

Swarthmore College

## Works

---

Psychology Faculty Works

Psychology

---

2018

### The Social Construction Of Reality: Traces And Transformation

Kenneth J. Gergen

*Swarthmore College*, [kgergen1@swarthmore.edu](mailto: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. (2018). "The Social Construction Of Reality: Traces And Transformation". *Social Constructivism As Paradigm?: The Legacy Of The Social Construction Of Reality*. 259-272. DOI: 10.4324/9780429467714-17

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-psychology/1122>

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](mailto:myworks@swarthmore.edu).

# 16 *The Social Construction of Reality*

## Traces and transformation

*Kenneth J. Gergen*

My attempt in what follows is to offer an intellectual history in which Berger and Luckmann's classic work has played a pivotal role. While this early work is no longer central to this story, its major thesis ultimately served as a conceptual catalyst for an intellectual transformation of major proportion. It is the stages of this transformation I wish to illuminate. Admittedly my account cannot be separated from my position as an American social scientist, confronted with a particular configuration of challenges and influences. However, the intellectual developments at issue have grown in significance, now moving globally; multiple perspectives are essential for gaining understanding and appreciation.<sup>1</sup> In the following account I first consider, then, the controversial intellectual climate into which the Berger and Luckmann treatise arrived. Here their work played a key role in the shift from a foundationalist philosophic to a social account of science. In the subsequent stage, the rapidly accumulating scholarship in critical and literary domains began to undermine the assumptions of the social account, including those undergirding the Berger and Luckmann formulation. Ultimately emerging from these dialogues was an orientation to knowledge described as reflective pragmatism. In a third stage, a major shift occurred from attempts to ground a social epistemology to constructionism as a discourse of practice. Here we find an enormous range of professional practices inspired by constructionist discourse. Finally, I consider the way in which constructionist ideas opened a space for imaginative and ideologically sensitive theoretical departures. I conclude with a discussion of a newly emerging, relational conception of human action, one presaged by Berger and Luckmann, but now opening entirely new vistas of inquiry.

### **The gathering storm: the end of foundationalism**

The English translation of Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality*, published in 1966, arrived in a period of intellectual and cultural upheaval. Indeed, the conditions of the times formed the very context that imparted such significance to the work.<sup>2</sup> Of particular importance is that in both the United States and Europe, there was growing

antagonism – particularly among the younger generations – toward the established structures of society. There were many reasons for the strikes and demonstrations of the times, but a primary target of critique was what was largely perceived as an unjust war in Vietnam. The scientific establishment was included in this critique, especially as its claim to ideological neutrality seemed disingenuous. Science seemed essentially serving as a handmaiden to military and societal control. The adulation enjoyed by science – the apex of modernity – was eroding. Likewise, logical empiricist philosophy of science, which had provided the foundations for both the natural sciences and the newly developing array of social sciences, became the subject of increasing skepticism. The critiques of Wittgenstein (1953) and Quine (1960) were among the most crippling.

It was under these conditions that an opening developed for an alternative to the philosophically based logical empiricist account of science. The ground had been laid for a fully social theory of science by sociologists such as Durkheim (1915) and Mannheim (1985 [1936]). But it was the 1962 publication of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* that was to carry the banner of transformation. Partly owing to its title – echoing the revolutionary spirit of the times – and partly to its rhetorical brilliance, the work became a major catalyst of critical reflection. As Kuhn demonstrated, what had been viewed as linear scientific progress in physics was not the result of increasingly accurate measures of the world, but a shift in paradigms of understanding. These paradigms were constituted primarily by agreements among enclaves of scientists in the assumptions that informed their inquiry. A shift in assumptions could bring into focus a new way of observing, understanding and making claims to knowledge. In bolder form, scientific knowledge is not driven by observation, but observation is driven by social interchange. Controversy was intense, and the scholarly outpouring enormous.

It was into this controversy that the Berger and Luckmann volume arrived. The work was of signal significance for, unlike Kuhn, it offered a sophisticated and richly elaborated account of the social process out of which reality claims emerged. It also buttressed the arguments in the history of science – of which Kuhn was a part – with extensive deliberation in the sociology of knowledge. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, was the title of the work. Cadres of scholars from across the social sciences and the humanities were exploring the potentials of a social (as opposed to philosophical) view of science. Yet, there was no overarching term or phrase that united these efforts. Owing to the broad scope of the Berger and Luckmann volume, their choice of the phrase “social construction,” proved prescient. It enabled scholars from across disparate communities to recognize, appreciate and integrate the work of others. And it was this very breakdown in disciplinary restrictions that enabled diverse movements to unite in a major transformation in the concept and practice of knowledge-making.

