

Social Constructionist Psychology

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This interview is a slightly modified transcript from the third Psyche Talk, hosted at the Department of Communication and Psychology at Aalborg University, November 08, 2024. Psyche Talks are hosted as biannual events, where prominent psychological researchers are invited to discuss fundamental questions about the nature and subject matter of psychology through an interview-based format. The focus of this interview is on Social Constructionist Psychology and its development over the past decades. In this interview, Kenneth J. Gergen (emeritus Professor in Psychology at Swarthmore College) is interviewed by Carolyn Demuth (Associate Professor of Cultural and Developmental Psychology, Aalborg University).

Carolyn Demuth: (after the introduction) A very warm welcome to Kenneth Gergen also from my part. You are currently here in Aalborg to give a keynote at a conference and have a very busy schedule, so we really appreciate that you are available for this interview today.

The first time I heard Kenneth Gergen talk was in the late 1990s when I was a graduate student at the Free University in Berlin and Kenneth Gergen gave a keynote at a conference that was hosted there. Ever since, social constructionism has had an impact on my work and on how I view life more generally. It is a great pleasure, and I feel very honored and very privileged to conduct this interview with you today.

I would like to start with a more biographical question: your academic career spans over many decades. You actually started out as an experimental social psychologist. What you later developed became one of the biggest challenges to positivistic psychology, however. What was it that stirred your interest in questioning common assumptions in psychology back then?

Kenneth Gergen: Yes, why did I become such a villain? Well, you said this dialogue could be autobiographical so let me share a little bit about my life that I have never talked about before. I grew up in a family in which my father was a mathematician and my older brother autistic, as I now see it. My father kind of knew everything; he had a Germanic background and what he said was simply true by definition. And my older brother rather modeled him. So, I lived in a condition of what you might call epistemic suppression. I had no voice because everything was already known. Trying to find my way out of this, I began arguing with my older brother. He was a smart guy so it was like early training in becoming an academic, learning how to engage in these battles. Now I want to add, however, that I also came away battling myself. It is one thing to be in an argument with others, but I adopted a resistance in responding to whatever I would think as well. In some ways it was self-defeating, because I could never be sure of my grounds. But this kind of self-challenging also became the source of moving forward. So, there has always been this internal dialogue going on, between being critical and self-critical. This was preparation for villainy. Now, before I graduate school, I was required to enter military service. I was thus late entering a graduate program. By that time I was also married and had a child, and eager to get to work in becoming a scientific psychologist. I did not choose experimental work, but that was the future of psychology at the time. It was an enchanting future in certain respects, because it was widely believed that empirical psychology was a natural science, and could make progress in the same way that natural sciences did. This was the optimism of the 1950s. However, in the middle of this experimental program, I was struck by two things. First, I had professor who taught History and Systems in Psychology, Sigmund Koch, who didn't believe in the positivist program. He was a critic, but required to teach it. He thus had a way of teaching but simultaneously smirking, like a non-verbal commentary to undermine everything he was saying. He got my critical juices flowing. It was great fun but gave me the sense of, "wait a minute, it's my profession that's in question." The second invitation to deviance was really interesting. I began reading Erving Goffman at that time, and my professor, Edward Jones said that he wanted to do experiments on self-presentation. That seemed straight forward, but when you start to think about it, Goffman's subject is a very clever person. He stood in contrast to the subject we more or less presumed to exist in an experiment, that is, pretty much the product of cause-effect relationships. However, a Goffman subject

in an experiment will play games with you, and change his mind as events play out. He is not subject to experimental prediction and control. Here began the thinking that was ultimately embedded in my article on social psychology as history (Gergen, 1973).

I didn't plan for the bombshell that it became. I was fairly successful at doing experiments and had a position at Harvard, so I was an "insider." When I published the article (Gergen, 1985), it was as if somebody in your family had turned on you. One of your own had stabbed you. Critique was angry and intense, and in some ways, I was pushed out of the mainstream. However, in defending myself, I also found that I no longer wanted to be there. Where I thought I had simply offered a rather interesting argument, one that we might discuss, I had not realized this was to be a knife fight and we were to be enemies. Given this treatment, I became totally free to let the critical juices flow. This was not difficult, because there had been little reflection on foundational assumptions in psychology. In the 1970s, when Thomas Kuhn's work came into view, you could detect a lot of distrust in what was going on in social science. Kuhn just opened the avenue to further reflection. For me, his idea of a paradigm was a natural for me, suggesting that a scientist could only describe the world in the terms shared within his paradigm. That is, if I were not a biologist, I could not describe biology; and if I am a biologist, the world becomes biological. More generally, this means the world does not determine your understanding of it; you incorporate the world from within your own perspective. This was the beginning of my social constructionist adventures. I did not mean to become so belligerent, the world invited me to be so.

