

THE VERBAL COMMUNITY AND THE SOCIETAL CONSTRUCTION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Mark Burton
Mancunian Community Health (NHS) Trust

Carolyn Kagan
Manchester Metropolitan University

ABSTRACT: Skinner's concept of the "verbal community" is developed as a link between the private experiences of individuals, on the one hand, and societal structures, practices and conventions, on the other. The verbal community enables the individual to have a discriminated consciousness of private experience, but since the verbal community is itself a historically constructed entity, then our most personal inner experience is also socio-historically defined. The nature of these relationships between society, the verbal community and the individual are explored from the standpoint of a transformational model of individual-society relationships, using Gramsci's concept of ideological hegemony to articulate the ways that consent to domination is created and reproduced in the lived experience of society's members.

This paper is about how human consciousness, and particularly the private experiences of individuals, can be understood in relation to social organization. How does what we think and feel relate to the society we live in? And how might such relationships be best described and understood? There are some practical reasons for attempting an analysis of this relationship, and it is particularly relevant to an understanding of the relationships between emotional phenomena and social or political change.

Reich (1942/1975), for example, tried to provide an account of the rise of fascism in Germany which drew on the conceptual tools of both historical materialism and psychoanalysis in analyzing the links between emotion, sexuality, political affiliation, and class. Whether or not we find that account plausible, many have seen the need for an analysis that bridges the worlds of personal experience (psychology) and the social system (social theory). In our day, this has relevance to feminist analyses of social relations and of sexuality. For example, how possible is it to overcome our socialization within a culture of gender-associated dominance and subordination and to re-negotiate our relationships equitably? Moreover, an analysis of the interdependence of private experience and social relations might pave the way for therapeutic approaches to mental distress that take account of its considerable societal causation (Brown & Harris, 1978) and definition (Burton, 1983), while incorporating insights into the nature of the experience (e.g.,

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We are grateful to Jerry Ulman for his enthusiastic encouragement to submit this article. Address all correspondence regarding this article to Mark Burton, Learning Disability Service, Mauldeth House, Mauldeth Road West, Manchester, M21 2RL, England. e-mail: mark.burton@mcr1.geonet.de

Beck, 1967).

An analysis of this kind has not been made with any great plausibility, and this may have resulted from an underdevelopment of the necessary conceptual tools; this deficit, in turn, may have been produced by the separateness of the various fields of social and psychological enquiry. Furthermore, cognitivism as a doctrine parallels the split between social and individual worlds. The discussion to follow will be centered on the problem of unifying accounts of individual consciousness and societal relationships, rejecting a common failing of cognitivism - the tendency to consider psychological phenomena as isolation from systems of social relations, thereby marooning them in the form of states and processes within individuals (Skinner, 1985).

This discussion will stand on two bases. First, it assumes a rejection of the doctrine of methodological individualism, which "... asserts that facts about society are to be explained solely in terms of facts about individuals" (Bhaskar, 1979, pp. 111-112). Any analysis of the relations between the individual and society requires a position on this issue. The rejection of methodological individualism does not, however, imply its inverse --methodological collectivism--which would explain individuals solely in terms of the social system. Instead, what Bhaskar (1979) terms the "transformational model" best describes the view taken here:

[People] do not create society. For it always pre-exists them. Rather it is an ensemble of structures, practices and conventions that individuals reproduce or transform, but which would not exist unless they did so. Society does not exist independently of conscious human activity (the error of reification). But it is not the product of the latter (the error of voluntarism).
(p. 120)

Second, the discussion makes use of Skinner's analysis of verbal behavior (1957), particularly his discussion of verbal behavior in relation to private experience (originally spelled out in 1945 and repeated with some elaboration in later texts). There is an irony here, since Skinner in his writings on social issues (e.g., 1972) clearly embraces methodological individualism. For Skinner, the problem in organizing society is how to control the behavior of the individuals who compose it. Three related observations will be made regarding this apparent contradiction.

