

"'Old-Stream' Psychology Will Disappear With the Dinosaurs!"

Kenneth Gergen in Conversation With Peter Mattes and Ernst Schraube

Key words:

epistemology of psychology, mind-world dualism, methodology, performative psychology, positivism, postmodernism, self, social relationship, social constructionism, theoretical psychology, traditional psychology, qualitative methods

Abstract: This conversation discusses the epistemology of social constructionism—theory, method, praxis—in relation with traditional psychology. The first part of the conversation deals with the places and forms of social constructionist thought and with the limits of the traditional positivistic epistemology of psychology. The next part of the conversation focuses on issues of social constructionist methodology and on the role of social relationships for an adequate understanding of human beings. The last part of the conversation illuminates the relationship between university structures and scientific knowledge as well as possible futures for academic psychology.

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About the Interview

The interview was conducted via e-mail in the autumn of 2000. It was part of a special issue on "Subjectivity, Technology, and Politics" in the German *Journal für Psychologie*, edited by the authors and originally published in German—2001 in *Journal für Psychologie*, 9(1), 45-51. The English version was revised and expanded—in cooperation with Kenneth GERGEN—and is now published for the first time. [1]

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, 2000), *Realities and Relationships: Soundings in Social Construction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), *Relational Responsibility* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999; with Sheila

McNAMEE), *Invitation to Social Construction* (London: Sage, 1999), and *Social Construction in Context* (London: Sage, 2001). You can find more information about Ken GERGEN [online](#). [2]

1. Places and Forms of Social Constructionist Thought

MATTES/SCHRAUBE: Kenneth GERGEN, it is now 20 years since your article "The Social Constructionist Movement in Modern Psychology" appeared in *American Psychologist*, and almost 15 since the publication of your book "The Saturated Self." In the interim, the term "Social Constructionism" has generated a lot of interest within psychology, including here in Germany. Is it accurate to say that social constructionist ideas now constitute "a movement?" [3]

GERGEN: If you mean by a movement an organized group of psychologists who work together around a specific agenda I would answer this question in the negative. However, if you view social constructionism as a set of dialogues—spanning the sciences and humanities—and primarily concerned with the collaborative constitution of meaning, the historical and cultural lodgment of science, and the ethico/political dimensions of knowledge generation and dissemination, then I would propose that there is a substantial transformation taking place. [4]

Within psychology, if you consider not only a wide range of books, journal articles and conferences on social construction, along with the remarkable flourishing of discourse analytics, the dramatic mushrooming of qualitative methods, the rapid growth of narrative and brief therapies, the active interest now centering on theory and metatheory (consider, for example, the emergence of the International Society for Theoretical Psychology and the journal, *Theory & Psychology*), the emerging concern of psychologists with cultural critique, the flourishing of feminist critique, the conjoining of constructionist with constructivist and social representation movements, and newly sprouting discussions of postmodern psychology, dialogic psychology, hermeneutics, and cultural psychology—all of which are informed by social constructionist dialogues—then you would have to say that this "movement" is now playing a substantial role in psychology as well. [5]

MATTES/SCHRAUBE: Where did major centers of social-constructionist thinking become established, and what are the most important theoretical areas within psychology that have been influenced by and proven fertile for social constructionism? [6]

GERGEN: I think it is premature to speak of major centers in terms of geographic locations. In fields such as literary study, anthropology, cultural studies, rhetorical studies, the sociology of knowledge, and women's studies, for example, constructionist ideas now simply contribute to the background assumptions for inquiry; one doesn't study constructionism or defend it; it provides the grounds for all one's research (much like empiricism in many of the traditional sciences). For a variety of reasons psychology has been far more resistant to constructionist assumptions than any of the other social sciences, and for this reason you will

find few "centers" of constructionist research. (The UK is a distinct exception. Social psychology in the UK is now primarily constructionist in orientation.) However, there is an enormously active network—very loosely speaking—of psychologists engaged in the dialogues and their implications. Particularly involved have been theoretical and historical psychologists, social psychologists (e.g. discourse analysts), clinical psychologists (e.g. narrative therapy), methodologists (e.g. qualitative methodology), developmentalists (e.g. VYGOTSKIANS), cultural psychologists (e.g. BRUNER), and psychologists interested in sex and gender (e.g. postmodern feminist psychology), and societal/ideological critique (e.g. SAMPSON). [7]