Carolyn Demuth: And we are glad that you did what you did - Thank you. With your contributions to Social Constructionism starting more than 50 years ago, you challenged a lot of ideas in psychology, regarding what is truth, what can you know about the world, what is the self, etc. Now, theoretical approaches, theories, usually develop in one's own work over time. Can you describe in your own terms how your theoretical understanding of social constructionism has developed over the decades and whether it has changed in any way.

Kenneth Gergen: Yes. but let's return to the first step, the shift in epistemology from the positivist idea of observing the world and describing it, to a constructionist orientation in which conversations within your group determine the way you observe and describe.

There were many other ideas in motion at the time, and I began to pick up various logics and to integrate them into what I would call a full-blown constructionism. One resource was critical theory, and the realization that whatever paradigm one occupies, there are political implications. So, the constructionist orientation now takes on a political consciousness. A new dimension is added to the dialogues. Not only you are defining the world for what it is, your constructions are also entering into society in ways that may affect that society. That was an important addition.

A further addition to the mix was supplied by what was taking place in literary theory and semiotics. I am not referring to social linguistics of that time, but the literary theory of Derrida, reader-response theory, and so on. Here you begin to say, alright if we are talking about constructing worlds in language, literary theory is relevant. Now you have another dimension to integrate into constructionist theory - the demands on description and explanation of language itself. Narrative would be the obvious case in point. Narrative study really came out of French structuralist literary theory. What, they asked, are the basic elements of a story? When you begin to think in terms of the basic elements of a story, you first realize that if I am going to describe the world across time, I have almost no choice but to use a narrative. And narratives have a pre-fixed structure, a form that precedes my telling about the world. There are rules for telling a good story. So, in some ways it does not matter what the world is. In psychology, for example, it doesn't matter what takes place in the life of a child across time, because if you are going to describe it, you are already locked in by language as to much that you can say. You can look at theories of human development, for example, as different forms of narratives: A stage-wise Piagetian movement upward, in contrast to a Freudian movement where you begin at sub-zero and fight your way out to ego-control. So, literary theory was an important addition to the constructionist dialogues.

Now you have not only the social construction of reality, but layered with political and ideological implications, and bound within linguistic constraints. That became for me, the fully integrated theoretical package with which I worked. You could look at much of that early work in two ways. We largely viewed it as liberating. There is a vast literature on the social construction of various taken for granted realities. Take the emotions, for example. You can show how they are constructed in literature, how the discourse of emotion is political, that such constructions differ from culture to culture and across

history. So, emotions lose their objectivity. Constructionism denaturalizes the world. For us this was very liberating. It meant that there are no necessarily accepted truths; no traditions that could not be questioned; no assumptions that were non-arbitrary. It was a real breath of fresh air. At the same time, this denaturalizing orientation was also destructive in a way. It takes the wind out of all sails; it is demobilizing. For example, take the idea of child development. After you see developmental theory as a narrative or story, how can you take the study of development seriously? Because all you can do is tell a story about it. Or, if emotions are social constructions, what sense does it make to study emotions as objects of inquiry? And this is just personal, but I also felt the critical movement was really getting out of hand - that critique was becoming ubiquitous. I often attended critical psychology conferences, and within a period of ten years psychologists were beginning to criticize each other. The feminists didn't like the Marxists; the Marxists didn't like the constructionists; the constructionists didn't like the individualists, and so on. We were all fighting each other. I began to feel that just continuing with critical liberation was a dead end.

But there was another movement taking place. At the outset, constructionist ideas were meta-theoretical; they were formed as an alternative to positivism. They were essentially a way of looking at the nature of knowledge, a way of undermining the grip of positivism on research and understanding. At the same time, however, professional practitioners were absorbing constructionism, not as a meta-theory, but resources for reflecting on their practice. I became drawn into those discussions, and then quite interested, as it seemed to me that if constructionism was going to have consequences in the world, it would be in the field of applications. Because those professionals - therapists, community builders, family therapists, educators, organizational consultants, etc. - were changing the world in their own way. If you want to have an impact, move the discussion into the practice world. If theory is going to make a difference, have it make a difference practically. So, I spent a lot of time working with practitioners, trying to develop a relationship that would ignite theory but also inspire practice - a theory-practice interchange. This seemed far superior to the positivist view in which you first establish truth and then apply it. Practitioners are positioned as secondary actors - waiting around for scientists to tell them about the world. But in the constructionist case, you have a direct relationship to the world of practice. And it is not hierarchical but mutually supportive. So, this work consumed a lot of my

time. Now there is a later shift into relational theory but let's save that. But these were the early changes in constructionist work for me.

Carolyn Demuth: Thank you very much. I would like to take up on what you just said about what is the point of studying emotions if emotions are a social construction. The same applies for other concepts that we usually teach and do research on in psychology. The subject matter in mainstream psychology, positivistic psychology, are usually concepts like cognition, emotion, motives, and so on. From a social constructionist perspective, *what* should be the subject matter of psychology then, if that is not the subject matter?