1. As we shall see, the implications of Skinner's work on verbal behavior are threatening to methodological individualism.
2. The various bits of Skinner's work contain some incompatibilities. For our purposes, we note his eschewal of reductionism in the analysis of behavior (1950) and perception (1963), in contrast to his enthusiastic use of it in trying to understand social systems (i.e., in terms of the behavior of organisms).
3. We can live with these contradictions because, while we may find some of Skinner's work useful, this does not commit us to its every detail.

One way of approaching *Verbal Behavior* (1957) is to read it in the light of Skinner's historical context, particularly his own context, in the development of schools and systems of psychology. By so doing, it is possible to do the opposite of Chomsky (who emphasized apparent limitations of Skinner's laboratory-inspired concepts and terms (Chomsky, 1959; MacCorquodale, 1970; Waller, 1977) and

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instead de-emphasize the metaphors of stimulus, response, reinforcement. Indeed, Skinner had moved a long way from a research program founded on conditioned reflexes, through the notion of selection of behavior by its consequences (see Skinner, 1981) and the free operant (Skinner, 1956), the probability of whose response members was "controlled" but not elicited by discriminative stimuli. In *Verbal Behavior*, categories like the intraverbal, and the autoclitic classes allow analysis of phenomena which (as Chomsky rightly pointed out) are not understandable in terms of serial behavioral chains, eliciting stimuli, or drive reduction. Skinner had jettisoned the concepts of "drive", "reflex" and "reflex reserve" (Coleman, 1981; Skinner, 1938). We might suggest that much of *Verbal Behavior* could be written in a language which is not indebted to the animal laboratory and classical behaviorism. It is possible that Skinner, if he were writing the book now, might use an analysis [albeit non-mentalistic] of social interaction as a base for his writing. Indeed, social interaction is what the book is all about. Skinner's concept of verbal behavior is not the same as language, or speech, but rather "behavior reinforced through the mediation of other persons" (Skinner 1957, p.14).

According to MacCorquodale (1970), speech is one of the most important varieties of this behavior. Skinner's concern, then, is to describe verbal behavior, and sketch out some behavioristic hypotheses about its determinants. The account is *causal* (i.e., "functional")—seeking the causes in the environments of speakers (and listeners). But this social character of verbal behavior is often omitted from the cognitivist psychology of language, which is concerned with explaining language use in terms of cognitive events, structures and processes. At its most extreme, this cognitive approach appears to forget that people actually have something to say.

Skinner does not rule out the partial determination of behavior by private events; rather, he provides an analysis of how we learn to talk about experiences inaccessible to those around us. In the still dominant Cartesian view of mind-body dualism (Ryle, 1949), it is the private events that we can be most sure of describing accurately. According to Skinner (1957), however, we learn to talk of these things in a social context, and because of their inaccessibility to others there can be problems in describing them accurately. For instance, if I call what is actually a kettle a "desk," people are soon likely to correct me. But if I call fear what others call "anticipation," the mistake is less obvious, and correction is, therefore, less likely. Skinner suggests that we learn to talk accurately about private events in at least four ways:

1. As a result of others using reasonably regular accompaniments of private stimuli as a guide to whether or not the event has occurred (e.g., a child is taught "hurts" when people use the occurrence of obvious pain-provoking stimuli as criteria)
2. By others based on *their* observation of collateral behavior as criteria (e.g., scratching might accompany the occurrence of "itching")
3. Having learned to describe a private event that occurs as a result of a behavior, that behavior then "recedes" to the covert level, but still supplies the same private stimulus
4. Through metaphor, in that a verbal label might be transferred to private stimuli having coinciding properties with public stimuli, (e.g., "sharp" pains)

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So, while the accurate labelling of private events depends in one way or another upon others being able to check usage against the public correlates, Skinner (1945) goes on to note that "a differential reinforcement cannot be made contingent upon the property of privacy" (p. 275).

Finally Skinner (1953) also points out that many things remain unobserved until we have our attention drawn to them.

The environment, whether public or private, appears to remain undistinguished until the organism is forced to make a distinction. Anyone who has suddenly been required to make fine colour discriminations will usually agree that he now "sees" colors which he had not previously "seen." (p. 260)

And when this is applied to private events, strangely enough, it is the community which teaches the individual to "know himself" (p. 261).

