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# **Achieving Diversity**

**By**

**Erich John Knerr**

**Hons. B.A., Brock University, 1994**

**THESIS**

**Submitted to the Department of Psychology  
In partial fulfilment of the requirements  
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Abstract

This thesis is about achieving diversity in our society and in our world. In it I examine attributes of relativism as well as understandings of our existence in order to develop a model for achieving diversity. I examine our present model of science and the approach of romanticism and conclude that our sciences today are really about control and domination. I propose that the goals of our sciences should not be about domination, and therefore neither should our methods of science. Further, I propose that attributes of relativism represent a necessary beginning in achieving diversity and in bringing compassion into our sciences.

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## Prologue

As you start to read this thesis, I think you will find that it begins like most other theses you may have read. I attempt some critical examination of relativism and I do this in a way in which you (as a scholar in a university) will find familiar. However, somewhere along the way you may notice a change in the process and the model which I use to examine the issues.

Using a different model than that which dominates the sciences has not always been easy. The constraints of operating in this specific environment are plentiful. Many find meaning and find it easy to work in this environment, but many do not. The content of this thesis is about diversity. It is about how we find meaning in different ways and how we can proceed given our diversity. As a specific piece of work it is about the meaning that I find in these issues, and my right/need to find meaning in this way.

One of the propositions made in the content of this thesis is that we all have a basic right to find meaning in our own way. This piece of work reflects the tensions of my finding my own personal meaning in a system with specific constraints and assumptions which does not necessarily recognize my right to do so. As such, I find myself challenged with the task of proposing alternatives

to a model which I find inadequate, while at the same time justifying what I propose using that very same model. What I really want to say in this prologue is that the process of this paper, and the process of me doing this thesis in this program, is a reflection of the point that I attempt to make in the content of this paper.

### Introduction

The essence of this thesis is about diversity. Specifically, it reflects my thoughts about relativism and diversity, both in our sciences and in our society. It is a demonstration of the thought processes that I went through in an attempt to address the issue of diversity, and to see what could be taken from ideas of relativism in addressing diversity in our society and our world. The impetus for this thesis is my interest and passion for diversity and related issues. This paper will reflect that which I value, who I am, where I come from and what is important to me. Specifically, it reflects my concerns around those things which for me present themselves as absolute in our society. Things which I feel, in my life have been used to dominate, devalue, isolate and persecute that which is different from that which holds the power in our society.

Before proceeding I would like to try to explain for

the reader why respect for diversity is so important to me and why I am here attempting to develop ideas of relativism as my super ordinate value for society and the sciences. I hope to describe as best I can my social construction, which has shaped my ideas and values around diversity, absolutism and absolute power, and relativism.

My personal history is in some sense a continuation of the history of who I come from. I was born to a Native mother and a German immigrant father. As a child, I lived the majority of my life with my father, which for a child was certainly the best thing. My father could best be described as reserved, hard working and with a great sense of personal responsibility. He provided for me the stability, security and love which we all need, especially as children. My mother was unable to provide these things for me, as she had never had them herself. She had no ties to her reserve or her past, beyond an alcoholic mother and absent father. She grew up in Children's Aid along with her younger sister and two younger brothers, her brothers being separated from her.

I grew up and have lived my life as a white male, which as one learns is a most advantageous thing to be in our white society. I lived most of my life without my mother and without her past, not only in a physical sense, but within myself, as just simply not having a

mother seemed the easiest way to cope as a child. Her life has consisted of wandering and battling both mental health and substance abuse problems. I too continue to deal with these same difficulties in my life.

I suppose then that my experiences and understanding of authority have been greatly shaped by my history and the history of those close to me. My mother's dealings with the mental health system could best be described as typical for her time, which could also be described as devastating. Her dealings and my own encounters with the system have left me at best disserved. I have a great deal of resentment for that system which has left me fearful of it and the broader medical system. This has at times left me alone and isolated with my problems in living.

Substance abuse problems just seem to be part and parcel of the whole situation. It is something which has devastated my mother's attempts at dealing with her difficulties, and is something which I continue to struggle with. My struggle generally goes well, although at times it is more of an issue than at others. However, these struggles further leave me feeling devalued and on one side vs. the right side of society.

In attempting to understand my own mental health difficulties, my feelings have been described as a great

outrage at those things which I find unjust. This outrage can provide within me a great deal of empathy for others. But at times this empathy can be overwhelming, and inwardly expresses itself as depression. The overwhelming aspect of it often expresses itself as anxiety and panic.

Over the past ten to fifteen years I have been going through a process of integrating these parts of me which I had found too difficult to deal with as a child. In examining these parts I have found much that I am outraged at.

My outrage starts with a language and a culture which I was denied and which was beaten out of my forebearers. It is reflected in a lost child who could not find a home or the love she desperately cried out for; my mother. My mother, that lost child who although she tried desperately could not find a way to give these things to her own children. I was able to find these things in my father, who couldn't always understand the difficulties of me or my mother, but was there to give me what I needed nevertheless. It seems it was a good thing that my grandmother told her daughters (my mother and aunt) to marry a German man, because this was the best thing they could do for their children, to make them as white as possible. The outrage is felt in my living as a

white male, denying a past not necessarily deliberately and perhaps without a choice, but nevertheless benefiting from doing so.

As I began to deal with these things and my feelings around them I found more outrage as I pushed from the personal outward. I found outrage in the history of aboriginal people everywhere- dominated, subjugated and often exterminated. The victims of physical and cultural genocide. Further, I find outrage in the sexism, racism and economic injustice of our society and in our subjugation of other species and our planet.

For the personal, this outrage centres around the power and authority of our children's aid system, our medical and mental health system, and the history of our society's treatment of aboriginal people. Outwardly, this outrage continues on to our entire society, its institutions and its sciences. And it is the omniscient power of these things, so sure how right they are and of their ability that can justify anything, and have throughout our history. And, perhaps what fuels my outrage the most is my perception of the inability of this power to examine and to look beyond itself, to question itself at all. This is me. This is why finding a way of integrating that which is different is so important to me and why I find solace in that which

challenges the absolute and proposes something different for society. Further, I am sensitive to those powers which I feel are unable to look beyond themselves. I fear that which is seen as absolute, for I have felt that the absolute has been used to exclude and to fuel the outrage within me. I recognize that all that I am affects my beliefs around issues and guides my thoughts throughout this thesis.

The thesis begins where my thoughts began, with psychology and social constructionism and their treatment of relativism. Here I determine that psychology uses relativism merely as a measuring stick. I found that different propositions in psychology are measured as more or less relative than others, but relativism is never seriously assessed as a proposition for a different model of understanding knowledge or morality. Further, after reviewing the debate around relativism started by the social constructionist movement in psychology, I believe that psychology has failed to consider other long standing sources on the issues. Psychology seems to be unwilling to make connections with other disciplines and with other perspectives in society. Instead psychology prefers to continue its debate in isolation, leading me to further wonder about psychology's role and purpose in society. Hence, I conclude that the social

constructionist debate about relativism within psychology reflects greater problems within the science itself: problems of egocentrism, shortsightedness, lack of interdisciplinary connections, and lack of connection to and a defined purpose in society (Fowers & Richardson, 1996). I propose that these problems reflect a lack of serious consideration of values and goals, in psychology and in all of our sciences and in society. Here, I view psychology as an example of our sciences and as reflective of our society and its assumptions as to how we gain knowledge, how we determine the truth, and how we decide what is right. Further I believe that there is a lack of discourse about the values and goals which drive these assumptions. We have embarked on a particular method in our sciences and in our society without considering the values and morality which drives this method. Thus, I believe that in a sense we have isolated ourselves from our own values and goals. Here, I propose that a lack of moral discourse in our sciences and society is the result of the lack of a will to discuss morality and the lack of a method for doing so.

The following section expresses some of my ideas on how to begin implementing moral discourse in the sciences and in society. This section finishes with my contention that moral discourse is crucial in all aspects of our



society, and that an explicit articulation of values is a crucial beginning for everyone in all scientific discourse and practice. In accordance with this I myself attempt to explicate some of my values and my goals for society.

The following two sections express an effort by me to bridge some of the egocentrism in psychology and explore some alternative perspectives on relativism. Thus I attempt an examination of how some other discipline view relativism. I do this not to try to create a complete picture of relativism, but to give the reader both a sense that relativism has existed and has been explored in detail outside of psychology (emphasizing a lack of connections in psychology), and an insight into the perspectives which have shaped my ideas on relativism. The first section here deals with some thoughts from philosophy, where not surprisingly, the merits of relativism have been explored in some depth. Here I try to give the reader an overview from philosophy and its treatment of relativism. This includes some history on the idea of relativism and sections on both cognitive or epistemological relativism and moral relativism. Epistemological referring to how we gain or define knowledge and moral referring to the correct course of action to be taken.

The next section explores some ideas from cultural psychology and anthropology, which also have well developed ideas on relativism. This section includes some discussion on the method and perspective labelled as "romanticism". Somehow perhaps not surprisingly, this was my first encounter with the formal perspective of romanticism. This, I believe, is another example of the isolation of thought in our sciences. I also feel that this further reflects sciences isolation from the rest of society and the values and goals of society. In romanticism I find ideas, perspectives, and methods which made me most comfortable. In romanticism I found purpose and meaning which until now I had not found in my education in psychology. While I don't propose that all should take a romanticist perspective, nor am I sure that I always will, it does have something to offer. I believe that the fact that I had not even encountered this perspective until now underlines some of the problems present in psychology and the sciences today. This isolation of thought in the sciences I propose reflects a problem of isolation from our society.

Here I also discover a critical turning point in my understanding of relativism. This is based on what Shwedder (1991) describes as the distinctions often made between "existence" and "pure being". Existence here is

described as the day to day tangibles of our world. It is the physical world as well as all other aspects of our world, including our thoughts, desires, urges and impulses, and further the contradictions which help to define our everyday world. Pure being is that which we seek to understand, be it through our sciences or through other explanations of being found in our society (i.e. religious). It is what defines our essence and gives us meaning. Shwedder (1991) discusses the problems of defining existence as the negation of pure being. Often in our sciences and in our religions pure being (that which gives us meaning) is sought not in our existence, but is defined as something beyond our existence. It is proposed here that many of our efforts to date do in fact define our existence in this way, either by seeking that which transcends existence and feeds it from above as in theology or philosophy, or by excluding everything diverse about our world in an attempt to uncover the truth below, as in the sciences.

Before I go on to explore some of my propositions on relativism, I give some comment on interviews I had with social science professors concerning relativism. Here too I believe I find some useful analogies which say important things about discourse and practice in the social sciences. I believe that in these interviews I

find further evidence of relativism not being considered as a proposition which questions our basic assumptions in the sciences, but only as a concept relevant in certain degrees in certain areas.

Following this I try to develop some of my thoughts about relativism and its possible role in helping us to find some harmony in values, methods, and goals, amidst the diversity in our society and our world. I then attempt to further explicate my views by applying my propositions of relativism to a practical example in our society.

Afterwards I attempt to apply some of the concepts developed to community psychology. Using relativism I visit some of the values which community psychology uses to define itself. Here I propose that relativism is crucial to community psychology's values and goals.

It is also important to note here that this thesis deals with my vision of the "good" society. Thus, it is a vision of the ideal; what I believe we should be striving towards in our society. How we would transform our present society to this ideal is another question. Although I may touch on this at certain points in the paper, it is not the focus of this work. Beginning the process of defining the ideal, where should we be heading?, is the focus of this work. Inherent to the

task of actually transforming society is the question of power. How do we correct the inequitable distribution of power in our present society? This thesis does not directly address this question and the ideals presented within would necessarily be incoherent in any system with an inequitable distribution of power.