Kenneth Gergen: What should be the subject matter? Is there a "subject matter," as a matter out there that we should study? Let us change the question, as the assumption of a subject matter rather springs from positivist realism. For me, the constructionist question is, what kind of future do you want to see? What do you want to create? What do you envision for the world? Because the moment you begin studying, you are creating a reality of some kind, with potential implications for society. So, is studying a pre-existing *it* necessarily what you want to do? Let me return to the question of theory for a moment. Doing theory is not simply gathering ideas and drawing them together. The question for theory is: What kind of ideas would function to change society in ways that you think would enhance it? Primary then: what world do you wish to see.

Let me be a little clearer here in terms of research implications. In terms of research, there should be no requirements in terms of methods, theory, or practice. But my strong sense is that I would begin within one's community - and this could be a global community - and participate in that community's realities with whatever resources you have to work with. So, the research problems you select would be problems within the vocabulary of that community. And what you offer them are potentials or possibilities. You have methods to use if you wish (or not), and they could include positivist methods (nothing rules them out) along with qualitative methods. Again, the question is, to what kind of world do you wish your research to contribute? Pursue that world; use any method, any theory, any practice, that moves you in a direction that you feel is right. Which is to say that constructionism for me is a pragmatism, but a pragmatism with a conscience: a *reflective pragmatism*. After that, the door is open.

Carolyn Demuth: Yesterday in your keynote, you stated that research is not about objects, but it is about changing the future. You argued that social science, carried out within a positivistic framework, is always falling behind because it treats things as if they were stable, as objects. In a world of increasingly rapid change, research focuses on what is currently the case, but it rapidly loses relevance. You gave the examples of anorexia and cognitive dissonance. Nobody talks about those things anymore. You compared positivistic science to journalism in slow motion. Can you elaborate on that and what do you suggest as an alternative in order to change the future?

Kenneth Gergen: Yes, in the last decade this concern with the social and political implications has become acute. You can begin to see the potential end of humanity at this point. And any science - particularly a social science - that is not tuned into the threats we face, is irresponsible. So, what are we doing, then, that can make a contribution in these conditions? Now, one of my concerns has been with the ways the world is rapidly changing. I could talk at length here about technology and its effects on society, but in any case there are unpredictable disruptions of many, many kinds. At the same time, we have an understanding of social science that is largely based on the natural sciences, that is, presuming a fixed object of study to which we can fix a continued gaze. To conduct re/search is to search again and again, with the presumption that we'll know more and more about that object. But in a world of change, at what point do you define the object? I mean, you might have studied something at time one, but by the time you got around to analyzing the data, writing it up, sending it to a journal, revising the manuscript, and two years later publishing it in some obscure journal, the object has probably changed or disappeared. And few people will ever read the journal. Aren't we largely wasting our time? This is rather discouraging. We have hundreds of thousands of social scientists using old-style assumptions and pretty much doing nothing of significance. I have a friend in policy making, and asked him why he didn't use the findings coming out of psychology and sociology in terms of making policy. He responded that social science is like journalism in slow motion. "By the time we have the data, the problem is different. We need findings that are up to date." His reply was one spur to my conceptualizing a *future-forming orientation* to science. Returning to what I said before, let us not try to focus so fully on what is happening now. Let us think about creating the world we wish to see. Do

not try to predict it; make it happen. Do research that enters society to create the future. So, that is the general line of thinking.

Carolyn Demuth: Thank you. The core of your work has always been the primacy of relational process. You say all human intelligibility, including claims to knowledge, is generated within relationships. Everything comes out from relationships. It is from relationships that humans derive their conceptions of what is real, rational, and good. In your book *Relational Being* you radically expanded this idea in many ways. I see the relational theory as perhaps your leading intellectual interest these days. What is your vision here, and why do you think it is important?

Kenneth Gergen: Okay, this is relevant to the earlier question about changes in constructionism over time. Working with practitioners I had realized their potentials for social change. Up to that point, constructionist inquiry had largely been directed to the constructions, that is, the ways in which we variously construct the world and their social implications. But the *social process* of constructing worlds had largely been left out. In all that epistemic talk, few were addressing the social process. What do we understand by the idea of a “social relationship?” At least in the West, we chiefly inherit the idea of a social relationship as the coming together of independent persons. When two or more individuals come together they are creating a social relationship. In effect, a social relationship is a biproduct of the more fundamental reality of individuals. At the time I was becoming increasingly anti-individualist, questioning the implications of individualism for the future. I was particularly unsettled by the construction of the individual as the fundamental atom of the social world – to whom we should devote our attention, and whose welfare is primary.

