

The Deconstructive and Reconstructive Faces of Social Construction

Kenneth Gergen in Conversation with César A. Cisneros-Puebla

With an Introduction by Robert B. Faux

Key words: social constructionism, research methods, social science, positivism, epistemology, ethics, deconstruction

Abstract: This conversation is an effort to include new elements in the FQS debate on constructionism. In his eloquent and unambiguous style GERGEN speaks out about critical realism, rationality, truth claims, grounding and other scientific and human beliefs. Firmly based in the constructionist perspective of ethics, GERGEN leads us to examine relevant epistemological questions such as solipsism and the value of prediction, the searching for foundations, and the radical and retro pendulum in the sociology of knowledge. The "conversational reality" performed in this piece is just a small part of our cultural complexity.

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Introduction

For centuries philosophers and scientists have grappled with how we come to have knowledge of our world and ourselves, and what constitutes that knowledge. The explorations of the natural sciences have ranged from the cosmos to the atom. The explorations of the social sciences have ranged from group and individual behavior to the workings of the brain. These endeavors have resulted in the creation of many theories and methods to help explain and understand these phenomena. The "scientific method" as used in the natural sciences has come to be seen as the exemplification of these theories and methods. [1]

The scientific method generally consists of four stages: (a) forming hypotheses or research questions, (b) gathering data relevant to the hypotheses or research questions, (c) testing hypotheses with these data, and (d) either rejecting or failing to reject the hypotheses or adequately answering research questions. Within these general stages, scientists meticulously plan their research, describe their procedures, and explain how their results will be interpreted (CHAPLIN & KRAWIEC, 1968). Following from the assumption that there is a reality "out there" to be uncovered, scientists, of all ilks, pose questions to nature and await

the responses, thereby uncovering that which is real and true (GUBA, 1990); and producing positive knowledge. These procedures are based upon what has come to be called the positivist viewpoint, which argues that nature will reveal its secrets in an unambiguous way to those who accurately follow the methods of natural science (SCHWANDT, 1990). Such a view of science emphasizes method, measurement, and quantification, for it is believed that these afford the most reliable knowledge about the world (FAY, 1996). The assumption is that there is an obtainable "truth" about the world to be revealed. [2]

As the social sciences emerged from the religious, political, economic, and intellectual upheavals of the Enlightenment, many modeled themselves after the natural sciences (FOX, PORTER & WOKLER, 1995). It was believed that the adoption of these methods by the social sciences was a natural extension of those methods (MAZLISH, 1998). LAZARSELD (1961) has suggested that the adoption of quantitative methods by sociology in the 17th century was due, in part, to "the desire to imitate the first major success of the natural sciences" (p.149). As these developments were taking place there were dissenting voices, the loudest among them belonging to Giambattista VICO (1968) and Wilhelm DILTHEY (1988). Both of these thinkers, in their time, argued against the blind adoption of rational natural scientific methods. Each argued that the human sciences were fundamentally different from the natural sciences and, thus, required fundamentally different methods. While their calls were clarion, few heeded them. However, the debate had begun between those who saw the adoption of natural scientific methods as a detriment to the development of the social sciences and those who saw it as a boon to that development. [3]

The positivistic methods of the natural sciences were adopted by psychology as it emerged from philosophy in the late 19th century. It is these methods that dominate psychological research today. There are still dissenting voices. For instance, HARRÉ and SECORD (1972) have argued that the methods used by academic psychology throughout most of its history have reflected a mechanistic view of humans, leaving explanations of their behavior bereft of much meaning. Furthermore, as SLIFE and WILLIAMS (1995) have pointed out, the use of scientific methods in psychology has led to a form of reductionism in which human behavior is reduced to a necessary principle or phenomenon. Over time, principles and phenomena have become reified, taking on a life of their own apart from the behavior they were meant to explain (ANDERSON, 2000). We define the phenomena we study by how we choose to study them (BRUNER, 2004). Thus, for a behaviorist, learning is a permanent change in behavior and for a cognitivist it is a change in how an individual processes information. In each case the complexity of learning is reduced to a few set of principles and laws; few meanings are imputed to learners, they are simply the objects of investigation. Are these investigations precise? Do they result in valid knowledge? Many would say no, they do not. The reductionism inherent in much of psychological research leaves out meaning and, often, a true understanding of the individuals being studied. As HABERMAS (1972) has argued, once our ways of knowing have been reduced to method we lose sight of that which we are attempting to know. While post-

positivism has helped to modify the grand claims of positivism, it is constructionism that offers the greatest divergence from objectivist science. [4]

Constructionism is a term used by philosophers, psychologists, educators, and others, to describe the active construction of knowledge. From the constructionist perspective, knowledge of the world is not acquired in a passive way, akin to what the behaviorists or many positivists typically argue; rather, knowledge is acquired through our engagement with the world (CROTTY, 2003), and as we ascribe meaning to our perceptions of the world. Thus, meaning is ours to make, it is not "out there" to be discovered. [5]

