



A Sociology of Psychological Representations

James Moir



A Sociology of Psychological Representations

Abstract

This paper considers the way in which psychological representations are used within various social practices as the prime accountable basis for action. Reference to an association between what people do and how they act, and seeing them as psychological entities serves to maintain a major cultural dualism: interacting with people in terms of embodied individual psychologies. In this way much of the basis for action is rooted in a discursive constructions that refer to what people are like 'inside', what they think, feel or believe.

This kind of perceptual-cognitivism is, of course, the basis of much psychological investigation which trades on a the assumption that people are concerned with seeing and interacting with one another in order to understand what they are thinking and feeling. This is part of a wider cultural commonplace, the notion of an 'inner/outer' dualism, and one in which the disciplines of psychology and sociology have played a considerable part in actively maintaining. It provides a means of trading on rationalist notions of 'sense making' as well as the portrayal of people's inner' psychological states. By eschewing the pre-supposition of a psychological system as the basis for agency and instead looking at how people use psychological accounting as the basis for the negotiation of agency then it becomes possible to take up a sociology of psychological representation that is situated in people lives rather than in their heads.

**Contact details: Dr James Moir, School of Social & Health Sciences,
University of Abertay Dundee, Bell Street, Dundee, Scotland,
UNITED KINGDOM, DD1 1NJ. (Tel. 01382 308752 E-mail
j.moir@abertay.ac.uk)**

Introduction

This paper considers the way in which agency is constructed within various social practices in terms of psychological representations. Agency is conventionally associated with how people 'think' and 'feel' and the way this relates to their actions. These psychological representations provide the means for a varied way of engaging in social and institutional life and a means of making it intelligible and orderly. Cognitive references to 'thinking', giving 'reasons', 'knowing' 'interpreting' or 'understanding' provide publicly accountable criteria for agency, a kind of grammar for engaging with others. Here I use grammar to refer to a set of 'rules' that can be applied as a resource for agency and its accountability. Take for example, the references to "thinking things through" or "thinking before acting". These provide yardsticks for agency with respect to various activities such as making 'decisions' where the person is about to undertake some sort of commitment that entails a long terms consequence. They provide both the means for ordering people's lives as the basis for agency and a way for others to consider, judge and assess these actions in the way that they are orientated towards in terms of duality of inner mind and external world.

Cognition is regarded as the element of control and providing a basis for thinking before acting. The affective or emotional element

is taken being spontaneous and representing 'feelings' that in terms nonetheless can be taken as an accountable basis for action.

The emotional basis for action that can be presented as understandable, as a means for literally moving a person to do something, or indeed for inaction. It is often portrayed as an influence on how people think, where thinking is taken as reasoning and emotion as providing a means of supporting this as in terms of action or as something that skews or bypasses the reasoning process. Reason implies stability and order in how people conduct themselves; unchecked emotion can be seen as threatening in terms of association with lack of order.

This duality is interesting in terms of the ways in which emotion discourse can be a flexible and useful means of characterising action. As Edwards (1997) notes emotion discourse can be put to a great variety of uses within a range of social practices due to their flexibility as an accounting resource:

- (i) They can be contrasted with cognitions in terms of their less deliberative nature.
- (ii) They can be taken as being as 'understandable' and appropriate as how any reasonable person would react.
- (iii) They can be characterised as being the outcome of events or in the nature of the person.

- (iv) They can be treated as being kept under the control of a person's reasoning or as reactions that resist control.
- (v) They can be presented as the interaction of mental and physiological systems, as natural, or as derived from moral and ethical concerns.

In this paper, I want to make a case for a sociology of psychological representations terms of an association between this inner/outer dualism provides a 'grammar' for structuring the discourse used on specific occasions of use. This framework overcomes some of the problems associated with a tension in discourse analytic work that leans towards ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (e.g. Potter & Wetherell, 1987): the trade off between focusing on the indexical nature of discourse versus reading in an element of 'context'. Studying participants' orientations, either in terms of direct psychological accounting, or in terms of orientating towards aspects of the inner/outer dualism allows for a level of analysis in term of the study of the orderliness of social action. In this way a major cultural dualism is maintained: taking people's 'outward' accounts and actions and considering these as representations of what they are like 'inside' as thinking and feeling agents. I want to stress that this derives from accountability within practices rather than as the result of some sort of inner mental cognitive processing and exchange of representations.

A perceptual-cognitivist view of people's actions is, of course, the basis of much psychological investigation which trades on the assumption that people are concerned with interacting with one another in order to understand what they are thinking and feeling. This is part of a wider cultural commonplace, an 'inner/outer' dualism, and which is integral to a range of social practices.