So, my attempt in writing *Relational Being*, was to flip the entire vision, to make a case for social process as prior to the individual. Process prior to person. This is a little hard to grasp, but let me try to make it simpler. If I enter a debate, I may attack you. If I see you at a party, I may shake your hand and talk about the weather. If I am in a tennis match, I will be your opponent. If we are dancing tango, I will be your partner. The process of debate creates me as an assailant, the process of tango may create me as someone who will step on your toes. But you get the point. The process in which we participate begins to create who we are. So, the dance creates the dancers, the game creates the players. Let

me take this one level higher and you can begin to see the implications. The dance in which international relations traditionally function is primarily a competition. Every unit or nation acts in its own self-interests, maximizing gain and minimizing loss. If we continue this competitive game, we will never see any significant change in climate policies, because every nation will first of all protect itself. It will cheat; it will fail to meet agreements; each will critique the other for not having done enough. All basically self-maximizing. So, the common good is never met. In effect, if you do not change the process in some way, human survival becomes questionable. A dance of death. So, it is not a matter of paying attention to the individual nation, but the processes in which we are engaged.

This represents a shift in the whole way of looking at relations, paying attention to the process of relating prior to or above the individual participants. Not you *and* me, but the you-me nexus? Perhaps you can begin to see why I am so involved with this. To me, we have left out a huge and very important focus of study, as our fields of knowledge are largely entity or object oriented. You have sociology to study social structures, psychology to study individual minds, anthropologists to study individual cultures. It's almost always the bounded unit to which we direct attention, without regard to the process of relating that creates what we take to be the unit.

Carolyn Demuth: The way in which we relate to each other nowadays is very much through new technologies. Already 30 years ago, you argued that the development of communication technologies will ultimately lead to the saturated self and people not engaging in deep relationships anymore. You wrote about the multiphrenic self in that context (Gergen, 1991/2001). Communication technologies have in the meantime been further developed and the use of social media is even more widespread these days. Where do you see the biggest threat in today's use of social media in terms of relational beings?

Kenneth Gergen: When I wrote *The Saturated Self* (Gergen, 1991), I was rather optimistic; I felt that all these communication technologies would bring the world together. I would become part of you and you of me. We would become kind of multi-beings in our relations with each other – carrying each other in all our relations. I was pretty positive when I finished that book. When it was re-issued 10 years later (Gergen, 2001), I had quite different views. It seemed that instead of merging, people were dividing

into isolated camps. The first issue of that book was written before the Internet, a source of dramatic expansion in social communication. In addition, there were neither email nor cell phones. At present we are in instantaneous contact with the entire world 24-7. So, communication is everywhere. Let me wiggle back one step. When I talked about the modernist culture of the mid-20th century, the hope was that we could use science to organize self and society, to bring everything into a rationally organized state. We could solve all problems with science. But now, in terms of scientific advances in communication technologies, everybody can organize a reality anywhere at any time, develop a following, form a group. And this process is out of control. There is no government control over the process, no business or money that can stop it. This continuous process of relating - of co-creating realities, visions, ways of thinking about the future - is out of the box. Possibly Pandora's. Now, to return to your question, I am bothered by the future of collective society. What is a society unless there is common agreement about who we are or what we desire? If we have no agreement, what will become of the society? What I see taking place is a fragmentation into an infinite number of groups. With a cellphone, you can form a group in 20 minutes, and have people in the street with signs or guns. And within a group, it is easy to construct "the other" in terms of your perspective. No, I am not talking only about political groups alone. I am also talking about religious groups, sports groups, academic enclaves, and so on. These fragmented groups can act like non-communicating monads. How are we to go on if that is the nature of social life? I do not have an easy answer.

There is also the way in which the media invite the worst kind of relating. For example, I can say things about you for which I cannot be held responsible because I can hide my identity behind an address. I can attack you unmercifully, I can hound you, harass you, tell lies about you with no responsibility. You have probably read about what has happened to Twitter (or X) in the United States - increasingly filled with rancor, hatred, racism, and sexism, with no responsibility. So, we now have a society pulling apart into alienated and angry subgroups. This frightens me. You asked what bothers me. Well, this is the case.

Carolyn Demuth: Yes, so that are implications related to society. What are implications in terms of the self? If already 30 years ago, i.e. before the existence of the internet, you talked about the multiphrenic self as a consequence of new communication technologies,

what does that mean in terms of the multiphrenic self today – in light of the even further expansion of communication technologies?

Kenneth Gergen: I had the idea in writing the *Saturated Self* - and which developed further over time - of abandoning the idea of fixed self-identity, along with the Eriksonian idea that at a certain stage of life you should find your identity. It seemed to me that having a firm, core self is simultaneously the inability to move in relationship. It is to say, "I am just *this* person, regardless of who you are or what you care about. So deal with it." If we indeed co-create the world and you are immobile, we may have a difficult time. And if we are both immobile, how will we go on? So I have championed a vision of a more fluid self. We are always moving, shifting selves as we move from one context to another, carrying with us all the relationships of our past. They are available in the same way that I carry all the words I am speaking. All originate in different relationships. I did not make them up. I am just drawing from a resource of relational history, using that resource to try to make sense here. And I do so without asking who I am exactly. My words are just actions in the continuous dialogic flow of the world. So, do we need to have an established sense of self? I am not sure.