To engage with the world and with one another means to construct meanings from our experiences. As MERLEAU-PONTY (1962) suggested, we are utter amalgams of our relationships in and with the world; the world is always with us. We shape it and it shapes us. The raw materials of our constructions are shaped by our Culture: American, Japanese, Indian, and so on; and our cultures: neighborhood, family, classroom, workplace, and so on. To accept this notion of a co-construction of reality requires that we reject the rigid objectivism as required by positivist science. Our relationships with the things of the world are too intertwined to ever be perceived as anything but parts of a whole; the subject—object dichotomy becomes indefensible (CROTTY, 2003). As GERGEN, MASSEY, GULERCE, and MISRA (1996) have pointed out, our beliefs about knowledge, objectivity, values, and language are shaped by our cultural traditions or schemas. How we construct and make meaning of our world and attempt to understand our place in it are guided by our cultural schemas (LEHMAN, CHIU, & SCHALLER, 2004). [6]

Research guided by constructionism sees reality in a holistic fashion. The objects of our investigations cannot be described apart from our relationship with them. The meanings we ascribe to our world do not inhere in the things of the world, rather they emerge as we interact with them; meaning and truth are not there to be revealed but to be constructed from our interactions. We and the objects of our study are embedded in a cultural matrix that refuses to be torn asunder and are bound in the on-going construction of meaning. The aim of constructionism is not to discover the truth as revealed but the truth as constructed and imbued with meaning. [7]

There are few scholars as vocal and eloquent as Kenneth J. GERGEN in his defense of constructionism. Throughout his distinguished career GERGEN has explicated and defended constructionism against those scholars who see the methods of positivistic science as the only tenable methods to be used by social scientists. In the conversation that follows with César A. CISNEROS-PUEBLA, GERGEN continues the tradition of dissent begun so long ago. [8]

About the Interview

This interview was conducted in Morelia, Michoacán, México on October 25, 2005 during the First International Conference in Psychology held at the Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, Michoacán. Kenneth GERGEN agreed to be interviewed by me, César A. CISNEROS-PUEBLA, with the interview having as its focus the on-going debate concerning the epistemological plausibility of social constructionism. This debate was generated by Carl RATNER and Barbara ZIELE following the conversation GERGEN had with Peter MATTHES and Ernst SCHRAUBE—published in the special interview issue of *FQS* in September 2004. I provided Kenneth with the manuscript entitled "Epistemological, Social, and Political Conundrums in Social Constructionism" that was submitted by Carl RATNER in October 2005 and which was published in *FQS* in January 2006 as a reply to Barbara ZIELKE'S manuscript, "The Case for Dialogue: Reply to 'Social Constructionism as Cultism' by Carl Ratner" which was published in *FQS* in February 2005. [9]

Our interview took place in the lobby of the hotel where Kenneth and his wife Mary were staying. During the interview Kenneth and I sipped our drinks while a pianist provided pleasant background music. At times our conversation led us in many different directions. In some ways we resembled the children Kenneth talked about in our conversation to illustrate the difficulty in "grounding" our knowledge, or anything. In the end you could say we had a "conversational reality," or did we? The interview (one hour in duration) was audiotaped and transcribed by me who sent it to Kenneth to be reviewed. Kenneth and Robert FAUX copy-edited it. I thank both of them for their support and our other *FQS* colleagues, Günter MEY and Kip JONES, who have been interested in this contribution and who have closely followed this debate. I as the interviewer take sole responsibility for the contents of this submission. [10]

About Kenneth GERGEN

Kenneth J. GERGEN is Professor of Psychology at Swarthmore College in the United States. He is one of the leading figures of social constructionism. Among his most important books are *Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge* (London: Sage, 1994), *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), *Realities and Relationships: Soundings in Social Construction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), *Relational Responsibility* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999; with Sheila McNAMEE), *Invitation to Social Construction* (London: Sage, 1999), *Social Construction in Context* (London: Sage, 2001), and *Therapeutic Realities, Collaboration, Oppression and Relational Flow* (Cleveland, OH: Taos Institute Publications, 2006). You can find more information about Kenneth J. GERGEN at: <http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/kgergen1/>. [11]

1. From Deconstruction to Anti-Epistemology

CISNEROS: My first question to you is: What do you think about the ideas Carl RATNER (2006) is proposing? [12]