Before continuing with the body of the paper I believe it is important to address the paper's purpose, models and goals. The purpose of this work is to examine my thoughts and feelings around issues which are of importance to me. These issues and my senses of them are reflective of who I am and where I come from. Further, the primary goal of this thesis is for me to come to a better understanding of what I find important and how I feel around the issues discussed. Of course, the secondary goal is to attempt to better explicate for myself and others my perspectives on these issues. Thus, the model of explanation which I use in this paper may differ from that which you are used to.

This thesis is not a perfect offering. It reflects the value and idea that knowledge and understanding are never complete. This paper is not solely an intellectual exercise with clear intellectual boundaries. It reflects thoughts and ideas within me which reflect who I am. As I change and grow these thoughts and feelings continue to

develop. As an expression then of who I am, for this work to be complete in a traditional sense, I as an individual would have to be at the end of my development around the issues presented. Further, the restraints of using a specific medium (writing), and my own inability to myself understand these issues in a way which can be communicated fully through writing may also leave this work seeming incomplete. But the purpose of this paper is for me to begin the process of understanding and communicating who I am and how I feel about specific issues. In this sense then I hope that this paper can be considered complete.

Given that this paper is not a complete offering on relativism, diversity and related issues, it does attempt to explicate points for discussion which I believe to be important. These points which I believe to be important centre around two main areas. The first is the idea that relativism as presently understood in psychology and the social sciences is thought of as only a critique or a measuring stick. Relativism as a value for society has not been explored or considered. Psychology has decided to view relativism only through the lenses of its own models and has failed to consider relativism's implications for these models. Secondly, I propose that psychology's inability to look beyond its own models and

further to look even beyond its own discipline reflects isolation between science's disciplines and isolation of our sciences from the greater society.

A causal or compounding factor I propose for this isolation is our view of science as a mechanical or impartial exercise. This encourages finding knowledge in isolation and ignores examining the values and goals which actually drive our sciences. I then propose that in order to address science's isolation from society we must begin integrating our values with our sciences. We must find a way of engaging in moral discourse, both in our sciences and in society.

Further, after reviewing some of the discourse around relativism, I propose an examination of relativism from a romanticist perspective. Using this perspective we consider the ideas of pure being and existence. Here it is believed that most of our present models of understanding view existence as the negation of pure being. That which we seek to understand through our sciences, religions, and philosophies is considered above or beyond the existence of our daily lives. In examining relativism I propose viewing our existence as our pure being (Shwadder, 1991). Relativism becomes a mechanism for recognizing our existence as our pure being and further can be developed as a value and a mechanism for

implementing the diversity of our existences.

### From Positivism to Social Constructionism

Theory and practice in psychology have until recently been based upon a model traditionally used in the natural sciences (Osbeck, 1993). Under this model, there is assumed to be an objective reality or truth which can be understood. The purpose of science and psychology is to uncover this truth and uncover the reality of our world. The values and cultural/historical perspective of individuals engaged in psychology are seen as irrelevant, as there is an objective reality to uncover. This model is termed objectivism, absolutism or positivism. Objectivism assumes there is an objective reality to uncover. Absolutism assumes that there is one right way or one unrestricted, uncaused (able to stand on its own, without context), independent reality. Positivism assumes that we can know this objective or absolute reality. The merits of theory in psychology are then judged by how accurately theory mirrors reality; or, by how close theory comes to the "right" description of specific phenomena. In accordance with this philosophy, practice in psychology has involved the use of scientific models and statistical methods to produce explanations which explain our objective world (Osbeck, 1993).

While a more thorough description of positivism and



its problems in psychology are beyond the scope of this paper, a major criticism of the positivist perspective in psychology is its assumption that the realm of human activity can be described in terms of universal and unfailing regularities. Experimentation in traditional positivist psychology has then followed from the assumption that context must be stripped away in order to maintain a desirable level of control. The problem with this, many authors contend, is that human behaviour can never be isolated from social context (e.g., Gergen, 1982; Harre, 1979). Individual consciousness and action are interdependent with social surroundings, making the culture-free restrictions of nomological-deductive explanations neither desirable nor possible (Osbeck, 1993).

Alternative models of explanation in psychology emphasize the irreducible social and historical nature of human cognition, emotion and action. These models have coalesced into what is termed social constructionism (Osbeck, 1993). Constructionism is the idea that things are not unrelated to human constructions, they are constructed. Social constructionism proposes that our reality (or at least our social reality) is constructed by the social fabric which we together create.

Social constructionism asserts that no real world or

objective reality exists independent of human symbolic language and social interaction. Constructionism contends that our experiential world is constructed through our interactions within social and historical contexts. "Consequently, no one account or interpretation of reality can be considered more accurate than the other, if only because there cannot be 'one account'. Accounts are discursive, not private" (Osbeck, 1993 p.340).

Social constructionism emphasizes the social nature of understanding. As Gergen described, "...the question 'why' is not answered within a psychological state or process but with consideration of persons in relationships" (1985, p.27). Inquiry in constructionism moves from the traditional level of the individual to a social or collective level, and it is through social interchange that the individual's knowledge of the world and of the self evolves. It is the social context which provides meaning for the experience of each individual.

#### Relativism and Social Theory

Inherent in the assumptions which underlie social constructionism is an emphasis on relativism. Relativism here describes the idea that what we seek through science is not objective or absolute. What we seek is relative to the agent or agents for which it has meaning. Gergen

(1992, p.26) describes the relativistic capacity of social constructionism as releasing us from the "imprisoning effects" of that which we take for granted. It enables us to challenge ideas such as cognition and our commitment to an individualistic ideology (viewing the individual as a private decision maker). It challenges the modern methods which continue to perpetuate specific ideas. Through de-objectifying existing realities, relativism demonstrates the social and historical roots of our ideas and in so doing offers new alternatives.

The prospect of new alternatives has made relativism an important part of other areas of social theory. Feminist theorists have developed an important sense of relativism, which they use to challenge traditional thinking about gender and society (Gilligan, 1982; Harding, 1991). For them, relativism opens the door for debate around basic issues of science, morality, and social organization. Without relativism, these issues are seen as absolute and not open for discussion.

Cultural anthropology and other non-psychology attempts at understanding the "other" also rely heavily upon relativism (Maybury-Lewis, 1992). A developed sense of relativism is necessary in understanding different ways of living and organizing. Relativism

makes alternatives to our ways of thinking and living possible by granting legitimacy to alternate voices (Maybury-Lewis, 1992). Relativism is not only important to psychology and social constructionism, but to all areas of social theory and society.

### The State of Relativism Today

The advent of relativism within social constructionism has led to a profound debate within psychology and the social sciences (Robinson, 1992). On the one hand, relativism challenges the assumptions of theory and practice in psychology. It proposes a vastly different model for viewing the world, and attempts to demonstrate the need for context in psychological theory. It challenges the impartiality of scientific activity as well as the very nature of knowledge within the social sciences.

On the other hand, some wonder where this vision of relativism will lead us. If everything is relative and there are no universal truths, are we left with nothing? Brewster-Smith (1994) refers to this debate as "...the unnegotiable clash between fundamentalism and absolutism on the one hand and nihilistic relativism on the other" (p. 405). Many authors have concerns about the perils of "extreme" relativism (e.g., Brewster-Smith, 1994; Osbeck, 1993; Parrot, 1992). Brewster-Smith (1994)

describes the relativism of Gergen (1985), as both "dizzy and disoriented." He goes on to describe his alarm at "...the extent to which just such an extreme version of anti-scientific relativism is gaining prominence at the margins of mainstream psychology" (Brewster-Smith, 1994 p. 408). Under the challenge of relativism Brewster-Smith wonders whether "...it is still possible to retain some toehold to sustain the old human struggle toward truth, goodness, and beauty as meaningful ideals" (1994, p.409).

Even proponents of social constructionism challenge relativism in its full extent:

...A thoroughgoing social constructionist stance...seems to suggest that not only our knowledge of the world but the world itself is a social construction, and this seems to leave social constructionism whirling in a maelstrom of total relativity, bankrupt of any standard against which to judge the merits of their claims to knowledge (Shotter, 1992 p.69)

Shotter's comments also help to elucidate an important point in the debate on relativism. For many authors the debate occurs on two separate levels, epistemological and moral philosophical. While some find it useful to make this distinction (Brewster-Smith, 1994; Osbeck, 1993), others (e.g., Gergen, 1985) believe this distinction to be artificial, as both are simply components of the other. In terms of relativism, this

distinction has often lead to confusion as debate bounces back and forth between epistemology and moral philosophy.

As seen above, discourse on the issue has been phrased in terms of radical relativism, moderate relativism, and objectivism. And it seems that debate has centred around where we draw the line on this spectrum of relativism. In a sense, relativism has become a measuring stick upon which we place different ideas and judge them as more or less relative than others. In this way relativism has only really been used as either a critique or a criticism. "Radical relativists" will critique objectivists and point out that their theories lack proper context. While "less relativists" will criticize "radical relativists" as being too extreme, proposing nothing for society, and being nihilistic. This is the state of the issue in psychology today. Relativism is viewed as a spectrum and theorists now debate how much relativism is appropriate or inappropriate in different areas (Brewster-Smith, 1994; Gergen, 1985).

While constructionists debate the extent to which relativism is relevant to specific psychological theories and objectivists dismiss the constructionists' position outright (or make provisions for the issue within

specific theories), it seems to represent just another academic debate as the science of psychology advances. But the issues which postmodernism and social constructionism present challenge psychology at its basic core. Issues of relativism, objective truth, values, cultural/historical perspective, and the tension between epistemology and moral philosophy challenge psychology's scientific model as well as its role in society. Are psychology and the social sciences in general, separate from society? That is, is science purely a mechanical exercise of "uncovering" the truth, not at all influenced by the culture, values and historical perspective of the individuals and society who practice it? And further, does it have no influence or responsibility to the future of that same society? If psychology is more than this, or even if it is only possible that psychology is more than this, then the debate around these issues cannot occur within the specific models under which psychology currently operates. For how can psychology grow if it only looks to its own past in deciding how to proceed in the future? If psychology is currently building tension and entering a new era (a postmodern era?), then it would seem reasonable that any changes for a new psychology would necessarily be found outside psychology's current models and methods. For if psychology is to be more than

just a mechanical exercise it must demonstrate its importance in and connection to society, as well as fully explicate and acknowledge its influence on society. To do this the methods, models, and values of psychology must be made explicit. They must be made explicit so that society can decide on the values and goals of psychology. For the future of a psychology which emphasizes its commitment to society must be determined by the values and goals of that whole society.

Moreover if the goal of science in general is to aid society, then it must integrate itself with society towards defining and achieving our common goals. The problems we face do not occur in isolation from society, they are a part of our society. Nor will solutions to these problems be found in disciplines isolated from each other and the society which they propose to help.