For Skinner, this is one argument for minimizing the importance of private events in the prediction and control of behavior, although this is not a total proscription (see 1957, p. 136). However, for our purposes, we should note that it implies that the most private and personal things about ourselves, (i.e. what we experience inwardly) are not only *labelled*, but also *created* as realities in a social context.

Verbal behavior, then, is a social phenomenon by definition. Using the above account, the "phenomenology of the private" is also, if paradoxically, social in nature. Skinner uses the term "verbal community" to define that special social environment that establishes and maintains verbal repertoires. Already, however, we have the suggestion that more is involved than the immediate interpersonal environment, as community implies complexity, structure and relationships with particular human pursuits. At times, Skinner writes about the verbal community in an active sense, as when dealing with various problems in establishing particular verbal repertoires, but he is silent about how we are to conceive of the verbal community. In fact, he, in effect, rules out this area from his project when he says, "A functional analysis of the verbal community is not part of this book" (1957, p. 461). Interestingly, the appendix to *Verbal Behavior*, entitled "The Verbal Community," turns out to be concerned with the question of the origins of vocal responses in human evolution.

The Verbal Community

At this point then, we need to discuss the nature of this "verbal community" before returning to its interface with behavior and examining the implication of different ways of conceptualizing it. To begin, we assert that the verbal community is an historical changing entity that links closely with other societal categories such as class, the means of production and reproduction, dominant and subordinate cultures, the media, and ideological practices such as religion or science.

For example, in *The Long Revolution* Williams (1961) discusses the development of the English language. English as we know it emerged between 1204 and 1500 from a fusion of the languages of two classes: dominant (Norman French) and

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subordinate (Old English), linguistically separated between 1066 and 1204-1362 (a transitional period). During this period of separation the language acquired a class-related character. We can still see the marks of this in terms like villain (i.e., serf) or gentle. But more fundamentally, the degree of access to the power of words became class related. English was the language of uneducated and powerless people, while the vocabulary of learning, of power and of sophistication came in the main from Norman French sources. By tracing this history, Williams (1961) illustrates how language is intimately bound up with social relations which in unequal societies are power relations. Not only are the characteristics of languages influenced by [although not reducible to] social relations, but also, languages themselves influence those relations. Verbal communities, the collectivities that practice language, then, can be regarded as closely bound up with power relations. The patterns that they impose on our verbal behavior and private experiences (in ways analyzed by Skinner) are strongly influenced by the socio-historical dynamics of dominance and subordination.

We might say that Skinner discusses the verbal community in "psychological" terms—that is, in terms of its influence on the behavior of the individual speaker/listener; while Williams provides a "sociological" account of the verbal community by discussing its relationships with the wider social system. While convenient as a means of grasping the pivotal role of the verbal community in linking the individual's behavior (and hence thoughts, beliefs and emotions - cf. Skinner, 1945) to the wider social systems, that distinction between "psychological" and "sociological" creates problems. By separating the two arenas, psychology is given a separate status, as if what happens in the life of the individual can be understood without reference to the full system of social relations. Hence, individuals and their experiences and actions can also be understood in isolation. This approach actually obscures major determinants in people's lives, and has both practical and theoretical implications. To illustrate this point, we examine several spheres of human activity.

Much of our identity is related to our occupation. Not only might we describe ourselves as a such-and-such, but also much of our waking life, (e.g., who we spend time with, who we spend more time with, what we do with our time, what skills we acquire and lose) is structured through our roles in the division of labor. That division of labor is not arbitrary but has developed with the unfolding of the economic and administrative systems in relation to the activity of groups and individuals. Moreover, our position in that system is likely to influence our conceptual resources and how we frame problems, using categories and conceptual skills, and is likely to reflect the way we approach problems at work. So, for the sphere of work (and this includes both unpaid work and lack of work), much of our social network, our abilities, our outlook and style of thinking reflects our position in the division of labor. There is no clear point at which "psychology" begins and ends in this analysis, because any part of individual experience and behavior vis-a-vis work can be seen as continuous with that extended system of production and nonproduction.

