

The Case for Dialogue

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Reply to: [Social Constructionism as Cultism](#), Carl Ratner, December 2004

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1. Introduction

After reading Carl RATNER's comment on Kenneth GERGEN's constructionism, I decided to offer comments of my own. In my view, constructionism is an innovative, critical movement in psychology, the growth of which has contributed to, and one hopes will continue to contribute to, the kind of discussion within the psychology that will reflect that it is a cultural and social science. In addition, the constructionist viewpoint supports the critical reflection of the academic "mainstream's" performance and points to the historical and cultural contingency of many of psychology's "warranted" constructs. For these and many other reasons, I think psychology can profit from such movements, their critical impetus and even from fierce and critical discussions about their "value." And as far as I can see, some reflexive branches within the heterogeneous field of cultural psychology have much in common with a constructionist orientation: the critical approach to psychology's individualism, the resistance to naïve ethnocentric universalisms (which are the result of an overall scientific orientation), the understanding of psychological functions as constituted by cultural meanings, the researcher's obligation for self-reflexivity, and many other things. Therefore, I think that there is a case to be made for cultural psychology and constructionist psychologies to keep in dialogue; I was surprised by RATNER's "sharp" and "radical" comments. In the following section I present four points I think challenge RATNER's critique and that may lead to further discussions of this topic. [1]

2. The Distortion of the Constructionist Notion of Dialogue

RATNER begins his critique with a description of what he thinks is the constructionist concept of knowledge. The assumption that "any group of people reflects its own needs and interests" and that this "contains no information about the world, per se, since the world cannot be known" might correctly be attributed to most constructionist writers. The conclusion RATNER draws from this, however, may not. "Consequently," he continues, it will make no sense to "take an interest" in others' viewpoints or "for you to adopt my belief" (see para. 2). It is easy to see, what can be held against this "conclusion." [2]

- *The argument is superficial:* The improbability (lack of "impetus") for people to engage in dialogue or show interest in the perspectives of others is for RATNER a "consequence" of the insight that people's "perspectives" are relative to the language of a culture. This sounds as if the "impetus" to try to convince others or to strive to understand others' viewpoints must be attached to the assumption of some culture-free *tertium comparationis* (the world as it can be "known," para. 2, or "empirical evidence," para. 6). RATNER should take the trouble to distinguish his point from naïve realism. [3]
"Beliefs" constructed within language games are not the same as "subjective beliefs": RATNER quite self-evidently talks of "subjective" beliefs, "idiosyncratic ideas" and "the group's view" as if they were monolithic and stable "objects" and then criticizes that they are not "communicated to outsiders" (para. 2). I suspect that he has not really understood the constructionist idea of how cultural meaning and "different perspectives" or "views," come into place at all. "Subjective beliefs" that are "communicated to outsiders" implies a radical division of knower and "known." "Perspectivity," or "cultural meaning" in contrast, are constituted by participatory social practice—it is not really the question if one chooses to communicate them to outsiders or not. It is rather the other way round: Limits in the communicability of meaning make visible the borders between language games or "cultures" and makes some people outsiders for others. [4]
- *The need to explain why people should be motivated to engage in dialogue if they cannot seek "truth"/"shared understanding" has been addressed by constructionist writers:* Constructionist writers have invested much energy in explaining why the exploration of "different interests" can make sense without searching for the "right" (most adequate, most convincing) perspective. There is an enormous value attributed to dialogue, polyphony, and pluralism of perspectives, for the sense of dialogue and perspectiveness or multiperspectivity per se across constructionist writings. There is even the constructionist idea of how—in a fundamental sense—meaning can only be derived from dialogue and from letting others' perspectives mean something (SHOTTER 1994, 2003; GERGEN 1994, 1999). What constructionist meta-theory would indeed exclude is to attach the possibility of dialogue to the fixed objective of either reaching "truth" or an otherwise commonly shared perspective. [5]

- *I agree that the constructionist notion of dialogue is too weak, too optimistic or normative:* The crucial question: how radically different cultures can step into dialogue, how the polyphony of different, maybe incommensurable perspectives makes a dialogue (and not a cacophony) or *what the constructionist notion of dialogue* (dialogue without recognition?) exactly looks like—has in my view been unanswered (and maybe unasked) by constructionism. In my view, the constructionist refusal to seek performative or procedural criteria for an adequate understanding of dialogue is problematic. (But the solution will not be stepping back to a naïve concept of "truth" or "reality," see below) [6]

3. The Lack of Evidence

The second major reason for RATNER to call constructionism "cultism" comes in a set of accusations: Constructionism "rejects criticism" and this is, in RATNER's terms, not only "a form of intolerance," but also "totalitarian" (para. 5); "a license for demagoguery, dogmatism and mindlessness" (para. 6). First, I am startled by the aggressive tone of these lines. Second, it is questionable if the absence of general moral principles is a greater risk to create (a license for) dogmatism than their establishment. Third, this is one of the points in his argument where the distortion of constructionist ideas is most obvious (as, for example, dogmatist or totalitarian views are central targets). Fourth, several constructionist authors have sought to discuss "criticism" or critical questions concerning their own constructionist assumptions (see for example GERGEN 2001, 2002, & BURR 2003), and there are also several book publications in which controversial "debates" within constructionism are discussed openly (see for example PARKER 1998; NIGHTINGALE & CROMBY 1999). In these publications, constructionism is presented as a self-reflexive and self-critical scholarly movement—a style which does not support the impression of a dogmatic and hermetic "cultism" suggested by RATNER's depiction. [7]