## **Radical emancipation: the end of knowing**

While scholarly contributions to a social account of scientific knowledge have continued unabated, they have been accompanied by two other intellectual movements of substantial scope. These movements – emphasizing ideological critique and literary artifice – have both augmented the social view of science while simultaneously undermining the assumptions on which it rests. To put it differently, they have expanded the scope of a social constructionist vision, but transformed its premises.

To expand, the ideological critique of knowledge claims gained prominence in the 1930s' emergence of the Frankfurt School writings of Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse (Tarr 2011). Their critiques were both novel and unsettling as they thrust into question claims to knowledge, not in terms of evidence, but of their underlying ideology. This form of argument was easily grafted onto the social account of science, as it suggested (to use Kuhn's terms) that the paradigms framing any given research project could be both ideological and politically freighted. Thus, lines of social inquiry were stimulated that illuminated, for example, the gender biases inherent in both biology (Martin 1987) and physics (Longino 1990). With Foucault's (1980) writings on the ways in which knowledge claims subtly affect relations of power, the span of critical analysis was dramatically expanded. Minority groups from across the spectrum (e.g., African American, feminist, gay and lesbian), along with advocates for various social causes (e.g., environmentalist, anti-psychiatry, economic equality), were furnished with a means of challenging empirical knowledge claims with a logic that could not convincingly be refuted.<sup>3</sup>

While Berger and Luckmann made note of the important place of language in their sociology of knowledge, their formulation was scarcely prepared for the ferment occurring in the fields of literary theory and rhetorical studies. In both cases, scholars went on to demonstrate the extent to which scientific accounts of the world are not so much dependent upon or driven by the world in itself, as they are on our discursive conventions (Goodman 1978; McClosky 1985). Regardless of "the way the world is," we must rely on circumscribed traditions of language to describe and explain this world.

Both the critical and the literary/rhetorical movements added substantial scope and power to the social accounts of knowledge. At the same time, however, they undermined the premises upon which these accounts were based. The problem was most acute in the social studies of science, because virtually all such analyses employed empirical data to justify their conclusions. If such data could not adequately provide the grounds for truth claims in the sciences, they could not then be used to justify their own proposals. Further, one might properly inquire into the ideological and political investments of such accounts. Did they not represent liberal and anti-establishment interests? And finally, were the social accounts themselves not linguistically circumscribed and rhetorically fashioned? Is social construction itself not a social construction?

With these two intellectual laminations added to the social account of knowledge, the premises of the Berger and Luckmann (1966) thesis could scarcely be sustained. As Berger and Luckmann had concluded, “our conception of the sociology of knowledge [...] does not imply that [it] is not a science, that its methods should be other than empirical, or that it cannot be ‘value-free’” (p. 189). Now impugned, however, were both the status of empirical fact and the possibility of ideologically uninflected theory.<sup>4</sup> More generally, these additional lines of argument essentially threw into question the entire modernist project: The presumption that the application of astute reasoning, combined with systematic observation, could provide continuous progress toward the goals of mastery, well-being and survival. Through reasoning itself, reason lost its command.

### **From impasse to outcome: the pragmatic turn**

These three intellectual movements – the social account of science, critical studies and the literary/rhetorical movement – converge into what may be termed the social constructionist dialogues. Together they have virtually eliminated foundationalist philosophy of science from the contemporary agenda in philosophy. At the same time, they have undermined interest in establishing foundations for an alternative epistemology – including the social constructionist. The Cartesian dream of an inclusive rational framework for directing action lost its momentum; in Berger and Luckmann’s terms, claims to knowledge – regardless of origins – could no longer be legitimized. And, because the teeth were simultaneously removed from critical analysis (unable to justify its own critique), one could begin to see the demise of the social constructionist dialogues themselves. Interestingly, the reverse occurred: Constructionist-informed initiatives increased in vitality.