The notion of these two separate realms is therefore a major rhetorical feature that is incorporated into how people interact with one another. It provides a means of trading on notions of 'sense making' as well as the portrayal of people's 'inner' mental states. There is a huge cultural imperative to be seen to be intelligible and to be able to convey one's 'thoughts' and 'feelings' in the form of judgements, reasons, and evaluations as the outcome of some kind of mental *process*. In perceptual-cognitive processing terms it is an "input-process-output" model.

I want to suggest that this model is orientated to in discourse as part of the social practices that people engage in. It is something that people orientate to in terms of how they portray individual attitudes, beliefs, motives, goals, judgements etc. Notice here that orientating to something does not necessarily involve an explicit mention of these psychological terms but rather how people treat each other as if these are germane or at stake. In effect, this

orientation is one of a discourse of an intra-psychic world as something that is normatively attended to as a means of accomplishing order within social practices.

The nature of this order is founded upon an orientation of participants employing a discourse of as related to mental processes in order to account for how they perceive matters and as the basis for action. In this way events are placed prior to this operation, as having happened and needing to be communicated, to be 'understood' in terms of emotional response. In this communication model there is a realm of people placed in amongst events and occurrences and a realm of mental operations requiring to be brought together. Here rationality is associated with the psychological notion of 'perception'. Accounts of an about actions are presented as part of texts of 'meaning' in which a mental processing system is assumed to be brought to bear upon matters in order to display these as the result of psychological agents who reach 'decisions', *have* feelings, have deliberated on something or other or who have can account for something in a way that 'make sense' to others who can understand a course of action. It is interesting to note here how even accounts that allude to emotions as the basis for actions may nonetheless be treated as rational in terms of their accountability or intelligibility. We can see why a

person might act in a particular way given certain circumstances and the way they react to and deal with these.

Cognitivist Assumptions: Academic and Everyday Practices

As noted above psychological investigation typically trades on a 'sense making' rhetoric in which the mind is theorised as a mental system that operates upon an external reality in order to produce a rational account of it. The aim of cognitive psychology is to examine, usually via experiments, how this system 'works'. The assumption is made that there are two realms: an external reality which acts as 'raw material' the 'input' for a psychological system which operate upon this in some way to produce an 'output' such as a perception. The de-coupling of cognitive activity from social practice through the use of experimental methods of investigation is what makes this activity easier to portray as the outcome of some neutral inner sense-making process.

Although this kind of model of mind is very much the lifeblood of modern cognitive psychology, it can also be found in less explicit ways within other, more unlikely, realms which accord more theoretical weight to social practice. As Potter & Edwards (2001) point out, the social theorist Pierre Bourdieu may be considered an unlikely advocate of cognitivism but his theorisation of *habitus* (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977; 1992) trades on an unreflexive 'inner/outer'

dichotomy. This presupposes the development of a psychological system in which dispositions associated with membership of social and cultural groups come to generate practices, perceptions and attitudes. This system is then able to produce 'meaning' (i.e. make sense), store and process it. Now whilst Bourdieu gives more weight to social practice and culture than that of cognitive psychology, he cannot rid himself of this 'inner/outer' dualism and the reification of 'mind' as a perceptual system.

But whilst academic disciplines such as psychology and sociology trade on this dualism it is also, of course, constructed and maintained in less formal academic ways as part-and-parcel of everyday social practices. Much of this is accomplished discursively in ordinary everyday conversation or in the talk and text associated with institutions and organisational settings.

My aim is to sketch out in this paper how referring to matters as the result of thinking and feeling is related to the construction of the 'inner/outer' dualism in ultimately producing order within social practices.

Anti-cognitivism, anti-foundationalism and models of personhood and society

In order to explore this issue it would be unhelpful to start from the assumption that such a dualism exists, that there is a psychological system that operates upon an external reality in order to produce rational thought. For one thing such an assumption is not necessarily a cultural universal, and for another people themselves do not exclusively make reference to such a dualism in terms of 'sense making' as they engage in various social practices. This is not to say that it does not exist but rather that for the purpose of studying how people make of use this dualism we need not start from a cognitivist position. But why? The reason for adopting a non-cognitivist approach is that my focus on is how this inner/outer dualism is pressed into service as part of various social practices where rationality is something that is at stake or germane. In other words my focus is on rationality as something that is constructed construction as part of what people do in the world.