Further, any position, like social constructionism, which is trying to develop a new paradigm and proposes to take into account the cultural and historical effects on theory, should necessarily look beyond psychology to culture and history, and should listen to the voices of the society in which it hopes to operate. It is my opinion that the present debate in psychology around relativism reflects both a shortsightedness and egocentrism which is inherent in many of the social



sciences and is a specific postmodern criticism of psychology. The social constructionist debate in psychology is a prime example of psychology's inability to look beyond itself. Issues of relativism, objectivism, and epistemology vs. moral philosophy were not invented by social constructionists and the debate is not restricted to the field of psychology. Yet, if one were to peruse the literature in psychology, one would think that these issues are somehow new (Gergen, 1985; Robinson, 1992). This simple lack of interdisciplinary connections reflects a more serious issue: connection and relevance to the larger society. The relativism debate in psychology I believe demonstrates the isolation of our sciences from themselves and from society. But further, it demonstrates a lack of vision and relevance. Where are our sciences going? For what purpose does debate and scientific inquiry occur? If these things occur for the benefit of all of society, then they cannot occur in isolation. Or is the relativism debate in psychology only for the benefit of psychology? I challenge the idea that sciences in isolation can be directed towards our common goals, the goals of all of society. Are our sciences driven by society's goals or by their own isolated goals? If psychology and the social sciences are to become more than just mechanical exercises, they

must become more relevant and inter related to our society. Further they must acknowledge their responsibility to society and develop new methods and connections which emphasize their responsibility. For research cannot be done just for research's sake. All scientific activity has social and moral ramifications. Thus, all must be involved in defining the goals and methods of our sciences. I propose that this must be done as the guiding principle of all of our sciences and in psychology.

In developing its responsibility to society, psychology must begin to address the issue of epistemology and moral philosophy. I believe that psychology and the sciences are not separate from our society, nor are they separate from the values of the individuals and the society in which they operate. Hence values guide both how we gain knowledge and how we define knowledge. What we study, how we study it, and the conclusions we reach are a reflection of the values which guide all of our actions (Suzuki, 1991). As such the values which guide our society's sciences must be determined by all of society. These values are not given a priori, nor are they static. The sciences will and must reflect the values of the society in which they operate. Determining these values must be done by all of

our society in a way which responds to and respects the diversity of methods, goals, visions and values of our pluralistic society. Given this position, it would seem that an initial step would be to develop some sort of method for integrating values with science.

The following is a beginning attempt to set the ground rules for just such a discourse; the ground rules for a discourse in psychology which recognizes values and morality. This is my proposition for moral discourse, and it is proposed as a starting point for discussion.

#### Some Ground Rules for Moral Discourse in Psychology

If the goal of psychology, and science in general, is to advance society, then the construct of "generativity" (Osbeck, 1993) is integral to any theory in psychology. Gergen (1982) describes the generative capacity of a theory as "the capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is taken for granted, and thereby to generate fresh alternatives for social action" (p.2). If the goal of theory in psychology is to advance society, it must propose some vision for that society. That vision must be made explicit so that others may participate in the development and evaluation of that vision.

The problem of generativity is one which Osbeck (1993) often associates with some forms of social constructionism (Gergen, 1991). While Gergen (1991) points out some serious problems with "modern" visions of science and psychology, his emphasis on context can be seen as reflecting only a criticism. Gergen himself does not propose anything and hence does not leave his propositions open for debate. Nor does his criticism help us to advance, as he proposes nowhere for us to go.

For moral discourse to occur all aspects of that theory must also be made explicit. In addition to the vision set out for society, specific goals and objectives for society must be made explicit. The type of reasoning used to arrive at these goals, as well as the assumptions that this reasoning is based upon, must also be made explicit. Only by doing this, by laying things out and laying them on the line, are all aspects of a theory open to meaningful discussion. By making everything explicit, a theory recognizes its morality as well as how it defines its reality. It recognizes where it comes from and where it hopes to lead society. Only by recognizing these things can true moral discourse of theory occur.

Prilleltensky (in press) demonstrates the problems of value inarticulation with respects to both psychological discourse and practice. Explicit

articulation of our values, goals, and methods will not resolve our moral dilemmas, but it is a crucial step in respecting others' positions and in making justification for our own.

In addition to, or in conjunction with generativity and explicitness, there is a third construct which is essential for true moral discourse in psychological theory. For complete and inclusive discourse to occur, all perspectives must be respected. To respect other perspectives in moral discourse, a theory must recognize its own subjectivity. In order to engage in respectful debate around specific goals for society, the reasoning behind these goals, and the assumptions which underlie this reasoning, theory must recognize the subjectivity of its propositions. By recognizing the subjectivity of one's position, we invite others with different perspectives to engage in meaningful discourse. Even if a theory is made explicit, if it fails in recognizing the subjectivity of its assumptions and reasoning, it does not open itself up for respectful debate. By not recognizing the subjectivity of one's perspectives we assume there are no other valued perspectives and we fail to recognize the validity of differing perspectives.

Richardson and Fowers (1994) describe some of the debate around social constructionism's use of just such a

construct. They accuse some constructionists of the same problem they often levy against many modern positions, "...that of presenting us with only two basic options-their own and one other very unattractive viewpoint" (Richardson & Fowers, 1994, p.6). Richardson and Fowers (1994) point out that in order to find a way beyond the opposition of differing values we often need to blend them in new ways to address challenging new situations. Understanding can be seen as more a path and less a decisive position. "We gain access by participating wholeheartedly, not by defining an incontestable philosophical standpoint" (Richardson & Fowers, 1994, p. 6).

Above I have presented themes which I believe are essential for meaningful and respectful moral discourse in psychology. These involved the ideas of generativity, explicitness, and recognition of subjectivity. My propositions are a reflection of my morality and my vision for society. They are meant as a starting point for discussion on recognizing the importance of morality in social theory. But they provide me with a starting point as well, as I will now attempt to explicate my values and my vision for society. These have guided and will guide this entire thesis.

#### My Vision for Society

I attempt here to explicate some of my values and my vision for society as I believe it is important for all of us to do so. The previous section I hope has explained why I believe that explicit articulation of our values is important. I propose then that this is something we should all be doing at the beginning of all articles and any discourse in psychology or the sciences. It give us a place to start.

The purpose of this paper, and I believe the purpose of all work in psychology and the sciences, is to help guide society towards some ends (Fowers & Richardson, 1996). The ends, or the goals for society, are open to all for meaningful debate. But to progress we must have some vision of where we are going. This vision will be determined by society's values, and society's values will be decided by the values of the individuals in that society. Science treated as a mechanical exercise has no vision for society. My vision for society, and the issues which are of most importance to me, will necessarily be dependant upon who I am and where I come from. They will be reflective of my values and my morality. I accept this as a given and realize that others may have different visions for society, and will be more concerned with issues very different from what I am concerned with.

My vision of the "good" or "just" society involves a recognition and respect for human diversity. Broadly stated, I feel that respect for diversity entails meaningful involvement of all members in society and in defining society. Much activity in the social sciences to date has been geared towards involving members in society. By meaningful involvement in defining society I mean to say that the values, standards, goals, visions of reality, and models of justification and social interaction are not established a priori, nor once established are they static.

Now, one may wonder if there are no limitations to this respect. Or, as the relativist has been accused of before, is there nothing that I would condemn? By proposing a respect for diversity I am proposing a mutual respect for all. Are there actions and propositions in this world which I condemn? Of course. But while there are a diverse number of actions and propositions which I do condemn, for me the essence of what I condemn about them is their disrespect for others. A society and a world must define and live with specific values and standards. It must define a morality for itself. But this morality is neither pre-determined nor static. All must have a say in defining our shared morality for respect for diversity to occur. Respect for diversity



starts with the individual and moves up to the community, the society, to the world. The individual must define his/her own morality. Then as a society, we must negotiate our shared morality. This means that not all of our moralities are open for negotiation. The individual can have his/her own morality. But as social beings living in communities and societies there are conditions, interactions and realms of agendas which we share, and the morality which guides all of us in these areas must be negotiated. Further, inherent in this idea of a negotiated morality must be the idea of free or fair negotiations. By this I mean that any negotiation in which one player has greater power than another cannot be considered truly fair. One who negotiates without power only has everything to lose. They end up with what is handed them. Conversely, one who holds all the cards (has power and resources) has an unfair advantage and can only win in any negotiation (Fowers & Richardson, 1996).

We live in a society with people who are different from us, and a world in which societies are different from each other. If individuals were homogeneous in their beliefs, value systems, and understandings of the world, and if societies sharing the same planet were also homogeneous, then these issues would have little meaning, as perhaps they once did. But I believe that these

issues are of great importance and are of greatest concern to me in directing society towards my vision of the good society.

If diversity is a part of our world and our society, and given that we must all share this society and this world, then the question arises how do we integrate our diversity? If there is nothing we can accept a priori, at least socially, then how does the individual find meaning in this pluralistic world? And how does a pluralistic society justify itself to groups of diverse individuals (Fowers & Richardson, 1996)? These are the questions which are of greatest concern to me, as they are paramount to my vision of society, a society and a world which can find a way to integrate this diversity in a way which truly respects all who share our world. In other words, how can we all get along? This is the question which drives me.

I feel it is necessary to note here that this essay deals primarily with the issues of relativism and human diversity. However, I also recognize that the question "how can we all get along?", has meaning beyond the interactions of people to include the interactions of people with their physical world and the other beings which co-habitate with us in this finite world.

What follows is my attempt to evaluate the concept of relativism and to see what can be taken from it which can help us to address these questions, how can we integrate the diversity of our pluralistic society and world. What I hope to develop for the reader is a sense of how relativism (or parts of relativism, or what relativism means to me) can be used as a tool for the respectful implementation of diversity in our pluralistic world.

#### Some Thoughts from Philosophy about Relativism

In this section I hope to acquaint the reader with some of the basic issues and ways in which some philosophers have attempted to analyze the concept of relativism. It is by no means an exhaustive study in the philosophy of relativism. Its main purpose is really to demonstrate that relativism, as may be used in social constructionism, is not a new concept and its questions were not invented by psychologists in the 1980's.

Relativism, as a family of views, has been around for at least as long as western thought has been (Ancient Greece). Protagoras is a kind of patron saint of relativism, and although his entire thesis is largely lost, we can learn something of his position by examining the arguments which are made against him (Margolis, 1991; Plato in Hulton & Cairns, Eds. 1961). Plato's and

Aristotle's reaction to Protagoras' teachings can be seen as the beginning of a western image of relativism as a product of a "...weak or wild intelligence that neither understands nor cares about the nature of the stable invariances of life and thought that govern the human condition and make it whole and humane" (Margolis, 1991, p.xi). One can sense in their reactions the contempt and actual fear which relativism created and which still pervades many people's reactions to relativism today. The charge made against relativism, made with almost desperate conviction, was that "...genuine stability in anything either is, or depends upon, an unchanging, underlying order of reality, and that any threat to it is quite mad and beyond the pale of reason" (Margolis, 1991, p.xi). Protagoras was the first to look at this claim (call it archism) and declare it nonsense (Margolis, 1991). The thesis of relativism and its debate must be carried on today by modern theorists. It is worthy of note though that the basic arguments against relativism are still used today, and have changed little.

"Relativism begins with the observation of diversity" (Meiland & Krausz, 1982, p.1). In our society, and especially in other societies, we see that different people may have different beliefs. A typical western reaction to this diversity is to employ a notion

of progress, and to distinguish what is "backward" or "arrested development," on the one hand, and what is "advanced" or "civilized," on the other.

But such conclusions should make us suspicious of the line of reasoning which leads to it. Are not such conclusions just what one would expect to reach? And would not those who differ from us reach similar conclusions about their own beliefs and practices? Hence, these types of conclusions would seem to only reflect our own prejudices and biases in favour of our own beliefs and practices. Given this, we are left with the question, how do we decide what is really right and what is wrong? How do we establish criteria of right and wrong that will be acceptable to everyone (Meiland & Krausz, 1982)? The view that all moral positions should be considered equally correct, since there are no criteria for picking out the single correct set of moral principles is one type of moral relativism.

