

## Book Reviews

*The Psychology of Human Possibility and Constraint.* J. Martin and J. Sugarman. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999, 160 pages.

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### *Introducing a Middle Way for Psychology*

Martin and Sugarman claim that *The Psychology of Human Possibility and Constraint* presents a unique argument for a reconceptualization of some of the significant ideas of the discipline of psychology. The book is directed primarily toward psychologists and students of psychology, and as I am neither I cannot say whether the ideas are indeed unique for the discipline. As a teacher and researcher interested in cognition, however, I am able to recognize in Martin and Sugarman's work echoes of ideas that have recently become significant in the fields of education, cognitive science, and "new biology" (Maturana & Varela, 1987).

Martin and Sugarman begin in Chapter 1 by articulating their understanding of two dominant views of contemporary cognitive psychology with respect to the human condition. They explain these two positions, which they describe as cognitive constructivism and social constructionism, develop briefly the intellectual ancestry of each position, and put forth their own thesis (a position they describe as "dynamic interactionism"). All this is accomplished in the first three pages of the book, so for a reader unfamiliar with the perspectives of cognitive constructivism and social constructionism, or meeting for the first time the ideas underlying Martin and Sugarman's own position, these initial pages might prove overwhelming. As one familiar with the ideas of cognitive constructivism, social constructionism, and dynamic interactionism (albeit through a lens other than that of psychology and recognizing other descriptors for this position), I was not overwhelmed but, rather, disappointed that Martin and Sugarman had chosen to reveal all so soon.

Leaving aside my initial reservations, I continued to read and discovered that Martin and Sugarman devote the remainder of their first chapter to an elaboration of the two positions they are attempting to bridge and an initial exploration of, and justification for, their own position. Recognizing that in trying to achieve a balance between the sociocultural position such as that articulated by Vygotsky, and the constructivist position such as that articulated by Piaget, one cannot simply conclude that both sides have merit and leave it at that, Martin and Sugarman claim that what is necessary is a new theoretical

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approach that has ontological and epistemological assumptions different from either of the positions to be bridged. Dynamic interactionism, they say, offers such an approach by “holding an essentially social constructionist thesis concerning the origins of psychological phenomena, without denying the phenomenology of individual psychological experience” (p. 7).

In Chapter 2, through an exploration of memory and imagination, Martin and Sugarman explain how although “the psychological is cut initially from the same cloth as the physical and sociocultural ... [it] gradually emerges and develops beyond these origins” (p. 39). This they claim as their “underdetermination thesis”: that “personal theories, including theories of self, arise from but are underdetermined by human experience in sociocultural contexts” (p. 35). This proposal is consistent with the position offered by Maturana and Varela (1987) upon whose work, incidentally, I am surprised Martin and Sugarman do not draw. Maturana and Varela suggest that changes that result from interaction are brought about by the disturbing agent (sociocultural contexts, in Martin and Sugarman’s vocabulary) but determined by the structure of the disturbed system (the individual). Of course, Maturana and Varela mean something particular by the word *structure*; however, it is beyond the scope of this review to elaborate further on their position. Nevertheless, readers of Martin and Sugarman’s text may find it helpful also to consult Maturana and Varela’s work.

Martin and Sugarman begin Chapter 3 by setting forth their interpretation of the subject matter of psychology in order to convey some of the epistemological challenges that confront psychological inquiry. They articulate three distinctive features of psychological phenomena and explain how these features contribute to the challenges facing psychological inquiry and how they set it apart from the subject matter of the physical sciences. Such differences, the authors suggest, carry strong implications for epistemology and methodology in psychology. With this suggestion in place, Martin and Sugarman move to reject both scientism and strong relativism as adequate bases for psychological inquiry. They propose instead a particular form of weak relativism that they term *perspectivism*, claiming that this perspective holds that our concepts are partly constitutive of the reality about which we offer reasons and evidence. Such ontology, they claim, seems most compatible with the kind of philosophical hermeneutics articulated by Gadamer (1975, 1977). Martin and Sugarman suggest that their

dynamic, perspectivist, and fallibilist epistemology 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. (p. 63)

Martin and Sugarman’s aim, then, is “to envision psychological inquiry as nested ontologically between classic dualism and antipsychological reductionism (such as ... social constructionism ...), and epistemologically between scientism and strong relativism” (p. 64), what Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991) might term the seeking of a middle way.

In Chapters 4 and 5 Martin and Sugarman attempt to demonstrate how their theory plays out in practical understanding in the fields of psychotherapy, education, and human creativity and innovation. Turning first to psychotherapy, Martin and Sugarman discuss the traditional privileging in psychotherapeutic practice of cognitive constructivist rather than social constructionist perspectives. However, they note the move in recent postmodern approaches to psychotherapy away from traditional emphases on the individual self, yet claim that the presence of truly social constructionist, "selfless" (p. 71) psychologies is mostly absent from psychotherapy theory and practice. Martin and Sugarman present five basic metaphors under which constructivist thought in the area of psychotherapy is, they claim, subsumed. Each is briefly introduced and its link to cognitive constructivist thought emphasized. Drawing on the ideas and language thus far developed in the book, Martin and Sugarman then move to incorporate more of a social constructionist perspective into their reading of these metaphorical positions, drawing in particular on one metaphor, therapy as conversational elaboration. They include a brief case study drawn from Martin's previous work, which they claim is offered as an "empirical demonstration" of how from this new perspective clients in psychotherapy can internalize therapeutic conversations and of how such internalizations can become functional psychological tools for the client. Perhaps because I have no background in psychotherapy, and despite the inclusion of the case study, I found this section of the book too brief to achieve the authors' aims (of explicating alternative perspectives on psychotherapeutic theory and examining the import of such a perspective in psychology).