GERGEN: I think there are several ideas that RATNER was trying to develop, and I tried to read with some degree of openness. Without such effort I never learn. However, I think that one of RATNER's problems is that he simply has not read very much. He came to these issues as a practicing psychologist who had not stepped out of psychology enough to appreciate the range of relevant scholarship available. There is an enormous amount written about these issues that he does not seem to be aware of. My own feeling is that despite what he calls it, critical realism, he is essentially extending the arguments of 1930s positivism. There are many different schools that use the term critical realist, and in its most recent form, it is most commonly identified with what might be seen as a neo-Marxist movement in the UK, and with the work of Roy BHASKAR and his colleagues in particular. RATNER simply conflates the term with traditional hypothesis testing, which is not at all what contemporary critical realists would say. Now with that said, let me try to deal with one issue he raises that I do think provides a challenge. [13]

As constructionists we have to distinguish between what I would call a deconstructive and a reconstructive phase of scholarship. Certainly constructionism begins with an enormous skepticism, one that has been sweeping across the academic sphere over recent decades. It is a skepticism born in various, contrasting circles, including the social studies of science, literary and rhetorical study, and cultural studies. These critiques remove the foundations of progress in empirical knowledge (as in KUHN); they undermine the concept of rationality (as in DERRIDA); they destroy the assumption of "ideological free knowledge" (as is in FOUCAULT) and so on. Now I see all these logics of critique coming together as elements in the constructionist dialogues. (I like to look at constructionism as an array of dialogues and not as some kind of dogmatic system, as in "the five principles of constructionism" or something like that.) All contribute to what I view as a deconstructionist phase in constructionist scholarship. No authority is left standing to proclaim knowing more or better than anyone else. [14]

CISNEROS: Given this perspective, what do you think about, for instance, social constructionism as epistemology, as an epistemological framework? Even though social constructionism appears not to have an epistemological position? [15]

GERGEN: Let's not abandon the RATNER discussion, but I would say that for me constructionist thought is equivalent to a social epistemology, but simultaneously serves as an anti-epistemology. That is, it mounts proposals for the social genesis of what we take to be factual, objective, real, valuable, or rational, and in that sense you could look at it as a social epistemology. But, simultaneously it applies this same skepticism to its own assertions. It purposely offers premises without foundations. In this way it is an anti-epistemology. [16]

CISNEROS: But how is that possible? How is it possible for social constructionists to take an anti-epistemological stance? [17]

GERGEN: It is possible in this sense: Because constructionism undermines the very idea of truth claims of any kind, it also undermines truth claims of its own. For me constructionism says, "let us replace truth claims with issues of practical outcome"; don't ask whether a given statement is ultimately true, but "what happens for good or ill if we claim this to be true?" For me this removes all foundational disputes between, let's say, realists and idealists, monists and dualists, Marxists and capitalists, theologians and materialists, individualists and communitarians, and the like. We can certainly continue deliberation of these issues, but the ultimate question is not which side is ultimately or foundationally right or wrong. Rather, we should ask, what happens to us as a culture or a civilization if we crawl into one of these discursive spaces and live within its realities, logics, values, and so on. [18]

Thus, returning to RATNER, I do not want to have a foundational dispute with him on what really is the case, but I want to say to him, if you propose that "the world is all observable material" what happens to us as a culture? I have serious misgivings about the implications of such a claim. However, at the end of the day, I must also be willing to address the question, "What happens to the world if we take constructionism seriously?" [19]

CISNEROS: But it is necessary to take it seriously because constructionism has political and ethical implications. [20]

GERGEN: Exactly! So I respect those people who would ask about the potential consequences of taking constructionism seriously. Now, RATNER has the beginning of a very good argument here. He borders on saying constructionism has no foundational logic for bringing conflicting parties into dialogue. Thus, if you claim the truth of religion and I claim the truth of science, or if you espouse Christianity and I believe in Islam, there is no reason I should listen to you. I understand that we are both constructing the world in our terms, in ways that we value, so I have no reason to speak with you; I can simply remain in the world I already appreciate. [21]

It is also clear that constructionists have no means of declaring one of these perspectives more true, rational, or valuable than the other. However, it does not follow that constructionism invites all parties to go their own way. On the contrary, once you crawl inside a constructionist perspective there is every reason to speak with alien others. The lack of ultimate grounds for one's perspective invites both a curiosity ("What is the value those people derive from their perspective?") and a certain humility regarding one's own views. [22]

2. Science and the Solipsism Problem

CISNEROS: Are you not, as Carl RATNER's critic, leading us to solipsism? [23]

GERGEN: Not to a solipsism in a traditional sense; that is, the argument that we create the world in our minds. Constructionist arguments rather permit us to deconstruct the dualist binary, with minds "in here," and a world "out there." There is a sense, however, in which constructionist arguments warn us against a communal solipsism. Indeed, here is another context in which I find RATNER's arguments quite strange. He seems to feel that constructionists invite people to live a communal solipsism, when the vast share of scholarship in the deconstructionist phase moves in just the opposite direction, toward liberation from a communal solipsism. To make matters worse, RATNER then crawls inside a communal reality himself, namely that of positivism/empiricism. This remains for him a territory beyond question. Everything outside this territory is, for him, somehow misinformed or wrong-headed. For him, every tradition that is not empiricist is obliterated, which to me is exactly what he is trying to criticize constructionism for, when indeed constructionism rejects nothing in principle. [24]