Further, similar arguments can be made about empirical beliefs. Different societies, and different individuals in societies, will adhere to different empirical beliefs and models. Again, it is tempting (especially when considering the empirical beliefs of non western cultures) to say that those who believe differently from us are "unenlightened" or are in an

earlier stage of development, which will ultimately lead to our superior understanding of the world. But again we must ask the question, according to what and whose criteria is our understanding of the world to be considered superior? (Meiland & Krausz, 1982).

Of course there are phenomena and understandings of phenomena which we accept as irrefutable fact in our culture. We would find it difficult to understand these things as merely "relative." We believe it a fact that the world is round, and that this fact cannot be only relative to us, it must be true for all who share our planet. While it would seem foolish to argue this fact, there is much in our culture and science which can be seen as only limited facts. These facts or understandings can be seen as relative to our knowledge of the total that there is to understand. Our understanding of reality, no matter how great, is really only a piece of our total reality that can be understood. Hence, our understanding of specifics of our reality is relative to our understanding of our total reality. And while some things that we accept as facts may indeed be facts, regardless of our total understanding of that which there is to understand (i.e., our planet is round), how can we be sure? Much of what we perceive as facts are really only pieces of facts,

relative to our understanding of all that there is to understand, and changing as our understanding of our total reality changes. As examples of this I point out our understanding of light as a duality, the atom as the basic unit of our universe, and our understanding of geological formations as the result of only chemical and physical processes (Suzuki, 1989). Here, even in our empirical sciences, our understanding of reality, our understanding of "facts" change as our understanding of the world expands. Further, I would propose that for those who lived and continue to live without science and technology as we know it, the fact of the earth as round has/had no meaning for them. From their perspective, and for their needs the world is/was flat.

Relativism is one reaction to these observations, but it is not the only possible one. This helps us to recognize the difference between relativism and one of the positions that it is often lumped together with: scepticism. Scepticism is the belief that it is impossible to know the truth about matters of value or fact (Meiland & Krausz, 1982). Either there is no truth to know, or human beings are incapable of knowing the truth. Relativism, like scepticism, gives up the pursuit of universal, objective, absolute and immutable truth. But unlike scepticism, it does not conclude that there is

no truth or that truth is unknowable. Instead, it proposes that truth may be, and often is different for each society, each individual, or each methodological approach (Meiland & Krausz, 1982).

The lack of criteria for determining a single, objective truth does not mean that there are no criteria for truth at all. Instead, societies, methodologies and individuals have to develop their own criteria of truth. The sceptic focuses on the unknowability of truth because s/he believes that absolute truth is the only type of truth.

While many social theorists (e.g., Gergen, 1985) consider the separation of epistemology and moral philosophy to be somewhat artificial, philosophers have found this a useful distinction in describing attitudes and in defining theories of relativism. Here the term cognitive relativism is used to describe the issue of epistemology and relativism. Presently, I would like to address the issue of cognitive relativism from a philosophical view. I hope to describe what are considered to be some of the different types of cognitive relativism.

### Cognitive Relativism

In his book Ways of Worldmaking (1978) Nelson Goodman points out that there are a vast number of



descriptions of the world. Different sciences have different depictions of the world and descriptions by different writers and artists also differ. Most people would agree that there are many different descriptions of the world, but would also feel that not all of these descriptions can be true. These people would say that only one description can be right and therefore other descriptions must either be a part of the right version, or are wrong. Goodman (1978) asserts however, that many versions of the world can be right at the same time, even when these different versions are in opposition to one another.

Further, those who believe that there is only one right version of the world would probably also believe the right version is the one which corresponds to the world (to reality). These people would then necessarily believe that there is a world which is separate and distinct from any description of it. Goodman (1978) disagrees here and proposes that we have no access to the world as an undescribed or unperceived reality. Therefore, we cannot compare our descriptions of the world with the world itself. Others make the same point, stating that we have no way of knowing about the world except through the use of concepts. Hence, when we compare our description of the world, we are really

comparing it to our own conceptualization of the world (Meiland & Krausz, 1982). This, of course, is the thesis of the social constructionist.

Maurice Mandelbaum (1982) goes on to describe what she identifies as three different types of cognitive relativism. Subjective relativism proposes that "...any assertion must be viewed in relation to the beliefs and attitudes of the particular individual making the assertion" (Mandelbaum, 1982, p.35). In this sense truth is relative to the individual. While relativism of this type has sometimes been accepted in regards to judgements of value, it is rarely applied when the truth or falseness of a judgement of fact is at issue, as criteria of judgements of fact are usually socially or culturally defined.

A second type of cognitive relativism can be characterized as objective relativism, which holds that an assertion must be viewed in relation to the "...total context in which the assertion is made" (Mandelbaum, 1982, p. 35). In the context of objective relativism, "total context" refers to purposes and points of view. These are very much like subjective relativism's "beliefs and attitudes." But the view is not identical to that of the subjective relativist. Unlike the subjective relativist, what is true or false is not primarily a

function of the beliefs and attitudes of the particular person making the assertion, but it is relative to the nature of the total context in which the assertion is made. Further, unlike the subjective relativist the objective relativist would claim that such judgements will be concurred on by others who are similarly placed and share the same concerns. Thus, knowledge is seen as objective in spite of its being relative to a particular context. For in that particular context, it does not vary subjectively between individuals.

A third form of cognitive relativism can be termed conceptual relativism. This view holds that assertions are relative to the "...intellectual or conceptual background which the individual brings to his (sic) problems from the cultural milieu to which he (sic) belongs" (Mandelbaum, 1982, p.36). Under this form of cognitive relativism what is important is not the purposes or interests of the individual (subjective relativism), nor the particular relationship of the individual to the objects with which his judgements are a concern (objective relativist) but the culturally defined conceptual framework which the individual brings to his problems.

Mandelbaum, having described these three forms of cognitive relativism, goes on to lay perhaps the most

common, and what is thought to be the most devastating criticism of relativism. This is the criticism that relativism, in all its types, is self-refuting. The charge goes essentially like this. The relativist holds that all statements at best are relatively and not absolutely true. Does this relativistic thesis apply to itself? If it does, then the relativist's position is itself only relative, and therefore need not be taken as true by anyone who does not already subscribe to it. If, on the other hand, the relativist's position does not apply to itself, then there is something which is absolutely true, namely the relativist's own thesis. This would contradict the relativist's own thesis.

But if taken seriously, I believe the self-refuting argument can be seen as somewhat superficial. If taken from the relativist's perspective, the argument can be seen as the objectivist holding the relativist to her standards. The relativist is asked to justify herself using an objectivist's line of reasoning. Once an individual views herself as a relativist, she will naturally regard something as relatively true- that is true for herself. Since she is a relativist this is all that is needed for the evidence to be convincing to her. Any statement which is considered by the relativist as true for herself is as convincing as anything could be.

The evidence need not be true in some absolute sense (Meiland & Krausz, 1982). This argument that the relativist position is necessarily a proposition of absolute truth and that therefore it is self-refuting involves the relativist justifying her position using an objectivist's model. This clearly has no meaning for the relativist. I believe that it reflects a superficial argument and one made in bad faith, as it does not help us to deepen our understanding of these important issues.

These distinctions of relativism can help us to understand how relativism may apply itself in different ways in our society. In terms of epistemology, conceptual relativism best describes how we may come to our understanding of the empirical world. Our understanding of the physical world via the scientific method can be seen as reflecting our conceptual relativism. It explains why our understanding of reality may differ from that of other cultures. Our specific conceptual background, culturally defined, differs from that of other cultures. However, within our own culture, our understanding of the physical can be viewed as fact, as we all share the same conceptual background.

However, when the object of our understanding changes from the physical to the social or political, we begin to have a breakdown of consensus within our own

society. Here, objective relativism seems to hold true. Political, social, and economic truth is often relative to the agenda and the social, political, and economic context of the individual making the assertion. This truth will be shared by those similarly placed, and in this sense it is seen as objective. For in a particular context it will not vary subjectively between individuals.

Subjective relativism is really relativism of the individuals who make up our society. It defines the understandings of individuals as relative to their particular beliefs, attitudes, histories and tastes. These understandings are relative to who they are as individuals. But within our society this type of relativism will hold for only those things which are not covered in some way by societal convention. This would include judgements of value and taste, and perhaps even facts which are not covered by our conceptual relativism (i.e., are we alone in the universe?). This type of relativism does not hold for that which we must all share in order to form a society. This would include our model of reality which is culturally defined through our conceptual relativism.

### Moral Relativism

As with cognitive relativism there are many types of

moral relativism. Phillipa Foot (1982) identifies her version of moral relativism by describing three features which she considers important.

(1) There are wide variations in moral judgements between different cultures and different generations.

(2) No one set of these opinions appears to have any more claim to truth than any other. (3) The concepts "objectivity" and "faith" apply to moral judgements only within a community of shared reactions, although these judgements do not report these reactions. (Foot, 1982, p.149)

Foot (1982) also states that moral judgements are not reports of individual or group reactions (i.e., "I like this" or "most of us approve of that"). This is an important distinction in the issue of moral relativism. It often represents a point of confusion, as the relativity of moral judgements is often confused with that of personal or group affinities. A moral proposition is different from the proposition "I like chocolate ice cream." While in this instance the distinction seems quite obvious, it is important to keep these distinctions in mind when specific issues make them less apparent.

This is demonstrated by the fact that one can meaningfully accuse both individuals and groups of being mistaken in their moral judgement. If moral judgements were merely reports of individual reactions, then they would presumably be uncontested, since an individual

would best know her own reactions.

Instead of reporting reactions moral judgements are applications of community or group standards to individual cases. According to the relativist such judgements are to be evaluated only in relation to the standards of the group or society of which the person making the moral judgments is a member, without any regards to whether or not those standards are "correct." "There is no absolutely true set of moral standards against which the standards of a group can be measured and judged as correct or incorrect" (Meiland & Krausz, 1982, p.149). Further, Foot (1982) holds that a moral relativist can even hold that moral judgements should be evaluated relative to the standards of the individual making the judgements, regardless of whether or not that individual's standards are identical to those of the individual's group.

Thus the idea of a relative truth can be found in the doctrine of moral relativism, just as it is in some forms of cognitive relativism. In relation to moral relativism, however, we are referring to what Foot (1982) describes as "substantial truth." True in this sense is truth in relation to moral principles. In cognitive relativism true refers to truth in relation to a particular conceptual framework for understanding the



world. True never refers to judgments of taste or of agreement.

Foot (1982) goes on to address several common objections to moral relativism in order to demonstrate that the doctrine must at least be taken seriously. The first objection is that the relativist believes that an action can be both right and wrong. Since an action can be considered right by the standards of one culture or time period and wrong by the standards of another, the relativist must regard this action as both right and wrong. This would seem paradoxical or even contradictory. Foot (1982) replies that a relativist's judgement about a moral judgment is only made relative to a particular set of standards. Further, like everyone else the relativist can only use one set of standards at a time. Hence an action will be considered either right or wrong relative to the standards used. It is not considered both right and wrong.

Another common objection to moral relativism is that it is a totally subjectivist doctrine. This idea is often referred to as a totally individualistic relativism. In this form of relativism everything is totally subjective to each individual. Hence, there is no point in discourse of any kind. Individuals and individual moralities are assumed to exist and operate

independently of all others. It is thought to hold the idea that if a man thinks something is right, it is necessarily right for him. But Foot (1982) would reply that this is not the case in her version of moral relativism.

Moral right and wrong are determined by a set of standards. A person might believe that an action is right while the relevant set of standards yields the conclusion that the action is wrong. In this case the person wrongly believes that the action is right. Thus an action is not right for a person just because he thinks it is. (Meiland & Krausz, 1982 p. 150).

