

Texts of Identity

John Shotter and Kenneth J. Gergen (eds.)

London, England: Sage Publications Ltd., 1989, 244 pp.

It seems fitting that Shotter and Gergen's *Texts of Identity* was published in 1989—a year in which dramatic social and political changes began in many parts of the world. For, in its own small way, this book is part of a major shift that is occurring in social psychology (and, indeed, in all parts of the discipline except quantitative and physiological psychology)—a shift that challenges our traditional subject of inquiry and the methodologies appropriate to it.

Texts of Identity is the second volume in the Sage Publications' series entitled "Inquiries in Social Construction". The fourteen chapters that comprise this volume are diverse in two ways. First, their focus varies from a consideration of the philosophical, theoretical, and conceptual issues that underlie a textual analysis of selfhood to the application of this analysis to medical examinations, mystery stories, mid-life crises, mitigating accounts of police violence, terrorism, and lesbianism. Second, the contributors come from several different countries (e.g., the United States, England, Australia, Canada, and the Netherlands), have different backgrounds (e.g., sociologist, psychologist, philosopher, Jungian analyst, and freelance folklorist), and necessarily bring these individual differences to their consideration of specific subject matter. Yet, despite its diversity, the book is a coherent piece of work, primarily because certain central themes recur across the chapters.

One theme is the comparison of the dominant view of the self that has been a mainstay of experimental social psychology with the view held by those who take a social constructionist position. In a chapter entitled "The Deconstruction of the Self", Edward Sampson questions psychology's assumed object of inquiry, i.e., the self-contained, individual, autonomous person who is a centre of awareness, an integrated whole, an entity apart from others. He also challenges psychologists to view the self as multidimensional, "open-ended and indeterminate except as fixed in place by the culturally constituted symbolic order" (p. 14), and to recognize the other-in-self and the self-in-other, i.e., the interpenetration of society and the individual. This questioning of the notion of the unitary self, coupled with a view of the self as multiple and indeterminate (although constrained by our ways of talking which serve to maintain various forms of social relationship) is a sub-theme that runs through many of the chapters—as, for example, in Celia Kitzinger's presentation of how the dominant Western ideology of liberal humanism denies lesbians their differences, depoliticizes them, and removes the threat they impose on the prevailing moral and social order; in John Shotter's account of how we have focused on the 'I' and ignored the 'you' in our research endeavors and scientific communications, how we are entrapped in the text of possessive individualism, and how we might shift to the counter-text of communitarianism; and in Kurt Back's thesis that in contemporary mystery and spy novels there is an increasing emphasis on the complexities of the self, with the question of the real self being left indeterminate.

A second theme, and a major departure from our discipline's appeal to observation or experience as justification for understanding, is that self-knowledge is, as Kenneth Gergen maintains, "a mastery of discourse" (p. 75). We know about the self not by probing our inner psyches or by being acutely sensitive to our emotions and motives, but rather by developing the linguistic skills necessary for articulating our intentions. Furthermore, the self is constructed in discourse—discourse that is constitutive of social relationship. The implications of this position for social psychology are immense. For example, as Rom Harré maintains in his chapter entitled "Language Games and Texts of Identity", it means that in order to understand human conduct we must look at practices and customs rather than search for mechanisms, and we must study how we talk about our actions, how our grammar of the concepts of action and agency create the illusion of hidden states 'within' a person. Ben Slugoski and Gerry Ginsburg's challenge to Erikson's theory of identity formation is a concrete illustration of how our traditional conceptions of selfhood are altered by taking a social constructionist position. They argue that 'crisis' and 'commitment'—two criteria considered necessary for the achievement of identity—are "not concomitants of a private, underlying process, but culturally appropriated modes of discourse" (p. 37)—modes that are most appropriate for Western, economically privileged males. Taking this position also means, as Kitzinger states, that research "is focused not on the 'accuracy' of the identity account, but on the social and political functions it serves" (p. 82), not on the refutation of theories through hypothesis-testing and statistical analysis but on conceptual advances as Harré maintains, and not on the quantification of behavioural characteristics in large samples but on the study of individual cases as Kevin Murray illustrates in his analysis of romance and comedy in identity projects.

The crucial role of language in the construction of persons is central to a third, and major, theme that runs through the book, i.e., the role of the text or narrative as the medium through which individuals discover the sense of self. Several excellent examples of textual analysis are provided, including (but not limited to) Katharine Young's analysis of three stories told by a patient during a medical examination, Margaret Wetherell and Jonathan Potter's analysis of mitigating accounts of police violence, and Khachig Tölöyan's use of the projective narrative as a means of analyzing and understanding Armenian terrorism. What emerges from these contributions is how the use of features of a narrative permits us to look differently at phenomena.

With the possible exception of three chapters ("Discourse and Power" by Ian Parker, "Individualizing Psychology" by Nikolas Rose, and "Complex, Ontology and Our Stake in the Theatre" by David Holt) which are rather obscure and require an understanding of the work of Foucault and Jung, the contributions are focused, clearly written, and comprehensible by readers who have some familiarity with social constructionism. I do not mean to imply by this that the book is easy reading—far from it. *Texts of Identity* is a very challenging collection of scholarly papers which, for most of us, will require several readings before all of the themes, sub-themes, and corre-

spending implications for the discipline of psychology are understood. However, it is well worth the time.

Linda McMullen
University of Saskatchewan

The Political Economy of Information

Mosco, Vincent and Janet Wasko, (eds.)

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For some reason, political scientists, sociologists and those who teach in departments of communication occasionally feel the need to masquerade as economists. When this happens they call themselves political economists, and they generally make a hash of things. *The Political Economy of Information* is a case in point.

In the introductory essay the senior editor provides his views of the information society and an overview of the other thirteen chapters in the book. His views and those of the other authors mesh nicely. He suggests that the chapters fall into three groups. The first provides the theory ("How to Think About Information"), the second identifies "specific domains in the political economy of information" and the third considers some international aspects of information.

I do not, however, find three precise divisions to the work in this book. Much of each chapter seems interchangeable with parts of any other chapter. Here is the senior editor discussing a fundamental issue:

Yet computer communications are eliminating the jobs that provide the income necessary to keep consumption going. Certainly there are ways of maintaining an economy based on concentrating consumption in a fabulously wealthy elite. But how will that society control the millions who are denied? For example, will the millions of women and racial minorities who have struggled for years for some degree of economic, political and social equality yield easily to deepening inequalities? I think not.

There, in a nutshell, is the book. Bad economics. Bad history. A nod to minorities to arouse our sympathies. And a touch of the self-righteous. Certainly, economic historians will be baffled by the view of recent technological innovations (the new information revolution) that seems ignorant of past innovations.

This time, according to several of the authors, there will be secular unemployment in the wake of technological change and permanent harm to workers, women and minorities. History says otherwise, of course, but the authors ignore this embarrassment. They show shocked surprise that recent innovations such as personal computers are marketed to the wealthy (thus widening the rift between the wealthy and workers,