The sources of this explosion in activity might be traced to the contributions of Wittgenstein, Foucault and John Dewey to the constructionist dialogues, and particularly to their strong pragmatist leanings. If one abandoned the quest for foundationalist metatheory, logic or legitimation, there still remained the question of the resulting outcomes. What is achieved by virtue of a given standpoint, paradigm, theory, empirical study or construction of the world? What doors to action are opened; what is no longer permitted; what forms of life do we create or subvert? Put in these terms, all traditional forms of knowledge-making could be resuscitated. Traditional empirical work could be honored (or not) depending on what such research contributed (or not) to the world. And further, all those voices marginalized by the dominant order now had a place in the agora of reality-making. What could they offer, how would these offerings play out for our future? This did not mean an “anything goes” mentality; indeed, the criteria of acceptability were multiplied. For what constitutes a useful contribution in one enclave, may be deeply oppressive in many others. The rights to reality were open to all, but so were the rights to moral, political or ideological resistance.

In short, emerging from the constructionist dialogues was a general orientation of *reflective pragmatism* (cf. Gergen 2015a). The concern with societal outcomes was already evidenced in much critical work, oriented as it was to liberating readers from taken-for-granted assumptions. The outpouring of books and articles beginning with the phrase “The social construction of...” has been continuous, with targets including mental health, geography, sexuality, race, homicide, gender, age, deviance, the theory of evolution, among many others. Yet, many professionals found means of employing constructionist ideas to transform practices more directly. Two illustrations are illuminating: First is the virtual explosion of research methods or practices in the social sciences. Empiricist foundationalism had come to dominate 20th-century social science. As a result, all those orientations that differed in assumptions – such as phenomenology, psychoanalysis, ethnography and participatory action research – were either disparaged, suppressed or eliminated. The focus of research was radically narrowed to prediction and control, with experimental methodology and statistical analysis considered the gold standard. With the development and expansion of constructionist ideas, the rationale for such restrictions evaporated.

Nurtured especially by the critical work of feminist, gay and lesbian, humanist and African American enclaves, there was increased motivation to develop alternatives. Traditional claims to value neutrality seem disingenuous, and the manipulative and distancing practices of experimental research smacked of exploitation. How else could inquiry proceed? First, this meant a revival in a range of the otherwise marginalized practice. Feminists also began to develop a range of research practices congenial with an ethic of caring (Gilligan 1982). Constructionist researchers launched a new range of research practices, including narrative study, discourse analysis and conversation analysis among them. The focus on the place of narrative in constructing worlds stimulated enormous range of inquiry – spanning the humanities and the social sciences. Most importantly, with the traditional strictures now removed, a space was opened for the imagination to soar. The result was a plethora of newly minted practices – auto-ethnography, portraiture, critical hermeneutics, visual methodology, online ethnography, creative nonfiction and arts-based research (cf. e.g., Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

Collectively, these many forms of practice are placed under the rubric of qualitative inquiry, in contrast to the quantitative methods preferred in the empiricist tradition. However, the label is misleading in two senses: First, many of the newly emerging practices have made use of empiricist assumptions (e.g., value neutrality, independent subject matter, subject/object dichotomy). Much that appears under the banner of qualitative inquiry is simply empiricism without numbers. Second, there are substantial differences among the various qualitative practices in terms of assumptions, values and pragmatic interests. Most interesting from a constructionist standpoint, however, is that while vast differences prevail, there is relative equanimity in terms of relationships among enclaves. As Wertz (2011) has

put it, the qualitative movement is essentially *pluralist* in character. Mutual openness prevails. In effect, without a metatheoretical foundation, there are no grounds for mutual dismissiveness.