Foot (1982) also addresses the idea that a relativist, by virtue of being a relativist, can have no moral beliefs of his/her own. But this contention reflects the idea, incorrectly, that relativists believe that no moral judgements can be true. The idea being that if the relativists believe no moral judgments are true, they cannot consistently believe any moral judgement. Foot's reply is that moral relativists do believe that judgments can be true, but that this truth is only necessarily a "local truth." Which is to say that it is truth relative to either the local standards or the standards of the individual. Hence the relativist can have her own moral beliefs, but she recognizes the limitations of these beliefs.

What Foot (1982) points out is that all moral

judgements are relative to some sort of moral standards. As individuals we all have moral standards against which we make moral judgements. As a society, we collectively define the standards against which we can make moral judgements as a society. Some of these standards are incorporated into our laws. Our laws provide for a safer and smoother running society for all. However, these laws and all moral judgements are still relative to some moral standard. Standards may change and hence moral judgements and even our laws will change. Relativism recognizes that these judgements are not absolute, but are relative to some set of moral standards.

The previous sections on cognitive and moral relativism reflect only a brief summation of some of the issues that the discipline of philosophy has attempted to address. The purpose of these sections was to give the reader some philosophical background on the issues. But it was also intended to demonstrate some of the shortsightedness, egocentricity and lack of connection to the rest of society that many of the social sciences have. These issues have been around for a very long time, and others have spent great effort in trying to address them. These issues were not invented by or for the social constructionist movement in psychology. Nor are they restricted to the field of psychology and its

specific models and theories. The fact that psychology is now reinventing these issues and has failed to incorporate the understandings of others in its understanding of relativism, demonstrates I believe, psychology's shortsightedness, egocentrism and lack of connection.

### Some Thoughts from Anthropology and Cultural Psychology

In this section I examine in some depth ideas from Shwedder (1991). These ideas lead Shwedder to advance a method called romanticism. In romanticism and in Shwedder's evaluations of "existence" and "pure being," I discover a critical turning point in my understanding of the issues. Here, I find meaning that helps me to organize my thoughts and helps me to express that which I have to offer.

In Thinking Through Cultures Shwedder (1991) describes cultural psychology as the idea that "...individuals and traditions, psyches and cultures, make each other up" (p. 2). Given this description cultural psychology further implies that the processes of consciousness (self maintenance processes, learning processes, reasoning processes, and emotional feeling processes) may not necessarily be constant across cultures. Hence any serious examination of cultural psychology must address the issue of rationality (or

psychic unity) as well as other closely related issues including relativism, romanticism, realism and pre, post and pure modernism.

One of the central tenets of the modern period in the west is the idea that the world is divided into then and now, them and us. This is based upon the two opposing forces of religion-superstition-revelation vs. logic-science-rationality. According to this tenet the world woke up and knowledge began three centuries ago when Enlightenment thinkers began to draw distinctions which previous thinkers had apparently overlooked.

The premodern period is often constructed as a period of intellectual confusions: "the confusion of language with reality, of physical suffering with moral transgression, of subjectivity with objectivity, of custom with nature" (Shwedder, 1991, p.2). This image of the premodern was built out of presupposed distinctions of language vs. reality, subject vs. object, and of custom vs. nature. But today in the postmodern era, these distinctions are beginning to be challenged. Today rationality is no longer a static given, as cultural psychology and anthropology present us with the following problem: "what inferences about human nature are we to draw from the apparent diversity of human conceptions of morality, and what justification is there

for our own conceptions of reality in light of that apparent diversity" (Shwedder, 1991, p.3).

Our rationality in the modern era is assumed to be the end product of development. It is considered a stable, static and irrefutable point of comparison. In light of anthropological relativism, however, how do we reconcile the legitimacy of "different" rationalities with our own? Is it coherent to claim simultaneously that others are rationally justified in their conception of things, even though our conception of things are truly different and inconsistently so?

But as many philosophers point out, we could not possibly know that others are rationally justified in their conception of things if we could not make rational sense of their conception of things "by our lights" (Shwedder, 1991, p. 5) or "against the backcloth of our world" (Gellner, 1985; Rescher, 1988). In other words, if we can make rational sense out of others' conceptions, then their conceptions cannot be that different from our own. For to make sense of others' conceptions they must make sense in terms that are understandable to us. "Hence, it is our rationality that we explore when we confront their conception of things, for how else could we understand them, unless their ways, beliefs, and modes of justification were in some way available to us?"

(Shwedder, 1991, p.5).

Does this mean then that we cannot make any claims of genuine difference in conceptions? This question would depend on what we mean by difference in conceptions. Spiro (1990) contends that what we cannot mean is that the conceptions of others are fundamentally different from our own. Others' conceptions are not fundamentally different from ours. They are simply inconsistently and importantly different in their conceptions (as expressed in their texts, in their discourse, in their institutions, in their personalities), at least at the moment.

Yet the conceptions held by others are available to us, in the sense that when we truly understand their conception of things we come to recognize possibilities latent within our own rationality, or existent in the history of our reason, and thus ways of conceiving of things become relevant for us for the first time, or once again. In other words, there is no homogeneous "backcloth" to our world. We are multiple from the start. Our indigenous conceptions are diverse, whether they are centred in our official texts, or our underground newspapers, in our discourse or in our psychoanalytical soliloquies, in our customary practices or our idiosyncratic routines, in our daytime task analyses or our nighttime fantasies. (Shwedder, 1991, p.6)

Our understanding of the world is not fundamentally different from others'. Nor does our understanding represent a proper vision of the homogeneous backcloth of our world. Our understanding represents one way, one

history of understanding among many. There are a multitude of histories and ways of understanding the world. In examining others' understanding of the world we come to see the possibilities latent within our own understanding of the world, ways which may have developed if we had had a different history for understanding the world. There is not one way to understand the world, but a multitude of ways as there are a multitude of histories. And these multitude of ways for understanding the world are expressed in the multitude of ways we have for expressing our understanding of the world.

Romanticism and the Search for Pure Being: A Turning Point

The problem of rationality (or psychic unity) continues to be an issue in the interpretation of conceptual diversity. The problem has a rich religious and philosophical history, and can be seen in terms of a larger tension between the pride and identity we have for our traditions and the pride and identity of our ego to define itself separately from the limitations of our traditions. It reflects the tension we experience as we struggle to define ourselves both as products of this world and as something greater than this world. This tension has continued to exert an intellectual and spiritual uneasiness throughout our history. "The



philosophical source of this uneasiness is the demand of individual consciousness to be free from the influence of established things. The theological source is the idea that this existence is some kind of negation of pure being" (Shwedder, 1991, p.7).

In this sense Shwedder uses "existence" to describe all the things of our physical and experiential world. It includes all experiences of this mortal existence; all cultures, all histories, and all diversity of our social, spiritual, and physical worlds. It involves the world that we create through all of our existences. Our pure being is that which we seek to understand. It is our essence. It is what defines us and gives us meaning. This world (our existence) is often thought in contrast to our essence or "pure being". It is thought in contrast to that which we seek through our sciences, theologies, and philosophies.

The idea of existence as a negation of pure being can be traced in the west to Plato through Descartes and to various contemporary "structuralisms." The whole purpose of this idea can be seen as aiming to recover the abstract forms, universal grammar or "pure being" hidden beneath the "superficialities" of any individual's mental functioning or of any particular peoples' social life (Shwedder, 1991).

Shwedder (1991) describes two ways in which the structural traditions have attempted to discover the autonomous being or pure consciousness beyond the situationism of our world. Descartes developed a method of erasure, through radical doubt, in which everything sensuous, subjective, embodied, temporary, local or tradition bound is seen as prejudice, dogma or illusion. Pure being is reserved for only those things in which an autonomous reason could have absolute confidence: in itself and in deductive logic. In this way Descartes determined that everything existential about his being was in effect superficial. His essence or 'pure being' was only that which he could find self evident or could determine through deductive logic.

Others, especially those in the social sciences, have made famous a method of subtraction. This method of subtraction is often referred to as "convergent validation," "inter observer reliability," or "data aggregation," whereby everything different about different ways of being in the world (or different ways of seeing the world) is treated as error, noise or bias. Pure being is the abstraction of those common denominators which make people the same.

Yet prejudice, dogma, illusion, error, noise and bias are not the only locutions with which to possess or (as the structuralists would have it) dispossess a

tradition, and our ability to recognize each other as pure beings does not necessarily arise out of what is left over after we subtract all of our differences. (Shwedder, 1991, p.8)

Some propose that it is our prejudices that make us see, that traditions not only obscure but also illuminate. It is our differences which make us real. A specific existence can be a selective affirmation of pure being. Objectivity and reason are not in opposition to tradition and they do not lift us out of custom and folk belief. "Reason may lift us out of error, ignorance, and confusion. Yet error, ignorance and confusion are not proper synonyms for tradition, custom and folk belief" (Shwedder, 1991, p. 8).

Romanticism stands out against the view that existence is the negation of pure being by offering us its alternative: the view that existence is the infusion of consciousness and pure spirit into the natural world "...thereby narrowing the distance or blurring the boundaries between nature, humanity, and the gods" (Shwedder, 1991, p.9).

Shwedder goes on to describe the attributes of romanticism.

The practical result of romanticism's doctrine is a revaluation of the subordinated pole of each of those opposition: reality as an achievement of art and invention; objectivity as the extension of imaginative paradigms into nature, community and sacred tradition as the precondition of profane

knowledge and free criticism; the concrete and the particular as the genuine vehicles of the transcendent; beauty as the figure of truth; logic as a lonely, empty form; feelings and emotions as rational and adaptive ways of being in the world; love as the realization of our veritable nature; language in general, and poetic language in particular, as the divine expressive instruments of the real; adventure, astonishment, and cultural anthropology as proper responses to the variety of inspiring manifestations of pure being in the world. (Shwedder, 1991 p. 9)

Shwedder further defends romanticism and insists that it cannot be dismissed as "mere emotivism, nihilism, solipsism, paganism or perversity" (Shwedder, 1991, p. 10). Nor can it be routinely dismissed as relativism often is, relativism often being used as a catch phrase for all of the above. He feels that what romanticism's critics fear is that any rebellion of existence over pure being will lead to a sort of reverse discrimination, in which rhetoric will replace reason, art will replace reality, sentiment calculation, and difference will be the overriding goal, ignoring our human commonalities. But what Shwedder feels is that the wholesale and outright disparagement of romanticism is the real threat to pure being.

More important, the criticism misjudges the true project of romanticism. For the aim of romanticism is to revalue existence, not to denigrate pure being; to dignify subjective experience, not to deny reality; to appreciate the imagination, not to disregard reason; to honour our differences, not to underestimate our common humanity.

The negative intent behind the doctrine of

romanticism is to expose the pretence that literal truth is artless. The positive intent is to develop theories about how realism-the experience of the transcendant things as direct, transparent or close at hand- is achieved artfully. (Shweddor, 1991, p. 10)

Romanticism proposes an investigation of our existence as our pure being. We must abandon the search for just that we can be boiled down to or for what defines us from beyond our worldly existence, because our pure being (our essence) is our existence.

With respect to relativism, this means that there are no absolute or objective truths or standards which we seek. Our truths and our standards are not found beyond our existence, they are found in and are relative to our existence and how we express our existence.

