

Social Constructionism as Cultism

Comments on:

"'Old-Stream' Psychology Will Disappear With the Dinosaurs!"
Kenneth Gergen in Conversation With Peter Mattes and Ernst Schraube
<http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-04/04-3-27-e.htm>

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GERGEN's social constructionism is appealing because it appears to espouse tolerance and empathy with different viewpoints. However, social constructionism actually promotes the opposite of these; it promotes estrangement and divergence. [1]

The reason it promotes these social problems is that GERGEN claims that beliefs are arbitrary and subjective. Any group of people constructs its own view of things. The group's view reflects its own needs and interests. It contains no information about the world, per se, since the world cannot be known. Consequently, there is no reason for you to adopt my beliefs because they are just my way of seeing things. My beliefs will not help you understand things better since things cannot be understood at all. You have different interests and can invent your own viewpoint. Of course, you may take an interest in my viewpoint if you feel like it. But there is little impetus for doing so. [2]

Arbitrary, idiosyncratic ideas, based upon idiosyncratic needs and interests, and expressed in idiosyncratic terminology, are difficult to communicate to outsiders with their own interests, frames of reference, and terminology. Social constructionism is thus a form of cultism. [3]

The cultism of social constructionism is intensified by rejecting criticism. Nobody outside a group can criticize a belief of that group. First of all, outsiders are accused of not understanding the local framework, which they do not share. Critics would also be accused of imposing their own local truth onto others. They would be accused of intolerance and lacking in reflexivity—i.e., not recognizing the limits of their own ideas, that their ideas are simply what they have agreed upon and have no truth value, per se, which can supplant the cult's ideas. Outsiders would be accused of violating local truths, which is totalitarian. [4]

Rejecting outside criticism is a form of intolerance, not tolerance. Other views are dismissed as not relevant to the interests of cult members. This insularity makes beliefs unfalsifiable and dogmatic. [5]

Cultism of arbitrary beliefs is a license for demagoguery, dogmatism, and mindlessness. It forestalls critical thinking, logical reasoning, and an appreciation of empirical evidence. Anything is true and acceptable within a cult that believes it. And there are no grounds for evaluating or rejecting a belief, except for personal preference. Social constructionism would accept the most pernicious fictions because they are local truths. If a group believed the Holocaust never occurred, that's fine as a local truth. If a group believes that there is no global warming, that's also fine as a local truth. If a group believes that Saddam Hussein was linked to Al Qaeda that's fine as a local truth. Social constructionism is powerless to refute such absurdities because there is no reality which could refute them. [6]

Paradoxically, GERGEN's endeavor to avoid conflict by endorsing cultism and uncritical tolerance, denies any way to resolve differences, achieve harmony, overcome mistakes, and

advance our understanding of things. There is no standard for acquiring evidence, drawing conclusions from it, assessing conflicting claims about things or resolving them. There is no way to communicate across divergent frames of reference. There is not much point in communicating since communicating simply displays belief systems that have no truth value. There is no need or desire to leave the safety net of one's own cult and learn from others because there is no truth value to what they are saying. The doctrine of local truths denies there is a common reality to be understood, and also denies a common way to understand it. [7]

With estrangement and disinterest built into his social philosophy, GERGEN is reduced to haplessly pleading for people to try to somehow get along with each other:

"The challenge for the social scientist (and for us all) is to generate means by which conflicting and mutually destructive realities can be brought into a state of mutual viability and productive interchange. This does not necessarily mean seeking harmony or resolution among these realities, but we are challenged to think through these issues and to work toward ameliorating practices that may be integrated into the global society." (paragraph 24) [8]

Here GERGEN pleads for viable co-existence and productive interchange without destructive conflict. However, he cannot imagine or achieve real harmony or resolution because local truths preclude them. He can only offer vacuous platitudes: that we should "think through these issues" (How, and in what terms? Utilizing what concepts?) and "work toward ameliorating practices" (What could these possibly be?). [9]

Social constructionism offers no alternative to the estrangement of modern life. Quite the contrary, it rationalizes estrangement as a necessary consequence of human subjectivity. [10]

References

Mattes, Peter & Schraube, Ernst (2004, September). "Old-Stream' Psychology Will Disappear With the Dinosaurs!" Kenneth Gergen in Conversation With Peter Mattes and Ernst Schraube [39 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* [On-line Journal], 5(3), Art. 27. Available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-04/04-3-27-e.htm>.

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