. Tools allow for new functions connected to those of the tool; they make certain natural processes obsolete, as they can now be achieved with the tool. “They alter the course and individual features...of all the mental processes that enter into the composition of the instrumental act” (Cole & Wertsch, n.d., p. 3). This is similar to what Bruner referred to in relation to getting past biological/physiological constraints. Of all the “tools,” that mediate the gap between lower and higher mental functions, including various systems for counting; mnemonic techniques; algebraic symbol systems; works of art; writing; schemes, diagrams, maps, and mechanical drawings; all sorts of conventional signs; and language, it was language that Vygotsky considered as most significant (Cole & Wertsch, n.d.).

The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is “the discrepancy between a child's actual mental age and the level he [sic] reaches in solving problems with assistance” (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 187). Nicholl (n.d.) notes that “the zone of proximal development is

the range of potential each person has for learning, *with that learning being shaped by the social environment in which it takes place*” (p. 2, my emphasis). The implications of this are really quite significant. For example, in an educational culture that focuses on individual proficiency and autonomous work, children’s development will remain within the confines of the zone of proximal development. However, if cooperation is emphasized in a classroom, rather than competition, children may acquire higher mental functioning capacities that allow them to expand the boundaries of their ZPD.

The key developmental abilities that Vygotsky is concerned with, then, are intramental and intermental processes.^{ix} Intramental abilities exist within a developing child while intermental abilities occur in the relationships between people (Nicholl, n.d.). The intramental abilities a child has—that is, the higher mental functions that they are able to utilize as individuals in their continual interactions with the world around them—depend on intermental, or interpersonal, processes. Psychologists’ and others’ emphasis hitherto on individual cognitive abilities and the privileging of spatially and temporally bounded notions of selfhood are again challenged as Vygotsky marks social exchange as the necessary precursor for individual higher mental functioning.

The critical role of culture in this social model for human development and consciousness is explicated by Cole & Wertsch (n.d.). They say, “Higher mental functions are, by definition, culturally mediated; they involve not a ‘direct’ action on the world, but an indirect action, one that takes a bit of material matter used previously and incorporates it as an aspect of action. In so far as that matter has itself been shaped by prior human practice (e.g., it is an artifact), current action benefits from the mental work that produced the particular form of that matter” (p. 2). Consequently, all psychological

or cognitive functions begin, and to a large extent remain, culturally, historically, and institutionally situated and context specific. This is because the artifacts, or what Vygotsky calls “tools,” are themselves culturally, historically, and institutionally situated. There is no way out of this. There are also no tools adequate for all tasks, “and there is no universally appropriate form of cultural mediation” (Cole & Wertsch, n.d., p. 3). They therefore conclude from Vygotsky’s position that the meaning of an action and the meaning of a context cannot be specified independently. “Objects and contexts arise together as part of a single bio-social-cultural process of development” (Cole & Wertsch, n.d., p. 3). They propose that “action-in-context” must be the unit of psychological analysis, rather than some essential construct belonging to an individual. Nicholl (n.d., p. 1) says, “Action is mediated and cannot be separated from the milieu in which it is carried out” and we are left again with the supposition that human behavior and development cannot be understood in the context of a “mind” located entirely inside the head. Higher mental functions “are transactions that include the biological individual, the cultural mediational artifacts, and the culturally structured social and natural environments of which persons are a part” (Cole & Wertsch, p. 3). We are thus presented with a solid argument against the universalizing totalization that grounds dominant human developmental discourses; the notion that there are fundamental, essential phenomena universal to human life across time and space.

Relational Identity

For over three decades Ken Gergen (1985, 1991, 2000) has been challenging individualistic human development canon with a doctrine based on relational identity. His

position rests on the argument that universal descriptions of human behavior and development are only possible when there is a lack of diversity in viewpoints. However, contemporary living prevents us from inhabiting such a homogenous discursive space due to the “enormous proliferation of relationships” brought about by technological achievements in the last century and a half. These include “low tech” innovations: the railroad, public postal services, the automobile, the telephone, radio broadcasting, motion pictures, and printed books; and “high tech” innovations: air travel, television, computers, and networks (Gergen, 2000). Gergen does not distinguish between an internal human developmental process and the socio-cultural context with which human development interacts.

Gergen operates within a reluctant *postmodern* perspective. He notes, “I’m not altogether happy with the term, which is also in broad currency within literary, architectural, artistic, political, and philosophical circles, and which has recently been carried over into pop culture...Still, there seems to be a corpus of coherently related ideas and images surrounding the use of the term in many of these contexts, and it would be a mistake to let the term slip away before examining its fuller significance” (Gergen, 2000, p. ix). In contrast to the notion of “self” as a mysterious inner world or an individual autonomous essence and identity, with postmodernism, “the very concept of personal essences is thrown into doubt. Selves as possessors of real and identifiable characteristics—such as rationality, emotion, inspiration, and will—are dismantled” (Gergen, 2000, p. 7). What we are left with, then, are “constructed selves,” “relational selves,” and/or selves of multiplicity.