4. The Misinterpretation of Constructionist Meta-Theory

The third element of RATNER's attack finally points to a problem which has been widely discussed within and outside of constructionism: Being a constructionist in meta-theory means—in certain aspects—subscribing to epistemic and moral relativism (RATNER doesn't really distinguish here, he talks about truth problems, but his illustrations and conclusions often point to moral issues, such as the "Holocaust" or "real harmony"). But there is much more to say about this than his critical comments imply. [8]

- *The problem of moral relativism should not be denied:* It is true that there are moral institutions applied and assumed by most constructionists: it is "good" to engage in dialogue and to reflect on as many perspectives as possible; it is misguided to suppress identities or fix identities. Here it would be legitimate to demand that the moral premises of the pragmatic or dialogical ideal favored by constructionism be explained and discussed in reference to (relativist) meta-theory. But the way RATNER defines the relativity-problem is based on

misleading conclusions: He not only concludes that the idea that "truth" is always "local truth" automatically leads to the "dismissal" (para. 5) of other views. But he also concludes that when admitting that moral premises or "truths" are always based on cultural agreements (however stable these may have proved to be) the constructionist must thus deny the possibility of critically questioning those cultural agreements (para. 4). This is not necessarily so. If people believe that something is the case—whatever the content of their thinking may be, it is a local truth as content of their thinking—not more and not less. But there are reasons and ways to criticize such a local viewpoint without claiming "objectivity" or "truth" or raising the issue of universal "moral standards." I can do so from "my point of view" referring to the practical ground of everyday living; beyond that, I can think about procedural or formal criteria for a non-oppressive dialogue; for instance, HABERMAS' discourse ethics. (GERGEN, as far as I know, has been reluctant to accept the latter as a meta-perspective. As long as his meta-perspective is confined to "viability," I do not agree with him.) But whatever I choose as good or bad I can defend a certain idea of morality or a particular "truth" in a specific case *and* understand moral standards *in principle* as relational, procedural, and contingent constructs at the same time. [9]

- *The relativism-realism dilemma has been addressed in various ways by constructionist authors and it does not lead to an "anything-goes attitude."* A general critical stance, a genuine interest for societal matters, especially concerning power imbalance, and the very insight in the *perspectivity of all knowledge* have made constructionism a critical movement from its beginnings (and this critical impetus has been constitutive of research and theorizing). In my view, there still is a problematic relation between the urge to criticize oppression/power imbalances on the one hand and the relativist meta-theory on the other—but its effect on constructionist activity is very different from the anything-goes attitude RATNER attributes to constructionism by repeating "that's fine as local truth" (para. 6): Whenever anything is at stake, be it homicide, educational practice, cultural psychology or terrorism, the constructionist stance will rather force us to inquire into the pragmatic circumstance of any statement or practice than make us "disinterested" or simply agreeable, as RATNER thinks (see para. 8). In contrast, the constructionist thinker will always tend to ask "What does he or she gain from making this statement, who might lose his/her face by saying this, what practice is supported by this?" [10]
- *There are different positions within constructionism as to how this dilemma might be resolved:* Some constructionist writers have taken this as a reason to make up their own, non-relativist branch of constructionism and create names like "Foucauldian studies" or "critical discourse analysis" for it. Others, like GERGEN, point to the possibility that one can be a relativist in meta-theory but a critical theorist "in action" (as can be learned from GERGEN's interview text, by the way). [11]

5. A Simplistic and Problematic Understanding of Cultural Difference

I would not be this stunned to read RATNER's "radical," but not really profound critique if I had not located him in the field of cultural psychology. I would like to learn what his attitude is towards the numerous cultural practices we can hardly accept or understand from a "Western" point of view: religious practices, patriarchal family structures, extreme societal hierarchies, such as castes, cultural practices that restrict women's "rights," authoritarian practice in education, and so forth. Can we deny the problems of incommensurability by "resolving differences" (what does that actually mean?), by simply stating that the others are "mistaken" or by pointing to a "truth value" (which is what he demands of GERGEN, see para.7)? Referring to ethnical or cultural conflict, I do not think that the concept of "viability" discussed by GERGEN stands for very much, but maybe it points to the fact that introducing shared practice may be possible in situations of conflict where explicit consensus will mean no more than introducing another hegemonic perspective. Again, claiming only "mutual viability" is too weak. Perhaps it is more questionable that RATNER seems to propose that ethnic/cultural conflict can be "resolved" by prescribing "real harmony" and "resolution" (para.9) to those who live in culturally different or conflicting worlds and have to cope with it. [12]

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