Our sexuality is another sphere of activity wherein we see our behavior and experience as inseparable from other aspects of the "ensemble of social relations" (Seve, 1968/1975). Our sexuality relates to the circumstances of our sexual

socialization and our current sexual contexts which are, in turn, integrated into that system of cultural and human reproduction centered on the family and characterized by both male power and by links with the capitalist system of production. Similarly, for psychological categories like "social skill" the wider social relations penetrate deeply into the interpersonal and "intrapsychic" sphere via our assimilation of social norms, rules and values in interaction (Kagan, Evans & Kay, 1986). These notions about the non-independence of the psychological have been little developed in psychology, but works by Leonard (1984), Levidow (1978), Llewelyn and Kelly (1980), Luria (1976), Seve (1975) and Vygotsky (1978) are among the exceptions.

The Concept of Ideology and Marxist Approaches to Ideology

One way in which psychological and social contexts, may be brought together is through the concept of ideology. There have been various formulations of ideology, but this is not the place for a detailed review. However, differing Marxist approaches to this issue will be discussed and related to the notion of the verbal community. Our aim is to suggest a tentative formulation using the strengths in the social constructionist account of individual consciousness taken from Skinner, together with a Marxist account of cultural production that owes much to Gramsci and Williams. Traditional Marxist approaches to ideology have tended to stress the base/superstructure metaphor, false consciousness, and conspiracy. This provides a rather limited notion of ideology, seeing it as ideas that are somewhat disconnected from fundamental social relations in the economic base.

A theory of this sort would translate without great difficulty into psychological and sociological discourse about the verbal community. In a parallel formulation, sociology would focus on the verbal community that, while shared by us all, is unequally controlled by different classes, chiefly through differing access to the mass media. This unequal control would be reflected in the verbal sub-communities of our workplace, neighborhoods, affinity groups, etc., and, in turn, would determine our verbal behavior.

Within the psychological realm, we might discuss the implications of such influences on our verbal behavior and our experience and handling of private events (cf. Skinner, 1945; Wittgenstein, 1953), our outlook on the world, or conceptual skills. A concrete example might be the media's frequent modelling of the vocabulary and social behaviors of jealousy in films and soap operas. This would have an effect on the way that the private sequels of those social events associated with jealousy are identified, labelled, discussed and acted on, thus reproducing in our own personal experiences many of the emotional forms portrayed to us by media dominated by a particular variant of sexual relations, (e.g., where the control of women's sexual freedom was a strong theme.)

The kind of "translation" of a base/superstructure formulation of ideology into one centered on the sociological construction and psychological effects of the verbal community would be of some real usefulness in linking societal relations to the experience of concrete individuals. But it would tend, through separating the psychological and sociological spheres and through its highly unidirectional causal analysis, to isolate the individually located phenomena (emotion, belief, thinking,

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etc.) from the social relations into which they enter. This methodological collectivist approach would create problems for an account that was to have a bearing on the relationship of individual consciousness to social and political change, or indeed to the social system in its more static periods.

The Italian Marxist activist-theoretician Antonio Gramsci developed an alternative approach to ideology in his *Prison Notebooks* (1948-1951/1971). They are not the easiest of writing, but Williams (1973/1980), Sassoon (1980) and Simon (1982) provide accessible discussions. Gramsci provides a formulation of class domination and conflict in the realm of ideology that does not resort to the base-superstructure metaphor. This formulation uses the concept of **ideological hegemony**. His understanding of hegemony is not just about beliefs and ideas, but concerns the whole of society, "saturating" it as Williams (1973/1980) describes it, and even defining the nature and limit of common sense.

In the Gramscian view, ideology is not simply a set of ideas that can be "read off" from an economic base. Nor is it a world view imposed by a conspiracy masterminded by the ruling class. Both these formulations are one-sided, and both imply a split between the world of ideas, of beliefs, of world views, or of subjectivity from that of production, of practice, action, or objectivity. Williams (1980) points to the importance of practices in ideological hegemony:

... what I have in mind is the central, effective and dominant system of meanings and values, which are not merely abstract but are organized and lived. That is why hegemony is not to be understood at the level of mere opinion or mere manipulation. It is a whole body of practices and expectations; our assignments of energy, our ordinary understanding of the nature of man and his world. It is a set of meanings and values which as they are experienced as practices appear reciprocally confirming. (p. 38)

Under capitalism, then, domination is maintained through a system in which practices and beliefs are closely tied to one another. Our assumptions about the naturalness of certain ways of organizing things (e.g., male dominance, or division between those who manage and those who are managed) derive as much from our everyday confrontation with those facts of social organization and their results (e.g., female passivity, ignorance of the managed) as from verbally articulated ideas. The conception of ideological hegemony, uniting categories from base and superstructure while acknowledging the fact of domination, is able to give a plausible account of the way in which an inequitable system keeps itself going.