CISNEROS: What is important is that this debate is renewing or continuing talk about the paradoxes of knowledge construction. [25]

GERGEN: To me it is ironic that the Enlightenment, with its great promise of replacing dogma with freedom, has slowly established yet another dogma. As the celebration of reason gave birth to the tradition of contemporary science, control and constraint have ever increased. And, as FOUCAULT has argued, so subtle and inviting is the work of science that we become complicit in our own enchainment. After WW II, Karl POPPER helped to establish a large educational institution in Austria based on empiricist principles, because he felt if empiricism could be part of everybody's daily knowledge, and if everyone embraced the neutrality of scientific fact, there could never be another Nazi party or a Holocaust. If we could only embrace the truth as revealed in science, it was reasoned, there would be no more ideology. This is a very inviting proposal, but only until you realize that science is itself an ideology. [26]

CISNEROS: Both RATNER and POPPER use the Holocaust example in their arguments. [27]

GERGEN: Yes, and without realizing that when science begins to claim that everyone should think in its terms, it becomes the new dogma, and the process of suppression begins once again. Once the scientific way of thinking is instilled in the curriculum there will be no more serious talk about values, justice, or morality because these are all "subjective." We will leave it to scientists to determine who is "mentally ill," without questioning the fact that every designation of illness carries with it a definition of what it is to be a "good person." In psychology we will never really listen to the voices of our "subjects," because all we know how to do is to exploit these voices in the service of establishing "scientific truth." [28]

CISNEROS: Anything that is different from the main perspective ... [29]

GERGEN: ... is expelled. Now, this is not at all to say that we should abandon science. This orientation has many excellent outcomes for many people. This is one of the things I like about social construction, and renders it unlike any philosophy of knowledge that I know. There is no demand to eradicate any tradition. [30]

CISNEROS: Would you explain? [31]

GERGEN: I grew up in the empiricist tradition and learned to appreciate certain of its potentials. But if you go with RATNER and crawl inside that space of understanding, you find that there is nothing else outside worth attending to. For a constructionist you must ask, what then are you eradicating? Who has lost the right to voice? Who is silenced? Clearly, all religion becomes declass  because religion is mythological and irrelevant to truth. From this perspective, we might well favor closing religious institutions because they are generating mass illusions. But in eliminating many religions, you also eliminate voices that place a value on human life, on equality, and on justice. None of these feature in the discourse of science. For the scientist qua scientist it does not matter whether he develops a rocket to destroy two million people, because science says "it is not your job to ask what kind of world is best for us, it is your job simply to do the work of making better and better predictions." So science itself eliminates all deliberation about what ought to be. Hitler could use science to eliminate more Jews more rapidly, and science qua science had nothing to say about that. Science is willing to talk about what is (in its own terms), but now not about what ought to become of the world. [32]

3. The Scientist as a Mapmaker

CISNEROS: Would you reflect a little more about your last statement, "What is science for?" [33]

GERGEN: As often characterized, science is dedicated to illuminating the objective truth. However, for the constructionist one must add, "truth according to its assumptions, forms of reasoning, and internal system of values." On the traditional account, the scientist is simply a mapmaker; the challenge is to make the best map of what is the case. Now consider: A high ranking governmental official comes along and says, "I think we ought to use this map to destroy all the people who are against us." As a scientist I have nothing to say about that because that is not my job. I have nothing in my scientific vocabulary that allows me to say, "I think that it is wrong or bad to destroy those we do not like." So, when RATNER says: "Oh! we can use science to eradicate disease," he must place a value on eradicating disease. Yet, he could not derive such a conclusion from scientific observation. In effect, he must step out of the empiricist framework he attempts to champion. [34]

CISNEROS: RATNER (2005, para.13) uses EINSTEIN to criticize you. What do you think about that? [35]

GERGEN: This is simply obfuscating rhetoric. Actually, if you look at EINSTEIN's writings you can find other passages which are quite constructionist in character. [36]

CISNEROS: Why do you think RATNER has to rely on thinkers of the past to support what he says¹? [37]

GERGEN: One reason for such rhetorical maneuvers is because science cannot prove itself. In fact, no attempt at meta-theoretical foundations can prove itself. You cannot prove science is true by using science. I cannot prove to you that empiricism is true by using experiments. And if I use rational means to prove empiricism, then I have undermined the foundations of empiricism. Let me put it in a slightly different way. RATNER will attempt to justify scientific theories (as opposed to religious ones) because they are closer to what is real. Yet, we might ask RATNER, how do you know that is the case? Somehow you must know what is real in order to make such a judgment, and you must have known it independently of any scientific research. [38]