I watch with great interest what is happening in the United States – and possibly here as well – regarding the disappearance of gender identity. For a thousand years the West has shared a common gender binary - male and female. Within a single generation that binary has become nonsense. There was a recent study that identified some 73 different classifications of gender shared in the youth generation. Now, once you have 73 different classifications, you can forget the idea of gender distinctions. The vocabulary is too large to be useful. Whatever I am, the young person might say, I am within the context. What will this mean for our future lives together? I watch with interest, curiosity, and hope.

Carolyn Demuth: Would you say that the fragmented multi-phrenic self is simply a consequence of historical and societal changes that we now have to live with – a natural process in a way, or is there also a downside to it? Is there a negative side to it or is it just the way things develop?

Kenneth Gergen: Yes, there are downsides, depending on what criteria you use. Take the value of coherence, for example, championed by modernist rationalism. An ideal person should be like a good theory, coherent in every way. A good mind, a rational mind,

is logically coherent. But what does this mean for social life if you are a multi-being? You will always carry a voice that denies whatever it is you are saying, a part of you that could criticize what you are doing at any moment. And I confess that I do. So, I may be coherent in any given context, but I am not sure what will happen in the next. One could make an argument here for irony. Perhaps we could think of irony as a positive condition - knowing that whoever we are in a given moment, we are not. But now we locate a new downside. I fear the effects of incoherence on trust within relationships. Perhaps you are similar to me in disliking the feeling that people are just making things up for me at the moment. This unsettles me a bit. But perhaps I am old fashioned.

Carolyn Demuth: In your work, you have always been very visionary. This, e.g., is something you made us aware of already 30 years ago. Another thing you already dealt with back then is what you called the *Cycle of Progressive Infirmary* (Gergen, 1994). With the dissemination of information about categories of mental illness people come to see themselves in these terms, and as a result they seek help from the mental health professions which are in turn expanded in numbers with expansion of the mental health industry, and diagnostic categories are developed and disseminated and the society hence becomes progressively infirmed. I remember when I as a student heard your talk in the 1990s, you were already discussing that the DSM, back then it was DSM-4 (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), is ever expanding and that we have an increasing number of new diagnostics leading to an ever-increasing pathologization of individuals in our society. Where do you see the biggest challenge here today? And what would you consider to be contributions of social constructionism to get out of that dilemma?

Kenneth Gergen: I would like to return to the constructionist logic for a second: to study mental illness is to create mental illness. To study it is to create its reality, which is also to furnish the conditions in which people will come to believe in that reality, will come to understand themselves in that way. So, how to get away from that? It is especially difficult to escape, because the drug companies now have an economic investment in the reality of mental illness. I was invited to a psychiatric conference a number of years ago and the first thing they gave me was a suitcase. I didn't know why I was offered a suitcase; I already had one. Well, soon I found that I needed it because there was a giant hall in which all the drug companies had booths, and in every booth you are offered a gift with

their logo. You were to take home the loot in your suitcase. And that is what we are up against.

Of course, I am not the only one doing critical work here. There are many critics indeed. I do think the constructionists have added significantly to the conversation. For one, is the attempt to create alternative constructions for what is commonly called mental illness. I have been part of various movements here, but most prominent is the Hearing Voices Movement – where the attempt is to reconstruct what is commonly called schizophrenia. Rather than looking at it as a mental illness, it can be understood in terms of natural neurodiversity. Some people hear voices, others do not. This does not make it an illness. There is also a group of therapists who refuse to diagnose their clients. Instead, they use the same diagnosis for all their clients. In this way they receive insurance payment, but by using a diagnosis like “character disorder” for all their clients, the system of diagnostic categorization begins to break down. An approach I like very much – especially congenial with constructionism - is called Open Dialogue, originating in Finland but now practiced internationally. Rather than a psychiatric diagnosis, you create a group. The psychiatrist is joined, for example, by a social worker, family members of the client, the client’s friends, possibly the client’s teacher or professor, and the client. And the group discusses the problem, it’s possible origins, and options for action. So you do have the psychiatrist’s opinion, but it doesn’t dominate. It is just one contribution to the dialogue among many. And you have the entire group as a supportive force for change. I look at that as wonderfully promising,

Yet, while promising, these moves still leave us with the drug companies. Ultimately, I think it will become a policy issue for countries. I don’t know how it is here, but the costs of treating mental illness in our country have gone sky high. And the economy cannot tolerate it. The amounts we are paying for treatments of depression, bipolarity, attention deficit disorder and so on, are unsustainable. More than one in ten school kids is now receiving pharmacological support. So, my hope is that policymakers will take an interest in the problem.