Turning next to the field of education, Martin and Sugarman begin by emphasizing the current contention between theorists and practitioners on both sides of the cognitive constructivist/social constructionist divide in this field. It becomes clear in this chapter that the kind of bridge between cognitive constructivist and social constructionist thought proposed by Martin and Sugarman requires one end of the bridge to be fixed before the other, and that end is the social. In discussing education the authors indicate that in their view, "the development of mind is sensible only within a *pre-existing* social, intersubjective consensus" (my emphasis, p. 85). It is here, I believe, that Martin and Sugarman's bridging theory parts company with the middle way proposed by certain biologists, cognitive scientists, curriculum theorists, and educators (Davis, 1996; Davis & Sumara, 1997; Davis, Sumara, & Kieren, 1996; Maturana & Varela, 1987; Varela et al., 1991), who propose that rather than one of the individual or social existing before the other, the two co-evolve in "mutual specification" (Varela et al., 1991, p. 198). In particular it is unfortunate that, despite drawing heavily on theorists in the area of mathematics education (e.g., von Glasersfeld, Cobb, Confrey, Bauersfeld) where the debate between the cognitive constructivists and social constructionists is arguably the most heated, Martin and Sugarman omit any reference to the work of Davis and his collaborators. Since the early 1990s Davis, whose curricular focus is mathematics and who draws on many of the same intellectual ancestors as Martin and Sugarman (such as Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty), has proposed a middle

way in the field of education (Davis, 1996). His work would not only have lent weight to Martin and Sugarman's claims, but may have moved their thinking yet further with regard to the relative primacy of the dualisms of self and other, mind and body, knower and known that they seek to disrupt. This omission is perhaps the text's greatest limitation.

Turning finally to the field of creativity and innovation, Martin and Sugarman briefly set forth the history of creativity research, emphasizing its traditional focus on the individual and the shift to a focus on the social dimension, and acknowledging recent moves to recognize the significance of both perspectives. Martin and Sugarman claim, however, that little progress has as yet been made in situating these ideas in a theoretical framework that elucidates how individual and sociocultural factors are related and gives some explanation of how creativity can emerge from them. They claim to be responding by "elaborating the role played by the developmental context in interpreting the conditions of possibility and constraint under which creativity and innovation occur" (p. 106). This section of the book is particularly brief and, for me at least, was inadequate as a response to that claim.

Not content with having addressed three major fields of research, in the final chapter of the book Martin and Sugarman claim to "consider the implications of [their] general account of psychological and sociocultural ontology and development for modern life" (p. 114). Drawing on the work of Gadamer (1975) and Taylor (1991), Martin and Sugarman claim that their

theory of psychological development is primarily an attempt to explain the way in which the individual emerges psychologically within the context of social, cultural practices and forms of historical understanding, and becomes capable of contributing new possibilities to these sociocultural traditions, even while constrained by them. (pp. 129-130)

They conclude by restating several times in different ways their claim that their proposed perspective, dynamic interactionism, "fuses postmodern social constructionism with positions that argue for the retention of bona fide psychological phenomena that are not reducible to sociocultural means" (p. 132).

Many of the significant ideas proposed in the first two chapters are repeated, rephrased, and expanded in subsequent chapters, and this will be helpful to those readers for whom these notions are new. The text is readable, helped in the first few chapters where the main ideas are proposed by sparing use of citations and relevant, comprehensive footnotes. This is not a text for the faint-hearted, however. Martin and Sugarman cover a broad landscape in relatively few pages. It is a pleasantly thin volume that is unfortunately a little too thin in places. In referring to the fields of psychotherapy, education, and creativity, Martin and Sugarman are able to do little more than point to how their ideas might be relevant. A much more detailed study, and treatment, of each field would have been required to make a real difference to a reader from any of these areas.

Further, of the three main fields toward which they point, it is in education that Martin and Sugarman appear most out of their depth. I would have preferred that they had either researched the most recent ontological and

epistemological positions being discussed the field of education more diligently, or restricted their writing to the field of psychology. Nevertheless, if, as Martin and Sugarman claim, the ideas they present are new to the field of their intended audience, then the text serves as a credible introduction.

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*Researching Education: Data, Methods and Theory in Educational Inquiry*. David Scott and Robin Usher. New York: Cassell & Continuum, 1999, 179 pages.

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Two criteria for reviewing this book include the general conditions governing the use of course textbooks in university education departments and the possibilities for using this particular text in a graduate seminar on educational research methods. Both perspectives partake of a fundamental question raised by the text itself: How is knowledge configured in relation to practices in education, and how is that question addressed by the text under review?

The presentation of philosophy, theory, method, criticism, and interpretation in an exegetical (expository textbook) format is an ambitious undertaking. *Researching Education* might find its application in graduate seminars where students of diverse backgrounds and interests gather, challenging the instructor to make coherent sense of a field of study that is itself highly diversified. This is where the book's claim to be of value to "anyone involved in education" will be most aptly tested—in sites where students may display a resistance to unfamiliar paradigms and to the literature that conveys them. Because instruction in a timed syllabus is a largely invitational effort, the depth of students' engagement depends greatly on their receptivity and on a sustained interest beyond the scope of the course.

In my own experience of a graduate research methods seminar, selected readings were handed out in the absence of a core text. That Gadamer, Geertz,

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