MATTES/SCHRAUBE: We would like to explore a little further the question of how psychology perceives itself as a science. Social constructionism is seen as an alternative to the positivistic scientific approach still dominant within psychology. What are the main drawbacks and contradictions inherent in the traditional approach? Where are changes most urgently needed? [8]

GERGEN: The problems inherent in the positivist orientation in psychology are numerous and substantial, and there is no way within the span of this interview that I can do justice to them. I have written at length about some of these problems in early works such as *Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge and Realities and Relationships*, and there are two more recent works, *An Invitation to Social Construction*, and *Social Construction in Context*. Sage Ltd has even gone on to publish *Social Construction, a Reader*. For present purposes, let me simply say that the major problem with the positivist program as practiced in psychology is its lack of critical reflexivity. It is not that positivistic psychology is inherently or transcendently bad; it is simply limited. And these limitations—as profound as they are—receive virtually no attention within the field. Virtually all dialogue remains "within paradigm." Thus, for example, there is little consciousness of the intellectual flaws, the ideological and ethical biases, the cultural and historical contingency, the theoretical blindnesses, and so on, and virtually no attempt to speak about these issues with those who do care about them. My purpose is not at all to eradicate the positivist program, but to eradicate the grounds by which it is claimed superior to all others. It is when positivistic psychology is our only psychology that we invite suppression, totalitarianism, and intellectual and cultural impoverishment. [9]

2. Constructionism and its Critique of Traditional Psychology

MATTES/SCHRAUBE: What are the differences between a social-constructionist scientific understanding and that of traditional psychology? [10]

GERGEN: This is a far-reaching question, and I must refer you again to the works I just mentioned (along with the vast literatures which they represent.) However, it is very important to realize that the positivist/empiricist view of knowledge (or metatheory) to which the field is largely committed, is lodged in metaphysical dualism. Here one presumes a real world (objective, material) somewhere "out there" and a psychological world of the experiencing agent "in

here." Knowledge is essentially achieved when the mind of the individual agent has mastered the complexities of the material world. And this knowledge is ideally reduced to propositional networks (theories and descriptions) for purposes of communication. [11]

For the social constructionist, the act of communication is not an after-thought, something you do once you "know," but is the germinating process for all that we consider intelligible. It is through the coordination of human action that language emerges, and it is through language that we come to agree on "what there is," "how it functions," and why it is possibly "good" or "evil." Such agreements serve as the necessary forestructure for carrying out scientific work—in psychology as well as any other science. Such agreements, along with the institutions and actions in which they are embedded, are equivalent to what Thomas KUHN might call a "paradigm." Further, it is from this font of relationship that the very idea of mind-world dualism arises. Dualism is not, thus, a universal given; it is simply one view among many. [12]

Likewise, constructionism itself should not be considered a universal truth; it too is a view that emerges from social process. As you can see, the constructionist is not, then, interested in truth as a scientific outcome—or at least truth with a capital "T"—a universal or transcendent propositional network. There may be local truths, established within various scientific fields, within the various communities of humankind, and these must surely be honored from within the traditions of these communities. However, the future well-being of the world community depends on facilitating dialogue among these local traditions. Declarations of truth beyond tradition are, in this sense, a step toward tyranny and, ultimately, the end of communication. [13]

MATTES/SCHRAUBE: Mainstream psychology orients itself towards the natural sciences both in its terminology and its use of a statistically based experimental method. In contrast to other disciplines within the social and human sciences such as Anthropology, Sociology and Economics, or inter-disciplinary approach such as Science and Technology Studies, Psychology has clung tenaciously to this methodology aimed at the establishment of "objective" knowledge. The resulting cognitive poverty has entailed a process of intellectual stagnation and isolation from related disciplines. Why is it that throughout the twentieth century academic psychology has stuck so firmly to its traditional scientific bias? What are the roots of this deep attachment to positivistic paradigms? [14]