It would also be absurd to begin from a point of doing what I intend to study, that is, how 'reality' and 'mind' are associated in order to do something or other. To take these as givens would be to fall back on 'experiential reality' as a foundational assumption instead of examining what this dualism is used to do. The analytic pay-off for this is in terms of achieving a means of dealing with its sheer pervasiveness as a means of accomplishing a range of social practices. So my starting point is to adopt an analytically agnostic

stance with regard to the 'inner mind' and 'external reality' and instead of adopt an epistemologically relativist, or anti-foundationalist, position, that is, to examine how versions of 'reality' are produced as part of what people do, and in particular as related to the production of what counts as the outcome of a rational agent.

It should also be noted that the position I wish to take does not require any stipulation of a model of the person or society. In other words, the focus is squarely upon the business of what gets constructed as rational persons within society and how this is accomplished as an aspect of social practice. By taking seriously the issue of what gets constructed – how, where and when - then the more traditional approach to society and its actors as causal entities is bypassed altogether. By not starting with some pre-defined model of the actor, especially the traditional cognitivist model in which the 'problem' becomes one of understanding how people perceive matters, it is becomes possible to treat 'knowledge' and 'reality' as cultural categories maintained or challenged within a range of social practices.

This may all seem a bit abstract but the significance of such an analytical move is that it allows the focus of study to become how the relationship between 'mind' and 'reality' is not, for most people, some philosophical issue but a rather a practical sociological

construction. Much has been written recently about the discursive means by which people construct such an association (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992; Edwards, 1997; Potter 1996, Potter 2003; te Molder & Potter, 2005) but there is much less of a discussion as to how psychological agents are constructed in terms of the direction of 'flow' in terms of presenting matters as external to the person and requiring to be made sense of, or in stressing the 'inner' thought processes brought to bear upon matters as being rational. This is what I wish to concentrate upon in the remainder of this paper. In doing so I wish to focus upon these rhetorical constructions in which one kind of move involves the use of a perceptual rhetoric as a 'reality-fixing' practice associated with a mental world knowing and understanding. The other works in the opposite direction and involves the establishment of a person's state of 'mind' by the presentation of some aspect of their actions in relation to the 'external' world.

Both sets of practices are fundamental to the pervasiveness of rational agents are constructed. Again it is worth re-iterating at this point that my focus here is on the construction of accounting practices in making use of this culturally embedded inner/outer dualism rather than taking this as read.

Making 'Outer' Matters The Subject of an 'Inner' Psychology

Let us take the first of these then, the means by which something is presented as a means of constituting its existence in a particular way as the outcome of trying to make sense of it via a set of cognitive operations. Within the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK) there have been a number of studies (e.g. Goodwin, 1995; Lynch & Woolgar, 1990) of the ways in which much of scientific *practice* involves observation and the visual constitution of 'facts'. For example, in biology scientists may present evidence in terms of images obtained from microscope slides as indicative of a particular pattern of say bacterial growth. In this way 'growth' is constituted as a biological phenomenon but of course there is nothing that is pre-conceptual or pre-discursive about this. This process therefore involves constituting and labelling a phenomenon that is then placed prior to this process as an already-existing feature of the world.

But whilst this form of constituting facts is the stock-in-trade of scientific practice, it is also a major part of people's everyday accounting practices. Referring to outer matters in terms of seeing things establishes the 'facts' and nature of 'events'. This form of accounting presents a case of the person as a psychological agent in terms of 'mental processes' being *required* to operate upon an external world out there that is seen in order to 'make sense'. In

this way the events are placed prior to this operation, as having happened and needing to be 'understood'.

In this communication model there is a realm of events and occurrences and a realm of mental operations requiring to be brought together in order to apprehend or grasp the nature of these events and occurrences. In this way the selection and active constitution of these matters as a social practice is occluded through the reification of 'reality' and 'mind', through the 'external' world that requires to 'understood' or 'made sense' of by an inner mental processing system that 'perceives' that outer reality.

This association between the presentation of objects, events and occurrences and the mental operations that have been applied to them provides for a means of establishing rationality as inhering in the person as an agent. In this way a perceptual-cognitivist form of accounting is actively maintained through an 'inner/outer' dualism in which persons look out onto the world in order to 'make sense' of it. It is this outer world that is taken as presenting itself as requiring 'interpretation' or 'understanding' in terms of an active 'inner' response. It can also be the basis for creating a version of temporality in which what 'has happened' is taken as being apparent in the person's account such as a 'decision'. Actions are manufactured in the course of practices that require such

accounting. There is a huge cultural imperative upon people to produce, at least attempt to produce, normatively appropriate psychological discourse that fits with particular social relations and interactions.