How, then, does this more adequate (and more complex) account of ideology relate to the notion of the verbal community and to our original question about the links between social relations and individual consciousness? The system of social relations that we live in is but one possible way of organizing the satisfaction of human need and of reproducing the various components of that system (to maintain it over time). So, in the capitalist system, the means of production are not owned by those who provide the labor for production. Capital is invested in the means of production and in raw materials. Workers sell their labor and surplus value is extracted, providing for the growth of capital. Furthermore, labor is reproduced in a form usable by this system through the institutions of family, school, etc. This is not to imply that the oppression of women, minorities, persons with disabilities, etc.,

can be explained solely in terms of the contradiction between capital and labor (see Barratt, 1980), but rather to give us some social relations on which to hang the present analysis.

All this does, however, entail a great deal of social interaction, and a lot of talk about the activities that comprise production and reproduction. Instructions are necessary for it to work, but so are the social processes of problem definition and solution, the organization of consent, etc. (see Hales, 1980, for a labor process account). All this verbal activity, from a Skinnerian viewpoint, relates to a verbal community, a community of speakers and listeners (as well as writers and readers, etc.) who mutually influence one another, keeping communication meaningful and relevant to those (historically constructed) realities that surround them. So, the verbal community, with its speakers and their thoughts, feeling and actions is integrated into the system of social relations of production and reproduction. It does not stand outside or above production and reproduction, as in the base-superstructure metaphor, but is a necessary component and concomitant of that system.

But just as the base-superstructure account yields a view of the restriction by the socially determined verbal community of possibilities for verbal behavior, thought, experience and action, so does this account. The social system (of which the verbal community is an integral part) allows only certain possibilities for action and talk. The verbal community, then, can be used as a way of describing the mediations between the social system and the way that the talk of individuals is bounded by the limits of possibility set by that system. Since the verbal community also constrains our experience of private events, then these, too, are bounded by the system. Having learned to experience the world and oneself in certain ways, it becomes difficult to change, for example when trying to reconstruct our individual identities and sexualities, or to replace divisive individualism with solidarity, or to socialize our understanding of emotional distress. And, of course, our capacity to imagine alternatives will be similarly restricted. Thus, the verbal community may be viewed as a major mediator of the integration of individuals (as corporeal loci of behavior and experience) within the system of social relations. So the possibilities for stepping outside and inventing alternatives are limited although not closed entirely.

To break that spell of ideology entails a dual process of developing both alternative social relations and verbal communities that correspond to them, but which also mediate between alternative social realities and the individual consciousness that provides the guide for action. Gramsci's own practice strove to build oppositional social coalitions together with their ideological 'social' cement.' His terms "prefigurative struggle" and "war of position" summarize one model for this process. So too do the "New Social Movements" (e.g., the feminist, green, peace, or minority rights movements) which, as Habermas (1991) notes, step outside the traditional social relations of dissent and disorganize the given categories of control and dissent.

An active struggle against oppression and its culture also involves the empowerment of the oppressed, entailing acquisition of not only economic and political power, but also ideological power, creating what Gramsci called "counter hegemony." To break the ideological bonds between oppressors and oppressed (paraphrasing Freire (1972), to enable the oppressed to remove the oppressor's

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conception of reality from their thought processes) means that emancipatory movements need to take seriously the issue of their verbal communities and their relationships both with existing social relations and the fragile emergent forms that they are nurturing. It is a fortunate contradiction [termed the duality of structure by Giddens (1979)] that while the verbal community restricts possibilities, it also simultaneously provides us with the means for beginning to move beyond what has been given us, even if our attempts will bear the marks of where we start.

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