What I have attempted to this point is to demonstrate some of the thinking that I have gone through with respect to relativism and other related issues. It is by no way meant as a comprehensive assessment of all of the important issues which need to be considered. It does however represent a small sampling of the relevant issues and I hope that it reflects both the vastness and the interrelatedness of the issues which are important to this discussion. Further, with respect to psychology and social constructionism, I believe that it demonstrates (at least in some small way) some of the limitations of

our present ways of doing "science." For the issues which we are attempting to address are not just defined by how we do science, but are crucial to us all, and all are needed in the discussion if we hope to progress.

In the section on philosophy and relativism I addressed some of the common charges often made against both cognitive and moral relativism. I did this in order to demonstrate that relativism cannot be just outrightly dismissed. With respects to cognitive relativism, I defined different types of relativism and tried to show how they may work in our society. Further, I submit that our understanding of the world cannot reasonably be viewed as "superior development." Others' conceptions of reality do not represent arrested or perverse development. They represent the diversity of our world. I also conclude here that the charge that relativism is a self-refuting proposition is a superficial argument made in bad faith. This argument does not help us to reach a better understanding of our different ways. It merely represents an attempt by objectivists to hold the relativist to their standards.

In the part on moral relativism, I address some confusions and claims often made about moral relativism. Here, I determined that the charges that the moral relativist: (a) believes that a claim can be both right

and wrong, (b) proposes a totally subjectivist, individualistic doctrine, and (c) can propose no moral beliefs of her/his own; are not wholly damaging and nor can they be taken as necessary to the moral relativist's position.

In the section on anthropology and relativism, I discovered ideas which challenge our present understanding of rationality and psychic unity. Here I proposed that our understanding of others is really a test of our rationality, and in our attempts to understand the rationality of others we discover new possibilities within our own rationality. The conclusions I take from these ideas is the possibility that there is no "homogeneous backcloth" to our world. Our understandings of the world are diverse. We are multiple from the start. We may build a backcloth for ourselves, but this backcloth cannot be assumed nor is it static. Recognizing that there is no homogeneous backcloth is the first step in respecting all in building our backcloth.

In Shwedder's propositions I discover a different method for addressing these issues: romanticism. This is a method which values and explores our diversity. As well, for me, it helps to integrate our different ways of understanding the world and recognizes us all as integral

parts of this world, not as separate from it. In Shweddler's analysis of existence and pure being I begin to appreciate more fully the possibilities of relativism. Here, I equate relativism with a valuing of our existence in our search for pure being. It is our existence which defines us, not absolute laws or standards. In this analysis I find meaning and purpose in our existence and begin to see our existence as our pure being. These ideas become central to my understanding of relativism and my ideas of what relativism proposes for society.

#### Some Comments on Interviews with Social Scientists

In seeking out different perspectives on these issues I interviewed a small cross section of social science professors here at Wilfrid Laurier University. In all I interviewed six individuals. Two each from Psychology and Sociology and one each from English and Philosophy. All but one, from Sociology, were males. These interviews were not meant as research from which broad generalizations could be made. Nor were they meant to represent all of the different perspectives there are on these issues. They were meant to help me to organize my thoughts on relativism and to sample some ideas which I may not have considered. Within time constraints, I attempted to sample a small cross section of individuals within the social sciences. I chose these individuals



from disciplines which I felt may have something to say about relativism.

### What I Found in the Interviews

What I will now attempt is some sort of summary of what took place in these interviews. While most of the interviews seemed somewhat general and artificial at first, there were some specific issues and implications of relativism which did arise. What follows is my interpretation of the main implication of relativism individuals discussed in each interview.

Five of the six people interviewed believed that excessive relativism could lead to some form of anarchy or disintegration of society or the sciences. Individuals felt this because they believed that relativism, gone too far, could lead to an absence of standards against which to hold anyone or anything to, either in society or in the sciences.

Three of those interviewed discussed in detail the problems of fully implementing relativism in the sciences. In the interviews it was believed that while relativism could provide for greater access of people and ideas in the sciences, the standards and criteria of science could not be open to relativism. For this could undermine all that science has done for and would propose for society. Here, it was viewed as a problem of having

established criteria and standards for research and practise in the sciences. It was a matter of having a model for doing good science. As such, relativism was viewed not as a value in itself, but as something that could be applied to some degree in some areas but not in others.

In another interview the discussion also turned to the problem of applying relativism in the extreme. Here the concern was that relativism could and has lead to some totally subjective, individualistic attitudes among some students. Relativism was seen in this interview as being used by some students as a cop out and a way of avoiding serious debate of issues and theory. It was felt that students often used replies such as: "It's all relative anyway," "Its all in how you look at it," "Let's just agree to disagree," to avoid critical analysis of their own beliefs or views on different theories. Such a widespread attitude as this, it was felt could render all discourse and interaction between individuals meaningless. Hence, we would all live isolated from each other, without common goals and without a meaningful common society.

In the fifth interview, the implications of relativism were applied to a specific agenda and were deemed detrimental to that agenda. Here the agenda was

women's rights and equality of women in our society. The interviewee believed that ideas in relativism could be used by others in society as a way of devaluing and discriminating against women; a way of not giving women their just due. It was believed that women needed to fight for equal rights and an equal playing field and hence needed an opportunity to establish their value according to some type of objective criteria. To elaborate, it was believed that any attempt to establish different or relative ways of understanding or types of knowledge or skills, could be used by others in society to trap women in traditional female roles. Relativism could be used by others to define the knowledge or understandings of women as only female knowledge, not worthy of being considered on the same level as male knowledge. It was believed here that women needed objective criteria in order to have a chance at proving their skills or worth, and any attempt to relativize different knowledge and skills would be used to devalue the skills and knowledge of different women.

In the sixth interview the thrust of discussion took place on a different level. Here the implications of relativism were not applied to specific areas, but the implications of relativism as a proposition were discussed. In this interview the overriding model under

which all of our sciences operated and the implications of relativism for this model were discussed. The assumptions of our present model were examined and relativism was seen as challenging these assumptions.

Especially in the social sciences, the assumption of an objective reality or truth seemed problematic. As well, the assumption that our method (the scientific method) of uncovering this truth was the only proper method of inquiry seemed exclusionary, and left our system of inquiry incapable of integrating alternative ways of understanding. Further, it was felt that our entire system of science, by its guiding assumptions and by its organization in our society, left only the practise of science and not the model itself open for debate and alternative propositions. In all of our disciplines of science energy and resources are strained towards better and more efficient ways of doing science in that specific discipline. There is little energy or resources available for exploring the connections between our artificially segregated disciplines, or towards examination of our guiding model of science and the goals and values which drive this model. In light of relativism, which challenges the basic premise of objectivity, an examination of the goals and values which defines our methods would seem an imperative. It was

concluded that we need a way of justifying what it is we are doing.

### My Conclusions on these Interviews

What I found in these interviews was that these social scientists had in fact considered some of the implications of relativism, at least at some level. All acknowledged that propositions of relativism were important considerations, both in the social sciences and in society. They recognized that relativistic properties provided in our society and in our sciences an air of understanding and inclusion amidst great diversity.

However, five of the six professors interviewed believed that there were critical limitations to relativism, and that relativism applied too liberally in specific areas could (and would) lead to some sort of nihilism in the sciences and in society. The reason for this is that it was believed that relativism would lead to a lack of standards and criteria for scientific inquiry, discourse in theory and beliefs, and in establishing equality for discriminated populations.

The insight I reached from these interviews was an affirmation that practice in the social sciences and humanities greatly reflects the theoretical discourse in these disciplines. By this I mean that the issue of relativism vs. objectivism, which fundamentally

challenges the overriding models under which we operate is acknowledged, but really only superficially. Again, I believe that relativism is now only considered as a measuring stick, to determine how much or how little relativism is needed in specific areas. The demands of practice and discourse in specific areas seem to preclude deep and meaningful thought about relativism and its implications for the model under which we currently operate. As such relativism may have meaning for individuals in important areas, but its implications for the models under which our sciences operate were not seen as crucial.

I propose that this again may reflect the rigidity of our models, which does not make it easy or even beneficial to consider that which is outside of our present models. For social scientists to constantly challenge the overriding model under which they have worked their whole lives would be a great impediment to the work that they do. The problem however, is that in this way our present models perpetuate themselves and can prevent us from meaningful consideration of important alternatives. This is done regardless of the difficulties we may find with our present models. It often seems then that this is the definition of our "science"- not to consider what we have not yet

considered.

### A Proposal: A New Way of Thinking About Relativism?

#### What Is It That We seek?

As Meiland and Krausz (1982) point out, relativism is about diversity. In our pluralistic society, and our pluralistic world, diversity has become something we cannot avoid, nor has it ever been clear that we should want to. Avoiding diversity and not questioning our own beliefs and methods of acting may seem easier in the short term. But at best it merely reflects our egocentrism, at worst it challenges our abilities to learn, to grow and to expand our horizons, and may ultimately challenge our ability to survive on this planet.

Kane (1994) analogizes our present situation to a modern day Tower of Babel. Our situation is seen as a loss of moral innocence, and the problem is how do we proceed? The question seems to be how can we resolve the tension between conflicting views and methods and find a way of proceeding? But this question is often confused with another, which seems so paramount in our western tradition: How can we find the one right way, the one that is right for all and the one that we can hold all to? This question is very different from the first, how can we proceed given the diversity of our world? I

believe the distinctions between these two questions to be crucial.

These questions reflect different values. The first, how can we proceed, is a pragmatic question; but it reflects the values of understanding, respect, and inclusion of all of our goals. Its solution is central to us all. And it is true that any position which would propose that this is unsolvable or that there cannot be any standards against which to judge solutions to this problem, does reflect a kind of nihilism. The second question (which is the one "right" way) is also one of value. And the fact is, not all value this question. This question also reflects a particular set of values, which are also very prevalent in our western society: to categorize, to quantify, to know and to control the world around us.

Both of these questions, how can we proceed given our diversity and what is the one right way, the one that we can hold all to (this question can also be phrased as How can we do away with diversity?), reflect different values. These different values define meaning in different ways. In seeking "the one true way," meaning and "pure being" are defined in a specific way. Here, meaning defines our pure being as that which is found above or beyond this world of our sloppy existence. It



seeks the rules and standards through which our "existence" can be justifiably controlled and dominated. It defines our pure being as the domination of our existence.

But in seeking a way of proceeding given our diversity, we do not define our "pure being" as separate from our "existence." We recognize that the essence of our pure being is our existence. Meaning is found in our existence and pure being is that which we express through our existence. There are no absolute standards given from above nor are there any absolute rules to uncover. Our standards, our meaning, and our 'pure being' must be found in how we express our existence. Given the diversity of our world, how we are going to express our existence is the question we must address.

#### Relativism and What We Seek

It is interesting to note the reaction which "relativism" has elicited from individuals, from Plato and Aristotle to Descartes through to modern day theorists who are almost paranoid of the word itself. The counter arguments to relativism then often reflect what I believe are negative arguments (what do we do then if it is all relative?), arguments in bad faith (semantic or artificial arguments as described in the philosophy section, not meant to further understanding), and

arguments of blackmail ("...is it still possible to retain some toehold to sustain the old human struggle toward truth, goodness, and beauty as meaningful ideals?" If relativism is accepted we cannot propose or justify anything, nor can we condemn anything- the rise of Nazism seems to be the favourite example). Because some may not share the value of looking for an absolute truth that we can hold others to (ones that we can use to control the world beneath us) they are accused of not offering anything and not caring about the world at all.