These innovations in the practice of social inquiry are currently changing the character of social science. However, there is a second significant illustration of the constructionist-based shift toward pragmatic outcomes. Especially relevant to the continuing significance of the Berger and Luckmann thesis is the metamorphosis of constructionist ideas from a theory of knowledge to a discourse of practice. From a metatheoretical perspective, fields of study such as physics, chemistry, economics, literary study and so on can be viewed as communities of practice. At the same time, there is an active and expanding community of practice in which the social constructionist vocabulary plays a central role. Constructionist ideas essentially constitute a *vocabulary of practice*. Here, both scholars and practitioners explore ways of using the vocabulary in their research, creative theorizing and innovations in practice. A significant illustration is furnished by developments in the therapeutic world. The traditional orientation to psychotherapy is based on assumptions borrowed from medicine. That is, bizarre behavior and intense anguish are constructed as “illnesses,” for which psychotherapy should furnish a “cure.” The result over time has been the development of an enormous classification system for mental illness (as represented in successive volumes of the DSM), the dissemination of mental health information to the general public, and institutional requirements for assigning labels to those providing help. The results of these efforts, now spanning a century, is that the number of people defined as mentally ill has continuously increased (now numbering more than 1 in 10 in the United States), and the amount spent on psychotropic drugs has entered into the multibillions of dollars. As constructionists argue, the very use of mental illness terms to define people with personal problems leads them to construct themselves in these terms, thus expanding the dependence on therapists and psychotropic drugs.

The outpouring of constructionist critique of deficit discourse has been a significant precursor to a creative and far-reaching search for alternatives. Drawing from the constructionist dialogues, Michael White and David Epston (1990) developed the concept and practice of narrative therapy. “Problems” on this account do not reside in the individual mind, but within the individual’s narrative. The therapeutic challenge is thus to work toward transforming the narrative. In the same way, a range of brief therapies and strength-based therapies (de Shazer 1994) shift the focus of conversation from what the individual lacks or is anguished about, to positive potentials. Collaborative therapies (Anderson & Gehart 2006), in turn, emphasize the power of joining with clients in searching for more viable life forms. All these practices avoid using diagnostic categories; all center on ways of reconstructing reality. In related initiatives, Tom Andersen (1991) and his colleagues have developed the practice of *reflecting teams*, that is, teams of therapists who offer clients multiple ways of understanding their condition

and potentials. Jakko Seikkula and his Finnish colleagues (Seikkula & Arnkil 2006) have developed the practice of *dialogic meetings* as a means of subverting the process of “expert diagnosis.” In the initial consultation, multiple parties share their views of “the problem” and potential directions for action. Client difficulties are ameliorated with help from their families, friends, teachers, coworkers and others, including medical personnel, social workers and therapists. Dialogic meetings have succeeded in reducing the number of patients in mental hospitals and lowering dependency on drugs.

These developments in the therapeutic world are simply illustrations of creative endeavors across a vast spectrum. In the world of organizational development, for example, constructionist-informed practices have given rise to an entirely new way of transforming organizations. Rather than studying the organization, and using the results of empirical study or strategic planning, innovators focus on “changing the conversations” within the organization (Bushe & Marshak 2015). As participants co-construct the meaning, values and activities of the organization, so they can generate routes to change (Cooperrider & Whitney 2005). In education, scholars and practitioners have relied on constructionist ideas to transform pedagogy, curricula, school administration and school culture (Dragonas et al. 2015; Lewis & Winkelman 2016). In the area of healthcare, we find constructionist ideas emerging in practices of collaborative medicine, hospital reorganization and doctor-patient relations (Charon 2006; Uhlig & Raboin 2015). In peace-building, constructionist ideas have stimulated the development of new practices for traversing boundaries of understanding (Herzig & Chasin 2005; Winslade & Monk 2008). Additional contributions of constructionist ideas to practice may be found in practical theology (Hermans et al. 2002), geography (Henderson & Waterstone 2009), economics (Granovetter 1992), social work (Witkin 2011), counseling (Monk et al. 2007) and nursing (Kelly & Symonds 2003).<sup>5</sup>

It should be noted that one of the major reasons for constructionist ideas having been so important to communities of practice lies in their implicit optimism. Fields of study like sociobiology, neuroscience and experimental psychology are based on the presumption of a fundamental human nature. Human patterns of selfishness, aggression, racism, philandering, power-seeking and so on are locked into our biological system. For constructionists, however, these very constructions of the world are inimical in their consequences. They invite a conservative posture: “After all, there is no way you can change human nature.” For constructionists, human action largely emerges from social negotiation. As we come to agree on what is real, moral, rational or worthwhile, we fashion our patterns of acceptable activity. In this context, the potential for change is as close at hand as the next conversation.