Now, obviously he will not wish to embrace such a conclusion. Rather, he is likely to argue, we know science is closer to the real because it is more predictive. Yet, when you press such an argument further, you realize that it is empty. That one can predict, simply means that one can predict. I can predict perfectly well that the sun rise tomorrow, but for the scientist this is an illusion. I can predict that mixing red and green will produce blue, but for the scientist colors as such do not exist in the world; I can predict that God will cause objects in a vacuum to fall at a given velocity, and science will object. Good predictions provide no justification for claiming reality, but they can be justified on the grounds that they are useful. The question that must be asked, however, "It is useful for whom and within what frame of values?" [39]

CISNEROS: Could RATNER argue that predictions are real in different ways? [40]

GERGEN: I don't mind if you say "I like science because it makes good predictions." I have no problem with that, and think it is just fine that medical science makes good predictions about what we call disease and illness. But as a constructionist I want to be able to step outside of the world in which these predictions are being made and ask who benefits and who loses in such efforts? What are these predictions used for? Who is the knowledge empowering, and who is eliminated from view? For example, you have psychopharmacology as a means of curing what psychiatric science calls "mental disease." They say "we are the experts and we know reality, we know mental illness when we see it, we

1 I would like to call the attention of the reader to the discussion about citation practices in the social sciences and the differences in these practices due to the cultural context. Relevant to this is ABEND's (2006) examination of Mexican and American scientists' practices of "doing theory" and "making sense of data" because the presented dialogue takes place between CISNEROS as a Mexican researcher and GERGEN as an American researcher.

have the categories of mental illness and pharmacology is a highly effective cure. There is the disease of Attention Deficit Disorder, and we can cure it with Ritalin; here is depression, and it can be cured with Prozac. And we do have predictive evidence." [41]

But as a constructionist I am able to say, "Wait a minute ... who is being called 'mentally ill' and what counts as a 'cure', in this case?" You take a child who doesn't pay attention in class and you call him "mentally ill." The child is not in anguish, the parents think he is ok, but the teacher cannot tolerate him because he gets in the way of class. So the teacher says, "This kid is not like the other kids, he is too active." She will talk to the parents, and bring in the therapist who will confirm the deviance by labeling it a disorder and prescribing drugs. Now the child begins to suffer from both the labeling that has taken place and the side effects of the drugs. He has a "disease" which will always be threatening him, or so he thinks. Further, psychiatrists have little interest in removing people from pharmaceuticals as they may be sued. Thus, therapeutic patients may remain on drugs for a lifetime. So, has this child been "treated" or "victimized"? This kind of dialogue is essential, and it cannot be addressed from within the perspective of the science itself [42]

CISNEROS: But RATNER might say that you have no grounds for advocating dialogue as opposed to mutual disregard. [43]

GERGEN: Yes, RATNER feels that in the face of differing claims, constructionism leaves you no place to go. But for most constructionists I know, there is a shared feeling that if you remove the grounds for truth claims, you invite a certain humility about your position. You realize that it is only one position among many others. And, if all claims are useful in some way to those who proclaim them, then there is reason for mutual inquiry into the ways in which they are useful. Thus, dialogue is favored over disinterest or a fight to the finish [44]

4. On Fundamental Grounds

CISNEROS: Do you see constructionism as a new form of ethics? [45]

GERGEN: This is a very interesting question. As I suggested, constructionist views do seem to function as a prohibition against eliminating other voices, and invite one to be a little more cautious about one's own claims. Which is to say that if you open yourself to dialogue—for example as a scientist listening to people who have religious beliefs, ethical philosophies, or folk wisdom—you will not create a separate and "superior" encampment, but one filled with the processes of meaning making. There is a second and related piece I must add: If our constructions of the good or real depend on relationships, so that we have no commitment to the good except through some kind of tradition of relating, then as you eliminate relationships you move toward the end of meaning, and to the end of "the good" of any kind. So as you begin to close off traditions and relationships you close off the possibilities to create anything as virtuous. If I eliminate everybody whose ideas are different from mine I am alone. And because meaning

requires collaboration, nothing can be meaningful or good. You could say there is an ethical implication here: to remain in the relational flow. But, in the end, I cannot establish this as an ethical principle. I would again create a world of difference and animosity. All I can say is, "you know, if we do not wish a world of continuing hatred and bloodshed, perhaps we should all talk with each other." [46]

CISNEROS: Can you tell me where the grounds for this view come from? [47]

GERGEN: There are no grounds. On the contrary, we might ask, "How did it come to be so important to have 'grounds' for doing anything?" If we are children playing and I say, "Oh! Let's call the green blocks 'monsters'," and you say, "yeah, and the blue ones are knights from the palace over there (pointing to a chair)" we are off to a very fine time together. We do this without any grounds; all we are doing is playing. Now if someone comes and challenges us, saying, "Why are you doing this?" [48]

