

Gergen, Kenneth J. (1994). **Realities and Relationships: Soundings in Social Constructionism**. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 356 pages.

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*Realities and Relationships* offers an enlightening account of the social constructionist approach to the human sciences, with a particular emphasis on the implications of this approach for the field of psychology. In this captivating work, Gergen provides an in-depth portrait of the social constructionist position, which is particularly viewed as emerging out of dissatisfactions and inherent problems with empiricism and rationalism. Gergen includes his perspective on controversial issues with constructionism by providing a detailed account of critical and moral consequences of the constructionist approach. More specific applications of constructionism in such areas as psychopathology, the self, the emotions, psychotherapy, human meaning and deceit are also explored. These examples of application work particularly to reduce the relevance of the common criticism that constructionism is synonymous with relativism, and therefore of little scientific value.

In the preface, Gergen promptly provides the foundation of the constructionist position by rephrasing Descartes' infamous declaration "cogito ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am) to that of "communicamus ergo sum" (I communicate, therefore I am). Here it is argued that Descartes presumed that doubt was a function of "mind" without having proved this relation. Gergen claims that while we may never be able to prove the relationship between doubt and mind (or the existence of mind at all), we can be sure that doubt is a legitimate product of discursive practices. As long as we, as Descartes, can communicate issues of doubt, then "...one can scarcely doubt the discourse on doubt" (p. viii).

It is Gergen's position that, through centuries, western culture has placed the individual at the center of knowledge. Yet the importance of the individual is diminished if we instead consider individualized concepts (such as doubt) as discursive processes. Since individuals are dependent on others for discursive practices, we are compelled to transfer our conception of the individual as center of human knowledge, to an understanding which centralizes social relationships carried out in language. This is the basic foundation of the social constructionist epistemology, and a position which Gergen elaborates and expands throughout his book.

*Realities and Relationships* is broken down into three parts. Part I consists of four chapters which provide an in-depth understanding of social constructionism, including the background for its emergence, basic principles, and a response to prior and anticipated criticism. Gergen begins by describing the science of psychology as traditionally dependent upon both empiricism (as exemplified in behaviorism) and rationalism (as viewed in current cognitive psychology). Recently, the rationalist paradigm has replaced early empiricist dominance; but in Gergen's opinion both traditions are deeply problematic.

Gergen then describes a group of intellectual movements (often placed under the general heading of "postmodern") which, although differing in origin, point towards the adoption of a constructionist paradigm of the human sciences in which social relatedness is viewed as the core of understanding. From this follows an extended explanation of social constructionism, which includes the presentation of some basic principles.

Perhaps the most compelling section of Part I is Chapter 3, where Gergen directly addresses and convincingly counteracts anticipated and prior critique of the constructionist perspective. Here such issues as the rejection of personal experience and objectivity, and the threat of moral and conceptual relativism are discussed. The moral critique is of particular concern to Gergen and, for this reason, the entire Chapter 4 is dedicated to this issue. Gergen's response to criticism in Chapters 3 and 4 is so deeply considered and well-articulated that it greatly enhances his presentation of the constructionist perspective.

In Part II, Gergen demonstrates the critical consequences of viewing scientific psychology from a constructionist perspective. The critical assessment of scientific perspectives, Gergen argues, is a necessity if we are to enhance the possibilities for construction and ultimately lay new grounds for the evolution of culture. At the foreground of critique in Part II lies the cognitive movement in psychology (Chapter 5), deficit discourse in the mental health profession (Chapter 6), and the notion of objectivity produced by the scientific world (Chapter 7).

In his discussion of the cognitive movement in psychology, Gergen describes various paradigm related problems which result from this individualist position. He then exemplifies how varying forms of inquiry are encouraged by a constructionist epistemology. Of special interest, Gergen defends the continued utilization of traditional empirical methods, yet with a re-definition of meaning ("pragmatic" as opposed to "truth bearing") such that we can expand rather than eliminate the potential for alternative claims to knowledge.

The presentation of constructionism's critical function continues with Gergen's illustration of how the mental health professions contribute to a rapidly expanding, cultural sense of mental deficit, which paradoxically serves to further legitimize these professions. Again, the emphasis is not necessarily on eliminating a need for these professions, but on de-constructing our understanding of their function. In a similar light, Gergen's discussion of the construction of objectivity illustrates how cultural rules which determine what we understand as objective serve to "exclude many voices from full participation in the culture's construction of the good and the real" (p. 180).

The dialogue again shifts in Part III, where Gergen explores some theoretical consequences involved in focusing on relationship as the primary unit of knowledge. A principal theme in Part III is constructionist explanations of self-understanding, where narrative about the self takes a central position. Hence, in Chapter 8 Gergen reacts against individualist notions of self-conception as existing as a function of cognitive structures, with an explanation of self-conception as narrative about the self which gains meaning within the sphere of relationship. This relational view suggests that our self-conception is not independently developed, but an interdependent product of our continuing participation in social life.

Gergen continues the development of a social constructionist understanding of self in Chapter 9, where he defines the emotions not as arising 'within' the person, but as a product of discursive practices. In Chapter 10, Gergen places his relational version of the self within the therapeutic context, and suggests an approach to therapy where therapist and client collaborate

in the exploration of a variety of narrative formulations, that function to expand upon the client's behavioral options in a variety of contexts.<sup>1</sup>

In the final two chapters, Gergen continues his exploration of some theoretical consequences of a constructionist epistemology. The subject of Chapter 11 is the question of how communicative processes become meaningful to people. How is it, Gergen asks, that we are able to "apprehend each other's meanings, successfully communicate, or understand each other." (p. 254)? By placing human relationship as a grounding point, Gergen outlines the beginnings of a relational theory of meaning. Finally, in Chapter 12, Gergen proposes a relational conception of deceit, and applies this conception to provide an explanation for how deceit became manifest in the Iran-Contra controversy in the USA.

As a whole, *Realities and Relationships* provides an encompassing, in-depth understanding of social constructionism. It is a book which is a must not only for supporters of constructionism, but also for skeptics. Over the past few months, a number of these skeptics have asked me various questions, such as "how do social constructionists explain subjectivity?" and "what is the use of a scientific perspective which only leads us to relativism?" I have here provided a brief summary of the chapters in *Realities and Relationships* to signal that Gergen does provide deeply considered, constructionist responses to these kinds of questions. I must also add here that I have yet to be asked a question which Gergen doesn't address in this book.

The language of *Realities and Relationships* is very eloquent, highly academic, and may initially be difficult for some non-native speakers of English. Gergen's expressive writing style serves him well by helping him to illustrate the full extent of his theoretical viewpoints. There are also a large number of citations for those interested in further investigating social constructionism's background and consequences. My appreciation of Gergen's book is a natural consequence of my own interest and work with social constructionism. Perhaps my own belief in the utility of constructionist thought has made it difficult for me to be completely objective in this review. But hey...what's objectivity anyway?

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<sup>1</sup> Additional comments on this approach to therapy are provided in my review of McNamee and Gergen's *Therapy as a Social Construction*, this issue.