### **Reconstructing the social: the relational turn**

As just discussed, the constructionist dialogues have had a liberating effect on forms of inquiry in the social sciences. A pluralist orientation toward



research is pervasive. This same spirit of liberation has also entered the domain of theory. With the increasing domination of empiricist foundationalism in the social sciences, the status of theory had diminished. After all, it was argued, a theoretical proposal without supporting evidence was mere armchair speculation. In effect, theory should serve a summary, integrating function, a means of drawing together empirical findings into a coherent whole. The constructionist dialogues struck a major blow to this inductivist view, in demonstrating how a socially negotiated fore-structure of understanding was essential to carrying out research at all. Without a world of constructed realities, there was nothing to study. In this context, creative theoretical work is at a premium. As new worlds are opened theoretically, there are also new ways of seeing and new routes to action.

To illustrate the impact of this line of reasoning, I wish to focus on a single but highly significant development in theory, one that is directly stimulated by the constructionist dialogues themselves. To set the context, one of the chief problems confronted in the Berger and Luckmann treatise inheres in their concept of social life. At the outset, they draw from two separate traditions of discourse. On the one hand, Berger and Luckmann draw from the individualist legacy in Western culture, that is, a conception of society composed of single individuals, each living in a subjective world. At the same time, they draw from the more recent, macro-sociological legacy in which the concept of society (or social structures) is essentially what Berger and Luckmann, posit as an "objective reality." Neither of these legacies, alone or in combination, offers a viable conception of social life, a conception that permits an understanding of the origins of social life. If there is to be a social life, how does it become organized; how does it change (or not) over time; how are we to account for conflict? Such questions would seem to require a viable account of communication.

With respect to the individualist conception, it has remained impossible for scholars to solve the problem of communication. How is it that one's subjective world can be understood by another? This has been a problem not only for those attempting to develop forms of *verstehende Psychologie* but also for several centuries of hermeneutical philosophy. Berger and Luckmann (1966) speak of this process in terms of a "taking over" of the world of others. But how this occurs remains mysterious. They speak only of a "complex form of internalization" in which "I not only 'understand' the other's momentary subjective processes, I 'understand' the world in which he lives, and that world becomes my own" (p. 130). We are still left, then, with the major hermeneutic conundrum of how we can adequately draw judgments about private meanings from public display, when we have no means of knowing how these realms are connected, nor the ability to verify a judgment save through further display (for further discussion, see Gergen 1994a).

The sociological legacy offers no panacea for this problem as communication is a process that we conceptualize as taking place *within* a society and its structures. It is communication that enables a social group or structure

to become solidified and identified as such. In effect, macro-sociology must presuppose a relationship among its units in order to realize intelligibility.<sup>6</sup>

Yet there does remain a further alternative to theorizing the social world and the potential for communication. If we remove individual subjectivity from the center of analysis, along with macro-social entities, there remains an alternative largely underdeveloped within the historical context of Berger and Luckmann's writings. This is the discourse of the micro-social world, lying between the macro and the individual.

To be sure, there were intellectual stirrings available at the time of Berger and Luckmann's treatise. There was first a range of symbolic interactionist writings, with George Herbert Mead's *Mind, Self and Society* preeminent. As Mead proposed, there is no thinking, or indeed any sense of being a self, that is, independent of relations with others. For Mead (1934),

No hard-and-fast line can be drawn between our own selves and others, since our own selves exist and enter as such into our experience only in so far as the selves of others exist and enter as such in our experience also.

(p. 164)

Also available was the expanding dialogue that came to be identified as relational psychoanalysis. There had long been discontent with Freud's relative inattention to social as opposed to psychodynamics. However, the most concerted attempt to shift the focus to social dynamics emerged in the *object relations movement* of the 1950s. In this case, theorists variously reasoned that the individual's fundamental drives are more social than pleasure-seeking in their aims. Thus, relational processes move onto center stage from childhood into adult years. In the hands of analysts such as Fairbairn, Mahler and Klein, the focus turned to the origins and dynamics of subjective interrelationships.<sup>7</sup>