GERGEN: This question is as interesting as it is difficult to answer. At least one way I have found it useful to think about this tenacious introversion of scientific psychology is that when the profession sought to break away from philosophy in the early part of the century it faced a legitimation crisis. The natural science model, as it was understood in the early part of the century, thus became a major means of rationalization for psychologists—both internally in making sense to the profession and externally in making claims for legitimacy within the university system. Once hierarchies of power and prestige were established, publication in scientifically oriented journals became the key to upward mobility, and national

foundation monies could fuel the enterprise, the profession simply became self-sufficient. Most young psychologists I know are little concerned about the problems of positivism. They simply want to get ahead in the status structure, and almost the only way to do it is by following the deadening demand, "publish more experimental articles or perish." If you question the field and attempt to explore alternative forms of inquiry, you threaten your professional career. This is one reason, by the way, that we should encourage new and varied journals in the field. Publication outlets are required so that questioning and creative voices can be recognized and validated. [15]

3. Constructionist Methodology

MATTES/SCHRAUBE: Is there such a thing as a social-constructionist methodology? [16]

GERGEN: Not in my view. As I have indicated, for me, constructionism is first an orientation toward knowledge itself. Once we understand knowledge as a cultural by-product—wedded to local and historically situated conditions—then we begin to ask new questions, and proceed with new sensitivities. As I mentioned, this does not mean abandoning all (or any) preceding modes of study or research. But it does mean an increased reflexivity about why we proceed as we do, and it raises questions about possible alternatives. Thus, for most constructionists traditional empirical methods are not abandoned; however, because of their many and important limitations, there is an open search for alternative methodologies. [17]

Thus the enormous flourishing of qualitative methodology: for example, emphasizing participation, narration, polyvocality, discourse, performance, social action, and the like. These are not constructionist methods, per se, but simply methods that have been invited by the recognition of the constructed character of our knowledge claims. Traditional journals have been reluctant to publish such materials thus far, but new and exciting journals are springing up. *Qualitative Inquiry* is an excellent source of innovative methodology; *Discourse and Society* has gained a new significance. And the electronic journals, [Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research](#), and [The Qualitative Report](#) have exciting potential. [18]

4. The Self in Relationship

MATTES/SCHRAUBE: In your work on the Self, you criticize the traditional view of the Self as an autonomous source culminating in a personal history, and emphasize instead a permanent process of construction and change. This process takes place among people specific to particular conditions where relationships are constantly being forged, developed and broken. What we term or experience in ourselves as the Individual or the Self is created and is continually being recreated through "relatedness." However, your writings imply from the outset people relating to one another. Is there a contradiction here or even a remnant of substantialism? [19]

GERGEN: I think it is first important to realize that we can distinguish between constructionism as a metatheory—a view of how what we call knowledge is generated and sustained—and as a theory in use. From the metatheoretical perspective, there may be multiple theories in use. In psychology, for example, behaviorist, phenomenological, and cognitive theories would all constitute such theories. From the metatheoretical perspective, all represent certain traditions, ways of life, values, etc. And from the metatheoretical perspective, constructionist theory may also be counted as a theory in use. My attempt to work out a relational view of the Self is just such an effort. [20]

With this said, if I am to write at all I will necessarily have to privilege some set of words in my descriptions and explanations. As a result, these words will seem to make claims to the real. They will appear to be what you call remnants of substantialism. If we are to use a language of nouns, we can scarcely escape this tendency. However, once you see the world through the lens of constructionism, you more or less understand that all propositions are subject to deconstruction, and get on with the conversation (interrupted by moments of critical reflexivity). [21]

Now, my work on the Self has attempted to generate a sense of the reality of relationship. The aim is to undermine the taken for granted reality of individual, private Selves so dear to the Western tradition. This traditional view is ideologically devastating, I would argue, in that it paints a picture of the world in which we are fundamentally alienated—alone, separate, and self-serving. The challenge is thus to create an alternative reality, one that binds us together, renders us inseparable. One problem I confront in generating such a picture is that our language for relationship is already wedded to an individualist tradition. We understand relationship as "between two or more independent entities." As a theoretical poet, this tradition poses a problem, and invites ways of conceptualizing the self as always already a matrix of relationships. The challenge is to begin with the assumption of relational process, out of which the very discourse of "individual entities" becomes intelligible. [22]

