

## Social constructionism in (con)text

### Book review

Gergen, K J (2001) **Social constructionism in context**. London: Sage Publications. ISBN 0-7619-6545-9 pbk. 223 pages.

Michele Vrdojak  
Johannesburg

Fifteen years after Gergen and Shotter's introduction of social constructionism to psychology, it seems an appropriate time to reflect on the journey and the place it holds in social psychology. Achieving just this, and in responding to a challenge to extend his "thinking across disciplinary boundaries, to come to grips with the complexities of social practice and speak out on various cultural issues" (Gergen, 2001:1) Gergen has produced **Social constructionism in context**.

This revised collection of Gergen's social psychology texts is rearranged in three parts, or as he puts it "[p]erhaps the archetype of the Trinity is in ascendance, as I have also chosen to divide the contents of this book into three sections" (p5): 1) social constructionism and the human sciences; 2) social constructionism and social practice and 3) social constructionism and cultural context. The newly formed conglomerate accordingly is said to "function in three significant ways – as *metatheory*, as *social theory* and as societal *practice*" (p2).

Part one begins by addressing the tensions between constructionism and realism, and is framed by Lannamann's retold narrative of the death of his brother as related to the fact that his Christian Scientist parents did not believe in the practices of modern medicine. In this particularly strong chapter, Gergen logically argues for the co-dependence of "constructionist and realist discourses" and hints at the "more promising territories" (p23) in which this will result. This acknowledgement of, and place for realism, however theoretically problematic from the perspective of either ontology, is much needed in addressing those uncomfortable gaps when confronted by the reality of physicality (the "extra-discursivity" for example, of the physical body, or of the concrete structures of particular places/sites of power).

Subsequent chapters cover a diverse range of considerations such as the psyche, the objects and subjects of psychology, therapy as a social construction, global organisation and relational politics. Thus in achieving a certain proximity to broader issues of culture and identity, Gergen does fulfil the aim of touching on a multitude of disciplines.

The collection ends on a weaker, and seemingly slightly rushed note with a chapter entitled "Technology, self and the moral project". The chapter offers a quick overview of

Gergen's accessible and elucidating **The saturated self** (1991), sans the vignettes which lent that text its applicability to everyday life. The chapter appears as a snapshot of Kvale's (1992:25) portrait of the postmodern attitude as "living with the here and now, with a weariness and a playful irony". Yet suddenly, and contrary to this "liberating nihilism", there is a leap from musings on Internet chat-rooms to constructionism's role in the formation of "moral resources for the future" (Gergen, 2001:195). With rushed equation-like claims of the interconnection of meaning, valuing and moral good, the book ends arguing that the previous chapters had demonstrated this point.

Revisiting the functions Gergen sets out to address – meta-theory, social theory and social practice – the beginnings of **Social constructionism in context** evidently supports this claim, with subsequent sections covering much social theory. The leap from the latter to social practice though is less well developed. A crucial theoretical omission here, which would have gone some way to addressing this problem, is Foucault's notion of discursive practices, that is, statements and actions that form and define a distinct field of objects and practices through a specific regime of truth and a definite set of subject positions (McHoul & Grace, 1993). The old failure to link theory and practice seems the book's central failing, and it is a failing perhaps indicative of the social constructionism's political shortcomings as a whole.

It should be noted that each chapter forms a sound and independent theoretical argument. It is just the flow of the book, its shortcoming in view of presenting a cohesive and satisfying theoretical 'whole', that makes **Social constructionism in context**, as has probably become evident, something of a disappointment.

## REFERENCES.

Gergen, K J (1991) **The saturated self**. New York: Basic Books.

Kvale, S (ed) (1992) **Psychology and postmodernism**. London: Sage.

McHoul, A & Grace, W (eds) (1993) **A Foucault primer: Discourse, power and the subject**. New York: New York University Press.

Social constructionism is closely related to social constructionism in the sense that people are working together to construct artifacts. However, there is an. First, social constructionists reject the traditional positivistic approaches to knowledge that are basically non-reflexive in nature. Second, social constructionists take a critical stance in relation to taken-for-granted assumptions about the social world, which are seen as reinforcing the interests of dominant social groups. Third, social constructionists uphold the belief that the way we understand the world is socially constructed. Social Constructivism. After the end of the Cold War and following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the situation turned much more fluid and open. It soon became clear that the parsimonious neorealist theory was not at all clear about the future developments of the balance of power. Constructivism as Social Theory. We can distinguish between theories at different levels of abstraction. Social theory is the more general theory about the social world, about social action, and about the relationship between structures and actors. Substantive IR theory is theory about some aspect of international relations. Social constructionism is a theory of knowledge in sociology and communication theory that examines the development of jointly-constructed understandings of the world that form the basis for shared assumptions about reality. The theory centers on the notion that meanings are developed in coordination with others rather than separately within each individual.