Carolyn Demuth: Another area where your work invites us to reconstruct how we talk about things, how we construct a social reality, is the positive aging movement. Together with your wife Mary, you published an online newsletter on positive aging for 20 years

(<https://www.taosinstitute.net>), where you challenge the longstanding view of aging as decline in terms a deficit discourse. In your 2010 book chapter, *Positive Aging: Resilience and Reconstruction* (Gergen & Gergen, 2010), you write that there is nothing about changes in the human body that requires a concept of aging or decline. As an alternative, you argue it is possible to discover and construct myriads of ways of creating later life as a period of unparalleled growth and enrichment. One example you give is that rather than talking about lower income and the limitations that come with it you can take pride in not needing so many material things and take joy in relationships and more quality time at home and so forth. Now that might be quite challenging for somebody who is sitting at home and does not know how to pay the bills. My question is, by talking differently about these changes in what happens as you get older - cognitively, physically, financially - can we change everything? Is there a limit to social construction? Because there are certain physical limits one has to face. I am thinking for instance that there is a reality that one might not be able to hike a 3000-meter-high peak anymore.

Kenneth Gergen: So, there are changes about which you cannot do anything?

Carolyn Demuth: Yes. So, what would be your answer to that?

Kenneth Gergen: Well, let me talk about positive aging for a minute. That was a project my wife and I developed as we began to grow older. Now, most all the research literature on aging had supported a view of aging as a downward slope. Consider here the commonly shared narrative of human development, in which the early years are characterized as growth, adulthood as a plateau, and then you are over the hill. So, we are informed, the last 30 years of life will be descent. We don't look forward to that. With signs of aging, "my god, I am going downhill." What kind of narrative is that for our lives? So Mary and I thought, why not try to reconstruct the narrative so that that final period is one of wonderment, of growth and development - perhaps the best years of your life. So, how to do that? We ended up generating an open source letter in which we gathered all the scientific findings - whatever we could find - that might add weight to the idea. (Recall, the approach here is pragmatic.) For example, there was a lot of literature coming out of Germany on aging and the development of wisdom. To be sure, many studies showed minute declines in reaction time over age. But here we had development of wisdom. And there were also data showing that if one has a positive view of aging, you

actually live longer. So, why not accentuate that? We had some success with the newsletter; people liked the “good news.” Ultimately, we had volunteers who wanted to reproduce it for their people, and the newsletter went into seven languages. In Taiwan, an academic center opened up on positive aging, and so on. After a decade or so, this orientation had become common; it was everywhere available. So, we didn’t continue. But here is an example of using empirical data to create the future you wish to see.

Now to return to your question about the limits? Well, God knows ageing can be difficult. Pain is not exactly a picnic. But the constructionist point is that, yes, you can just grovel with the calamities or downturns, and be depressed and pessimistic, but is that where you want to be? Are there not other ways in which you can construct these changes, ways that would be easier to live with possibly meaningful in some deeper way? Many of you may know Arthur Frank’s book *The Wounded Storyteller* (Frank, 1995), about how to live with an incurable illness in a way that gives you some meaning in life. Where it becomes really interesting to me is the case of pain, because the biological idea that the firing of pain receptors automatically creates pain must have limits. If someone came up and smacked me in the head, I would probably fold over in pain. If I were in a boxing match, head smacking is just part of the sport. You have a rugby player after an afternoon of being smacked who would exclaim, “I had a great afternoon, let’s have a beer.” So clearly there is a strong component of meaning in our experience of pain. This becomes very interesting, because pain management is a huge issue in society, economically costly and reliant on drugs that can be addictive. So, what would be the possibilities for pain management if we focused on practices of meaning making? I don’t have an answer, but I find it fascinating to watch the developments. Meditation has been shown some success, but there are others. What are the limits?

Carolyn Demuth: A point of critique that has been raised regarding social constructionism is: If everything is socially constructed, how can you then talk about the common good? And how can we talk about morality? If every sense of normativity, of morality, of what is good, and how we should live our life, is only a social construct, doesn’t this lead us to a complete cultural relativism? And how can we still be moral beings if every notion of what is good, is a social construction?

Kenneth Gergen: Yes, the question of moral relativism. A common critique of constructionism is that there is no moral backbone. Everything seems accepted, because you have no foundations for opposition. Well, constructionism's argument is not that everything is equal. It is mainly to point out that there are variations around the world and throughout history as to the nature of the good. And variations will continue to develop, as new groups of people are formed. Constructionism removes the foundations for any of these claims, other than social agreement. This is not to disregard the claims, but to remove the rationality for claiming one to be superior over others. Now once you remove these grounds, you open a space for being a little more humble about your declarations of the good, a little more curious about the other and what they gain from their beliefs, and possibly a space in which to formulate a way to go on together other than mutual annihilation.