MATTES/SCHRAUBE: Everyday conditions within which we constitute our social being lie at the heart of social-constructionist thinking. Which circumstances appear to you to be particularly important today with regards to relations between people? [23]

GERGEN: You ask questions about which entire books could be written. Since I must be brief let me offer a single reply, but one with substantial implications. As people generate realities and moralities together, as they come to build institutions and traditions around these constructions, so is the stage set for conflict. That which lies outside the privileged construction is, by definition, alien and potentially threatening. Thus, as a result of our simply living what we feel to be decent lives with others, so do we contribute to what can become a divided and hostile world. With increasing globalization this condition becomes pandemic. The seeds of alienation and conflict are everywhere moving toward fruition. 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. We cannot wait for another century of theorizing, or the incessant plea for "more research." We need to mobilize resources, talent, and committed engagement in the pursuit of new and effective practices. [24]

In part, this is the reason for the strong commitment I have to the work of [The Taos Institute](#). This group of scholars and practitioners is dedicated to dialogue between constructionist theory and societal practice. One of the major attempts is to generate more effective practices of conjoint meaning making, and particularly under conditions of conflict. [25]

MATTES/SCHRAUBE: What role do the new technologies play? [26]

GERGEN: As you know, I have written *The Saturated Self*, a book on technology and changes in cultural life. The significance of technology in our lives cannot be underestimated. One of these effects is directly tied to the issue of social conflict. As I see it, the communication and transportation technologies of the 20th century have made it increasingly possible for groups to develop self-consciousness, and to elaborate and sustain their particular worlds of belief. Virtually any group, no matter how small, can generate a common consciousness—a sense of what "we believe is true and right." Even the briefest scan of the political and religious spectrum on the World Wide Web will furnish a sense of the magnitude of the organizing processes. But, as I proposed earlier, every move toward organization gives rise to potential conflict. (Here it is sobering, for example, to scan the web sites of various radical political groups). We have little means thus far of using these same technologies for purposes of "border crossing," of fertilizing dialogues among disparate groups. Herein lays another challenge for the future. [27]

MATTES/SCHRAUBE: As a social constructionist you would not wish to be seen as the abstract representative of an idea but rather as socialized; the product of changing relationships and discussions and anticipating further intellectual, institutional and social tasks. Would you like to comment? Tell us about yourself! [28]

GERGEN: First off, I don't favor the concept of people being "products" of socialization. For me social constructionism is not a social determinism. The relationship out of which meaning is generated is not one of mechanical cause and effect, but of participatory coordination. [29]

With this said, what about myself? Perhaps the most difficult question of all, because what can I do at this moment but construct, and I don't want to give the impression that in spite of all I have said here that I can give you something in the way of an accurate portrait. And as you can imagine, I am also somewhat resistant to talking about myself as a singular, independent being. My wife, Mary, and I were once asked to write short autobiographies for a psychologist

interested in narratives (and the life stories of those who worked on narrative psychology). However, we decided instead to write a "duography," a narrative in which our relationship served as the object of description. It was great fun, and quite illuminating—even to us. [30]

Given the Western conventions of "self talk," I could also speak about myself as a decentered being—living my boyhood years in the southern US, schooling in New England, professing in the Mid-Atlantic region, and variously taking years away from Swarthmore to live and work in Germany, Italy, Japan, France, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. I seem to carry with me remnants of very different relationships, and have come to feel that there is little coherence among them. At the worst, I sometimes feel like Woody ALLEN's Zelig. But at the same time, I have come to see personal coherence as functioning something like dogma; not "with the world" but against it. [31]

These multiple selves become most apparent to others in what Mary and I call "performative psychology." We have been trying to encourage the field to abandon the dull, tedious, supercilious and alienating traditions of writing and to expand on our modes of expression. In effect, our ways of expressing our ideas and the results of our inquiry are relationships themselves, and thus furnish models for our world together. Why not, then, offer alternatives to the traditional models of expression? In any event, in various public presentations we try to put these ideas to work by acting out various ideas. We take relational theory, for example, and rather than simply articulating its major assumptions, demonstrate them in small vignettes; often humorous, sometimes dramatic, and so on. Within 30 minutes the audience senses the range of latent selves we carry with us, thus hopefully, opening them up to their own potentials in their subsequent relationship to us and each other. [32]