This is not an academic or rhetorical issue for Gergen. He suggests that people living in technologically embedded cultures experience a different sort of development, and can be described as “having” a different kind of behavior than those living in historic eras (or continuing to live in indigenous cultures). How we construct selfhood has very real effects in people’s lives as, “attempts to define or describe oneself inevitably proceed from a perspective, and different perspectives have different implications for how a person is treated” (Gergen, 2000, p. 146). Before the advent of technologies that multiplied people’s relationships with other people human development was a much more local process. There were fewer people with whom to form relationships, the variety of those relationships was more limited in terms of time and space or distance, and the validity of diverse perspectives was less equally distributed. Today, we have not just a multiplying of relationships, but many new patterns of relationships.

The multiplicity of relationships leads to multiple selves because when we are exposed to other persons, we change in two major ways. We increase our capacities for *knowing that* and for *knowing how*. Gergen (2000) says,

In the first case, through exposure to others we learn myriad details about their words, actions, dress, mannerisms, and so on. We ingest enormous amounts of information about patterns of interchange. Thus, for example, from an hour on a city street, we are informed of the clothing styles of blacks, whites, upper class, lower class, and more. We may learn the ways of Japanese businessmen, bag ladies, Sikhs, Hare Krishnas, or flute players from Chile. We see how relationships are carried out between mothers and daughters, business executives, teenage friends, and

construction workers...Hourly our storehouse of social knowledge expands in range and sophistication (pp. 69-70).

This massive increase in knowledge of the social world scaffolds development of strategies, skills, and practices that place such knowledge into action. These subsequent actions are performed within the context of cultural systems of meaning; at times maintaining them and at times changing them. Relating to and with the world, then, is a recursive process. “There is no self outside a system of meaning,” Gergen says, and because of this “it may be said that relations precede and are more fundamental than self. Without relationships there is no language with which to conceptualize the emotions, thoughts, or intentions of the self” (Gergen, 2000, p. 157). Arising from Gergen’s thoughts about relational multiplicity is a conception of human behavior, development, consciousness, identity, and selfhood that privileges language and culture over internal physical or psychological processes/ dynamics.

Systems of meaning are constructed through the coordinated use of language among members of a community. These systems of meaning are bounded by cultural discourses which are themselves shaped by and shaping of language. So, while Gergen maintains the primacy of relationships for facilitating language, he also concedes that “relationships cannot become the reality by which life is lived until there is a vocabulary through which they are realized” (Gergen, 2000, p. 160). Language makes relationships possible because it is through the medium of language that we construct meaning within communities of people. And, reflexively, sense of what language means is only derived from coordinated effort among persons—namely, relationships. This mutual bringing about makes little sense within linear positivist and/or modernist worldviews that

necessitate a singular cause conjoined with a singular effect. Barbara Myerhoff’s idea of a definitional ceremony is called forth with Gergen’s (2000) account of emotional behavior:

If we recognize that cultural rules govern when and where an emotional performance can occur, as well as others’ reactions to those performances, the expresser’s responses to these reactions, and so on, we can begin to see emotional performances as single movements within an elaborate dance or *emotional scenario*...To talk about ‘my depression,’ ‘John’s anger,’ ‘Myra’s joy,’ and the like is to misplace inside individual heads actions that form part of more extended scenarios. ‘My depression’ is only mine in the sense that I am playing out this particular aspect of the emotional scenario in which we are both engaged. Without your complicity, often preceding, during, and following this performance, the act would be reduced to nonsense (p. 166, original emphasis).

In stark contrast to the individualist and universal accounts of human behavior and development pioneered by Freud and dominating major 20th century iterations of human behavior theory, Gergen contends that human behavior and development is relational and contextual. “Without one’s culture to define the games and places possible within it, there is simply no being to be. We owe our sense of existence, then, not to internal sources—passion, reason, observation, and the like—but to our participation in the communal forms” (Gergen, 2000, p. 197).

Conclusions

In the spirit of “manifest destiny,” or what Gergen (2000) calls the “narrative of progress,” we can understand human development in the sense of unfolding toward something better, greater, bigger, fuller, more connected, more actualized, more autonomous, more independent, and/or more evolved. Human behavior itself can be regarded as preferred or problematic; one can aspire to “good” or “right” behavior. This position is dependent on an individualist discourse and is well supported by disciplines relating to human subjects (Swartz, 2007). Freud was a western pioneer for these modes of thoughts. We might alternatively choose to sustain the positions of socio-cultural discourses such as those traced by Vygotsky, Myerhoff, Bruner, and Gergen. Here, there is no essentialist human development. There are, in its place, social and cultural relations from which behavior emerges.