Let me return to relational theory for a moment. Now, relational theory is also a construction. But for me it a useful construction in terms of shifting our orientation to the directions we are taking in analysis and practice. At the same time, the theory provides an ethic, not a foundational ethic, but an invitational. The logic is essentially this: In the process of relating, we create the good. And because we create multiple goods, we may find others evil - which we do. We become antagonistic and mutually annihilative, which we do. In our antagonism we destroy the process of creating meaning – which is to say creating the good. Ironically, then, the multiplication of goods creates the condition for the decay of any good at all. The process by which we create the good is diminished. So, the relational ethic is an invitation to nurture this process, to value the process by which the good is created. Let us search for and establish ways of saving that process out of which we can sustain value in our worlds of difference. In effect, the process of co-creating ethics stands over and above any particular ethical claim. It becomes the prior to any particular claim of the good, as it is the process out of which the good comes. So, a relational view of ethics, as I begin to work it out, provides a way of valorizing dialogic and collaborative practices that bring differing peoples together, without making a claim as to who is wrong or right.

Carolyn Demuth: I would like to come back to the point that you mentioned earlier: you find it very important to enter into dialogue with practitioners. And that is also a very strong focus of the Taos Institute that you founded and that you are director of (<https://www.taosinstitute.net>). One of the aims of the Taos Institute is its commitment to practice. It also reaches beyond the field of psychology and has implications for the broader field of society. I would like to hear a little bit more about what kinds of activities the institute engages in that you feel make a difference to society more generally. And do you think the institute furnishes a model of some kind for others and specifically for academic researchers?

Kenneth Gergen: Well, the Taos Institute really emerged from that period in which I became fascinated by the potentials of professional practices to create change. The Taos Institute was an attempt to bring together academics and practitioners from across the range of professions in dialogue – for mutual illumination, sharing of ideas, sharing of practices. Practices were springing up, as I said, in narrative therapy, brief therapy, and so on. You also had organizational consultants using appreciative inquiry, educators interested in multi-perspective pedagogy, community builders and peace makers in transformative dialogue, and so on. And they could share with each other. “How do you do that?” “We can take what you are doing and use it here.” There was a place for exchange across practices and with theory. That was the idea, and now it has now had a life of almost 30 years. There are almost a thousand associates spread over the world, engaging in these conversations. We are formally an educational organization, providing resources not only for those within but for the public. At present, we do much of our work online. Speaker series, dialogues, book reviews, and so on. For ten years we had a PhD program for practitioners. We were working with a university in the Netherlands that was open to this possibility. Over 100 PhDs were graduated from that program, but the university finally closed it down. There are also educational programs, but the initiative that I like the most is what we call WorldShare Books. Here we publish books online free for downloading. They are essentially open access. The books are usually concerned with practice, but some are theoretical. For example, we have republished some of John Shotter's out of print books and give them away. And we can do this in any language. So, now there are over 100 books in 15 languages, including Farsi. Thousands of them go out

to the world. I like that project a lot. When the Institute does make money, we give it away. We give grants to people for their work. So, all is in motion, a work in progress.

Carolyn Demuth: In my next question, I would like to briefly touch on qualitative research in psychology: we as qualitative researchers owe you a lot. You have significantly contributed to foster qualitative inquiry in psychology. You fought for 10 years to get a section within the The American Psychological Association for Qualitative Researchers and eventually succeeded in having it included in Division 5. The name of the division was actually also renamed. One year later, the APA journal, *Qualitative Psychology*, was launched. Both are significant milestones for qualitative inquiry in psychology. You yourself talk about qualitative inquiry as a movement. Can you tell me a bit about why you are so invested in the qualitative movement in terms of psychology in general and beyond?

Kenneth Gergen: Yes, our attempt to get qualitative research accepted by the American Psychological Association was a major activity for 10 years. We had made a lot of headway in proposing constructionist ideas as an alternative to positivism. But within American psychology in particular, there was strong resistance to anything but straightforward positivist research. Experimentation was the gold standard. Nothing else counted. For constructionists this is enormously and unjustifiably constraining. I won't go into the details of how we finally succeeded, but you asked about why I was invested. At the outset, if we could manage to get qualitative research in the door of scientific psychology, it would be like a Trojan horse, bringing with it an enormous array of attractive possibilities. There is no end to the number and ranges of ways of doing qualitative research. It is important to note here that the term *qualitative* is a misnomer. The idea of qualitative research emerged from an early view that you could measure individual's activity in terms of quantity, usually referring to the objective measure of overt behavior. However, the character of subjective states could only be revealed qualitatively. The distinction goes back to the early 1900s. But today the phrase *qualitative research* refers to pluralism – as contrasted to a positivist singularity. It includes not only phenomenology, which has been there since the beginning, but action research, narrative research, discourse analysis, autoethnography, performance, arts-based research, and so on. There is no principled end to it. Every research method carries with it its own ontology of what is real, embedded values, and implications for how others

are to be treated. So, what you have in the qualitative movement is a massive expansion in voices, offering different resources, logics, values, and ways to move forward.

It is also important to note that the participants in the movement are not embattled with each other. It is a rather wonderful space (with some exceptions) in which there is an implicit understanding that while you see the world in one way, and I in another way, this does not make you wrong. This understanding almost carries a way of life with it - a multiplicity of voices and values, working in mutual appreciation. And I believe most students in psychology would far rather be carrying out research within this community than boxed in by traditional measuring, experimenting, counting, and so on.