The construction of an 'inner/outer' dualism in people's accounts presents a world of texts of 'meaning' in which a mental processing system is assumed to be brought to bear upon this material in order to 'make sense' of it, to provoke a reaction in terms of inner 'thoughts' and 'feelings'. In this way the inner/outer dualism is maintained as a pervasive discursive cultural common place: the construction of 'mind' as an active perceptual-cognitive system 'working on' what is beyond it pursued. Here the individual brings his or her mind to bear upon the world thus preserving intact the notion of the psychological individual. The construction of 'thinking' as being a deliberative mental process and 'feelings' as being more immediate is maintained.

Such accounting is a matter of public practice as people engage in various forms of social relations that are mediated through different social and organisational practices. The basis for a person's agency has to be intelligible and therefore such accounts must attend to this in their construction. In this sense the hearer of such an account is positioned as 'outside' of the person's thinking as another

but external psychological agent who must in the course of the account employ his or her own inner processes in order know the other's mind. Perhaps this is what makes dialogue such a powerful means of producing psychological agents; a form of interaction in which the positioning of speaker and hearer is predicated upon the achievement of orderliness through the construction of talk that is based upon the maintenance of a perceptual-cognitive discourse and the notion that unless we account for our actions through this discourse that they will be taken as literally non-sense. People are parties are placed in the position of have to display 'understandings', 'interpretations' or 'feelings'.

Making 'Inner' Psychological States and Processes the Subject of Outer Matters

I now want to turn to how the flow can be made to move in the other direction, that is, how 'inner' mental processes are constructed as relevant to a world of 'outer' matters. One technique in which the mind is made relevant is the notion of thinking leading to an outcome such as a decision or the forming of an opinion or judgement. This kind of direction presents the person as a psychological agent in terms of being able to form an independent judgement, as being able to decide matters for themselves.

In this way the inner/outer dualism is maintained through the construction of accounts based upon a rhetoric of 'access' to the inner stuff of people's psychology. This kind of discourse is rooted in the language of 'interpretation', of 'thinking things through' a means of portraying a psychological individual through notions of points of view, motives and so on. Of course people can also construct accounts in terms of being at the mercy of particular circumstances that they experience and which becomes an explanation for their actions. This again preserves the inner/outer dichotomy: the outside world that influences the inner stuff of the person. The hearer is again treated as being given a privileged perspective; as being let into a series of thought processes as a way building a rational account but of course there is a normative collusion again in how participants co-construct these accounts within different social practices.

Another process involves not showing people at all but rather a representation of what they 'think'. Take, for example, the use of opinion polls and attitude surveys. The presentation of information on voting intentions, political opinions and the like is associated with informing people. These representations are presented as just what the rational person needs to know about what other people think. This 'information' is then treated as the expression of mental

entities with any fluctuations and changes as the result of some sort of social influence process.

Conclusion

The notion of these two separate realms – inner mind and external matters - that interact, and where there is a process of influence going on between the two, is therefore a major rhetorical feature which is incorporated into the production of social practices through the construction of psychological agents. It provides a means of trading on notions of 'sense making' and social order as well as the portrayal of people's 'inner' mental states and processes states as related to their actions.

The construction of rational discourse in terms of the inner/outer dualism represents a means of examining the notion of a psychological individual who brings his or her mental realm to the world as the basis for accountable action. Agency here is constructed in the flow of moving from the inner world towards the external world or vice versa. A sociological analysis of how these directions are used within various social practices could provide a different level of discourse analysis that focuses on the way in which the psychological is referred directly or indirectly as a means of accomplishing orderly conduct within a range of social practices.

References

- Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press
- Bourdieu, P. (1992) *Language and Symbolic Power*. Polity Press
- Edwards, D. (1997) *Discourse and Cognition*. London: Sage
- Edwards, D. & Potter, J. (1992) *Discursive Psychology*. London: Sage
- Goodwin, C. (1995) 'Seeing in Depth' *Social Studies of Science*, 25: 237-74.
- Lynch, M. & Woolgar, S. (eds.) (1990) *Representation in Scientific Practice*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Potter, J. (1996) *Representing Reality: Discourse Rhetoric and Social Construction*. London: Sage
- Potter, J. (2003) 'Discursive psychology: between method and paradigm' *Discourse & Society*, 14(6), 783-794
- Potter, J. & Edwards, D. (2001) 'Sociolinguistics, Cognitivism and Discursive Psychology'. In N. Coupland, S. Sarangi & C.N. Candlin (eds.) *Sociolinguistics and Social Theory*. Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education.
- te Molder, H. & Potter, J. (eds.) (2005) *Conversation & Cognition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