CISNEROS: Or, "Those are not monsters and knights; everyone knows they are just blocks." [49]

GERGEN: Yes, precisely. Then we children would be invited to make up an answer. If I respond by saying, "Well, we are doing this because we are having fun," the interrogator might then respond, "Why is that a proper grounds to do anything?" Again I find myself forced to make up an answer, "Because fun makes us feel good." Clearly the interrogator is not pleased with this, and says, "Well, so why is feeling good so important?" We could continue indefinitely, which is precisely what takes place in philosophic dialogue on the ethical grounds for action. "Searching for grounds" is akin to a WITTGENSTEINian language game. The game can never be won because there are no grounds for any offering of grounds. Further, I suspect we would not search for grounds save for the fact that someone challenges us to justify our actions. Having grounds is a form of self-protection, and a means for claiming superiority over others. [50]

CISNEROS: Do you know where RATNER's arguments come from? Can you say something about that? Just try to explain from where RATNER is getting his arguments? In my view this is like an old debate, much like the discussion against positivism. [51]

GERGEN: In part I think RATNER's line of argument emerges from 20-30 years of resistance against deconstruction. To elaborate, we have in the United States what are called "the science wars." The science wars feature, on the one side, those who are committed to the natural science model of truth, objectivity and reason, which RATNER seems to be on, and on the other side are those who challenge the grounds of scientific truth on constructionist grounds. From the latter standpoint, science is primarily a tradition of understanding, and on this account, one among many. Further, based on the unquestionable acceptance of science we contribute to an enormous range of conflict and suffering. Many scientists are understandably irritated by such arguments. If a scientist spends his entire life pursuing the truth about a phenomenon, and you say, "Wait a

minute! There are no grounds save those of your group for making truth claims," or "Progress is just a narrative," you are challenging his life investments. [52]

Once Karl POPPER attended one of my lectures and became virtually apoplectic. He began pounding his fist on the table and screaming at me: "I do not like it ... I do not like it ... I do not like it." One does not wish to be told that a life investment in something they feel is superior, is "just another tradition," and ideologically problematic at that. And so, there has been this resistance against constructionist critique. The defenders of the tradition also occupy positions of institutional power, and these positions are also used for purposes of self-protection. [53]

5. Reconstruction and the Qualitative Movement

CISNEROS: I want to try to push you to a very critical idea, because in some ways I am truly curious to know what could be the next steps in the construction of the social constructionism movement. [54]

GERGEN: Let me go back to what I said earlier about the two phases of constructionism. The first is the deconstructive or liberationist phase, which has been dominant over the past 30 years. The second is a reconstructive phase, which acts as an invitation to create new ideas and practices in the service of bringing about new and more promising world conditions. It is work within this reconstructive phase that most engages my interest, and where I think the greatest strides can now be made. For me this has meant devoting much of my time to formulating what I call "relational theory," that is, an account of human action that does not begin with the assumption of individual, "self contained," or "biologically determined" persons, but to relational coordination as the birth of all that we take to be real, rational, and good. [55]

I am also very much in favor of developing new (or refreshed) topics of inquiry, such as discourse processes, narrative, indigenous psychology, and the like. I am very positive to inquiry that places social issues in the forefront of concern, as opposed to "testing" (actually a misnomer) abstract formulations. And I am an enthusiastic supporter of the qualitative movement. In my view, all methods of research come with values and ideology attached. Thus, as we expand the range of research methods, we also expand the range of voices participating in the molding of the future. There are other reasons as well, but I am most pleased with the development of action research, narrative methods, ethnography, auto-ethnography, performance, and more. [56]

CISNEROS: Currently auto-ethnography is becoming very important. Have you heard about constructivist ways of doing grounded theory? [57]

GERGEN: I am familiar with grounded theory. By now that orientation to research must be at least 30 years old. [58]

CISNEROS: "The Discovery of Grounded Theory" was published by GLASER and STRAUSS in 1967. [59]

GERGEN: Forty years then. In many respects I have always felt that grounded theory is only a slight deviation from empiricism. It suggests that moving back and forth between the conceptual and the empirical level will yield theory that is somehow more fully based on or driven by what is the case. Once you read Thomas KUHN or other history of science or sociology of knowledge scholars, however, you realize that this view is deeply problematic. What we call empirical data are already theoretically saturated. [60]

CISNEROS: Listening to you I was thinking about the influence of the constructionist point of view in qualitative research and that you probably know that grounded theory is one of the most radical and critical approaches. [61]

GERGEN: I think it was radical at one time. [62]

CISNEROS: Is it not anymore? [63]

