

Swarthmore College

Works

Psychology Faculty Works

Psychology

2004

Constructionism, Social

Kenneth J. Gergen

Swarthmore College, kgergen1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-psychology>



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to these works benefits you](#)

Recommended Citation

Kenneth J. Gergen. (2004). "Constructionism, Social". *The SAGE Encyclopedia Of Social Science Research Methods*. Volume 1, 183-185. DOI: 10.4135/9781412950589.n164

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-psychology/1064>

An [accessible version](#) of this publication has been made available courtesy of Swarthmore College Libraries. For further accessibility assistance, please contact openaccess@swarthmore.edu with the title or URL of any relevant works.

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Psychology Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.



The SAGE Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods

Constructionism, Social

Contributors: Kenneth J. Gergen

Edited by: Michael S. Lewis-Beck, Alan Bryman & Tim Futing Liao

Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods

Chapter Title: "Constructionism, Social"

Pub. Date: 2004

Access Date: March 13, 2020

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9780761923633

Online ISBN: 9781412950589

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412950589.n164>

Print pages: 184-185

© 2004 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE Knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

Social constructionism is, first of all, an account of knowledge-generating practices—both scientific and otherwise. At this level, constructionist theory offers an orientation toward knowledge making in the sciences, a standpoint at considerable variance with the empiricist tradition. At the same time, social constructionism contains the ingredients of a theory of human functioning; at this level, it offers an alternative to traditional views of individual, psychological processes. Constructionist premises have also been extended to a variety of practical domains, opening new departures in such fields as therapy, organizational management, and education. (For more complete accounts, see Gergen, 1994, 1999.) Of special relevance, they have contributed to the flourishing of many new forms of research methods in the social sciences.

Social Constructionist Assumptions

Social constructionism cannot be reduced to a fixed set of principles but is more properly considered a continuously unfolding conversation about the nature of knowledge and our understanding of the world. However, several themes are typically located in writings that identify themselves as constructionist. At the outset, it is typically assumed that our accounts of the world—scientific and otherwise—are not dictated or determined in any principled way by what there is. Rather, the terms in which the world is understood are generally held to be social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people. Thus, the extent to which a given form of understanding prevails within a culture is not fundamentally dependent on the empirical validity of the perspective in question but rather on the vicissitudes of social process (e.g., communication, negotiation, communal conflict, rhetoric). This line of reasoning does not at all detract from the significance of various forms of cultural understanding, whether scientific or otherwise. People's constructions of the world and self are essential to the broader practices of a culture—justifying, sustaining, and transforming various forms of conduct. In addition, different communities of meaning making may contribute differentially to the resources available to humankind—whether it be “medical cures,” “moral intelligibilities,” institutions of law, or “reason-stolive.” However, constructionism does challenge the warrant of any group—science included—to proclaim “truth” beyond its perimeters. What is true, real, and good within one tradition may not be within another, and there are no criteria for judging among traditions that are themselves free of traditions, their values, goals, and way of life.

Social Construction and Social Science

The social constructionist views favored by this composite of developments begin to furnish a replacement for traditional empiricist accounts of social science. In the process of this replacement, one may discriminate between two phases, deconstruction and reconstruction. In the former phase, pivotal assumptions of scientific rationality, along with bodies of empirically justified knowledge claims, are placed in question. This work essentially represents an elaboration and extension of the early anti-foundationalist arguments, now informed by the additional developments within the literary and critical domains. Thus, an extensive body of literature has emerged, questioning the warrant and the ideological implications of claims to truth, empirical hypothesis testing, universal rationality, laws of human functioning, the value neutrality of science, the exportation of Western scientific practices, and so on.

Immersion in this literature alone would lead to the conclusion that social constructionism is nihilistic in its aims. However, as many believe, the deconstructive process is only a necessary prolegomenon to a reconstructive enterprise. Within the reconstructive phase, the chief focus is on ways in which scientific inquiry, informed by constructionist views, can more effectively serve the society of which it is a part. From this emerging sensibility, several developments are noteworthy. First, constructionist ideas place a strong emphasis on theoretical creativity; rather than “mapping the world as it is,” the invitation is to create intelligibilities that may help us to build new futures. Theories of collaborative cognition, cyborg politics, and actor networks are illustrative. Second, constructionism has stimulated much work in cultural study, the critical and illuminating examination of everyday life practices and artifacts. Third, constructionist ideas have helped to generate a

range of new practices in therapy, organizational change, and education in particular. Many scholars also find that in challenging disciplinary boundaries to knowledge, constructionist ideas invite broad-ranging dialogue. Thus, new areas of interest have been spawned, linking for example, theology and constructionism, literary theory and social movements, and personality study and ethical theory.

Social Construction and Research Methods

Although much constructionist writing is critical of traditional empirical methods in the social sciences, these criticisms are not lethal. There is nothing about constructionist ideas that demands one kind of research method as opposed to another; every method has its ways of constructing the world. Thus, although traditional empiricist methods may be viewed as limited and ideologically problematic, they do have important uses. However, the major importance of constructionist ideas in the domain of methodology has been to incite discussion of new methods of inquiry. Although these new methods tend to be viewed as “qualitative” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), constructionists do not subscribe to the traditional qualitative/quantitative distinction that holds the former as preliminary and inferior to the latter. Most qualitative inquiry has different aims, different values, and a different politics than those inherent in quantitative inquiry. Thus far, constructionist work has functioned, in particular, to support research methods emphasizing the following:

- *Value reflection*: Who is advantaged by the research methods and who may be discredited? Is the research subject exploited by the research or treated as a mere object?
- *Subject voice*: Is the voice of the subject of research heard or legitimated by the method or obliterated by the research procedure?
- *Collaborative participation*: Can the subjects of research participate with the researcher in the generation of knowledge? Can they share in or benefit from the outcomes?
- *Multiple standpoints*: Are multiple viewpoints and values represented in the research, or does one standpoint dominate?
- *Representational creativity*: Must the representation of research be limited to formal writing, or can more populist and richly compelling forms of representation be located?

In its research emphases, constructionist assumptions are particularly evident in PARTICIPATORY ACTIONRESEARCH (Reason & Bradbury, 2000), discourse analysis (Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001), narrative inquiry (see, e.g., Josselyn, 1996), participatory ethnography, and literary and performative approaches to representation (see, e.g., Ellis & Bochner, 1996).

- social constructionism
- research subjects
- research methods
- empiricism
- standpoint
- inquiry
- Social Construction Theory

Kenneth J. Gergen
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412950589.n164>
10.4135/9781412950589.n164

References

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2000). Handbook of qualitative research (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks,

CA: Sage.

Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (Eds.). (1996). *Composing ethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.

Gergen, K. J. (1994). *Realities and relationships*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gergen, K. J. (1999). *An invitation to social construction*. London: Sage.

Josselyn, R. (Ed.). (1996). *Ethics and process in the narrative study of lives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (Eds.). (2000). *Handbook of action research, participative inquiry and practice*. Sage: London.

Wetherell, M., Taylor, S., & Yates, S. J. (Eds.). (2001). *Discourse theory and practice*. London: Sage.