For me, in terms of pragmatic potential, qualitative methods also have special potentials in future forming. Much qualitative research, for example, is linked closely to what is happening in society and the world. The focus on general theory favored by positivism removes you from society. You can do studies on cognitive dissonance, for example, that have nothing to do with anything outside the laboratory. But if you listen to people's narratives about their lives, you are into people's lived worlds. I can use narrative research to reveal immigrants' experiences of what it is like to be an unwanted stranger in a country, and this can be made public. The research thus functions in future forming way, enhancing solidarity and increasing understanding. In the qualitative sphere, the possibilities are more future forming, more accepting in terms of honoring multiple voices. So, yes, I champion the movement.

Carolyn Demuth: That is music in my ears, of course. A last question in light of the limited time: Your work is not only closely related to qualitative inquiry, but also to cultural psychology. At Aalborg University, we have a center for cultural psychology (<https://www.communication.aau.dk/research/research-centres/ccp>) and offer a master program in cultural psychology. Cultural psychology is an umbrella term for various different traditions addressing the relationship between mind and society. What in your view is the contribution of social constructionism to the field of cultural psychology?

Kenneth Gergen: I think that contribution for me would be as a dialogic partner.

Carolyn Demuth: What do you mean by that?

Kenneth Gergen: Well, 30 years ago I did a paper with an Indian, Turkish, and New Zealander on psychology in a cultural context. There we began to look at not only the ontology of Western psychology as a cultural construction, but the idea of empirical science as a cultural artefact. And the very idea of research – “I conduct research on you” – as a culturally embedded idea. Now, these were constructionist arguments. But these arguments later reappear in the development of indigenous psychology. Constructionism provides support for the whole indigenous movement. Likewise, there is support for the colonialist critique of Western psychology. So, these movements are quite congenial with the constructionist vocabulary. All this must be taken into account in doing cultural psychology. You can scarcely do cultural psychology without this background.

In earlier years, there was also a lively dialogue between constructionists and what were called *interpretivists*. Where the former emphasized the way in which the psychologist constructs the other in discourse, the interpretivist viewed the anthropologist’s task as penetrating the meaning behind cultural activities. This was the basis of interpretive anthropology. In turn, interpretive anthropology became the basis for a Rick Shweder-like cultural psychology. In effect, interpretive anthropology became a central view within much cultural psychology. This form of cultural psychology remains in conversation with constructionism, even while Shweder and other interpretivists still focus on the meaning behind our actions, while I am more post-structuralist. Why do we presume a meaning behind the action? Why do we presume the existence of cognition? Why do we presume there are variations in emotions underlying our behavior, as opposed to emotional performances secreted into informal rituals of social life? Constructionism is not preaching a gospel here, but it does invite dialogue and variation in what cultural psychology could be. I tend to toward the more discursive end of the spectrum, but that is my preference.

Carolyn Demuth: Our time is over, unfortunately. Thank you so much for your invitation to this dance of social constructionism. It was a pleasure to have you here. Thank you very much again for this interview.

Kenneth Gergen: Thank you.

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About the Authors

Carolyn Demuth's work is located in the field of Cultural, Discursive, and Narrative Psychology, as well as Language socialization. She is interested in the interplay of language, social interaction and mind from a developmental perspective. Another focus of her work lies on qualitative research in psychology. Some of her recent publications are *The Cambridge Handbook of Identity* (co-edited with Michael Bamberg and Meike Watzlawik) and the *The Routledge International Handbook of Innovative Qualitative Psychological Research* (co-edited with Eleftheria Tseliou, Genie Georgaca, and Brendan Gough). She is associate editor of *Frontiers in Psychology: Cultural Psychology* and serves on various editorial boards (e.g., *Qualitative Research in Psychology*). She is founding member and served as president (2021-2024) of the Association for European Qualitative Researchers in Psychology (EQuIP). She is also co-director of the Centre for Cultural Psychology and head of the research group Cultural Psychology at Aalborg University. She recently was awarded the Ernst Boesch Price for Cultural Psychology.

Kenneth J. Gergen is a major figure in the development of social constructionist theory and its applications to practices of social change. He also lectures widely on contemporary issues in cultural life, including the self, technology, postmodernism, the civil society, organizational change, developments in psychotherapy, educational practices, aging, and political conflict. He is also a founding member and President of the Taos Institute. Gergen has published over 300 articles in journals, magazines and books, and his major award winning books include *Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge*, *The Saturated Self, Realities and Relationships*, and *An Invitation to Social Construction*. Gergen has served as the President of two divisions of the American Psychological Association, the Division on Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology, and on Psychology and the Arts. He has served on the editorial board of 35 journals, and as the Associate Editor of *The American Psychologist* and *Theory and Psychology*.