GERGEN: At this point it is retro. [64]

CISNEROS: This is good to know; your view is interesting ... you are going to my critical points by yourself! [65]

GERGEN: The major value in grounded theory as an idea is that it gives qualitative researchers a way to talk to the quantitative people—the positivists—one that seems to define qualitative research as grounded in the real. To me, however, if you really press out the epistemological implications of much qualitative research, you are no longer in the positivist/realist camp. Take action research, for example. In action research you work with a group of people to achieve a jointly valued end. You are not holding a mirror to nature, as the positivists would have it, but creating anew the nature of nature. You help to create a new form of life. [66]

CISNEROS: But isn't this just like a new narrative? Do you consider the auto-ethnographer, Carolyn ELLIS, a social constructionist²? [67]

GERGEN: In many respects. Mary and I are very close friends with both Carolyn and with her husband, Art BOCHNER (a superb communication theorist). To be sure we may disagree on this and that, but there are many similarities and we are very supportive of each other. [68]

2 About the influences and epiphanies of some prominent qualitative researchers such as ELLIS, BOCHNER, DENZIN, LINCOLN, MORSE, PELIAS, and RICHARDSON, see ELLIS (2007).

6. Cultural Psychology and "Soft" Social Constructionism

CISNEROS: As you know Carl RATNER is a cultural psychologist. Are his criticisms arising from within the framework of cultural psychology? [69]

GERGEN: The ironic part of this is that scholars who do cultural psychology have been the most open to realizing that psychology is itself cultural. They see that once you go into other cultures you find that the psychology of the West is not the same as psychology in other cultures. The terms are different, the concepts, the assumptions; and if you push this very far, you also realize that the methods of psychology in the West are cultural. They represent the culture of the West and the way the person is conceptualized in the West. Thus, there is a tendency for cultural psychologists to become the more radical voices of the discipline. They often conclude that, "What we need is not more Western psychology in the world, but indigenized psychology." We ought to have, for example, a Hindu psychology, a Japanese psychology, a Filipino psychology, a Maori psychology, and so on, all manifesting different traditions, different conceptions, different methods. Thus, it is surprising to me that despite this background, RATNER takes such a strong Western traditionalist view. [70]

CISNEROS: Are you still radical? [71]

GERGEN: In the sense of? [72]

CISNEROS: In the sense of constructionism as a radical critique of the positivist/empiricist orientation in psychology. In some ways with some of my colleagues here, we have been thinking about you as a very soft social constructionist up to now. What do you think about that? [73]

GERGEN: Well, I did go through what you might call a period of scorn and anger, in large part because I felt the positivist/empiricist tradition was so fully institutionalized, that you had to speak with a harsh edge or you would not be heard at all. And in some degree this voice was successful in reaching an audience. There were many attacks on the ideas I was helping to develop, but the antagonisms were sufficiently energetic (sometimes even acrimonious), that the ideas did enter circulation. [74]

CISNEROS: This was in the 1970's or '80's, wasn't it? What about now? I do not know if someone else asked you this before, but let me ask it as my last question "Is GERGEN changing himself, is he becoming soft?" [75]

GERGEN: I have heard that question before. And I do think there are changes, both in the form of rhetoric I tend to use, and in the playing out of constructionist ideas in practice. Let me talk about rhetoric first. One of my chapters in *Social Construction in Context* (GERGEN 2001) treats what I call "the limits of pure critique." In part, my argument is that, once you engage in sharp critique, let's say of the dominant institutions, you also create an unbridgeable distance between you and the target, one that will never allow cross-talk, or productive dialogue.

Rather, you create an enemy, a group of people who will close ranks and construct you as a villainous threat. For those under attack, the critic has no "good and legitimate reasons." As constructionist ideas themselves suggest, compelling reasons are a byproduct of group participation. If you are outside the community, using alien logics, you are disqualified and thus silenced. In effect, if constructionist ideas are to be effective in bringing about change, new forms of rhetoric are essential. [76]

I should add here that another reason for my championing qualitative methods is because they function to invite scholars to engage in an interesting practice. It is not the principles that compel, but fascinating activities. And, once these activities are embraced, so is the way opened to taking seriously some of the constructionist arguments that inform such methods. [77]

There is a second reason for what you are calling a softening, which also issues from constructionist thought. There is a danger in championing constructionist ideas so strongly that they take on the character of "is true." So, I have to say to myself, "be careful that you do not become so engaged in these ideas, that you cannot see them as a construction." To do so would be to give up one of their major sources of hope for the future. The phrase, "Is true," can function like a sword, cutting us apart. And with this said, I must also ask myself, in addition to all you criticize in the positivist/empiricist tradition, are there also useful contributions? If I can locate these, I will also have a better chance of engaging in a dialogue with the traditionalist that will find him or her curious about constructionist offerings. So, perhaps I am a nicer guy, but don't mistake that for abandoning the ideals, on the contrary. [78]