I believe that it is necessary here to again address some of my own personal values. I do care about the world. I care about my responsibility to it and my place in it. And I care about how I justify what I do and what I propose, to myself. I seek to know myself and how I fit in with this world that I am a part of. I care about how I interact with others in my world and how they interact with me. I care about my own morality and about justifying it to myself, but I am not at all concerned about whether or not you are morally right or wrong in your beliefs. Further, this does not mean that I do not care about what you think or propose or do in our shared world. It means that I do not believe that I can hold you to some absolute standard of truth or morality, but I can hold you to some pragmatic standard concerning what

you propose for our world because we share this world. I also believe that we can interact better together if you understand yourself and your way of thinking, because you then become a more consistent partner for me to negotiate with in our shared world.

The problem I find with looking for the absolute is, as has been stated before, that it reflects the fact that most people in our culture see themselves as living on the world, not in it. It reflects the attitude that our essence is somehow separate from our existence as a part of this world. But I propose that in order to progress given our diversity, we must understand that we are this world, and we must define the goals and standards that we will strive towards.

What I hope to now do is to develop what I believe relativism proposes for our society. In addressing the issue of diversity I believe that relativism can be used as a tool for the respectful implementation of diversity in our pluralistic society, this being my primary goal. Further, I feel that respectful implementation of diversity is one of the most pressing concerns that we face in our society today.

As I have stated earlier, I believe that the good society is reflected in the respectful implementation of diversity, and the respectful implementation of diversity

in our society entails meaningful participation of all members of our society, both in society and in defining society. I believe relativism (or ideas in relativism) can be used to help achieve this.

My basic proposition is that relativism is not the end of defining our society (its values, its goals, its methods), but a necessary beginning. Relativism as a beginning grants all individuals and all views a legitimacy. Relativism does not mean, as it is often accused of, that everything is relative therefore nothing has meaning. To the contrary, all is relative therefore everything has meaning and deserves a basic respect. Relativism grants legitimacy to all who come to the table. But again, this marks the beginning of us defining our values, goals, and standards. And as a beginning it grants all a legitimacy in deciding how we are going to proceed. There are no sacred cows, all need to be listened to and evaluated on what they have to say and on what they have to propose for our existence. Relativism proposes that all have this basic legitimacy and all deserve to be involved in defining the values, goals, and standards of society. Are there standards and goals we can hold as a society? Is there a truth that we can hold as a society? Yes there is, but we all have a right and responsibility in deciding on these goals and

values and in defining our common truth. Relativism grants all, all individuals, all positions, and all truths that right.

For individuals interacting in our society relativism grants all a basic respect and proposes that no one and no one position can be dismissed outright. But it also proposes that for us all to be involved in building our common future we have a responsibility not just to respect others but to define our methods and the goals and values which drive them. By defining and understanding what we bring to the table we are in a position to negotiate our common future. We also have a responsibility towards critical analysis of our methods and values, as we have a responsibility towards all and everything which share our common world. Relativism is also a proposition of investigation and critical analysis. It reflects Protagoras' implicit understanding of Socrates teaching "Man is the measure." As men and women are the measure our greatest task then is to "know thyself." Relativism does not propose that all truths are relative therefore nothing needs critical assessment. But our truths and our values are relative, hence we have to be the measure of them. Their measure is not found in the absolute. Our existence is our pure being and how we express that existence will be the measure of our pure

being. Perhaps it is time to stop looking above as in a theological or philosophical sense, or beyond as in a "scientific" sense. We have to look to ourselves. Our prejudice, our dogma, our illusions, our variabilities, our existence must be the measure. This must be the "absolute" truth that we can hold all to. Hence we must know what they are, where they come from and what they propose. We must find a personal justification, as individuals and as a society. The justification for what we propose and how we will live must come from within. It is not found above or beyond our existence. We must "know thyself" if we are to hold something up and propose it for all. This is the crucial first step in determining our truths. The truths of our existence which is our "pure being." Relativism is about finding these truths.

Given what relativism proposes, given its seeming dismissal of all that was previously held up, one may ask then how can the individual find meaning in such a pluralistic society? Relativism is about finding meaning. It challenges us all to find meaning for ourselves (which does not preclude us from finding specific meaning as groups, as in specific religious beliefs), but more than this it grants us the legitimacy to do so. We all have the right to define our own

individual meaning. Of course it is true that other individuals may find their own meaning in different ways than we do. But we are all responsible for defining societal meaning and societal truths. These truths we must all negotiate. These things are not mutually exclusive. Our own meaning and truths we must find in ourselves. Our society's meaning and truths we must find in the collective of individuals who share that society. Then, only when society defines itself as the product of the interaction of the individuals who make up that society does that society have meaning for these diverse and pluralistic individuals.

Relativism does not answer our search for that which we can hold up above all else. It represents the starting point from which we can begin to decide on how to proceed given the diversity of our pluralistic society and our world. Relativism proposes that we must be the measure of our truths. Our truths are not found in the absolute, but are relative to us, our existence and how we choose to express our existence. It proposes that we all must take part in defining our values, goals and standards. Together we must find within ourselves justification for these things. Relativism provides us with the conditions under which we can begin to do this.

#### Relativism in a Specific Case

I will now attempt to better explicate how my vision of relativism could work in society by applying it to a particular situation. For this I will choose an issue used earlier by Richardson and Fowers (1994), the practise of clitorectomies, which is common in some middle eastern countries. I attempt to explicate using an example for two reasons. One, in order to address the idea that the relativist cannot propose anything for nor condemn anything in society. And secondly, I hope the example will help me to demonstrate how relativism, as my superordinate value, would work cross culturally and for individuals in a common society.

First, I will state that I do condemn the present practise of clitorectamies in these countries. But I believe that it is necessary for me to determine what it is I condemn in this practice and why I condemn it. I condemn any practice in which affected individuals have no role in determining the standards, values and practices of the society which they share. This again reflects my values of diversity and my goal of integrating diversity in a way which respects all.

In the practice of clitorectomies, long standing religious, cultural and patriarchal principles guide these society's attitudes and practice. Here, these principles preclude consideration of alternative



practices and exclude individuals from an influence in defining their society's goals, practices and values. As such, principles of relativism, such as respect for diversity, fair consideration of alternatives, involvement of all in negotiating society's shared practices and morality, are not respected. I believe that this is what is responsible for this practice and hence, I condemn it. I condemn it because it does not respect what I propose for society and the values which I find in relativism.

Personally the act of clitorrectamies I find disturbing. But it is the motives for the act and who decides these motives which I condemn in this instance. If individuals really believed that this act had important meaning for them, and if individuals were themselves responsible for finding meaning in this act, then I would not condemn the act for others. I do not feel that I would have a right to. But as the practice is carried out today, I equate it with a form of absolutism. There is an absolute power in these societies, one incapable of looking beyond itself and one which has decided on the values and goals of all, without recognizing the rights of all to decide together on their shared values and goals. It is the nature of the absolute power which I condemn in this act. It is not

the act itself. Relativism condemns this act because of the absolute nature in which this society imposes itself on its own members. Relativism proposes that the members of a society must impose themselves on their shared society to define their shared goals, values and practices, not vice versa. Thus, in this instance this society has failed to promote respect for diversity of its individuals and relativism among its individuals and then up through its entire society.

With respect to cross cultural relativism, I propose the same attitude described above towards this act. As one specific culture, I do not believe we have a right to condemn another which has properly, that is from its members up, decided to find meaning in a particular act. We have to respect the decisions and values of others. But any power which imposes itself on to others, and considers itself as absolute, we have a responsibility to condemn (Fowers & Richardson, 1996). If we propose respect for diversity and involvement of all in defining our shared society, then we must oppose any absolute power which imposes itself on to others.

Now, I would like to take relativism and apply it to some of the values of community psychology. While many would recognize human diversity as a central concept in community psychology, and would perhaps recognize some

importance of relativism to this concept, what importance relativism has to other values of community psychology is probably much less clear. I hope to show that a recognition of relativism is essential to community psychology's core values and goals.

### Relativism and Community Psychology

Human diversity is perhaps the most important issue which modern psychology faces (Watts, 1992). The professional split of Black psychologists from the American Psychological Association (APA), the formation of new APA divisions: the Psychology of Women, the Society for the Study of Gay and Lesbian Issues, and the Society for the Psychological Study of Ethnic Minority Issues, as well as the birth of Community Psychology and its emphasis on social change and cultural diversity, reflect the importance of diversity to psychology today (Watts, 1992). It also reflects the inadequacy of modern psychology with respect to diversity.

Community psychology as a sub-discipline has always been about diversity (Trickett, Watts, & Birman, 1993). Its struggle has been to advocate the right of other voices to be heard. "Community psychology, always looking toward a pluralistic society, has championed the right to be the same, the right to be different. The defining values of the community psychology movement

have been cultural relativity, diversity, and an ecological perspective that respects, indeed fosters, differences among people" (Rappaport, 1984, p. 19). However, as Trickett, Watts, and Birman point out, despite community psychology's commitment to diversity, its incorporation into the theory, methods and intervention practices of community psychology "is still hazy after all these years" (1993, p. 264). Community psychology, while claiming to respect and to foster diversity, has not defined a paradigm separate from that of general psychology. This would seem somewhat strange, as community psychology was supposed to be a response to general psychology's lack of integration of diversity.

While in this paper the examination of relativism began with social constructionism, diversity theorists in community psychology have developed some ideas of relativism and its propositions. Watts (1992) cites a value on relativism as an important part of diversity and its implementation in community psychology and society. Relativism acts as a critique of ethnocentrism and scientific imperialism and it "...helps to protect the myriad solutions populations devise to solve problems of human existence" (Watts, 1992, p. 117). However, the works of Watts (1992) and Trickett, Watts and Birman (1993) seem to be the only works in which direct

connections are made between relativism and the values of community psychology.

Here, I propose that relativism is critical to the full implementation of community psychology's values. The issue of respect for diversity can be rephrased as one of domination. Lack of respect for diversity and the lack of a full implementation of diversity in science and in society reflects the domination of some over others. This is both a social issue and a scientific issue. Further, I propose that relativism is crucial to community psychology's fight for diversity and fight against domination in our society.

The values of community psychology have evolved since their beginning, and some will define them differently than others. For my purposes here, I will initially address three concepts which are often proposed as values of community psychology. These are: self-determination, collaboration and democratic participation, and distributive justice.

Self-determination is often viewed as the "individuals right to pursue chosen goals without excessive frustration" (Olsen, 1978, p. 45). Self-determination is also regarded as perhaps the primary and most important right and value of the good society (Prilleltensky, in press); it calls for the assertion of

one's fundamental rights (Prilleltensky & Walsh-Bowers, 1993). It is easy to see then how self-determination is important to diversity and its implementation in society. If a lack of respect for diversity is about domination then self-determination is a fundamental concept, as it grants all a basic right to decide who they are and who they will be.

What all of this has to do with relativism may seem less clear. But I would propose that relativism lives at the core of this basic value. Implicit in the pursuit of one's chosen goals and a right to decide who one is and who one will be, is an attitude and a value which recognizes that there is not just one right set of goals or one right way to live and be in our society. Self-determination assumes relativism from the start. What is the point of granting one the right to decide on one's own goals and to decide on how one will live, if you then condemn their choices because they are not the right choices.

Prilleltensky and Gonick (1994) make these connections, perhaps without recognizing their relation to relativism, in their discussion of oppression (domination) and diversity and their implications to community psychology's values. Here they state that self-determination is about the right and ability of each

member of society to develop a personal identity without facing discrimination. This means that one has the right and the need to affirm one's own identity despite differences from the dominant societal norms. Again, this implies that there is no one right way to live or be, and that individuals have a basic right to decide for themselves without fear of oppression from those that they may differ from.