While these and other entries into a micro-social understanding of social life were available as theoretical resources, they were also flawed. They all sustained the impasse of mind/world dualism.<sup>8</sup> How can one mental world grasp, penetrate or comprehend the mental world of another? It is this impasse that gave way in the decades following the publication of Berger and Luckmann's prominent work. This transformation in micro-social theorizing can be traced to three specific movements in the social constructionist dialogues. First, as described earlier, there was the liberation of the imagination sparked by constructionist scholarship. The theoretical exploration of the micro-social world stood as an open and yet to be explicated door. Second, a pointed reason for entering this door emerged from the critical movement in constructionism. For a wide range of critics, Western individualism became a prime target for critical reflection. As critical anthropologists made clear, the Western concept of the individual self is a cultural invention, and to presume the existence of mental concepts such as cognition

and emotion in studying other cultures is a subtle form of imperialism. Further, as critics variously proposed (Wallach & Wallach 1983; Bellah et al. 1985; Sampson 2008), the primacy of the individual subject has injurious consequences for Western culture itself. The placement of the psyche at the center of human action lends itself to narcissism, instrumentalism, greed, loneliness, callousness and implicitly a “war of all against all.” The challenge, however, is to generate an alternative vision of human functioning.

Perhaps the major impetus toward a micro-social theorizing – including both communication and human functioning more generally – emerged from the pivotal place of language in the development of constructionist ideas. There was first of all Wittgenstein’s (1953) replacement of the picture theory of language with a use-based vision: The meaning of words arises in their social use. Implicitly, the metaphor of the language game lends itself to a micro-social analysis. Importantly, however, it is the game that takes prominence and not the individual players. Resonating with Wittgenstein’s vision, writers in the Bakhtin circle (Bakhtin 1981) pointed to dialogue – as opposed to mental functioning – as the primary source of meaning. Most importantly, dialogue is conceptualized as a super-individual process. It cannot be performed by a single individual alone. One may thus view relational process as a logical prior to individual functioning. Until there is dialogue, one cannot speak meaningfully of an individual or a self.

These intellectual currents flowed together in what may be viewed as a conceptual innovation of major proportion. In the social sciences, description and explanation have been dominated by a logic of separable units – stimulus, response, the individual, the group, the institution and so on. The relationship between the units has remained problematic, with cause and effect the most widely embraced solution. In contrast, implicit in the metaphors of the language game and the dialogue is the end of entification, or the fundamental separation of units. Rather, we move from “things in themselves” to *relational process*. “This” is only “this” by virtue of its relationship to “that” and vice versa.

In sociology, one could begin to sense the potential of this shift in the early writings of Garfinkel (1967) and colleagues in the ethnomethodology movement. A “suicide” could only be such, for example, by virtue of a social negotiation. As discourse analysts further began to document, one could illuminate the process of negotiation solely with reference to the discursive moves of the participants. Recourse to subjectivity or “meanings in the head” was unnecessary. Such post-structural arguments are extended in Gergen’s (2009) writing on “relational being.” As first argued, discourse about the mind originates within a relational or dialogic process, and its chief function is serving the relational process itself. That is, such discourse functions pragmatically in steering the direction of relational action. In this context, Potter and Wetherell (1987) take “attitudes” out of the head and focus on the positions people take up in discursive relations; Billig (1996) proposes that reasoning is essentially an exercise in rhetoric, and a variety of scholars

have explored memory as a social process (Middleton & Edwards 1990). As Gergen (2009) further proposes, mental discourse is a constituent of bodily performances, and these performances are embedded with larger interaction scenarios. Thus, for example, anger is a culturally scripted pattern of action and embedded within a more or less routine scenario in which others participate. On this account, emotions are not possessions of individuals, but of a relational process. From this position, it is a short step to understanding all meaningful action as originating within, and sustained (or not) within a relational process.<sup>9</sup>

This line of theorizing resonates also with a range of writings on practice theory (Nicolini 2012; Raelin 2016). Practice theory, like constructionism more generally, is not so much a unitary theory as a dialogue among theorists. Central to much of practice theory is the assumption of interlocking actions or performances. At the same time, such theory also recognizes the place of material settings, objects, technologies and the like within the interlocking array. Thus, we move from a specifically micro-*social* realm into a more holistic conception of a relational process. As Buddhist philosophers might put it, we arrive at a consciousness of *codependent origination*.