7. Final Comment

As Kenneth and I finished our talk, fireworks were going off in the Plaza in conjunction with a party going on there. I did not see the fireworks as I was walking in the opposite direction, but I am sure Kenneth saw them. Let me begin this final section with my first innocent question: What did Kenneth GERGEN see that night? Mexican fireworks happening in downtown Morelia? Or fireworks "Made in China" going off in a Mexican town? Risky "old fashioned" fireworks happening in a Michoacan capital? Or did he see simply "fireworks"? Look at us, GERGEN and me, walking in different directions: One sees the fireworks and the other does not. Now think about the fireworks as a tool to identify the cultural differences between GERGEN and CISNEROS and even the huge gap between both from the point of view of intellectual productivity³. Now you can think about us as a sample of our own indigenous psychologies, because of the way we can talk about the fireworks. We can even imagine ourselves together with another partner: Chicano, Croat, African, or whomever, seeing the "same" fireworks that

3 Surely none of us will agree on the so called "productivity enigma" from the perspectives of "intellectual capital" and "knowledge productivity" and so on, nor about the ways our scientific committees are building the index to evaluate all our actions, but this is just an example to generate some humor about the undeniable differences between CISNEROS and GERGEN, the interviewer and the interviewee, and how the Mexican-American accomplishes this "conversational reality."

night and giving us an oral testimonial about what she or he saw. It would be awesome to have every single time an ontological discussion about what actually anyone is doing: Is it in this case just seeing the fireworks? [79]

Regardless of any "materiality" of what GERGEN saw as "fireworks" on that night in the Plaza, I would like to advocate that we need complex and non-linear ways of thinking (KOSKO, 1993) to grasp the world. But linking "complexity theory" to social science is not simply to adopt the critical realism of Roy BASKHAR to analyze "the reality of the complex" like BYRNE (1998) aimed to do with no deep philosophical knowledge of the roots of this kind of thinking. As GERGEN says in this interview, RATNER is doing the same, simply conflating the term with traditional hypothesis testing. Let me say, it seems to me RATNER does not have the same theoretical ambitions as BYRNE. Finally, beyond constructionism and the brilliant defense GERGEN has been making for such a long time, keep in mind that cognitive science is changing along with the world (LAKOFF & JOHNSON, 1999), and it is changing too our conception of ourselves. GERGEN says here that Grounded Theory was radical at one time and now is retro, just 40 years on. What about constructionism? Will it, too, be retro in just another ten or so years? Is constructionism celebrating its 30th anniversary? This is my second innocent and impertinent question.⁴ [80]

Just as therapy is not an innocent activity neither is asking and having a conversation, like this one between GERGEN and me! In our globalized world how is it possible to organize a unique and actual view of the "real"? We can talk about scientific facts, kids' games or about fireworks and the situations are quite similar. This image reminds me of the illuminating discussions provide by HACKING (1999), who understands that the "science wars" are ancient and profound philosophical disputes. From this view, as you know, LATOUR (1987) is a modern-day Sophist and Steven WEINBERG embraces the tradition of high rationalism (ALLEN, 1999). PROTAGORAS is still a fascinating thinker for many social scientists like us. GERGEN would agree with me about the Protagorian sense of the idea of individuals as mapmakers. For centuries humankind and specific philosophers, in marvelous ways, have been searching for and discussing certitude (KOLAKOWSKI, 1975) and it looks like both, philosophy and humankind, will be search for many more years. [81]

Given that human beings, as mapmakers, are living by the language of their reality (even the most naïve reality), they can never be alone: Their experience is co-constructed. As this discussion was co-constructed, it is our hope that our colleagues will be encouraged to co-construct the debate about constructionism, any variety of social constructionism. Allow me to remind you of my second innocent question to Kenneth: "Will constructionism be retro in 10 more years?"

4 There is a kind of revitalization of Grounded Theory (GT) associated with CHARMAZ (2006) and CLARKE (2005) to be taken into account regarding the 40 years since the publication of Discovery of Grounded Theory in 1967. Both authors are contributing to discussions related to the postmodernist turn and the constructivist perspective. Unlike constructionism, the discussion around GT is recognizing tendencies to use the methodology of GT (linked to the founder's names) and not to a variety of methodologies.

To answer that it does matter what variety of social constructionism we are talking about and embrace (HARRÉ & LANGENHOVE, 1995). [82]

For the non-English speaking qualitative researchers of the world, such as Barbara ZIELKE (2005) from Germany who has participated in this debate since our first FQS Interview Issue was posted in September 2004, our globalized academia is still challenging the participation of the peripheries from a critical postcolonial perspective. We hope this conversation can stimulate other exciting discussions in the context of our cultural complexities. [83]

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