There is so much more to say and I have gone on too long. If anyone is interested there is also a [personal web site](#). [33]

5. Academic Psychology and its Future

MATTES/SCHRAUBE: The scientific system and university structures are closely linked to scientific thought and forms of cognition, whether they facilitate or indeed hinder them. For many in Germany, the North-American system is seen as exemplary. What is your experience of the U.S. scientific system? What is better in your system? More inter-disciplinarity? Less hierarchical or even democratic structures? Co-operative forms of learning and research (e.g. PhD programs)? We are sure you are also aware of some problems. What can we here in Germany learn from you? What should we rather not emulate? How would your university of the future look like? [34]

GERGEN: Although I am quite familiar with the German academic system—having spent various semesters in Heidelberg and Marburg—it is very difficult to make sweeping generalizations. So much depends on the particular composition of the groups, local histories, and so on. For purposes of discussion I would

propose that in general, the "knowledge generating apparatus" in Germany remains more directly hierarchical than in the U.S. Younger scholars seem to remain locked into the local hierarchies for longer periods of time. And perhaps because of the competition both within and between hierarchies, there is a posture of critique that pervades German academic life. One must always be ready for attack by one's colleagues, and few words of appreciation or encouragement are spoken. I say these things as an American, of course, and as such also realize that we have difficulties of an opposing kind. Our country is very large, and scholars are spread thinly over a broad surface. There is less hierarchy, but less in the way of invigorating dialogue as well. We can be more appreciative of each other, but in part because others' work is largely irrelevant to our own. [35]

Of course, I like to see constructionist views as a force for balance here. On the one hand, constructionism invites a collaborative and polyvocal orientation toward inquiry. There is less demand for hierarchy—and solid ground to distinguish between good and bad, and the line between "in" vs. "out" becomes thin and more subject to negotiation. Further, there is much more emphasis placed on communicative interdependence: the sense that we acquire meaning through relationships, and without an embeddedness in relationships we perish. In this sense we must be responsible to the health and prosperity of relationships. (Here you might take a look at a book I recently published with Sheila McNAMEE, called *Relational Responsibility*). [36]

MATTES/SCHRAUBE: What will become of academic psychology in the 21st Century? Will it remain as conservative as it is today? Or will post-positivistic approaches gain in influence? Can you see any signs of a fundamental change in the course of mainstream psychology? [37]

GERGEN: As you might imagine from what I have said, I am relatively optimistic about fundamental changes in what I now call "old-stream" psychology. This is so in part because the intellectual world outside of psychology has already moved on; I just don't think psychology's isolation can be maintained. There are also strong movements in motion within the field, as I mentioned, and an enormous amount of enthusiasm within these movements. Students are increasingly drawn to them because they reflect changes in the cultural sensibility as well. Most of all, however, these same technologies of social organization will increasingly confront the field with the fact of difference: cultural, ethnic, ideological and so on. Under these circumstances, the traditional claims to some kind of superiority in perspective will sound increasingly parochial and colonialist. I have often thought the field must give way to some form of constructionist polyvocality or disappear with the dinosaurs. [38]

Yet, I also realize that there are significant reasons for pessimism. The institutional and monetary constraints against change are enormous. For example, in the field of mental health the investments of the pharmaceutical industry in developing and promoting pharmacological "sedatives" for the problems besetting the society are enormous. At psychiatric meetings it is not

uncommon for there to be one drug sales person for every four psychiatrists. And, with managed care and insurance companies supporting these quick fix methods, there is little that the clinical psychologist can do but comply. Such compliance is also supported by the neuro/cognitive/evolutionary movement currently hegemonic in the field of psychology more generally. In effect, constructionist critiques of the drugging of the culture may be of little consequence. And the "reality of mental illness," now inviting more than 10% of the population to see themselves as needing "cure," may simply drown out the constructionist attempt at liberating dialogue. [39]

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