### Coda: reconstructing constructionism

In retrospect, I must again underscore the way in which the present account itself emerges from a social process. The account is neither a map nor a mirror, but an entry into a continuing reflection on our trajectory through time, its significance and potential. But writing now from a relational perspective, we can also see the way in which Berger and Luckmann constitute what Derrida would call an “absent presence.” The specifics of their initial formulation may no longer drive our scholarly dialogues, but traces of their work pervade and inform these various developments. They offered to the scholarly community a rich discursive structure, but ultimately they are not in control of its meaning. As scholars, we have “run away with it,” and future scholars will, as Wittgenstein would put it, take our own writings “on a holiday.” This inability to control our meaning is not a failing of any kind, but a recognition that it is only together that we keep meaning alive.

### Notes

- 1 In addition to the common (though inconsistent) conflating of constructionism and constructivism, one may wish to contrast a variety of understandings and interpretations of social construction: for example, Hacking (1999), Best and Harris (2012), Gergen (1994a), Heiner (2015), Shotter (2010) and Lock and Strong (2012).
- 2 As Berger and Luckmann note in their Introduction, their work deviates from the mainstream sociological interests of the times.
- 3 Should targets of critique defend themselves, they ran the risk of seeming simply to be protecting self-interest. The one argument left to them was essentially that

employed by the critic, to wit, the critique itself was ideologically or politically motivated.

- 4 Interestingly, Adorno (1985) had criticized Mannheim for not being able to apply his own theory of knowledge to himself. Much the same critique now applies to the Berger and Luckmann proposals.
- 5 For a broad review of research stimulated by social constructionist ideas, see Holstein and Gubrium (2008).
- 6 Berger and Luckmann confront an additional problem in proposing a relationship between society and subjectivity. Remove society, and there is no subjectivity; remove all subjectivity and there is no society. The two are essential redefinitions of each other.
- 7 In more recent years, relational theorists such as Mitchell (1988) and Aron & Harris (2011) abandoned the search for truth in psychoanalysis and centered their concerns on the interdependence of the analyst and analysand in constructing reality.
- 8 Also at hand were the more mystical writings of Martin Buber (1923) and Vygotsky's (1978) illumination of relational learning.
- 9 While not constructionist in their origins, the participatory ontology of Westerman (Westerman & Steen, 2007), Slife's relational ontology (2004) and Hermans' dialogical self-theory (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) all lend themselves to this more radical form of relational theory.

## References

- Adorno, T.W. (1985): *The Sociology of Knowledge and Its Consciousness*. In: Arato, A. & Gebhardt, E. (Eds.) *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. New York: Continuum.
- Andersen, T. (1991): *The Reflecting Team: Dialogues and Dialogues about the Dialogues*. New York: Norton.
- Anderson, H. & Gehart, D. (Eds.) (2006): *Collaborative Therapy: Relationships and Conversations That Make a Difference*. New York: Routledge.
- Aron, L. & Harris, A. (2011): *Relational Psychoanalysis V: Evolution of Process*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Bakhtin, M.M. (1981): *The Dialogic Imagination*. Austin: University of Texas.
- Bellah, R.N. et al. (1985): *Habits of the Heart*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Berger, P.L. & Luckmann, T. (1966): *The Social Construction of Reality*. New York: Doubleday.
- Best, J. & Harris, S.R. (2012): *Making Sense of Social Problems: New Images*. New York: Lynne Rienner.
- Billig, M. (1996) [1988]: *Arguing and Thinking*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Buber, M. (1923): *I and Thou*. New York: Scribner.
- Bushe, G.R. & Marshak, R.H. (Eds.) (2015): *Dialogic Organizational Development: The Theory and Practice of Organizational Change*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Kohler.
- Charon, R. (2006): *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cooperrider, D.L. & Whitney, D. (2005): *A Positive Revolution in Change: Appreciative Inquiry*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

- Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds.) (2005) [2001]: *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- De Shazer, S. (1994): *Words Were Originally Magic*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Dragonas, S. et al. (Eds.) (2015): *Education as Social Construction*. Chagrin Falls, OH: WorldShare Books.
- Durkheim, E. (1915): *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1980): *Power/Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon.
- Garfinkel, H. (1967): *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Gergen, K.J. (1994a) [1993]: *Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge*. London: Sage.
- Gergen, K.J. (2009): *Relational Being, Beyond Self and Community*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gergen, K.J. (2015a): From Mirroring to World-making: Research as Future Forming. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 45(3), pp. 287–310.
- Gilligan, C. (1982): *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Goodman, N. (1978): *Ways of World Making*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Granovetter, M. (1992): Economic Institutions as Social Constructions: A Framework for Analysis. *Acta Sociologica*. 35(1), pp. 3–11.
- Hacking, I. (1999): *The Social Construction of What?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Heiner, R. (2015) [2005]: *Social Problems: An Introduction to Critical Constructionism*. New York: Oxford.
- Henderson, G. & Waterstone, M. (2009): *Geographic Thought: A Praxis Perspective*. New York: Routledge.
- Hermans, H.J.M. & Hermans-Konopka, A. (2010): *Dialogical Self Theory: Positioning and Counter in a Globalized Society*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hermans, C.A.M. et al. (Eds.) (2002): *Social Constructionism and Theology*. Leiden: Brill.
- Herzig, M. & Chasin, L. (2005): *Fostering Dialogue across Divides: A Nuts and Bolts* guide from the Public Conversations Project. [pdf] JAMS Foundation. Available through: [www.intergroupresources.com/rc/Fostering%20Dialogue%20Across%20Divides.pdf](http://www.intergroupresources.com/rc/Fostering%20Dialogue%20Across%20Divides.pdf) [Accessed 29 January 2018].
- Holstein, J.A. & Gubrium, J.F. (Eds.) (2008): *Handbook of Constructionist Research*. New York: Guilford.
- Kelly, A. & Symonds, A. (2003): *The Social Construction of Community Nursing*. London: Palgrave.
- Kuhn, T. (1970) [1962]: *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lewis, R. & Winkelmann, P. (2016): *Lifescaping Practices in School Communities: Implementing Action Research and Appreciative Inquiry*. New York: Routledge.
- Lock, A. & Strong, T. (Eds.) (2012): *Discursive Perspectives in the Therapeutic Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Longino, H.E. (1990): *Science as Social Knowledge*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mannheim, K. (1985) [1936]: *Ideology and Utopia: Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Harcourt.

- Martin, E. (1987): *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*. Boston, MA: Beacon.
- McClosky, D.N. (1985): *The Rhetoric of Economics*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Mead, G.H. (1934): *Mind, Self and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Middleton, D. & Edwards, D. (Eds.) (1990): *Collective Remembering*. London: Sage.
- Mitchell, S.A. (1988): *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis: An Integration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Monk, G.D. et al. (2007): *New Horizons in Multicultural Counseling*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Nicolini, D. (2012): *Practice Theory, Work, and Organization: An Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Quine, W.V.O. (1960): *Word and Object*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Potter, J. & Wetherell, M. (1987): *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behavior*. London: Sage.
- Raelin, J.A. (Ed.) (2016): *Leadership-as-Practice: Theory and Application*. New York: Routledge.
- Sampson, E.E. (2008): *Celebrating the Other: A Dialogic Account of Human Nature*. Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute Publications.
- Seikkula, J. & Arnkil, T. (2006): *Dialogic Meetings in Social Networks*. London: Karnac.
- Shotter, J. (2010): *Social Construction on the Edge*. Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute.
- Slife, B. (2004): Taking Practice Seriously: Toward a Relational Ontology. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 24(2), pp. 157–178.
- Tarr, Z. (2011): *The Critical School: The Critical Theories of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno*. New York: Transaction Publisher.
- Uhlig, P. & Raboin, W.E. (2015): *Field Guide to Collaborative Care: Implementing the Future of Health Care*. Overland Park, KS: Oak Prairie Health Press.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978): *Mind and Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wallach, M. & Wallach, L. (1983): *Psychology's Sanction for Selfishness*. San Francisco, CA: Freeman.
- Wertz, F.J. (2011): The Qualitative Revolution in Psychology. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 39(2), pp. 77–104.
- Westerman, M.A. & Steen, E.M. (2007): Going beyond the Internal-External Dichotomy in Clinical Psychology. *Theory and Psychology*, 17(2), pp. 323–351.
- Winslade, J. & Monk, G.D. (2008): *Practicing Narrative Mediation: Loosening the Grip of Conflict*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Witkin, S. (Ed.) (2011): *Social Construction and Social Work Practice: Interpretations and Innovations*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953): *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- White, M. & Epston, D. (1990): *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. New York: W.W. Norton.