The value of collaboration and democratic participation is one which goes hand in hand with self-determination. It is essentially the expression and integration of the rights of individuals interacting in a social context. It reflects a model of our basic right and how we are to function as a group of individuals in a society. Prilleltensky and Walsh-Bowers (1993) describe the goal or the test of democracy and collaboration as "when all the stakeholders of a group or community are afforded meaningful opportunity to voice their concerns and to have consequential input into decisions affecting their lives" (p. 10). Democracy is one proposal for dealing with human diversity. A collaborative process involves treating persons fairly, equitably, and with respect (Prilleltensky & Walsh-Bowers, 1993). Democracy recognizes that individuals have a right and a need to choose their life goals and it provides a method for them

to defend their interest in a social context. Again though, what is the point of choice and the right to defend choices if they can then be dismissed in the name of the one right way. Collaboration and democratic participation assume a basic relativism. Relativism is that which grants a true legitimacy to those choices which are our right and our need. The proposal that there is one objective right way, one right choice reflects the goal of domination. The idea that there is one right way is in direct opposition to diversity. It is in direct opposition to democracy. Its essence reflects oppression and domination.

Distributive justice is the mechanism through which any change will ever be made. Regardless of the theories and the science, if we hope to affect social change, if we hope to achieve full self-determination and collaboration and democratic participation, if we hope to end domination and oppression, we must have a redistribution of the resources and the burdens in our society. Distributive justice is the process for change, all other things- other values and relativism- are the justification. Of course what we have to do is to make these justifications for change the impetus for change.

Again, relativism is the underlying value which opposes domination and oppression. Expressed through the



principle of distributive justice, it is the value which challenges the present distribution of resources and burdens in our society, as it challenges all justifications of the status quo. All justifications of the status quo are based on sentiments which reflect the idea that there are specific goals and ways of living that are objectively right, or that are at least innately more deserving of reward and recognition. Relativism challenges this basic proposition. I believe that until this idea is dismissed and some form of relativism is adopted there will be no distributive justice. Hence there will be no justice. For justice I believe is not blind and it is not objective. It is not about treating everyone the same. It is not about ignoring our differences, it is about respecting and embracing them. Thus, justice is about relativism.

Before making some conclusions about relativism and the values of community psychology, I would like to address one more value which has recently been proposed for community psychology: caring and compassion (Prilleltensky, in press; Prilleltensky and Nelson, 1997). Prilleltensky (in press) describes the value of caring and compassion as "the expression of care, empathy, and concern for the physical and emotional well being of other human beings" (p. 8). He also proposes

that caring for others in need is a fundamental pillar of moral thought. Our investment in the lives of others is that which defines us as social animals, as human beings and as integral parts of this world. Caring and compassion is our goal and it is the value which underlies all of our other values.

Caring and compassion is not about right or wrong. It is not about an objective truth. Nor is it about the rules which define us or the principles of our homogeneous existence. Hence, it is not about science as we understand science today. It is about different needs and the need for different ways. Caring and compassion cannot be about justifying needs, it must be about addressing needs.

Caring and compassion are also about justice. Here, I am no longer talking about just distributive justice. I am talking about my vision of societal justice, the importance of justice, and the importance of how we define justice. Further, I challenge the idea of justice as blind or even as impartial. I believe that justice is about compassion, and that compassion cannot be blind or impartial. Compassion is about addressing differences and different needs. For me, so is justice. Conflicts in our society arise not around similarities, but around our differences. They arise around differences of

values, goals, and methods. But impartial justice attempts to define us using the same construct, and then to impartially weigh one's validity using that one construct. But what constructs we will use reflects a certain set of values and a particular model of operation. Hence, it denies our diversity and represents domination. This is how for me, justice as compassionate, is also about relativism.

#### Some Conclusions on Community Psychology

I believe that none of the values of community psychology can have any consistency if they are presented within a model which assumes one right way, specific correct goals or an objective truth. These things are about control, domination and oppression. We seem to be able to recognize this, at least superficially in our society. But we fail to recognize it in the science in which we operate. How can our goals be caring and compassion if we operate in a system which is searching for the one right way? A system which searches for an objective reality by looking for our essence only in that which makes us the same. Our essence is also found in our diversity and our needs are found in those things which make us different. This is where the problems of our society express themselves.

Many in community psychology do recognize and have

tried to address the contradictions inherent in our "science" (Prilleltensky & Walsh-Bowers, 1993; Prilleltensky, 1997). Prilleltensky and Nelson (1996), in their chapter on "Reclaiming Social Justice," take a great step forward in helping to focus the issue. Here they iterate the need for integrating within ourselves our identities as professionals and as community members who have a role in defining the society which we hope to affect. They also propose social justice as the key agenda for an "integrated" community psychology as a transformative and not just an ameliorative discipline. In their article they go on to lay some of the conceptual groundwork for such a change. As well they propose some concrete steps for promoting real change. For me, these efforts really reflect less "science" and more responsibility. They reflect less pursuit of the absolute and more personal responsibility and justification for our common society. To me this is the standard which relativism proposes, personal responsibility for and justification of how we express our existence.

While I do not wish to diminish the significance of these efforts for change, this thesis is about relativism and about challenging our core values and methods, in community psychology, in our sciences and in our society.

It is my contention that community psychology's values are inconsistent with our guiding scientific model and methods. Our present scientific model is about finding the absolute, which reflects the idea of one right truth or one right way. Our methods of inquiry are based around control of our differences, but it is our differences which also define our existence. Hence I propose that the methods and goals of all of our present sciences reflect values which are in direct opposition to change, diversity and caring and compassion. I believe that our sciences, as they are understood today, reflect the goals of control, domination and oppression. The same things in society which we are attempting to change through the use of "science."

#### What I Take from this Thesis

As the title of this work states, the purpose of this thesis is really about achieving diversity. It contains thoughts and ideas which reflect this as one of my most important goals. My goal of achieving diversity is a product of my values and of who I am. It also reflects my vision of the good society, what I believe society should be striving towards. Simply put, my vision involves meaningful involvement of all members both in society and in defining society. Further, I take this statement to include our world, our reality, and our

morality, and how we all define them. Through the course of this paper I attempted to examine relativism and other ideas to see what could be taken from them in achieving my goal.

I believe my assessment of social constructionism and psychology's treatment of relativism reflects some important issues within psychology and the social sciences in general. These issues challenge the basic assumptions under which our sciences operate, but further they challenge our very purpose as scientists. I would propose that my assessment of relativism in the social sciences and my reflections on interviews done with social scientists, indicate problems in our sciences, problems of: egocentrism, shortsightedness, a lack of interdisciplinary connections, an inability to look beyond itself and more importantly, a lack of connection to and a defined purpose in our society. Further, I propose that these problems represent a lack of serious consideration of the values and goals of our sciences. In addressing this issue, I attempted to find some way of bringing values into our science and I proposed some ground rules for moral discourse in our sciences. Implicit in these efforts was a recognition of the importance of defining and explicating our values and goals at the beginning of any discourse.

After this, I did some exploring in other areas of the social sciences in order to bridge some of the gap between disciplines, but further to find new ways of dealing with issues. In the section on philosophy I attempted to give the reader some background on relativism. While this section really only represents how relativism has been thought of in our western tradition, it does help to explicate for the reader some of the main issues, charges against, and misconceptions of relativism and what it proposes.

The section on anthropology/cultural psychology and relativism also represents an attempt to bridge the gap between disciplines. As well though, in this section I found important ideas which helped me to organize my thoughts and to better focus the attributes of relativism which could help me in reaching my goal: achieving diversity. Here, the introduction of the method romanticism helped me to find meaning in these issues and in myself, as it made me feel like more of an integrated agent, addressing issues of vital importance to me.

In this section I also discovered a turning point in my understanding of relativism; the distinctions made between existence and pure being. Here, the problems of defining existence as the negation of pure being were explored, and it is proposed that many of our efforts do

in fact define existence in this way. This is done either by seeking that which transcends this world of our sloppy existence and feeds it from above, as in theology and philosophy; or by excluding everything diverse about our world, by excluding existence in an attempt to uncover the truth below, as is proposed in the sciences. This idea of existence as the negation of pure being vs. existence as our pure being is crucial to my propositions of relativism.

In developing some propositions of relativism I examined a question crucial to the point: what is it we seek? Here I proposed that what we seek and what questions we ask really reflect different values. I believe it is these values that we must address before we can proceed.

The central debate around relativism seems to be about justification. How do we justify or legitimize anything? What will be our measure? This debate has lead different people to ask the question in different ways. What is the one right way, the one way we can justify as absolute, and the one that we can hold all to. This is one way of asking the question. This question however, must be recognized as reflecting a specific set of values: values which seek to categorize, quantify, to know and to control the world below us; values of



domination. But another way of asking the question is how will we proceed given our diversity? How will we express our existence, and how will we define this world that we are a part of? These questions reflect different values. They reflect values of co-operation, negotiation, caring and compassion. Values which recognize us all as integral parts of this world and which recognize our existence as our pure being.

If we take these values which lead to the question how are we going to proceed given our diversity, we can begin to see that there is really only one way to justify or to measure anything. We must be the measure. Our truths and our values are not granted from above nor are they found in "invarying regularities" that deny our existence to define our pure being. They are found in how we express our existence as our pure being. This, of course, reflects Protagoras' implicit understanding of Socrates teaching "man is the measure". But more, it emphasizes our need to "know thyself". As we are to be the measure, we must know who we are, what are our goals and values, where do they come from and what is it we propose for our existence. This is the same sentiment which I expressed earlier in proposing the importance of all of science to examine and explicitly define its values and goals and what it proposes.

Relativism is that which grants all of us a basic right and respect, as well as a responsibility in defining our society and its values, goals, methods, and standards and in measuring that society. Relativism is the beginning of our achieving diversity. Hence relativism is my super ordinate value which I propose for our society.

I propose that absolutism, by virtue of seeking for the one right way or the one right truth is exclusionary. It excludes other ways of understanding and of finding meaning. As well, I believe it represents values of control and domination, of our physical world and of each other. Thus, I find it in direct opposition to diversity, its implementation and the values of caring and compassion. I also propose that any model based on absolutism leaves itself unable to look beyond itself, as it sees its goals and methods as the one true way. All of its energies then are only directed towards finding these absolutes and reaffirming its understanding of the world, without regards to other goals or values. Further, it does not leave itself open for discussion of goals and values as it values only the one, finding the absolute. This does not leave room for the diversity of goals and values which we share. This is why I propose that attributes of relativism provide us with a starting

point for finding new methods which respect our diversity.

In the last section of this paper, I took some propositions of relativism and visited some of community psychology's core values. I did this in order to demonstrate my belief that relativism is crucial to community psychology's values and what it proposes for society. Here, the conclusions I reach about community psychology are really observations and a critique of all of our sciences. Community psychology just opens itself up better for these critiques because it at least tries to explicate its values and vision for society.

The question of purpose is crucial to all of our science. Why are we engaged in these activities? Is it to find the absolute truths, to control our sloppy existence? To dominate the world below us? Are we here as individual scientists, for our own individual goals? Or are we trying to benefit the world that we are a part of? Are we here to help and to promote the causes of those most vulnerable in our world? Are we here to promote the cause of our finite world itself? I propose that our sciences must be about building a higher moral existence for us all. They must be about compassion. And they must be about diversity and defining a world for all of us. They must be about creating a world that we

are proud to be the measure of. I conclude here with the proposition that the model under which our sciences currently operate reflects values in direct opposition to change, diversity, and caring and compassion. It reflects the value of domination. Hence I am left with the question, how do we hope to advance the goals of compassion by using a model based upon domination.

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