When examining the variety of options available to social workers as they enact what the Council on Social Work Education (2008) posits as the profession’s purpose: “to promote human well-being by strengthening opportunities, resources, and capabilities of people and to create policies and provide services to prevent and address conditions that limit human rights and the quality of life,” I suggest that researchers, educators, practitioners, and students consider the *real effects* of the view they take. Instead of concerning ourselves with truth-value (which a socio-cultural perspective rejects at the outset), we ought to measure what happens to the people we serve when a particular perspective is embraced. We might then support, reject, or abandon a discourse on ethical grounds.

Socio-cultural discourses are currently on the margins in popular social work practice (though this may not be so obvious in academic communities), whilst the

individualist discourses solidified by Freud and maintained by subsequent accounts of human development (especially those associated with behaviorism and cognitive-behaviorism which are in vogue as “evidence-based practices”) are privileged. What are the real effects of individualist discourse on human behavior and development in the present world? Here’s an example: the United States spends an extraordinary amount of money researching the neurochemical nature of what is considered mental illness. Certain diagnoses are covered by insurance companies, while others are not, largely determined by availability of effective medications. These medications are prescribed to individuals. Many of these medications are very expensive. Despite increased demand *and* supply of pharmaceutical medications that treat perceived problems with human behavior and development, the cost of many new medications has risen (which flies in the face of classical economics) and the share of health expenditures American consumers spend on pharmaceuticals continues to rise (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2007). The pharmaceutical industry spends more of its budget on advertising than on research, (Gagnon & Lexchin, 2008) while a percentage of both activities continues to be tax deductible (Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, 2007). Many of the diagnoses addressed by these medications have maintained virtually the same name as those described by Freud (i.e., histrionic personality disorder, narcissistic personality disorder) (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). One of the largest influences on the rising cost of health care in America is the price of prescription drugs, which has resulted in an *increase* in the uninsured in the United States over the last several years (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2007).

All of this is made possible by the taken-for-granted nature of individualist discourses on human behavior and development that are essentialist, deterministic, structural, and global. Were socio-cultural visions for human development to be privileged, it is likely that universal, comprehensive, and uncategorical health care would stand out as the only possible choice for a democratic nation. Therapeutic care would be regularly available at multiple levels of intervention and would be located in a variety of relational communities. This is so because human behavior, development, identity, experience, and consciousness would be understood as social and cultural exchanges instead of bounded phenomena. Processes such as wraparound planning, restorative justice, and family decision-making would become the canon of social work practice rather than experimental, pilot projects (Swartz, 2004). Affirming the “S” in the concept of human behavior in the social environment promises a re-positioning of the National Association of Social Worker’s Ethical Standard 6.04 (NASW, 2007). Instead of being relegated to the end of the document, potentially losing the interest of students and grant funders, we would have a rigorous theoretical basis for and compulsion toward promoting “conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity within the United States and globally.” We would “promote policies and practices that demonstrate respect for difference, support the expansion of cultural knowledge and resources, advocate for programs and institutions that demonstrate competence, and promote policies that safeguard the rights of and confirm equity and social justice for all people.” This is not a pioneering mentality, it is a progressive one.

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ⁱ Here I am reminded of the oft-sighted bumper sticker found on European-American owned and driven cars in Oregon that says “Native Oregonian.”

ⁱⁱ I include those perspectives that might be considered social constructionist, postmodern, and/or post-structural in this “wave.”

ⁱⁱⁱ “Mental processes” are feeling, thinking, and willing.

^{iv} For example, Democratic Presidential candidate John Edwards uses the idea of being a voice for the poor in his campaign (John Edwards for President, 2007).

^v What might our world be like if biology, chemistry, and physics operated from a cultural orientation rather than a positivist orientation? Would we still have the internet? Pharmaceutical drugs? Abundant food? Cheap cars? Nuclear power? Genetically-modified organisms? Expedited extinction of plants, animals, and civilizations?

^{vi} “Meaning” is later described as “a culturally mediated phenomenon that depends upon the prior existence of a shared symbol system” (Bruner, 1990, p. 69).

^{vii} It dawns on me that the dominant metaphor used to represent humanness has shifted in Western culture as the cutting edge technology has shifted—from the clock in the 17th century to the late 19th century, the engine until the mid-20th century, the computer until quite recently, and now the “network”. What came before the clock and what will come after the network?

^{viii} The more contemporary anthropological/communications term “artifact” is interchangeable with Vygotsky’s “tool.”

^{ix} In contemporary terms, these may be referred to as intrapersonal and interpersonal development.