

An Invitation To Social Construction

Kenneth J. Gergen

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Review by Carey Glass

If I ask about the world, you can offer to tell me how it is under one or more frames of reference; but if I insist that you tell me how it is apart from all the frames, what can you say?" Nelson Goodman: *Ways of Worldmaking*.

It is with this clarity that Gergen introduces the idea of social construction, clarity and accessibility being the hallmarks of this book. If you have been searching for an accessible way into social construction this is the perfect read.

Within the first chapter Gergen addresses some of the basic questions that are puzzling when you first try to get your head around this area. For example he deals with the issue of what is real. He explains that social constructionists are not denying reality but are saying that we define any reality from a tradition of sense making. If this is so, for the constructionist our understanding of the world and our actions do not have to be constrained by anything traditionally accepted as true, rational or right. Rather, a vast spectrum of possibility opens up. For example he provides an eloquent and clear mapping of Derrida's proposition around the fragility of rational argument to support his thesis. He goes on to explain that what we take to be true of the world is born of relationships and the sense-making we create through relationships. He discusses the importance of Wittgenstein's approach to language and language games in defining this "reality". He brings all of this together to offer a brilliantly lucid explanation of how we define what is "objectively true" as a social process – using the simple

example of two people having a conversation around mixing plaster for a wall.

When I was first learning about SF I remember Insoo Kim Berg at SOL in Interlaken looking at me in her uniquely quizzical way when I suggested that SF contradicts the value of scientific method. While she impressed upon me that SF was not in any way anti-scientific, I struggled to resolve this dilemma. In the third chapter Gergen deals with such issues plainly. He explains how scientific knowledge is a communal construction, a small step if you accept that objectivity and truth are social processes, but a very earth-shattering one otherwise. However, Gergen is not arguing that science is not highly important and useful, but that it emanates from a common agreement and emergent set of values of what is important and useful. It became clear to me that SF and science are both different and highly important and useful ways of seeing the world, moving me from an either/or to a both/and proposition. Dilemma solved.

The second chapter is a rich exploration of how our constructions of what is real, rational and good come into being. SF practitioners will be delighted by the explanation of the importance of metaphor in constructing reality, for example how the archaeological metaphor is used in psychiatry to dig into the person's mind. The absolute importance of using metaphors to construct reality is noted, but the importance of not mistaking the archaeological metaphor for clinical reality is also noted, as this act reduces options in terms of finding alternative therapies. He also discusses the metaphor in Western culture of the "mind as a form of mirror of the world". It becomes easier to see how this might encourage us to think of the mind as having its own existence and the path that such metaphors might lead us to in terms of the mind/body dilemma or cognitive psychology for example. In a theoretical vein the book also devotes a chapter to an alternative construction of self that places major value on relationships rather than individuals, explaining how emotions are not private possessions of the individual mind but the property of on-going relationships. To suggest that

these ideas “blow your mind” may be a bit phenomenological for Gergen but, nevertheless, they do.

The book then devotes chapters to more practical applications, which are a feature of the second edition which will be of interest to the SF community. There is a large section on conflict resolution using the theme of moving from blame to relational responsibility, a theme familiar to SF practitioners. Sections are also devoted to transforming the education sector. Gergen discusses the idea of collaborative classrooms rather than seeing education in the “nutritionist” metaphor in which the educator dispenses healthy food to students who need to be fed. Organisational performance is also included. Gergen highlights the major challenge in organisations of mobilising collaborative processes and offers Appreciative Inquiry as one alternative approach. Published in 2009, there is clearly work for us to do to have SF included in this field. The section on alternative therapies however does include SF along with narrative therapy, polyvocality and the idea of moving from diagnosis to dialogues.

Throughout the book, the links for the SF practitioner are abundant. There are rich pickings for those interested in the degree to which SF sits within the social constructionist family and what might be made of seeing SF in this vein.

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